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Book Review: Lines of Flight: For Another World of Possibilities by Félix Guattari

blogs.lse.ac.uk/lseviewofbooks/2016/06/09/book-review-lines-of-flight-for-another-world-of-possibilities-by-felix-guattari/

Lines of Flight: For Another World of Possibilities offers an early but newly-translated text by Félix Guattari that contributes to his wider project of thinking through social spaces, structures and processes, in particular the political role of groups. Written when Guattari was collaborating with Gilles Deleuze on *A Thousand Plateaus*, this is a challenging read, but one that invigoratingly suggests 'another world of possibilities' when it comes to considering the most pressing issues and growing tensions facing us today, writes **Jodie Matthews**.

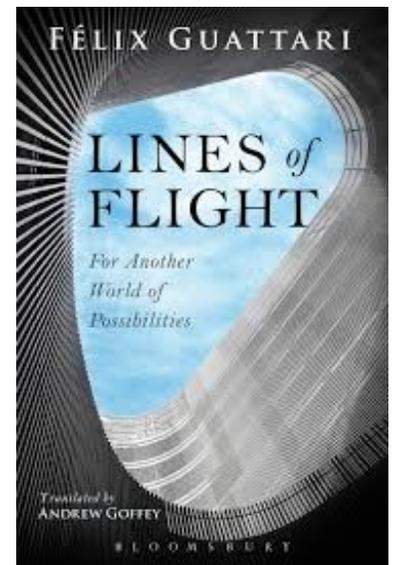
Lines of Flight: For Another World of Possibilities . Félix Guattari. Bloomsbury. 2016.

Find this book: 

Félix Guattari's translator, Andrew Goffey, has described the theorist's style of work as 'intractably baroque'. It is an apt description of the analysis of the spaces, structures and processes of society to be found in this early but newly-translated text by the French philosopher. The difficult nature of Guattari's prose seems a superficial place to start a review of this exploration of the social unconscious, and yet it must surely dominate every reading experience of *Lines of Flight: For Another World of Possibilities*, apart from perhaps that of the practised Guattari specialist. His writing features eighty-word sentences, some that aren't grammatically complete and so don't seem to go anywhere and instances of abstraction masquerading as specificity. And yet, this style can be forgiven, for it has a purpose.

Goffey has elsewhere described Guattari's interest in the 'disruption of the surfaces of sense' and the political implications of 'normalized forms of expression'. Indeed, in *Lines of Flight*, Guattari points to universities and their modes of communication becoming part of the 'equipment of normalisation', dampening their potential as sites of 'revolutionary effervescence'. To write as he does is to demand that we revisit language and meaning. And, to its credit, *Lines of Flight* is also cut through with brilliantly provocative section titles, such as 'Bureaucratic Socialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism'.

Goffey's introduction to *Lines of Flight* helps to locate the work, particularly useful for those wanting to place it in a genealogy of twentieth-century European thought. The text is part of Guattari's larger project of thinking through the political role of groups. It was originally titled 'Collective Equipment and Semiotic Subjugation', and was written around the time that Guattari was collaborating on *A Thousand Plateaus* with Gilles Deleuze, feeding directly into that landmark text. As well as being a philosophical piece, *Lines of Flight* was supposed to be practical: it was written as a report for the Ministère de l'équipement (created under the Georges Pompidou government in 1960), which was concerned with such things as transport, public works and construction. It is astonishing to think quite what the staff of the Ministry would have made of it.



