The Micropolitics of the Drives[1]

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Abstract: This paper aims to elaborate a concept of the drives that can suitably underpin an ontology and micropolitics of the self. Proceeding by way of engagements with Nietzsche, Lacan, Foucault and Deleuze in particular, it argues that the idea of the drives should be seen to offer an account of the sense, rather than the truth, of the self and the world it encounters. The thesis of the drives opens up a domain of difference that is impersonal and nonsubjective, and as such has drawn criticisms that it does away with both the subject and the space of the political. Against this, the paper maintains that this domain is the site of a micropolitics that serves as the guarantor of the possibility of political transformation by the way it impacts on the domain of political subjectivity.

Keywords: Deleuze, Nietzsche, Lacan, Drives, Micropolitics

This paper aims to elaborate a concept of the drives that can suitably underpin an ontology and micropolitics of the self. Proceeding by way of engagements primarily with Nietzsche, Lacan, Foucault, and Deleuze, it argues that the concept of the drives should be seen to offer an account of the sense, rather than the truth, of the self and the world it encounters. The ontology that develops from the concept of the drives facilitates the theorization of a domain of impersonal and nonsubjective differences, and though the character of this domain has frequently garnered criticisms that it does away with both the subject and the space of the political, I maintain that it in fact presents the site of a micropolitics that serves as the guarantor of the possibility of political transformation by the way it impacts on the forms of political subjectivity that emerge from and are dissolved by it.

Taken from the German *Trieb*, and variously translated as "drive," "instinct," and "impulse,"[2] the concept of the drives is theorized extensively, along overlapping but certainly not identical lines, by Nietzsche and Freud, and is developed further in the more recent writings of Jacques Lacan, Slavoj Žižek, and Gilles Deleuze among others. It also appears within the traditional canon of Western political thought, featuring significantly in the Introduction of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, where Hegel maintains that the natural will,

comprising a multiplicity of conflicting impulses (*Trieb*), remains only implicitly free until the system of ethical duty mediates and organizes the impulses to create a rational "second nature" that raises the will to infinite and actual freedom.[3] Despite its continuing presence in certain contemporary theories, however, it may still appear odd to invoke and give centrality to a concept that not only reached its heyday more than a century ago, but also comes across as manifestly unscientific today.[4] Any serious attempt to make use of the drives appears already to be discredited by Freud's admission that they are "mythical entities, magnificent in their indefiniteness" (Freud 1965: 95) and by the way they culminate in Nietzsche's thought with the seemingly fanciful assertion of the will to power. Nevertheless, as I hope to show, as an ontological – or perhaps, better, *ontopolitical* – thesis that can contribute to recent political theory's broader "ontological turn," the concept of the drives and the notion of the subject it entails can help make explicit the political import of *micropolitics*, of ethical practices of the self that are necessarily implicated in political life.[5]

William Connolly refers to Deleuzian micropolitics "as a cultural collectivization and politicization of arts of the self…[that] applies tactics to multiple layers of intersubjective being" (Connolly, 2002: 108). In this respect, he maintains, even though micropolitics and (Foucauldian) arts of the self are intertwined, "they also stand in a relation of torsion to each other" (ibid.) inasmuch as arts of the self are personal rather than collective, and thus require "cultural collectivization and politicization." I take issue with this separation, as Foucault consistently treats practices of the self as a collective rather than individual affair, holding them to be based on rules, representational meanings, and truths that are socially constituted and that refer to micropower relations and power/knowledge regimes. Moreover, as we will see, Foucault shows that the points where these rules, meanings, and truths become problematic necessarily require a collective and political response. In this way, arts of the self are always already political and micropolitical. With this in mind, I would like to set out

the terms of the micropolitical in a slightly different way to Connolly, holding it to be a

constitutive domain of power relations and desire whose mechanisms and dynamics both

form and undermine the concepts and categories that define much of macropolitical life, such

as the subject, identity, truth, representation, and so forth, but which for that reason is also a

domain where analyses based on identity, truth, representation, and the subject are

inappropriate and inapplicable. The aim of this paper, then, is to show how an ontology

involving the drives can delineate this micropolitical domain and offer a portrayal of the self

that maintains a complex and uncertain relation to the categories of truth, representational

meaning, and the subject, without for all that losing its determinacy or the constitutive

connection between the individual and the collective. Proceeding this way, I also hope to

show how this ontology and the micropolitics it entails sets it off from a closely-related group

of political theories that, drawing inspiration from Lacanian psychoanalysis, often thematise

the concept of the drives but offer a micropolitics that is fundamentally one of the subject,

holding the subject to be the only determinate form that the self can assume at both

macropolitical and micropolitical levels.[6]

Against Freud's declaration that the drives are myths, Lacan highlights an earlier text

where Freud refers to them as "conventions" (Lacan 1981: 162-63, referring to Freud 1957:

117). Drives in this respect are conventions used to account for behaviour that cannot be

explained by the observable evidence, nor by any conscious or unconscious aims or interests

that might plausibly be attributed to a reflective subject, behaviour that suggests instead

hidden and internal forces of compulsion. This shift may temporarily restore some dignity

and even an appearance of scientificity to the drives inasmuch as their introduction is justified

by the limits of empirical study. But insofar as this move suggests an appeal to the drives as

hidden causes – which is not actually Lacan's thesis, and Freud himself is at the very least

circumspect on this point – it would seem only to invite charges of a homunculus fallacy,

without, for all that, resolving the drives' problematic character. What sort of account could the drives then offer? At the risk of appearing only to sidestep the issue by creating another myth or introducing an entirely new set of problems, I maintain that, as an ontological concept, the drives should be taken to provide not a causal explanation of facts about the self or its world, but instead an account of the *sense* of both the self and the events in which it is implicated. It is a philosophical as opposed to a scientific speculation – if I may be permitted for my purposes here to treat science as the search for causal or explanatory models – formulated in reference to relations that seem to be discernible from observable phenomena without yet being demonstrable, and which might aid in developing the basic concepts of a science of those phenomena, but which for that very reason is not itself scientific. This is indeed how Freud (1957: 117-118) sets out the matter.

