Creativity as criticism

The philosophical constructivism of Deleuze and Guattari

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At first glance, Deleuze and Guattari’s *What is Philosophy?* may appear to confirm the mainstream critical opinion that poststructuralism has gone astray. What was once a radical agenda questioning the legitimacy of social institutions and the nature of modern subjectivity has now become, in the words of one reviewer, a matter of doing ‘philosophy for philosophy’s sake’. The abandonment of their earlier interrogations into the machinations of desire in this, their last work together, may have sanctioned the view that Deleuze and Guattari were always really ivory tower metaphysicians inclined towards an arid scholasticism. From this perspective, their investigation into that most intractable of problems, the nature of philosophy, is indicative of a common tendency within poststructuralism towards an uncritical variety of abstruse theorizing that all too easily loses touch with the demands of practical social criticism.

A thorough reading of *What is Philosophy?* shows that this charge is invalid. As I will argue, the constructivist view of philosophy outlined by Deleuze and Guattari culminates in a carefully crafted account of what it is to be a social critic. Specifically, *What is Philosophy?* is the most convincing attempt to date to reveal the philosophical claims implicit within poststructuralist theoretical analysis and critical practice. As such, it should not be dismissed as the product of ageing intellectuals losing touch with social and political reality; nor should it be confined to dusty shelves full of obscure works by difficult ‘continental’ philosophers. Its rightful place is alongside the ‘classics’ of contemporary thought as a novel and compelling account of what it is to be a (poststructuralist) social critic.

**What is philosophy?**

Deleuze and Guattari give a deceptively simple answer to this question: ‘philosophy’, they say, ‘is the discipline that involves creating concepts.’ At first glance this definition is hardly contentious. Its critical impact, though, is clear from the conceptions of philosophy that it excludes: namely, philosophy as ‘contemplation, reflection and communication’. Philosophy as contemplation Deleuze and Guattari call ‘objective idealism’, and it is clear that they have Plato in mind as the founder of this approach. For Plato, philosophy was the contemplation of ‘Ideas’. In *The Republic*, for example, Plato is able to equate justice in the individual with justice in the community because the ‘Idea of Justice’ resides in neither the individual nor the community but in a separate realm of pure ‘Ideas’, in the bright world outside the cave. Philosophy as reflection Deleuze and Guattari call ‘subjective idealism’, and here they have both Descartes and Kant in mind. In Cartesian philosophy the doubting subject cannot be sure of the objective status of ‘Ideas’; Platonism, whether right or wrong, must be bracketed out of the equation. Yet, in the act of doubting, Descartes rediscovers the ‘Idea’, only now it resides within the subject as the ‘I think’, the famous Cartesian ‘cogito’. Although Kant called into question the Cartesian ‘cogito’, the approach of reflecting upon an agent’s self-knowledge was maintained (the transcendental categories replacing the activity of doubting). Philosophy, on this account, is reflection upon the subject’s implicit knowledge of thought (in Descartes) or thought, space and time (in Kant). According to this approach, ‘objectivity will … assume a certainty of knowledge rather than presuppose a truth recognized as pre-existing, or already there.’

Philosophy as communication Deleuze and Guattari call ‘intersubjective idealism’, a philosophical moment whose beginnings they associate with phenomenology, in particular the work of Husserl. Husserl’s project was to reintroduce the Kantian subject to the phenomenal world, not in order to renounce transcendence but to put the transcendental subject on the solid empirical ground of ‘actual experience’. As Deleuze and Guattari explain, the subject’s transcendence via such
experience has a triple root: ‘the subject constitutes first of all a sensory world filled with objects, then an intersubjective world filled by the other, and finally a common ideal world.’ The transcendent ‘Idea’, on this account, is neither a pre-existing object, nor a presupposition of subjective reflection, but a consequence of intersubjective interaction. Philosophical activity becomes indistinguishable from the ‘communication’ (broadly defined) that takes place between subjects.

That Deleuze and Guattari take these differing accounts of philosophical activity to be variants of ‘idealism’ already suggests the tenor of their critique. Contemplation, reflection or communication, they argue, cannot be definitive of philosophical activity because the concepts ‘contemplation’, ‘reflection’ and ‘communication’ must first and foremost be created. What they say of Plato in this context applies equally to Descartes, Kant and Husserl: ‘Plato teaches the opposite of what he does: he creates concepts but needs to set them up as representing the uncreated that precedes them.’ Deleuze and Guattari are not suggesting that human beings do not ‘contemplate, reflect or communicate’, nor that philosophy should not concern itself with these actions, only that it is a mistake to equate these actions with philosophical activity itself. Philosophy, they say, becomes ‘idealism’ when it forgets this distinction.

Surely treating philosophy as a form of constructivism, as the creation of concepts, is also susceptible to the charge of idealism? Is ‘creation’ not a concept, and a distinct activity, as surely as contemplation, reflection and communication? One response would be: if creation is a concept, as a concept it must first and foremost be created, thus retaining the idea of philosophy as the creation of concepts. Does this help? To pursue this line is to ground philosophy in a representation of the ‘uncreated of creation’, precisely the kind of argument that engenders the philosophical idealism Deleuze and Guattari hope to avoid. Besides, to equate philosophy with creation and leave the matter at that would be to neglect the fact that other disciplines, such as science and art, are equally creative. To give substance to the idea that philosophy is the creation of concepts, and thereby meet the charge of idealism, one must look more carefully at what is being created: the concept.

What is a concept?