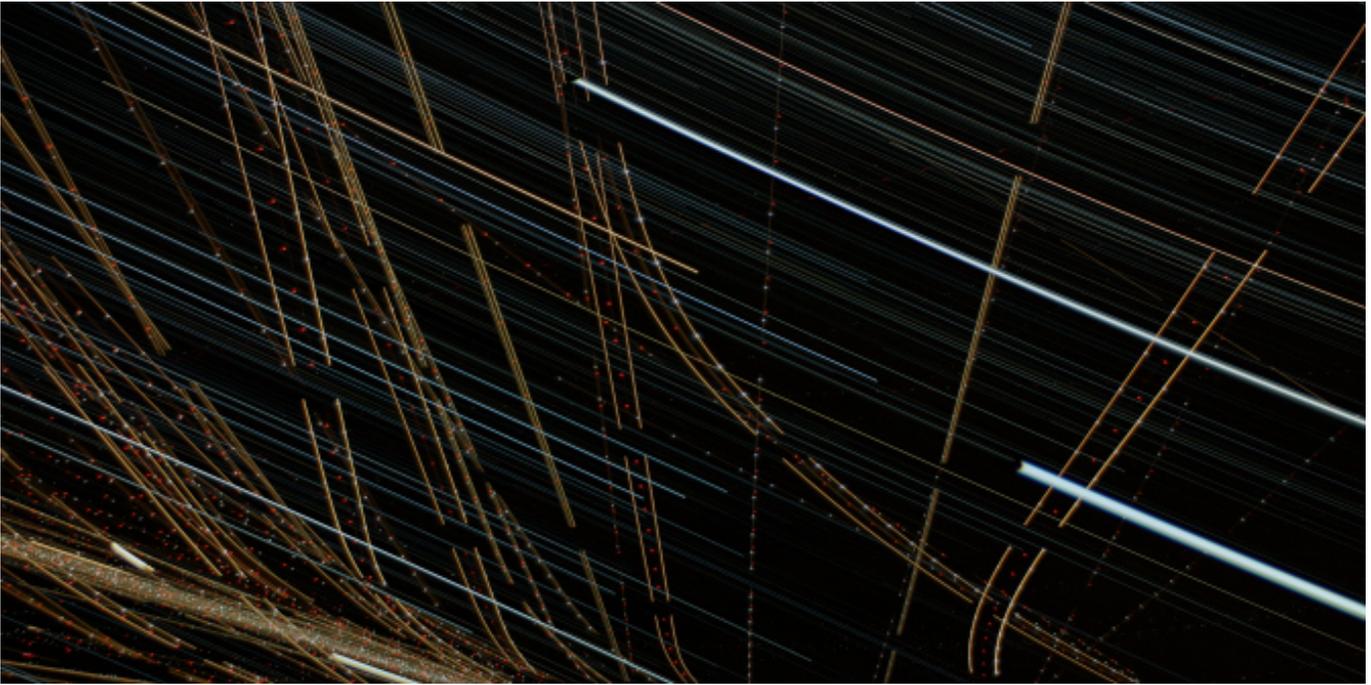


Image Credit: Crowded London Skies (Alexander Baxevanis CC 2.0)

In a section headed 'The Myth of Human Nature', Guattari asserts that 'the individual is entirely fabricated by society, in particular by its collective equipment', undermining humanist ideologies with that assertion. That 'collective equipment' is not just the walls, offices and circulations that might primarily have concerned the Ministry, but also 'rituals of submission': all the ways in which we are shaped by our existence in groups.

As a whole, the work explains that 'the unconscious is neither individual nor collective, it is everywhere that a labour of signs bears on reality and constitutes a "vision" of the world'. In other words, any context – economic, scientific, artistic – in which the world is represented, thought of or explained has an unconscious where, like the unconscious described by psychoanalysts, things are repressed. This is what Guattari calls the 'complexity of contexts', and to try to understand these via a set of semiotic master keys is absurd. The ideas, images and uprisings repressed in a school in twentieth-century Paris, for instance, are not those repressed in a bedroom in fifteenth-century Spain, an asylum in nineteenth-century England or the Sennedd in twenty-first-century Wales. The idea that there could be some universal referent to unlock the power, politics and meaning of every context is an error of everyday existence. In fact, for Guattari, such a belief is 'a fundamental procedure for the dissimulation of the real functioning of power formations'. The search for those master keys masks what's really going on. Being cannot be reduced to 'eternal and universal coordinates'. In other words, the book asks how we can really understand our relationships to each other and to the world in specific times, places and discourses, and what the limits of that understanding might be.

Despite – or perhaps because – of the stylistic complexities mentioned above, there are many philosophical or applied 'lines of flight' from this text: it could potentially be many things to many thinkers. I propose one of these in more detail below, but other possibilities include the usefulness of Guattari's rejection of humanist ideologies in exploring the human/animal relationship, especially in the third section of the book; his description in 'The Traps of Ideology' of where he parts company with Louis Althusser (in short: 'everything can become an infrastructure!'); the importance of moving beyond manifest discourse (legal, regulatory, etc) to grasp repression in capitalist regimes; and the use of Guattari's description of 'micro-struggles' to see how liberal conservatism co-opts 'social desire' in order to control it.

As the above list shows, much of this theory is eminently applicable to conditions in the twenty-first century. This particularly struck me when reading a chapter on 'A Molecular Revolution'. Here, Guattari notes that 'the breaks

between professional life, leisure and education, between private life and public life, the valorisation of serious mindedness, even being self-sacrificing, when it is a question of labour, seem to constitute the very foundations of every society'. Despite this quotation seeming to contradict Guattari's insistence on the complexity of contexts somewhat, I think that the breaks he mentions might certainly be constitutive of our contemporary being in relation to social media and digital communication. Column inches are filled with advice on how to prevent work email polluting one's home life. Are we looking to use the boundary between home and work as a way of defining who we are? The meaning of the gap between the public performance of identity via Facebook and Instagram and an 'authentic' self is one of the puzzles of this decade. The labour of finding love (or at least a mate) online is as constitutive of our culture as medieval courtly love was in another age. These are all merely untested suggestions that take a line of flight from Guattari's work.

'People have been taught to clap in time', says Guattari, but he saw a political shift that complicated the rhythm: 'left *and* right, inextricably mixed up, socialism *and* barbarity, fascism *and* revolution'. In a political context now defined by these mixtures, the capacity to analyse the repressions and tensions of our social unconscious is urgently acquired. Rather to my surprise, *Lines of Flight* really does suggest, as the subtitle has it, 'another world of possibilities'.

Jodie Matthews is a Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Huddersfield. Her research examines the representation of travelling communities in Britain in the nineteenth century, including Romani people and canal boat people. She has a background in Critical and Cultural Theory. [Read more reviews by Jodie Matthews.](#)

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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