This idea of sense, whose use here is indebted primarily to Deleuze, itself requires elaboration. It will hopefully become clearer as the paper progresses. But the following can be stated at the outset. First, sense is an ontological notion – as Deleuze maintains, philosophy must be an *ontology of sense*[7] – that includes both the physical (i.e., the sense of smell or touch) and the ideal (i.e., the sense of a word or a concept), and that therefore concerns both a theory of sensation and a theory of meaning, even if sense is neither simply physical nor simply conceptual. Freud positions the drive similarly when he defines it as "the psychological representative of an endosomatic, continuously flowing source of stimulation…lying on the frontier between the mental and the physical" (Freud 1953: 168). Drives to flee from danger, for example, combine shivers, palpitations, and an empty feeling in the pit of the stomach with mental anxiety and fear, while also being irreducible to these. Second, sense includes the notion of direction, which is explicit in the French *sens* and the German *Sinn* but can also be found in English in examples such as "the sense of history," which can be taken to mean the direction history is going. The drives' impulse, in this

respect, establishes both the sense (both physical and meaningful) and the direction of the becoming of the organism. Finally, the expression of sense, even while concerning real objects or states of affairs, remains distinct from and independent of the facts about these referents. Terms such as "morning star" and "evening star," or "Socrates" and "the gadfly of Athens," may refer to the same object but invoke completely different senses; conversely, contradictory statements such as "the tree is green" and "the tree is not green" may express the same sense – as Deleuze says, both express the event of "greening" or "becoming green," and are thus associated with the infinitive form of the verb "to green," whose meaning remains the same in its affirmative and negative conjugations (see Deleuze 1990: 12-22). The relation between sense and truth is therefore subtle and again very different from an explanatory or causal account of things. Sense is always plural and perspectival, and as such a matter of a philosophical art of interpretation (Deleuze 1983: 4) rather than a scientific analysis. If the drives do in some respect explain why we are what we are, it is not by way of a determination of truth that excludes all other possibilities as simply untrue or false, but by conferring sense in all its diverse aspects upon states of affairs even where the truth of those states remains ambiguous.[8]

In Deleuzian terms, drives are prepersonal and impersonal, and constitute a nonsubjective domain. This domain is at the focus of many critical attacks on Deleuze's philosophy that see it doing away with both the subject and the space of the political. Building upon a misreading of Deleuze's concepts of immanence and univocity, these attacks hold, on the one hand, that this impersonal and nonsubjective field reduces the self to a multiplicity of blind incommensurable forces that leave it unable to unify itself as a subject, and, on the other hand, that this field's all-inclusive and immanent nature denies the breaks, fissures, or negations that constitute the place of the subject and the possibility of change. In this way, and despite Deleuze's affirmation of becoming, the result according to these critics

is that becoming is reduced to a simulacrum of a fully positive and complete being, and the subject is reduced to a marionette, a lifeless automaton.[9] Often these interpretations of Deleuze's thought go together with an assertion of a Lacanian-style ontology and politics of the subject of desire as lack, where the subject is the very fissure or gap within the otherwise wholly enclosed world of immanence that guarantees the openness of this world and thus the possibility of difference. But this alternative and the red herrings used to support it misconstrue the central political point: namely, that this prepersonal or impersonal field is fundamentally *micropolitical*, and as such it is a place of transformation, but one where change is not construed in terms of breaks or fissures of something that would otherwise be closed, and thus does not revolve around the constitution of the place of a subject. These same critics often dismiss the micropolitical as a domain of merely personal or aesthetic self-creation. However, as I hope to make clear, it is a starting point for conceiving and enacting transformations that make possible an affirmation of pluralism, and in this respect its non-subjective character is crucial to the way it impacts on the domain of political subjectivity.

The Drives and the Ego

When writing a paper such as this one, I frequently chew on the end of a pen. I am surely not the only one who does this. Such activity indicates the force of oral drives that constantly compel us while also pressing against other drives such as drives to fidget, concentrate, wander, get emotional, get laid, etc. I chew, and the compulsion behind this has nothing to do with any need such as hunger or thirst, nor with any desire either for the thing I am chewing or for some missing object for which the chewed thing would be a substitute. Indeed, it compels me even when it is no longer pleasurable, when my jaw aches with fatigue. In this way, the agency of the drives cannot be explained by desire; rather, desire, as Lacan (1981: 243) says, is agitated in the drive. Every drive seeks only discharge, release

onto some object or other, though each also competes with innumerable other drives whose discharges may or may not be compatible with it. Their force is ever present, and decidedly amoral: as Nietzsche maintains, "In itself it [a drive] has…neither this moral character nor any moral character at all, nor even a definite attendant sensation of pleasure or displeasure: it acquires all this, as its second nature, only when it enters into relations with drives already baptised good or evil or is noted as a quality of beings the people has already evaluated and determined in a moral sense" (Nietzsche, 1982: §38). Drives thus receive their meaning from the dominant moral sense of the society in which they are expressed. In a certain kind of society, for example, drives to aggression might be considered noble. But this only means that at what Deleuze and Guattari call the "molar" level or the level of the "social machine," which emerges from the direct investments of "molecular" drives that exhibit certain stable properties when considered en masse,[10] particular drives have achieved collective dominance in such a way that they impose a sense upon all others. Ultimately, then, the sense of every drive is given only through its relation to the complex it forms with all the rest.