For Deleuze and Guattari, every concept is multiple. There is no concept with only one component – the Cartesian ‘cogito’, for example, involves the concepts of ‘doubting’, ‘thinking’ and ‘being’. Neither is there a concept that has infinite components – even ‘so-called universals as ultimate concepts must escape the chaos by circumscribing a universe that explains them’. The concept, therefore, is ‘a finite multiplicity’, ‘defined by the sum of its components’, the component parts being other concepts. Why can there not be any singular or universal concepts? For Deleuze and Guattari, such concepts are impossible because every concept has a ‘history’ and a ‘becoming’. Every concept has a history to the extent that it has passed through previous constellations of concepts and been accorded different roles within the same constellation. Every concept has a becoming to the extent that it forms a junction with other concepts within the same or adjacent field of problems. Given this, there can be no singular concepts to the extent that every concept implicates other concepts, and no universal concepts to the extent that no one concept could survey all possible concepts.

Why does every concept have a history and a becoming? For Deleuze and Guattari, it is not so much that concepts are embroiled within changing ‘social and historical contexts’, though of course they are; rather, it is because every concept has an ‘atemporal’ and ‘acontextual’ feature at its core. As well as ‘surveying’ its conceptual field, every concept inaugurates what Deleuze and Guattari call the ‘plane of immanence’ of the concept. The plane of immanence is ‘neither a concept nor the concept of all concepts’. It is, rather, a preconceptual field presupposed within the concept, ‘not in the way that one concept may refer to others but in the way that concepts themselves refer to nonconceptual understanding’. What is this ‘nonconceptual understanding’? Ultimately, Deleuze and Guattari argue, it is ‘the image thought gives itself of what it means to think’. They give the following examples: ‘in Descartes [the plane of immanence] is a matter of a subjective understanding implicitly presupposed by the “I think” as first concept; in Plato it is the virtual image of an already-thought that doubles every actual concept.’ The plane of immanence is inaugurated within the concept (that which is created) and yet it is clearly distinct from the concept (as it is that which expresses the uncreated; that which thought – to put it colloquially – ‘just does’). In this sense, there is always an expression of the nonconceptual, internal to, and yet ‘outside’, the concept. This complex relation is characterized by Deleuze and Guattari as follows: ‘concepts are events, but the plane is the horizon of events, the reservoir or reserve of purely conceptual events.’ We may say, for example, that ‘the present happens’ because there is a ‘past-becoming-future horizon’ presupposed by the idea of the present. Without a presupposed limitless expanse of
time we could not talk of the present. In the
same way, without the presupposed plane of
immanence, concepts would never ‘happen’. Moreover, as the present would never change
without the existence of an ‘eternal horizon’
presupposed within it, without the institu-
tion of the plane – that which thought ‘just
does’ – concepts would never change. The
fact that concepts institute this ‘unthinkable’
plane at their core engenders the movement
of concepts, their history and becoming.15

Two important consequences follow
from this discussion. First, the initial claim
– that treating philosophy as ‘contempla-
tion, reflection or communication’ leads
philosophers to confuse the concepts they
create with the activity of creation – can be
redeployed in a more precise way. Having
explored the nature of the concept, the
problem of ‘idealism’ is less a matter of
confusing concept and creativity than a
matter of confusing the concept with the
presupposed plane of immanence. In ‘ideal-
ist’ approaches, the prephilosophical plane
of immanence is always made immanent
to the privileged concept (contemplation,
reflection or communication). As such, the
privileged concept is considered coextensive with the
plane of immanence, rendering both the concept and
the plane transcendental – simply, ‘contemplation’,
‘reflection’ and ‘communication’ are privileged as that
which thought ‘just does’. Philosophy is contemplation
in Plato, for example, because the already-thought
object of contemplation extends across the plane of
immanence inaugurated by the concept ‘contempla-
tion’. In other words, both the object of contemplation
and the activity of contemplation are always already
bound together in the transcendent ‘Idea of Con-
templation’. Philosophy gives rise to transcendence
whenever it confuses the concept it creates with the
plane of immanence instituted by the concept; or, to
put it another way, whenever it confuses the image
it creates of what it is to think. In general, if philosophy
treats the plane of immanence as immanent to a concept, then it creates its
own ‘illusions of transcendence’ (in both concept and
plane). Deleuze and Guattari summarize their position
as follows: ‘whenever immanence is interpreted as
immanent “to” something a confusion of plane and
concept results, so that the concept becomes a tran-
scendent universal and the plane becomes an attribute
in the concept.’16

A second important consequence of the distinction
between concept and plane is that it helps us to see
why philosophical constructivism does not fall prey
to the charge of idealism; or now more correctly, the
charge of attributing immanence ‘to’ something. For
constructivism to escape the charge of idealism the
concept, ‘creation’, must be shown to institute a plane
that is immanent only to itself. Recalling that the plane
of immanence is ‘the image that thought gives itself
of what it means to think’, the question becomes:
‘what is the image of thought that treats thought as
immanent only to itself?’ We already know what,
according to Deleuze and Guattari, thought can not be:
an object for contemplation, a subject of reflection, or
an intersubjective act of communication. But what is
left? Given their critique of these ‘idealist’ accounts,
thought must be devoid of both subjects and objects.
Yet, if there are no subjects or objects in thought,
thought must be viewed as an impersonal field of
thought. If this is the case, there must also be no
boundaries to thought, as boundaries would reinstatethe
plane as immanent to whatever constituted the
boundary. What this suggests is that thought must
be viewed as ‘pure movement’, where movement is
taken to be ‘infinite movement or movement of the
infinite’.17 As Deleuze and Guattari put it: ‘thought
constitutes a simple “possibility” of thinking without yet defining a thinker capable of it and able to say “I”.

