

## ‘Framing Militancy’

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Goldsmith’s, September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2009

### **1) Militant Dysphoria:**

-My interest right now is in reformatting the politics of continental philosophy, away from its tendency towards grand abstractions, and focusing it more towards grappling with the concrete contours of the world.

-I take it that this basic imperative follows from three ideas:

- (1) Non-philosophy’s insistence that it is the real which determines its own objectification in thought. In other words, the reality of any particular political situation is what must be *allowed* and *permitted* to determine its own thought.
- (2) Actor-network theory’s idea of ‘empirical metaphysics’ – the idea that we can’t predetermine what entities are operating in a particular situation, and who is responsible for what actions. This means, for instance, getting rid of the idea of a pre-established revolutionary actor.
- (3) Lastly, the imperative to work within the networks we’re embedded in stems from the materialist belief that thought is not the medium through which objects appear, but rather thought is an object alongside other objects. Theory, in other words, cannot be independent of its physical and social conditioning.

-Now one of the interesting points about Dominic’s book in this regards is that the focus on militant dysphoria very much requires some form of distancing to take place. The militant is precisely the one who no longer takes comfort in everyday pleasures, and is no longer appeased by the mildness of mainstream debate. The militant, in some yet to be specified sense, exists outside of the typical networks. So one of the questions I want to try and suggest an answer to, is how to reconcile this distancing that Dominic highlights, with the necessarily flat ontology of a true materialism. What does distancing precisely mean when there’s no transcendent space to escape into?

-Let’s begin with Dominic’s outlining of militant dysphoria:

-“In that experience, the world appears before us in a kind of disfigured objectivity. We are no longer fully immersed in it, or engaged with it; indeed, our habitual satisfactions and modes of engagement are suspended, placed beyond reach. It is at this moment, however, that the “mechanisms of power” truly become accessible to understanding. The experience of the cold world is one of dislocation, of eviction; of being eased or jiggled or jolted out of one’s place in the world.” (*Cold World*, 12)

-Taking our leave from this description, what I want to do today is to place the militant subject within the framework of actor-network theory. I think this move can show how a necessarily embedded actor can nevertheless distance itself, and it can also provide some suggestions for how a militant can change society. To give away the ending, I'm going to suggest that Michel Callon's notion of 'framing' can give us some useful traction on these problems.

## **2) Framing and Dysphoria in a Materialist World:**

-For actor-network theory, we're embedded within socio-technical assemblages – a collection of human and non-human actors that comprise our modern-day world. Michel Callon takes this basic presupposition, and raises a traditional economic question. Basically, how do calculative agencies arise? Or in other words, how does the rational, economic actor of neoclassical economics arise? Now in standard economics, this actor has perfect knowledge and perfect rationality. She can immediately grasp all of her preferences and choose the best option in any particular situation. Clearly, that's not the case in real-world economics – we're subject to very strict limitations with our abilities. And so Callon tries to show how this limited rational actor can emerge. And the answer he comes up with is framing. Rather than the actor taking into account every single link it has to other actors, and rather than taking into account every single piece of knowledge it has access to, Callon argues that "framing demarcates, in regards to the network of relationships, those which are taken into account and those which are ignored." (*The Laws of Markets*, 15)

-So on one level, framing is like the establishment of firewalls between different areas of the collective – certain aspects are taken into account when making a decision, while others are left aside as externalities. But it's significant to note that this framing doesn't occur simply through cognitive restraint – things have to be *made* calculable. As Callon says at one point, "the framing process does not just depend on [a] commitment by the actors themselves; it is rooted in the outside world, in various physical and organizational devices." (*The Laws of Markets*, 249) In framing, agency is distributed. It is not that a particular actor wills something to be and immediately produces it. Rather, a whole series of actors – both human and nonhuman – have to collaborate to produce calculative subjects.

-To give an example, Callon talks about a small strawberry market set up in a warehouse. In order for rational neoclassical actors to emerge, there needed to be a number of components.

- (1) a whole architectural layout of the market, with buyers on one side of a room, sellers on the other, and both separated by a wall;
- (2) the products displayed side-by-side so that preferences can be formed;

- (3) an auctioneer guiding the process of finding the market prices;
- (4) a computerized data catalogue of all the goods;
- (5) and a series of rules outlining how the auction was to proceed

In other words, rather than individuals embedded within a network, it is an entire assemblage which creates agencies from material and ideational elements. The whole assemblage creates the agency, with responsibility and attribution of agency often demarcated from *within* the assemblage (for example, through legal means).

-Now what's particularly interesting for our purposes here is that framing is explicitly seen by Callon to be a matter of *disentanglement*. What framing does is to suspend all the standard relations we're involved in, precisely so that we don't need to be perfectly rational actors with infinite knowledge and infinite time to make the perfect decision. And with this emphasis on disentangling, framing mirrors the process of the militant becoming separated from typical everyday relations.

-So framing answers my initial question of how militant dysphoria can operate in a flat ontology. It's not that the militant suddenly extracts his self from his own embeddedness in a collective, rising above the mess of material reality as it were. Rather framing's reliance on external networks shows that the militant is still embedded. But what happens is that the militant is the one whose framing – and thus whose network that informs them – is *contracted* and made smaller. The normal relations we find ourselves in – worried about our jobs, worried about our friendships, worried about our social status – are evacuated from the frame. The frame becomes smaller, to the point of almost disappearing.