If I manage to complete the paper despite the divergent impulses within me, it is because some drive or set of drives has been able to dominate and compel the rest of my being to stay this course. This does not mean that competing drives have thereby been repressed, somehow excluded from the self or buried. Sometimes their compulsion has been sidelined so as to minimize their interference. In the case of my oral drives, I have found something onto which they can discharge themselves (the pen, but it could easily be something else) without this preventing me from concentrating and typing. In other cases a drive's force might be co-opted for the task at hand, as might happen with a competitive athlete's aggressive drives (albeit, hopefully, in a controlled manner). In yet others, it may simply be by chance that potentially disruptive drives are at their ebb when the task must be carried out. Social mores and meanings that, as already mentioned, are themselves products

of the drives, also play a role. A socially ingrained sense of responsibility, for example, might support the task of writing a paper I have promised to contribute to a friend's edited collection, as might a sense of honour at having been invited in the first place. Alternatively, a desire for career advancement or publish-or-perish pressure might be involved. But these larger factors can be effective only insofar as the drives in ascendance in me can link to them, thereby establishing a correspondence and resonance between constitutive a-signifying impulses and established social forces that can bestow upon these impulses a direction and a representational meaning.

What is definitely not the case in the terms set out by this account is that an ego, "I," or subject standing apart from the drives takes control and presses them into service. The relation between the drives and the ego can be usefully highlighted by considering Sartre's early work, *The Transcendence of the Ego*. Following phenomenology's basic premise that consciousness is always consciousness of an object, Sartre maintains that the ego is extraneous to consciousness's intentionality (its orientation or directedness towards worldly objects) and to the constitutive syntheses of past and present consciousnesses that give experience its unity. Indeed, while it may be necessary for the "I" to accompany all our representations, this only guarantees its status as a second-order object that appears when consciousness reflects on its activity and thereby divides itself into reflecting and reflected selves. Thus, for example, an unreflecting self might be absorbed in the act of reading, conscious of the book and its activity without any "I" being present; but as soon as consciousness divides itself to reflect on this activity, it finds itself declaring "I am reading" (Sartre 1957: 46-47). In this way, the ego is a transcendent object, standing outside consciousness and its activity like the ego of another (31).

All this does not make the ego unimportant, but rather means that its role involves representation and coordination rather than agency and decision. This is especially clear in

cases involving concerted action.

> Concerted action is first of all…a transcendent. That is obvious for actions like "playing the piano," "driving a car," "writing," because these actions are "taken" in the world of things. But purely psychical actions like doubting, reasoning, meditating, making a hypothesis, these too must be conceived as transcendences. What deceives us here is that action is not only the noematic unity of a stream of consciousnesses: it is also a concrete realization. But we must not forget that action requires time to be accomplished. It has articulations; it has moments. To these moments correspond concrete, active consciousnesses, and the reflection which is directed on the consciousnesses apprehends the total action in an intuition which exhibits it as the transcendent unity of the active consciousnesses. (Sartre, 1957: 68–9).

Many activities could not be accomplished without an "I," not because they require a chooser standing apart from and unifying consciousness but because they involve a relation-to-self that operates by way of the projection of a reference point. Stepping back from the ontological category of the subject to look at the concrete person who, through his activity, is meant, depending on the theory, either to express his subjecthood or to constitute himself as a subject, we can set out the relation between them as follows. A person who spends months or even years learning to dance, for example, is changing throughout the process, as posture, footwork, rhythm, and technique become intellectually and physically instilled. Absent the postulate of an "I" enduring through this process, and given that no one remains the same either physically (one's body continually changes) or "spiritually" (evermore layers of past experience accumulate in one's memory; one's comportment to the future shifts in different ways; one has changing relationships to different people), in the end it cannot be said that it is the same individual who began the undertaking. Nevertheless, because a self-to-self relation

is indispensable to the learning activity, that activity involving repetitive practices and reflection on these, the person learning to dance must apprehend the process as "what I am doing," even if this "I" does not accomplish anything because it does not act as an agent and indeed only persists as an image or a projection.