The ‘absolute’ plane of immanence, the plane which is immanent only to itself, is the pure movement constitutive of the possibility of thought.

For Deleuze and Guattari, this is not ‘thought-as-the-unconscious’, irrespective of whether or not the unconscious is deemed to be an attribute of persons or an attribute of a structural field, as ‘the unconscious’ resides firmly within the realm of the conceptual. Nor is this ‘thought-as-consciousness’. As already noted, Deleuze and Guattari refute the idea of thought as populated by subjects (or objects); yet, even if thought is deemed to be wholly co-extensive with consciousness, this still requires a conception of thought as ‘immanent-to-consciousness’. The failure of this (Hegelian) approach, for Deleuze and Guattari, is that it gets things the wrong way round: ‘immanence is not immanent to consciousness’; rather, consciousness is immanent to immanence. Taking one further example, the plane of immanence is not ‘thought-as-reason’, irrespective of whether reason is attributed to reflecting subjects or the structural features of linguistic exchange, as reason is a concept as straightforwardly as all the other examples (contemplation, reflection, communication, the unconscious and so on). Moreover, reason could not be the presupposed plane instituted by constructivism as creativity takes on many forms: rational, for sure, but also delirious, dream-like, intuitive, drug-induced and the like. Philosophers do not (always) ‘reason concepts into existence’; they create concepts and subsequently reason about them. As Nietzsche put it, ‘what happens at bottom is that a prejudice, a notion, an “inspiration”, generally a desire of the heart sifted and made abstract, is defended by them with reasons sought after the event.

In general, argue Deleuze and Guattari, we must accept that all attempts to define thought conceptually, ‘thought-as-x’, will ultimately fail because all concepts must first be created. Yet, if all concepts are created, then thought itself must be ‘conceptless’. The image of thought inaugurated by constructivism, therefore, is one of a ‘conceptless plane’. As such, the concept ‘creation’ is distinct from the ‘conceptless’ image of thought it institutes. In other words, constructivism is that which maintains the distinction between concept and plane. The confusion of concept and plane, as noted earlier, was the source of ‘idealist’ approaches to philosophy. Philosophy as the creation of concepts maintains the distinction between concept and plane, and to this extent may be said to avoid the charge of ‘idealism’. Constructivism is that which institutes an image of thought, a plane of immanence, which treats thought as immanent only to itself; that is, thought as an impersonal field of thought. As noted above, this is equivalent to treating thought as a field of pure movement constitutive of the possibility of thought. For Deleuze and Guattari, therefore, thought is not the object or ‘aim’ of philosophy; rather, thought is the nonphilosophical of philosophy, the nonphilosophical that is inaugurated within every act of philosophy.

We are now in a position to appreciate what Deleuze and Guattari understand by ‘good philosophy’. ‘Good philosophy’, they suggest, is that which is the most philosophical. The most philosophical approach to philosophy, however, is that which institutes the most nonphilosophical plane of immanence, that which manages to maintain the distinction between concept and plane. Of course, every philosophy confuses the concept and the plane, constructivism included, by virtue of the fact that a ‘perfect’ or ‘ideal’ philosophy is literally ‘unthinkable’ (thus Deleuze and Guattari are only too aware that ‘the plane of immanence’ is, of course, a concept). But ‘good’ philosophy is that which tries to grasp the plane as immanent only to itself. ‘The supreme act of philosophy’, they say, is ‘not so much to think the plane of immanence as to show that it is there, unthought in every plane, and to think it in this way as the outside and inside of thought, as the not-external outside and the not-internal inside – that which cannot be thought and yet must be thought.’

‘Good’ philosophy is that which, on the one hand, continuously tracks down transcendence wherever it appears and, on the other hand, restores immanence to the nonphilosophical (that which philosophy seeks to conceptualize, which is, ultimately, that which thought ‘just does’).

As it stands, this image of thought as pure movement may be said to ‘idealize’ the question of being; that is, confuse the ‘mental’ concept of creation with the ‘physical’ plane of being. Deleuze and Guattari solve this problem by claiming that ‘movement is not the image of thought without being also the substance of being.’ There is, then, a ‘vitalist ontology’ immanent to philosophical constructivism rather than a rejection, in the manner of much postmodern thought, of ontology per se. Without this ontology, Deleuze and Guattari’s depiction of philosophy would indeed be a variant of the ‘idealist’ approaches discussed earlier – the plane of ‘being’ would be constituted as ‘outside’ and correlatively, the plane of immanence as immanent to thought. With a vitalist ontology, an ontology of movement as the substance of being, the charge of idealism could not be more misplaced. In short,
idealism is avoided because the concept ‘creation’ inaugurates an image of thought as pure movement which retains its immanence by virtue of a vitalist ontology of movement as the substance of being.

**Between concept and plane**

What exactly is the relation between concept and plane? We know that the concept and the plane are intimately connected to each other, and yet wholly distinct. For this to be the case, that which is between the concept and the plane must be ‘external’ to both. The relation itself, in other words, must be understood on its own terms; it must have its own logic. This idea shows the strong connection Deleuze and Guattari have with a certain kind of empiricism. Deleuze credited Hume with being the first to treat ‘the relation’ seriously: ‘he created the first great logic of relations, showing in it that all relations (not only “matters of fact” but also relations among ideas) are external to their terms.’ This is not the empiricism so typical of first-year philosophy classes, where it is taught as a theory of ‘atomism’ or ‘individualism’. A ‘pluralist’ or ‘radical’ empiricism is a theory of ‘associationism’ where between ‘x’ and ‘y’ is ‘and’, not an abstract, eternal or universal ‘x-ness’, ‘y-ness’ or ‘z-ness’. The relation, ‘and’, is constituted as external to the terms ‘x’ and ‘y’.