-Intriguingly, you can see this process of frame contraction in the jihadist movement as well. Marc Sageman, a prominent researcher of jihadist networks, shows that 78% of the terrorists he covered were, in his words, "cut off from their cultural and social origins, far from families and friends." (*Understanding Terrorist Networks*, 92) They also almost always retreated into very small groups of 3 or 4 friends, disconnecting themselves from their wider social context. Again, the pre-requisite for militancy – in this case, violent militancy – seems to be a contraction of the framing around a particular subject.

-But there's one big distinction to make between Callon's framing for calculative subjects, and Dominic's framing for militant subjects. Contraction alone isn't enough to distinguish the militant from the calculating subject. What ultimately distinguishes them is that the militant is precisely the one who doesn't subject themselves to the calculations of the world as it presents itself, but rather, like Badiou's subject, follows the aleatory path of a truth that is irreducible to the situation.

-To some degree, we can see this in Dominic's discussion of the killing of Finke – the bystander who was killed by the RAF when they broke Baader out of custody. In the

militant's frame, this innocent bystander never enters into the calculations involved in their path. It's rather bourgeois morality which would force this calculation onto the agencies involved, but it's excluded here by the assemblage that has framed the militant. Whereas bourgeois morality would have paralyzed action by trying to calculate every possible consequence in advance, the militant has their frame contracted to a much more myopic vision.

-It is this aspect which makes the militant – potentially – a progressive and transformative agent, rather than a reactionary and conservative impediment. A sort of willful blindness, a contraction of the frame *beyond* everyday concerns, and the focusing of energies on a singular path.

-A whole study could be done on the socio-technical assemblages and the various tools that construct militant subjects – and some of them are outlined in Dominic's book – but for today I want to finish by turning to another aspect.

### **3) The Uses of Militant Dysphoria:**

-In order to be a transformative subject, disentanglement from society is only a necessary condition, and not yet a sufficient one. What is needed to fulfill this status, is the reinsertion into the situation.

-With framing showing how the militant can be both distanced from society's self-presentation, as well as remaining embedded within that society, the question has to be of working *within* the networks we find ourselves in.

-Going back to Marx, we can see aspects of this already in his work. Marx showed how a heterogeneous set of components were necessary conditions for the emergence of capitalism (for example, landless labourers, commodity production, primitive accumulation, a sufficient level of technical sophistication, and a sufficient base of money for large-scale factories to emerge). These historical conditions are the different components that allow the systemic logic of capitalism to first arise. Understood in this way, capitalism didn't arise all at once, but rather was slowly created over centuries. Many of these elements had existed a long time before capitalism ever arose. But it was only when they were placed together, in a particular configuration, that the logic of accumulation ever emerged.

-What actor-network theory is doing now is refining these hypotheses by looking at the emergence of new components – whether they be technical refinements that change the production process, or whether they're new financial equations that shift the financial sector, or whether they're new business models. Capitalism remains a collection of specific and diverse components – but one that is constantly changing in small and incremental ways that refute any grand analysis on the basis of dialectics or class struggle.

-Taking these lessons from how something revolutionary like capitalism emerged, we can see that what is needed now is *not* a full-scale revolution, nor an overthrowing of an entire network, but rather the piece-meal construction of the conditions for a *new* system to emerge. Just as capitalism relied on a particular set of components to be in place before it could historically emerge, so too do other socio-economic systems require a specific set of components. Our task should be to work these out, and then set to fighting for them piece by piece.

-It means, to put it simply, using reform to bring about revolution. In other words, this is not an all-or-nothing affair, but rather something that will take time, energy and struggle. A type of 'utopian realism' which works for an inexistent world, but uses the disentangled perspective of the militant to analyze and work towards it, from *within* the situation.

-There's a number of different tactics this entails, all of them ideally occurring simultaneously. That is to say, it's not a logic of destruction, *then* creation; rather destruction is immediately creative:

- (1) analyze how tipping points can be constructed, where a system shifts into a qualitatively different configuration
  - a. There's been a lot of work on modeling tipping points and phase shifts, and in *preventing* their destructive consequences. But there's been very little work on how to *actively* bring about these types of things.
- (2) figure out the pillar components of the current system, and methodically focus on these points
  - a. we can create incompatibilities between components in order to create a disruption
  - b. we can also force positive and negative feedback loops that cause elements to fail
- (3) develop the component conditions for a new system to emerge
  - a. This entails not just working for small but important steps like a raise in the minimum wage, or universal health care, or more regulations on the financial industry. It means taking a long-term, strategic look at how to bring about a new world, and specifically, how these various reform efforts can be made to resonate together towards a revolution.
- (4) release the socio-technical components of the current system from their subsumption in the logic of the system
  - a. Objects have their own agency, and by releasing them from their subsumption in a valorization process, they can be allowed to form different configurations amongst themselves.
- (5) experiment with creating new logics and new components, and actively replicating successful models

- a. We also need models of how experimental additions both proliferate and create new conduits between objects.
- (6) determine critical temporal points, and focus energies on issues where path dependencies are being set – these points are crucial for long-term change
- (7) link all of these efforts together, in a systematic fashion, in order to make them resonate together and establish a force beyond their individual means