Sartre is clear on this last point. Even while acknowledging the ego's reality – he considers it to be a dubitable but not a hypothetical object, maintaining that "I do not say to myself, 'Perhaps I have an ego,' as I may say to myself, 'Perhaps I hate Peter'" (Sartre 1957: 76) – he also explicitly refers to it using the language of simulation. With reference to its activity, he holds that "we are dealing here with a semblance [*apparence* in the original] only" (79), as only consciousness has genuine spontaneity; and when discussing its essential function, he gives it a practical role of disguise, asserting that "Everything happens…as if consciousness constituted the ego as a false representation of itself" (101). Similar formulations are also found in Nietzsche and Deleuze. Nietzsche refers to the ego, subject, or "I" as "only a fiction" (Nietzsche 1968: §370), a "perspective illusion" (§518), a marker that aids in the "coordination and becoming conscious of 'impressions'" (§504), and something "added and invented and projected behind what there is" (§481). It emerges when regular sequences of thought and action foster the erroneous belief that a unified will governs them and makes the thought cause the action (Nietzsche 1989: §19) when what is really happening is that the intellect is aligning itself with and becoming a tool of certain drives against others (Nietzsche 1982: §109). The subject for Nietzsche is thus a false interpretation of action, though it nevertheless "could be useful and important for one's activity to interpret oneself falsely" (Nietzsche 1968: §492). Deleuze and Guattari maintain that the molecular complex of heterogeneous drives working with and against one another – what they call a "desiring-machine" – functions on the basis of the connections between the drives, but is explained (in terms of the sense and direction of the machine as a whole) by their strife and disjunction,

such that the complex "works" only by continually breaking down. The subject or "I" emerges from this complex, they say, by way of a consummation or reconciliation of the conflict that propels the entire assemblage in a determinate direction. Thus "I" am driven to write the paper, it is not a matter of my choice, but when it is done I find myself declaring, "So that's what I did" or "So that's what I wanted" (see Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 1-22).

The "I" is therefore not a chooser at either a conscious or unconscious level, but more a dramatization or an actualization of the interplay of intensive impulses. In Nietzsche's words, it expresses "a pattern of domination that *signifies* a unity but *is* not a unity" (Nietzsche 1968: §561). This is not a denial of subjectivity, of the acting, feeling, and thinking that certainly exist and through which subjectivity is introduced into the world. Rather, it is simply that these standard trademarks of the reflective subject do not find their origin in such a being but instead in preindividual or nonsubjective conditions, with the subject itself being an appearance that is effectively "along for the ride." On these terms it is not the subject that guarantees the openness of what would otherwise be a closed structure of impersonal drives. Rather, it is this structure that is open, and it guarantees the possibility of subjectivity appearing. Something, after all, learned to dance, even if it was not an "I" taken as a subject, but the dynamic and strife-filled interplay of a complex of drives that propelled itself in this direction and retroactively gave itself a false sense of being a chooser.

The Drives and Sense

The account of the drives just offered reflects a more general thesis Deleuze draws from Nietzsche about the nature of force. Force too is a convention, used to account for observable phenomena that cannot be explained by the observable evidence, and it functions not as a cause but instead to account for the sense of these phenomena. As Deleuze states early in his seminal work on Nietzsche: "We will never find the sense of something (of a human, a

biological or even a physical phenomenon) if we do not know the force which appropriates the thing, which exploits it, which takes possession of it or is expressed in it" (Deleuze 1983: 3). Concepts of the thing or object, whether physical (the atom) or psychological (the ego), cannot account for their necessary relations to others, and only become coherent when replaced by the concept of force (6-8). But as a powerless force, one lacking efficacy and unable to influence others, would not be a force at all, the essence of force, like that of drive, is necessarily found in its dynamic relations to other forces. Deleuze maintains that this dynamic involves forces being constituted by their quantitative but non-numerical differences from one another, with these quantitative differences determining the distinct qualities of related forces, whose discharge against one another in turn establishes the sense of their struggle as a whole. This sense, again, is distinct from the facts of the situation. There are many things to unpack here, but an example taken from a different kind of struggle may be illuminating.[11]

In 1974, UK television host Michael Parkinson interviewed Muhammad Ali after the boxer had been named "Sports Personality of the Year" in the wake of defeating George Foreman to win back his title.[12] Ali expressed doubt about whether he deserved the recognition – and seems almost sincere! – because all he had to do was "go out and beat a man who had no skill, no class…the man fights like a woman, he's wild, no class, no science, and ugly, and I just don't know why they think I'm so great now because I beat George Foreman." Parkinson said that Foreman could not be so disrespected because he had previously beaten Joe Frazier and Ken Norton, who each had previously beaten Ali, and because Foreman not only beat them, but demolished and destroyed them. But Ali replied, "No he didn't. He just hit'em with a punch that they didn't recuperate from," and when the audience's laughter died down, he explained that "this is why the public are so dumb and ignorant to this point. Sonny Liston knocked out Floyd Patterson twice in one round. Then, I

fought Floyd Patterson twice, and never knocked him out. But I knocked out Sonny Liston! *It's the style*." And that is the point any boxing or sports fan knows well: contrasting styles make the fight, these styles being a matter of the qualities each fighter brings to the competition.

Frazier always fights going forward. He does not seem to know how to retreat and does not really even have the physical skills or personal temperament for it. "He got hit," Ali says,

> …and he don't have enough common sense to say, "I'm hit, I better back up."
> He don't back up. He gets knocked down. He don't have enough sense to
> say, "Millions of dollars are involved, my heavyweight title, I'm a little
> groggy." It's easier to get knocked down again, you need about 20 seconds to
> cool off. They can't think that much. So right away, he gets right up, and
> then instead of retreating, he runs into another one. He gets knocked down.
> He don't realize, "I'm lucky, I got knocked down twice, I'm getting a third
> chance." He gets up and he runs back into another one. And he still hasn't
> woke up, "Boy, I'm down for the fourth." He got knocked down six times,
> and on the sixth time he got up to walk right back into another one.[13]

Now the fact is that Foreman beat Frazier. But in a sense, Frazier beat himself. Or, rather, the sense of the fight maintains this ambiguity, since both of these perspectives are true. But even if the truth lay elsewhere, even if it was Frazier who won the fight, managing to get to Foreman first and knocking him out – in short, *even if his style worked* – it would not change the sense of the fight, inasmuch as the sense is a matter of the way the competing styles made the fight, irrespective of who actually won.