What constitutes this external relation between concept and plane? In its most general sense, it is ‘a point of view’. When a concept is created it institutes a plane of immanence, but since no concept can encompass the plane of immanence, philosophy always simultaneously invents a ‘point of view’ which ‘brings to life’ the concept and the plane. In *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze and Guattari characterize this ‘point of view’ as the ‘conceptual persona’ of a philosophy. Their choice of phrase is revealing. The ‘point of view’ is neither a concept nor a plane but that which ‘personalizes’ the absolutely impersonal plane by circumscribing a relative position on that plane. The conceptual persona, in other words, constitutes the impersonal field as a ‘perspective’ which then ‘activates’, or ‘insists upon’, the creation of concepts. It may be tempting to associate the conceptual persona that brings philosophy to life with the life of the philosopher. For Deleuze and Guattari, though, this would be a mistake: ‘the conceptual persona is not the philosopher’s representative but, rather, the reverse: the philosopher is the envelope of his principal conceptual persona and of all the other subjects of his philosophy. Conceptual personae are the philosopher’s “heteronyms”, and the philosopher’s name is the simple pseudonym of his personae.’ Once again the Nietzschean heritage is evident: ‘a philosopher: a man who constantly experiences, sees, hears, suspects, hopes, dreams extraordinary things; who is struck by his own thoughts as if from without, as if from above and below.’

While the conceptual persona, in its most general sense, is a point of view construed as external to both the concept and the plane, we can think of it in more particular ways. In *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze and Guattari talk of the conceptual persona as the ‘territory’ mapped out across the plane within the concept. Such territories may be geographical or national, as when one talks about the perspective ‘Italian philosophy’ brings to a set of problems; or they may also be ‘normative’, ‘cultural’, ‘ideological’, ‘historical’, ‘institutional’, ‘global’ and so on. When such territories become ‘sedimented’ in thought, as in the examples just given, we may talk of the formation of philosophical knowledge. Viewing philosophical knowledge in this way gives rise to a greater concern with the ‘territory’ upon which knowledge stakes a claim – ‘how does perspective function to create knowledge?’ – instead of the conditions which may ‘guarantee’ knowledge – ‘what kind of knowledge transcends perspective?’ Put like this, Deleuze and Guattari’s account of philosophical constructivism dovetails neatly with Foucault’s account of genealogy.

**Poststructuralism criticized**

We are now in a position to understand the ways in which Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophical constructivism provides poststructuralist social criticism with the justificatory framework it needs in order to avoid collapsing into incoherence. In particular, three common criticisms of poststructuralist philosophy – those of inconsistent anti-foundationalism, relativism and performative contradiction – no longer hold water if we treat Deleuze and Guattari’s constructivist account of philosophy as a clarification of the philosophical claims implied by poststructuralist social criticism.

*Inconsistent anti-foundationalism.* Poststructuralism is sometimes presented as a variety of anti-foundationalism that, despite itself, continually takes certain ‘foundations’ for granted. As such, poststructuralism is said to steep itself in confusion and error at every turn. While this may be the case for certain varieties of postmodernism, the claim is wholly inappropriate to the poststructuralist philosophy outlined by Deleuze and Guattari. On their account, poststructuralism combines Nietzsche’s insight that thought is
creative with both Spinoza’s insight that this demands an image of thought as immanent only to itself and Bergson’s insight that this in turn requires a vitalist ontology of movement as the substance of being. Far from constituting a lazy and inconsistent anti-foundationality, taking philosophy to be the creation of concepts rests upon very elaborate foundations with a long and complex lineage. As Michael Hardt has put it, ‘poststructuralism does critique a certain notion of foundation, but only to affirm another notion that is more adequate to its ends. Against a transcendental foundation we find an immanent one; against a given, teleological foundation we find a material, open one.’

Relativism. On this account of its systematic incoherence, poststructuralism is portrayed as a form of relativism that rests, therefore, upon the famously paradoxical claim, ‘there is no such thing as truth’. Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘perspectivism’, though, is not the same as relativism (where relativism is taken to entail the denial of all ‘context-independent truths’). For Deleuze and Guattari, philosophical knowledge must be perspectival because of a deep-seated claim to truth – the vitalist ontology that underpins constructivism – so relativism must be refuted to the extent that it impugns the validity of this claim. Deleuze and Guattari do not deny the possibility of philosophical knowledge, quite the reverse; based on the claim to truth of a vitalist ontology, they show that epistemological perspectivism is an inescapable aspect of philosophical thinking and that this perspectivism actually enables the generation of philosophical knowledge. There is no theoretical problem for poststructuralism in accepting a claim to knowledge that arises from a certain perspective. What poststructuralists do deny is the possibility of claims to philosophical knowledge that seek to transcend all perspectives, given the truth of vitalism. As Massumi has put it, ‘we can operate on whichever level [concept–plane–persona combination] seems adequate to the problem we are dealing with, and can choose to emphasize that level’s connection to or separation from the others…. We must remember, however, that the ground is ultimately unstable.’