Ali himself was not known as a hard puncher, and could not fight like Foreman or Frazier even if he wanted. But in his younger days at least he could afford to fight with his

hands down and invite opponents to throw first, which made it easier for him to hit them because he was faster than them. The point is that Ali's style – both what he could do and what he could get away with doing,[14] as well as what he would have to change later in his career – was not formed in a vacuum, but resulted directly from relations of more or less with his opponents: more or less speed, quickness, height, reach, and power. These are physical and quantitative relations, what Deleuze (1983: 42-44) calls the differences in quantity, and they give rise to qualitative distinctions. But though they are quantitative it makes little sense to place them on some sort of fixed numerical scale. What would it mean to say Ali is twice as fast as Foreman, or that Foreman punches twice as hard? For that matter, what would it mean to say that two fighters were equally fast or strong? These are at best statistical averages, involving external standards of measure and abstracting forces from the concrete context in which they are exercised. Indeed, what was notable about the "rope-a-dope" strategy Ali famously used in his "Rumble in the Jungle" with Foreman was that while Foreman wasted most of his energy throwing wild haymakers that hurt Ali much less than it appeared they did, Ali regularly hit Foreman with straight punches that Foreman walked onto and that wore him down in only a handful of rounds. In other words, their respective styles and strategies meant that in the fight it was Ali who punched harder than Foreman. And this was because, once again, the styles makes the fight.

Like boxers, forces have their own singularity, but this is established through their immanent relations to one another, since they find their meaning and sense only in their clash. This is the key to understanding both the relative stability of the arrangements they form and the way these arrangements change. As Nietzsche says, the stability results not from any universal laws of motion or some tendency of forces towards equilibrium, but because "a certain force cannot be anything other than this certain force…it can react to a quantum of resisting force only according to the measure of its strength" (Nietzsche 1968:

§639). Consequently, "a new arrangement of forces is achieved according to the measure of power of each of them" (§633). However the struggle of forces works itself out, it must accord with the sense that follows from how these forces reciprocally constitute one another. But as sense is independent of the facts of the matter, this determination of forces has no predictive value. No one could have predicted with absolute certainty that Ali would beat Foreman – and, of course, almost no one thought he would. But once he did, the result *made sense*, and in a way seemed like destiny. As Deleuze maintains, destiny – the temporal aspect of the determination conferred by sense, which may be the same even for diametrically opposed states of affairs – accords very badly with determinism, but extremely well with freedom,[15] and there is always freedom in the struggle among forces because this struggle involves relations of drive, resistance, inequality, reversal, and transmutation. Far from reducing becoming to a simulacrum of being, destiny ensures that becoming – the condition for the emergence of subjectivity – always remains open and expressive of sense.

The Drives and Desire

At this point I would like turn to Lacan's account of desire in relation to the subject and the drives. Desire, for Lacan, emerges when the individual becomes a subject by taking up the position of an "I" in discourse and using language to express its needs to others. This entails a fundamental displacement and exclusion, as language places the subject on the terrain of the Other (since it does not invent the language it uses) and requires it to expunge the particularity of its needs when articulating them via universal signifiers. There is thus "a deviation of man's needs due to the fact that he speaks: to the extent that his needs are subjected to demand, they come back to him in an alienated form" (Lacan 2006: 579). This is further complicated by the way the articulation not only calls for satisfaction of those needs but carries a demand for love and recognition from the Other, so that "demand in itself bears

on something other than the satisfactions it calls for (579). From this situation, however, the excluded particularity of need returns as an excessive desire "*beyond* demand" (580) due to the inadequacy of every response: even if the subject receives everything it needs and demands, it continues to feel lacking, and this sense of lack implies that something is withheld from it. This something, which Lacan calls the *objet a*, must remain nameless, since if the subject could articulate it, it would reduce to a need or demand. As a result, not only is the subject left incomplete or lacking, but the place of its constitution as a full or complete subject is subverted. That an *objet a* is withheld from the subject implies that it is desired and enjoyed by another – an Other, indeed, who exercises a power of prohibition. And so, the way in which subjectivity emerges with the adoption of language simultaneously entails a denial of this subject, its subjection to Law. The sense of the subject is then consolidated in a series of repetitions that reinforce this dual subject/subjected status, including repetitions of love, where the subject seeks another who can complete it, but this other is always inadequate to the missing *objet a*, and repetitions of self-negation, where the subject prostrates itself before the Other in the hope of receiving acknowledgement, of becoming the *objet a* of this Other's desire.

The status of this Lacanian subject constituted on the terrain of the Other accords well with that of the subject described earlier. That is to say, this subject, which forms at the unconscious intersection where the self and social structures meet, has only a semblance of agency, since its desires, demands, and even articulated needs are not really its own. Simply consider what you "chose" to eat for breakfast in the morning. If you picked what you thought you wanted, this was inseparable from the culturally available spectrum of options of appropriate foods, not to mention the breakfasts your parents prepared for you as a child and any good or bad experiences you had with various foods in the past. In the end, it is not you who are choosing so much as the social machine of which you are a part, and the same can be

said of the more profound objects of your desire and the lost object for which they are a substitute. But does this point about desire and subjectivity fully account for their relation to the drives' agency, given that the drives' force of discharge is not engendered by any desire or lack but rather is what agitates desire? Lacan seems to fudge the issue. Noting that drives find satisfaction simply in discharge, but the subject does not, he suggests that this discrepancy introduces "the category of the impossible" (Lacan 1981: 166) into the functioning of the pleasure principle, inasmuch as the drives' indifference to the object they cathect indicates that this is not an object of need but desire's *objet a*. As a result, the shifts made by the drive as it goes from one object to another necessarily follows the path taken by desire as it negotiates the prohibitions established by the subject's relation to the Law. A drive's force of discharge may be independent of desire, but it is nevertheless oriented by desire, and in this way the drive "is given the task of seeking something that, each time, responds in the Other" (196). The subject is thereby driven to that which it desires.

Yet this correspondence between the drives and desire is clearly not a necessary one. Indeed, Lacan admits that the vicissitudes of the drives have no essential relation to desire, as a drive manifests itself in "the mode of a headless subject, for everything is articulated in it in terms of tension, and has no relation to the subject other than one of topological community" (Lacan 1981: 181). Desire is thus no more than a contingent configuration of drives, one introduced, in the case of Lacanian desire, by a linguistic and therefore social structure that compels the subject to emerge and assume a position on this terrain. The result is a kind of non-reciprocity, whereby this exteriority of the drives to desire makes them at bottom indifferent to how they are organized, yet the subject necessary for that social structure would fall apart if the drives were not arranged in a way that could sustain a sense of lack or incompleteness. This is Deleuze and Guattari's very point when they hold that "desire 'needs' very few things" (1983: 27) and that the sense of lack is a social product and a

product of power: "The deliberate creation of lack as a function of market economy is the art of a dominant class. This involves deliberately organizing wants and needs amid an abundance of production; making all of desire teeter and fall victim to the great fear of not having one's needs satisfied" (28). Lacan himself, however, clearly remains committed to this form of the subject, and the organization of the drives it requires, as evidenced by his view of his own work as providing a foundation for the Cartesian subject, albeit in a way that paradoxically leaves it undermined,[16] and by his choice of Kant over Spinoza precisely because Kant grounds ethics in a moral law.[17] The Lacanian subject is neither the conscious subject grounded in the certainty of its thinking activity, nor the transcendental subject presupposed as the condition of possibility for the unity of empirical experience, nor even the dialectical subject realized through its relations of reciprocal recognition with others, but instead a subject of the unconscious that gives sense and direction to its conscious counterpart even while subverting the latter's pretence to being self-centred, self-identical, truth-oriented, and representation-producing. This commitment to a revised form of the subject, however, hardly removes the contingency of the entire arrangement.

The Micropolitics of the Drives

Deleuzian micropolitics rests on a wager that this structure of the subject is not quite so necessary and that alternative formations of the drives and of desire are possible and perhaps even admirable. This micropolitics involves a strategic and experimental engagement with both the immanent social forces that bring a semblance of the subject into being and the immanent movements of "deterritorialization" that can engender something new. Insofar as the sense of any configuration of drives follows its points of strife, so that the assemblage "works" only by breaking down, Deleuze and Guattari argue that these configurations have one dimension oriented towards the realm of stratifications – hierarchical organizations that

impose and operate according to principles of identity and representation, and that include the kinds of subjectification and signification that underpin the Lacanian form of the subject[18] – and another dimension oriented towards dispersive and deterritorializing "lines of flight" that escape the strata not by opposing or negating them but simply by exceeding them, such lines of flight being a-systematic or a-structural rather than anti-system or anti-structure. These dimensions of stratification and deterritorialization are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, micropolitics in the way Deleuze and Guattari intend it is possible only by way of a "double-conditioning," in Foucault's (1990: 99-100) sense, between the destratified and the stratified, the micro and the macro, the molecular and the molar. The micropolitical can be considered a domain where ethics and politics converge by way practices of self-formation. There is a micropolitical task of forming oneself as a "political animal" – a being that, pace Aristotle's definition of man as a zōon politikon, cannot exist in isolation but is instead constituted within social and linguistic networks[19] – that parallels the task Foucault identifies in his late writings on ethical self-formation. But this is decidedly not a task of forming oneself as a political subject, just as for Foucault the task of ethical self-formation is not a matter of becoming a moral subject.

Foucault's genealogy of ethics does involve a subject. Any moral code, he says, presupposes practices of the self insofar as the code implies a subject that relates to it through obedience or disobedience (thereby becoming a moral or an immoral subject), which in turn implies a self-to-self relation by which the self fashions itself as a subject, an "I" that takes up a position of responsibility towards the code. There must therefore be "forms and modalities of the relation to self by which the individual constitutes and recognizes himself *qua* subject" (Foucault 1992: 6). These forms and modalities are linked to games of truth that concern the ethical substance, mode of subjection, available practices of ethical work, and the *telos* or goal of self-formation (24-28), so that self-formation always relates to power/knowledge

regimes. Nevertheless, as Deleuze says, Foucault's excavation of these practices reveals "a dimension of subjectivity derived from power and knowledge without being dependent on them" (Deleuze 1988: 101). The fact that self-formation precedes the self-reflexive moral subject indicates that it must be of a nonsubjective order, but this entire step back to the ethical domain would be redundant if the only outcome possible for self-formation was this very subject. At the same time, the way resistance is embedded in Foucauldian power relations ensures that every moral code contains points of friction and problematization, where available social categories and truths are inadequate. The ancient Greeks, for example, encountered the problem of the morally ambiguous status of boys, because the available alternatives could not be cleanly separated into right and wrong, good and evil (Foucault 1992: 185-225). At such points of problematization, ethical practice becomes more subtle and practices of the self become more experimental. The Greeks, Foucault shows, used the problem of boys, and the codes, identities, and practices at their disposal, to expand themselves beyond what they were, inventing new says of relating to the other and to themselves. Their subjectivity was realized by moving away from being moral subjects relating to a code. Their ethical project thereby became a micropolitical project, shuffling both molecular and molar levels of desire and drives.