Performativity contradiction. This criticism, made famous by Habermas’s critiques of Adorno, Foucault and others, takes the anti-rationalist thrust of poststructuralism to be crippingly contradictory. Poststructuralism, it is claimed, surreptitiously deploys the court of reason to condemn reason, thereby contradicting the ‘total critique’ that it seeks to enact. By establishing creativity as the basis of all forms of philosophical critique, however, Deleuze and Guattari effectively displace the charge of performative contradiction. There is little sense in accusing Deleuze and Guattari of ‘using the tools of reason to criticize reason’ when they ground the critical act in creation not reason. The argument is twofold. On the one hand, Deleuze and Guattari claim that all acts of criticism are first and foremost acts of creation, as discussed above. Concepts are created, or ‘old’ concepts are revitalized, as alternatives to those that are being criticized; ‘the fact that Kant criticizes Descartes means only that he sets up a plane and constructs a problem that could not be occupied or completed by the Cartesian cogito.’ On the other hand, creativity has only a contingent relation to rationality: the concept may have been ‘reasoned into existence’, but this does not establish any necessary connection between reason and creativity, as creativity has many, non-rational, forms. The charge of performative contradiction is only salient under two conditions: first, where reason is deemed to have a privileged place in the philosophical lexicon, and second, where philosophers seek to criticize this privileged position without putting anything in its place. Neither of these conditions applies to the constructivist account of philosophy given by Deleuze and Guattari and to this extent the charge is inappropriate. From the perspective of constructivism, the real contradiction is in the neo-Kantian critique of everything but reason: ‘Kant concludes that critique must be a critique of reason by reason itself. Is this not the Kantian contradiction, making reason both the tribunal and the accused?’

All three criticisms seek to highlight internal contradictions within poststructuralism. The strength of Deleuze and Guattari’s constructivist account of philosophy is that it clarifies the claims implicit within poststructuralist social criticism in such a way that these criticisms can be straightforwardly rejected – not by a lazy appeal to a new discipline that is in some vague way ‘beyond the traditional demands of philosophy’, but by a careful reappraisal of debates that have always occurred at the margins of the philosophical canon.

Constructivism and social criticism

Another common charge against poststructuralism, though one quite different in character from the previous three, is that it rests upon a series of normative confusions. The claim is that poststructuralism unwit-
tingly smuggles normative judgements into its analyses while refusing to recognize that this is the case.\textsuperscript{40} Or, if it doesn’t (or shouldn’t) make normative judgements, if it is simply claiming to be a description of how the social and political world works, then it must give up its claim to be a genuinely critical philosophy. Such comments usually invoke the broader claim that social criticism, if it is to be anything at all, must be concerned with the pursuit of rationally defensible norms against which illegitimate and domanitory institutions may be held to account (to this extent, the charge of normative confusion is one that ultimately appeals to a standard external to poststructuralism). The charge of normative confusion, in other words, invites us to ask of Deleuze and Guattari, ‘what, if anything, is constructivist social criticism?’ Only once this issue is addressed is it possible to respond fully to the charge of normative confusion.

While it is not a question that Deleuze and Guattari directly address, in the light of What is Philosophy? one can say, initially at least, that ‘social criticism involves the creation of new concepts of society’.\textsuperscript{41} This general definition of social criticism from a constructivist perspective helps clarify the different elements of constructivist social criticism in three ways (broadly corresponding to the nature of social criticism vis-à-vis the concept, the plane and the persona). First, constructivist social criticism is immanent social criticism. Second, constructivist social criticism is practical social criticism. Third, constructivist social criticism is always ‘brought to life’ by a pragmatic assessment of the present milieu.

The first clarification draws directly upon the previous discussion. One of the claims at the heart of constructivism is that it is not possible to be genuinely critical of a particular concept (or set of concepts) unless one first creates a concept (or set of concepts) as an alternative. The critical act is primarily a creative act. Interesting and challenging social criticism – Habermas’s version of critical theory for example – always arises from the creation of a new terrain of thought.\textsuperscript{42} In itself this is hardly something that Habermas, or other conceptual innovators, would deny or worry about. The more challenging claim is that one can be a ‘good’ social critic by fully recognizing that constructivism underpins one’s own conceptual innovation. Recalling the arguments discussed above, this demands that one must keep the concept, the plane of immanence and the conceptual persona as distanced and distinct as possible. Taking the previous example, the problem with Habermas’s critical theory, from a constructivist perspective, is that it blurs the critical concepts it creates (say, discourse ethics) with the plane of immanence it institutes (the lifeworld of undistorted communicative encounters) because the conceptual persona that ‘brings it to life’ embodies the properties of both (the perspective of the rational and moral interlocutor is thereby privileged over other perspectives). As a result, Habermas’s social criticism does not avoid transcendentalism to the extent that it confuses the perspective it brings to thought with that which thought ‘just does’.\textsuperscript{43} For Deleuze and Guattari, social criticism is always creative but ‘good’ social criticism is always constructivist; that is, it maintains a position of immanence by recognizing the constructedness of its own perspective.

A legitimate response to this picture of constructivist social criticism is that it seems to reduce criticism to the academic activity of ‘out-creating’ one’s theoretical rivals, rather than giving social criticism a role in actually calling to account ‘real-world’ institutions and norms. Deleuze and Guattari appear to have relinquished the rhizomatic engagement of earlier texts for a philosophy that seeks a role independent from the world in which it operates.\textsuperscript{44} If this is the case, then the critical project inspired by constructivism would seem to be emasculated by a lack of practical bite. Such criticisms, while understandable in view of Deleuze and Guattari’s complex reworking of the philosophical tradition, do not stand up to much scrutiny. The whole thrust of What is Philosophy? is the condemnation of those who seek to halt the creation of concepts in all walks of life. Some of Deleuze and Guattari’s bitterest attacks, for example, concern the ways in which concepts have been harnessed to the service of sales promotion: ‘an absolute disaster for thought whatever its benefits might be, of course, from the viewpoint of universal capitalism’.\textsuperscript{45} But wherever and whenever concepts are used in ‘the social and political world’ (though this phrase itself is not beyond scrutiny) there is the possibility of a constructivist critique. Far from creating a hierarchical role for ‘academic’ social critics, constructivist critique does not distinguish between the use of concepts in an ‘academic’ context and the use of concepts in an ‘everyday’ social context. There is nothing to stop the constructivist social critic from pronouncing on the use of concepts in all realms of life and urging upon people the ‘good’ use of concepts. There is no link, in other words, between constructivism and quietism.