Deleuze and Guattari's micropolitics similarly starts from our already stratified desiring selves, and from the codes, practices, and truths available to us, and works to reconfigure both them and us. The experimental and political nature of the task, they argue, makes it impossible to specify rules in advance, beyond a general recommendation of caution and a warning that these practices can end up in "cancerous black holes" and forms of micro- or macro-fascism (see, for example, Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 149-150, 160-161). But however these experiments work themselves out, they are not a matter of a choice made by a subject, as they depend entirely on the existing structures of drives and desire and the

qualities that emerge from their immanent quantitative relations. We therefore necessarily react to the stratified formations around us and the possibilities for destratification in ways appropriate to who and what we are. Just as Joe Frazier could only fight going forward, some people cannot escape their stratifications, although "staying stratified…is not the worst that can happen" (161). Regardless, what makes the "choice" in this micropolitical project, Deleuze and Guattari say, is not the subject but the body without organs or BwO (165-166). The BwO is the point of tension where molecular drives and molar social formations intersect, the point that faces the divergent dimensions of stratification and deterritorialization, and it "chooses" in the sense of determining what can be attached to it and how, and thus what the self is able to do or become. This determination, once more, is a determination of sense, not truth, and thus it remains independent of forms of change or stasis we realize, while serving as the guarantor for the openness needed to realize something new. Indeed, the BwO is a difference, and specifically what Deleuze calls a "difference in itself." It is the very difference that makes the style, that style in turn making the fight and thereby determining the sense of whatever we become.

Nietzsche writes that "a well-constituted human being, a 'happy one', *must* perform certain actions and instinctively shrinks from other actions, he transports the order of which he is the physiological representative into his relations with other human beings and with things" (Nietzsche 1990: "The Four Great Errors," §2). The wager of micropolitics is that by working to constitute ourselves in certain ways, necessities of a political nature can follow. If these formations can become genuinely rhizomatic, then what they affirm is a form of pluralism that is both an ethics that feeds into politics and a strategy for political engagement. Just as something learned to dance without needing to endure as a subject to accomplish this, so something can also become a pluralist political animal. To see the possibilities of forming ourselves in this way is a crucial upshot of Deleuze's thought, and one that makes his

thinking political even if it does not present a political project as it is traditionally understood.

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[2] Freud translators consistently translate *Trieb* as "instinct," whereas Nietzsche translators use "instinct," "drive," and sometimes "impulse." Lacan (1981: 49; 2006: 722) argues convincingly that in Freud's case the translation is inappropriate as it misleadingly suggests a purposeful or even moral compulsion. In keeping with that reasoning I will also refer to drives rather than instincts.

[3] Hegel (1967: §§11-21). See also Widder (2015).

[4] On the historical and philosophical background to Nietzsche's and Freud's conceptualizations of drive, see Assoun (2002: 53-69) and Parkes (1994: ch. 7).

[5] The "ontological turn" is the name given by White (2000) to recent trends in continental-inspired Anglo-American political theory that challenge the approaches of dominant analytic liberal political theories. The latter eschew complex theorizations of the nature of the human self on grounds that these would invoke controversial and ultimately metaphysical conceptions of the person and the nature of the good life. As a consequence, they frequently reduce the political subject to a rational chooser and politics itself to a set of institutions where the interests of these choosers are mediated. Against this, White argues, proponents of the ontological turn demand that political theory engages in complex explorations of

language, mortality, the possibility of radical novelty or change, and relations to others in the constitution of the self and political life. But he further maintains that the ontology of these recent theories is specifically a "weak" ontology inasmuch as they remain wary of the kind of absolute truth claims that characterize the "strong" ontological and metaphysical speculations of the past. Any ontology advanced today, White contends, must acknowledge the indispensable but problematic nature of all ontological speculation.

William Connolly, who White considers the most explicit articulator of the weak ontology approach, expresses this acknowledgment by rejecting as "both too restrictive and too total" (Connolly 1995: 1) the idea of an ontology underpinning a political theory. Instead, Connolly holds that all political interpretations, including those of the analytic approaches that purport to avoid such commitments, is "ontopolitical," meaning that they invoke "fundamental presumptions" that "fix possibilities, distribute explanatory elements, generate parameters within which an ethic is elaborated, and center (or decenter) assessments of identity, legitimacy, and responsibility" (2). These fundamental claims, Connolly continues, are always contestable inasmuch as "no perspective has at its disposal a consensual, pastoral, or transcendental strategy capable of reducing competitors in this domain to a small set of friendly alternatives" (16). As such, the possibility is open for each ontopolitical position to acknowledge its contingency and contestability, in turn suggesting a way that "we can move the pluralist imagination into domains that have heretofore escaped it" (16) and thereby allow contending ontopolitical imaginaries to coexist.

Despite capturing how a great number of contemporary theorists seek to deploy ontological speculation, there are a number of contestable aspects of White's weak ontology thesis. Deleuze's ontological approach, for example, does not seem to fit the "weak" characterization of an ontology that problematizes its own claims to certainty, but instead seems very much to assert itself as a "strong" ontology, albeit one that, as an ontology of

uncertainty and indeterminacy, underpins the kinds of political and ethical formulations that characterize what White identifies as "weak" approaches. Nevertheless, inasmuch as such an acknowledged contestability, as will be seen, does accompany the concept of the drives, it can be considered a weak ontological or a contestable ontopolitical thesis, even if in broader respects the ontology that develops from it does not fit the strong/weak distinction .

[6] On the distinction between these two groups of political theories see Tønder and Thomassen (2005).

[7] "*Philosophy must be ontology, it cannot be anything else; but there is no ontology of essence, there is only an ontology of sense*" (Deleuze 2004: 15).

[8] Deleuze's philosophy is often read as providing a "realist" and "materialist" ontology, as well as an ontology able to underpin scientific theories of dynamical systems. While these interpretations have much to offer, they do not seem to me to do well in incorporating the theme of sense, which, while similarly concerning a constitutive field of impersonal differences that exceeds but also engenders an actual field of differences partially susceptible to principles of identity and representation, figures the relation between the determinations of this field and the determinations of truth very differently to what is presented in the science-oriented interpretations. It is because the drives are part of an ontology of sense as Deleuze develops it that they are more appropriately considered conventions in a way that generally accords with the weak ontology thesis, which the science-oriented interpretations of Deleuze would almost certainly reject.

It could be argued that the theme of sense belongs only to Deleuze's early writings and that it fades away after *The Logic of Sense*. However, I would argue that the work it does continues to have influence on the later texts. With respect to the ideas of micropolitics and subjectivity pursued later in this paper, this influence can be seen in the way Deleuze and Guattari isolate the strata of signification and subjectification in order to outline their

particularly close connections independent of corporeal considerations in several plateaus of *A Thousand Plateaus* ("The Many Regimes of Signs" and "Year Zero: Faciality" in particular).

[9] The three most prominent examples of this type of misreading are Badiou (2000), Hallward (2006), and Žižek (2004). The claim that Deleuzian multiplicity and becoming are simulacra of Being and thus lack real status is Badiou's, who links it to Deleuze's doctrine of univocity (2000: 24-26). The idea of the subject as marionette is Žižek's, who invokes it in relation to Kant's response to Spinoza (2004: 41-45) and links it to Deleuze's Spinozism, arguing that Deleuze and Spinoza share the reduction of the subject to substance (34, 68). There are numerous critical responses to these readings, but see, in particular, Smith (2004) in response to Žižek and Widder (2001) in response to Badiou.

[10] Deleuze and Guattari's molecular/molar distinction is borrowed from chemistry, where a mole – also known as Avogadro's number, or approximately 6.022×10^{23} – is the number of atoms or molecules of a substance needed for its aggregate mass in grams to equal its atomic number: thus a mole of carbon, whose atomic number is 12, will be 12 grams, and a mole of oxygen, whose atomic number is 16, will be 16 grams, etc. Among its applications in nineteenth-century chemistry, the mole was used to establish constants that emerge from large statistical aggregates. An example is the ideal gas law, which holds that equal volumes of different gases placed under the same temperature and pressure conditions will contain the same number of molecules. For Deleuze and Guattari, the molar is a domain where constitutive or molecular forces are configured "*according to the laws of large numbers*" (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 287).

[11] For a more conventional account featuring close readings of Nietzsche's and Deleuze's texts see Widder (2012: 63-70).

[12] *Parkinson* (1974). The exchange takes place in the first few minutes of the interview.

[13] Frazier was indeed knocked down six times, but never had a chance to walk into another one as the referee called a halt to the fight at 1:35 into the second round.

[14] Ali famously broke many rules of proper technique for punching and avoiding punches, etc.

[15] "Destiny never consists in step-by-step deterministic relations between presents which succeed one another according to the order of a represented time. Rather, it implies between successive presents non-localisable connections, actions at a distance, systems of replay, resonance and echoes, objective chances, signs, signals, and roles which transcend spatial locations and temporal successions. We say of successive presents which express a destiny that they always play out the same thing, the same story, but at different levels: here more or less relaxed, there more or less contracted. This is why destiny accords so badly with determinism but so well with freedom: freedom lies in choosing the levels" (Deleuze 1994: 83).

[16] "This makes it clear that, in the term *subject*…I am…designating…the Cartesian subject, who appears at the moment when doubt is recognized as certainty – except that, through my approach, the bases of this subject prove to be wider, but, at the same time much more amenable to the certainty that eludes it. This is what the unconscious is" (Lacan 1981: 126).

[17] "This [Spinozist] position is not tenable for us. Experience show us that Kant is more true, and I have proved that his theory of consciousness, when he writes of practical reason, is sustained only by giving a specification of the moral law which, looked at more closely, is simply desire in its pure state" (Lacan 1981: 275).

[18] Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 159-160) identify three key stratifications: the organism, which stratifies the body, subjectification, which stratifies consciousness, and signification, which stratifies language and the unconscious (insofar as the latter can, pace Lacan, be structured like a language).

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[19] The reference to Aristotle is meant to be a loose one. Among other things, the natural telos of Aristotle's political animal is antithetical to both Foucauldian practices of the self and Deleuzo-Guattarian micropolitics.