This idea can be expressed in a slightly different form. The practical nature of constructivism is not only about ‘professional’ philosophers pronouncing upon the conceptual matters of everyday life. In attempting
to salvage philosophy from the ravages of modern
capitalism, Deleuze and Guattari are not defending
academic ‘ivory towers’ as the only haven of critical
thought. Quite the reverse, they are defending ‘good’
philosophy (as that which engages in the self-reflexive
creation of concepts) wherever it appears. Such concep-
tual innovation, they recognize, is often stultified by
the disciplinary constraints imposed by the academy.
As they put it in the introduction to What is Phil-
osophy?, ‘the philosopher is the concept’s friend’
whether she is in the academy or not. This implies
a ‘democratization’ of philosophy where everybody
who uses concepts is a philosopher and, therefore, may
also be a ‘good’ philosopher; ‘so long as there is a time
and a place for creating concepts, the operation that
undertakes this will be called philosophy, or will be
indistinguishable from philosophy even if it is called
something else’. An example of a ‘good’ philosopher
in a non-academic context would be the nomad who,
in refusing the sedentary thought of the state, creates
new ways of living, new concepts. Equally though,
the nomadic lifestyle itself may become sedimented
into a regime of thought that could be just as stultify-
ing as the state-thought it sought initially to oppose,
but which it now resembles (the injunction, ‘We must
all be nomads!’ is an example of state-thought to the
extent that it circumscribes the creation of concepts).

For Deleuze and Guattari, therefore, one must always
approach concept creation pragmatically, not dogmati-
cally. ‘Good’ social criticism is always aware of its
context and always ready to be on the move.

This leads on to the third clarification of con-
structivist social criticism, namely that it involves a
pragmatic approach to the present. Given that con-
structivism recognizes its own perspectival charac-
ter, constructivist social criticism must always be aware of
the perspective-dependent nature of the forms of criti-
cal knowledge it generates and must, therefore, use as
its ‘starting point’ its embeddedness within a given
perspective. We can explore what this entails vis-à-vis
the normative dimension of social crit-icism through a
con-structivist intervention in the debates surrounding
‘the right and the good’.

For the constructivist, the neo-Kantian concern
with the priority of the right over the good emerges
from a legitimate suspicion of traditional moral ontolo-
gies. The constructivist and the neo-Kantian can agree
that there are very real dangers in affirming con-
ceptions of the good over the right – in particular,
the danger that marginal groups in society will be
(at best) underrepresented or (at worst) actively
excluded. To favour any particular ‘comprehensive
d doctrine’ – no matter how thin – is indeed an unten-
able position in light of the ‘reasonable differences’
over the legitimacy of such doctrines that characterize
modern societies. However, constructivism retains a
strong sense of sympathy with the communitarian
critique of neo-Kantianism. The idea that neo-Kantian-
ism invokes an impoverished sense of what it means
to be a human agent; the idea that neo-Kantianism
does not address the ‘background understandings’ that
generate moral decisions; the idea that neo-Kantianism
has insufficiently interrogated ‘the good’ – all of these
must strike the constructivist as serious problems for
neo-Kantianism. Constructivists and communitarians
alike remain unconvinced that neo-Kantianism can
realize the task it sets itself – the rational justification
of moral norms that do not give priority to one particular version of the ‘good-life’. Where neo-Kantianism accuses the communitarians of being wedded to old-fashioned ontologies and untenable teleologies, the communitarians accuse the neo-Kantians of surreptitiously advocating ‘a comprehensive doctrine’ of their own (without admitting it). Constructivists tend to agree with both, though on grounds that neither would accept.

As argued above, constructivism is not suspicious of ontology tout court, though it is suspicious of the kind of troubling moral ontologies found in many communitarian accounts; Taylor’s realist meta-ethics, for example, imbues the plane of immanence with a moral dimension that circumscribes the plane as immanent to conceptions of ‘the good’. Nor is constructivism suspicious of practical reason tout court. In the neo-Kantian affirmation of a ‘critical society’ that actively encourages difference to flourish there is a ‘critical ethic’ that is very dear to constructivism. However, as Hardt has put it, ‘the principal fault of the Kantian critique is that of transcendental philosophy itself … Kant’s discovery of a domain beyond the sensible is the creation of a region outside the bounds of the critique that effectively functions as a refuge against critical forces, as a limitation on critical powers.’

For the constructivist, it is not a matter of prioritizing either the right or the good in all cases; rather, it is a matter of prioritizing that which will allow for critical (i.e. creative) thought to flourish. In any particular case this may require prioritizing either the right or the good, but in general it is a matter of conviction for the constructivist that it would be impossible to cover all possible cases with either approach (given the perspectival nature of philosophical knowledge). There is no problem for the constructivist in pragmatically supporting the cause of practical reason in, say, a community where the dominance of one particular world-view is stultifying critical thought. Nor is there any problem for the constructivist in pragmatically supporting the cause of deeply embedded social goods where these are being quashed by the demands of political correctness. The constructivist is neither for the right nor for the good, but is aware of how the right and the good may be mobilized in any particular situation in the service of creative, critical, thought. Equally, therefore, the constructivist is aware that talking in terms of the right and the good may itself suppress the potential for creative thought. If this is the case, then the constructivist will look elsewhere for an opening that will allow a critical perspective to develop. Indeed, if we accept Deleuze and Guattari’s account of the disempowering pervasiveness of normative discourses in modern Western societies, then we would expect to have to look elsewhere. Contrary to the picture painted by Land, however, the pragmatic use of normative discourses may well be the most effective way of initiating a critical environment. In short, the nomad philosopher is neither a neo-Kantian nor a communitarian (though she may occasionally have the same objective as one or other or both) but is first and foremost a conceptual innovator who pragmatically pursues her innovations to see what critical potential they have (in the language of A Thousand Plateaus, the nomad philosopher follows the ‘lines of flight’ and charts the dangers along these lines). Constructivism is the tool-box out of which any number of useful conceptual tools (some well known, others not) may emerge to enable a critical perspective on the present milieu. As Foucault found out in his genealogies, changing one’s topic of inquiry required changing theoretical tools to enable a critical perspective to emerge. Above all, while the constructivist is unflinching when it comes to defining what counts as social criticism, she is thoroughly pragmatic when it comes to defining that which engenders the possibility of social criticism.

Is it not this pragmatism, this intellectual rummaging through the bags of others, that leads to the charge of normative confusion? If we take normative confusion to be the surreptitious use of norms whilst claiming a non-normative approach, then this criticism is misplaced. Having clarified the nature of constructivist social criticism we can now see that the charge of normative confusion itself confuses different analytical levels within constructivism. The conceptual relationship between critique and creativity is based on a series of ontological presuppositions regarding the nature of thought (as discussed above) and entails a non-normative account of what it means to be a social critic. At this level, the level of what the concept ‘criticism’ institutes as a plane of immanence (that which critical thought ‘just does’), there is no concession to a normative approach. It is imperative, therefore, that conceptual innovation is not thought of as a ‘good’ in itself. Constructivism asserts that all social criticism is first and foremost creative, and this has no bearing on whether or not that which is created is ‘a good thing’. Evaluation, as the act of judging novel concepts or ways of life against a pre-established moral framework, is not an act of criticism. If by normative confusion we mean the use of different critical tools, including normative ones, in different situations, then the criticism is appropriate but hardly
damaging. For the constructivist, it is wholly appropriate to be 'confused' on this level, given that the ontological account of criticism implies a perspectivist and therefore pragmatic practice of criticism (given the impossibility of creating a concept of criticism that is wholly coextensive with the plane that it institutes). The practical engagement of the constructivist, therefore, consists in both an analysis of the present milieu and, on the basis of this analysis, a pragmatic appropriation of the means by which thought may become creative within that milieu. Such practical engagement is distinct from the ontological status of criticism in a manner directly analogous to the distinction between the concept–plane conjunction and the conceptual persona; the logic of practice must be understood on its own terms. For the constructivist, therefore, the confusion arises when one perspective, the normative, is posited as the representative of a multitude of critical possibilities.

Constructivist social criticism is immanent, practical and pragmatic. It has a wide remit, a horizontalizing analytical thrust, yet no normative imperative which says, 'we ought to strive towards a radically horizontal society' (whatever that could mean, other than a complete dissolution of the social). If Deleuze and Guattari were found to be proselytizing in favour of such a universal imperative, then they certainly would be in a state of conceptual and normative confusion. However, there is nothing inherent in their description of the philosophical assumptions underpinning poststructuralist social criticism that entails this position.

The debate between poststructuralism and other approaches with theoretical 'family resemblances' (post-Marxism, critical theory, communitarianism) has become closed off in recent years by the acceptance of the claim that poststructuralism is an internally incoherent doctrine with little to offer the critical community other than 'empirical insights'. Deleuze and Guattari's What is Philosophy?, far from confirming this position, gives poststructuralism the strong philosophical foundation that may reopen the channels of communication. Their constructivist account provides a compelling picture of what it is to be a social critic and clears the way for future work looking at, say, the relationship between perspectivism and communitarianism and the ways in which this relationship may foster a poststructuralist intervention in contemporary debates about the nature of liberalism. Far from seeking to shelter poststructuralism in the shadows of ancient metaphysics, What is Philosophy? opens the door to future debate by showing the extent to which poststructuralism taps into a rich lineage of philosophical precursors in the service of creativity as criticism.

Notes

1. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, What is Philosophy?, trans. Graham Burchell and Hugh Tomlinson, Verso, London, 1994. The following discussion assumes that the work of Deleuze and Guattari is usefully categorized as 'poststructuralist', especially in an English-speaking context where the term helps to locate their contribution within an established set of debates. Of course this is not an unproblematic assumption. Given the distinctiveness of their approach, their tendency to sidestep direct engagement with almost all of their theoretical rivals or contemporaries and the complex sources that inform their work, there are grounds for doubting the wisdom of locating Deleuze and Guattari in as close proximity to structuralism as the 'post' prefix implies. That said, it would be foolish to deny the huge influence of structuralism in setting the tone for their collaboration. Despite their critique of varieties of structuralism that treat relations of difference in purely, or overly, symbolic terms, they retain a strong sense of the impersonal structures that operate throughout the social and political world. Where they differ from those they criticize is that they locate social and political structures in a virtual realm defined primarily by its temporality. Deleuze and Guattari’s poststructuralism, therefore, arises from this relocation and manifests itself in their insistence that it is a structure’s capacity for change that defines its nature. For an in-depth discussion see Tim Clark, ‘Deleuze and Structuralism: Towards a Geometry of Sufficient Reason’, in Keith Ansell Pearson, ed., Deleuze and Philosophy: The Difference Engineer, Routledge, London, 1997, pp. 58–72.


3. What is Philosophy?, p. 5. See also p. 7, where they define philosophy as the discipline which generates ‘knowledge through pure concepts’.


5. What is Philosophy?, p. 27.

6. Ibid., p. 142.

7. Ibid., p. 29.

8. Approximately half of What is Philosophy? is dedicated to discussing the relationship between philosophy, science and art. Deleuze summarized the relationship between these different disciplines as follows: ‘There is no order of priority among these disciplines. Each is creative. The true object of science is to create functions, the true object of art is to create sensory aggregates and the object of philosophy is to create concepts’ (Negro-
10. Ibid., p. 35.
11. Ibid., p. 40.
14. Ibid., p. 36. An insightful discussion of the plane of immanence can be found in Philip Goodchild, Gilles Deleuze and the Question of Philosophy, Associated University Presses, Cranbury, 1996.
15. The ‘contextualization’ of concepts within, say, ‘ideological structures’ is a secondary, though nonetheless important, feature.
17. Ibid., p. 37. The logic of this Bergsonian argument is necessarily truncated. For further detail, see Deleuze’s Bergsonism, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, Zone Books, New York, 1991.
19. While I have emphasized the Bergsonian heritage to the plane of immanence, this is by no means the only source from which Deleuze and Guattari draw. Different expressions of the same idea can be traced through a variety of Deleuze’s (and Guattari’s) works. In Difference and Repetition the plane of immanence is a realm of pure positive differentiation. In his book on Spinoza, Deleuze uses the concept of substance to express the same idea. In his works with Guattari, the plane of immanence appears as the realm of productive desire and rhizomes.
21. What is Philosophy?, p. 49.
26. This should not be confused with nineteenth-century conceptions of vitalism that posit the existence of a vital fluid or force which brings dead matter to (organic) life. Such substantivist vitalism, where a non-mechanistic source of life is sought, is quite distinct from the kind of differential vitalism espoused by Deleuze and Guattari, which introduces change into the very mechanics of life.
28. What is Philosophy?, ch. 3.
29. Ibid., p. 64.
31. What is Philosophy?, p. 69. In A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia (trans. Brian Massumi, Athlone Press, London, 1987), Deleuze and Guattari talk of territories in terms of their ‘de-’ and ‘re-’ territorializing functions so as to maintain an immanent conception of the constitution of territory. In a similar way, the conceptual persona should be thought of as the ongoing process of making and remaking a point of view, such that no point of view is accorded a fixed transcendental status.
32. Gilles Deleuze, Foucault, trans. Sean Hand, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1998. The obvious strength of Foucault’s work is in the way he actually charts out the construction of regimes of power–knowledge in ways only hinted at in the work of Deleuze and Guattari.
35. Michel Foucault, Foucault Live, Semiotext(e), New York, 1989, p. 78.
37. This is Thomas McCarthy’s formulation of the charge of performative contradiction; see his ‘Introduction’ to The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, p. xv.
38. What is Philosophy?, p. 32.
41. Or, less demandingly, ‘the creation of new concepts pertaining to social relations’ such that not all social criticism need involve a wholesale redefinition of the social sphere.
42. Jürgen Habermas, Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1990), is a good source of the many novel concepts that Habermas invokes in his version of critical theory.
43. Unfortunately, it is not within the remit of this paper to undertake a fully worked-out constructivist critique of Habermas’s critical theory.
45. What is Philosophy?, p. 12.
46. Ibid., p. 5.
47. Ibid., p. 9.
49. Strictly speaking, given Deleuze and Guattari’s definition of the nomad, upon uttering such a phrase the nomad would cease to be a nomad.
50. See ‘Micropolitics and Segmentarity’ in A Thousand Plateaus for an excellent discussion of the pragmatic nature of political practice.


52. Hardt, Gilles Deleuze: An Apprenticeship in Philosophy, p. 29.

53. See Nick Land, ‘Making it with Death: Remarks on Thanatos and Desiring-Production’ (Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology 24, 1994, p. 75), where he states: ‘nothing could be more politically disastrous than the launching of a moral crusade against Nazism’.

54. The image of the tool-box comes from ‘Intellectuals and Power: A Conversation between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze’, Language, Counter-Memory, Practice, p. 208.


56. If the act of evaluation involves the creation of new concepts, new ways of life, then strictly speaking it is an act of criticism not of evaluation in the sense just described. At best, and as I have just discussed, evaluation may enable criticism to emerge.

57. This is the implication of Hallward’s position; see ‘Gilles Deleuze and the Redemption from Interest’, Radical Philosophy 81, 1997, pp. 6–21. Hallward characterizes Deleuze’s philosophy as one that enjoins us to dissolve all that is Given and embrace the Real (the plane of immanence). This is a greatly mistaken reading of the politics of Deleuze’s constructivist account of philosophy. Deleuze invokes the Real in order to show how we may create new ways of living not so that life should be dissolved into one redemptive univocal realm. Hallward misses this dimension because he does not adequately conceptualize the nature of the relation in Deleuze’s work (the conceptual persona), and he fails, therefore, to keep a critical distance between the Given and the Real (the concept and the plane). He turns Deleuze into an ‘idealism’ despite claiming to recognize that Deleuze is a materialist, and he does this because he does not understand the meaning of ‘idealism’ in Deleuze’s work.