On Affirmation and Critique
Mercedes Bunz & The Cheerful Destructive Character (Leuphana University Lüneburg)
(bunz@leuphana.de)

Girl: There you are. I need your help. I have this workshop in a couple of weeks, and I have problems in bringing it all together. I am stuck.

Cheerful Destructive Character: Oh, Mrs. Always-on-time-with-Deadlines is late. Annoying, isn't it?

G: Shut up. – Let me explain the setting: We plan to look at the onto-epistemological grounds of critique, and I'd like to use this text by Virginia Woolf, in which she discusses the contemporary role of education, women, wages, and the war: "Three Guineas". But there is another thing. I also aim to take up a moment I wrote about last year, when I looked into the problem: how to make a stand when there is no opposing side.

CDC: The text in which you bemoaned the rise of frenemies and the erosion of opposition?

G: Exactly. It so annoys me: confronted with critique, your opponent agrees with you, but just in order to change as few as possible. This year, my plan is to look further into this. I'd like to sharpen the term „affirmation".

CDC: And for this you come to me. Funny chick.

G: It's not about affirmation in this 'I am okay, you are okay' sense. Negative critique is stuck. We discussed this. It prevents you from getting things done. We always critique capitalism, and by the time we're done, after one or two years, capitalism has reinvented itself, and our work starts anew. It has effectively neutralized negative critique. I want a way out.

CDC: Now you're talking. Okay, don't waste my time. Let's start the destruction.

G: But don't give me this … "Apollonian image of a destroyer. This … great bond embracing and unifying all that exists" Walter attributed to you. There is a certain bond between Nietzsche's "amor fati" and you, which I find a bit frightening. I am not that fond of Nietzsche's affirmation, although I must admit there is a certain beauty in saying yes "to all that is questionable and strange in existence" (Nietzsche 1924, 192). But even if we would get rid of all the pathetic „suffering as a pleasure" stuff, in which „heroic spirits ... say Yes to themselves in tragic cruelty" (Nietzsche 1968, 450), I am a bit ... judgmental.

CDC: Don't worry. Nietzsche always preferred Dionysus to Apollo. But there is a certain relation between affirmation and destruction, which you can't deny even if you don't want to let it into your orderly middle class life. Also you shouldn't condemn Nietzsche to early. His concept of affirmation might be of value. Remember: he set it up against Schopenhauer's

nihilism, which in his eyes was simply denying the actual setting with no outcome – he called it "the will to nothingness". In this context, Nietzsche's affirmation is surely transforming the setting. While Adorno simply dismissed the word, Nietzsche had a critical concept of affirmation. Affirmation isn't opportune, it is set as a critique. That was what fascinated Deleuze.

G: He also called the concept of your destructive friend Nietzsche "phantom of affirmation", and rightly so. But I get your point. I respect the work of your friend in setting up affirmation as critique. It allows Deleuze to further untie affirmation from negation. However, Deleuze is after a different mode of affirmation: he wants to change it from a reactive to an active force. No opposition – and this is what interests me. Also we might not forget that Hegel is a rather productive red rag for him, so his dialectical model – thesis-antithesis-synthesis – is also to be avoided. Affirmative critique as a model is radicalized for it can only be about "How to make a difference" if it also answers "how to make it different in itself". Now … where to go from there?

CDC: Aushebeln statt Aufheben.

G: Stop talking in German to me, I don't understand you.

CDC: I have noticed that – German philosophy doesn't seem to upset anyone these days anymore. And on *your* internet, the new niceness rules, and everything is liked. I am definitely not in the Zeitgeist anymore and not sure why you come to me. Apart from one point.

G: Which is?

CDC: The problem. It's the problem that is the point of departure for Deleuze's affirmation. Maybe we can even call it his Archimedean point.

G: What do you mean by that?

[CDC picks up a copy of Difference and Repetition, turns the pages, and reads triumphantly.]

CDC: "The 'problematic' is a state of the world," for: "it is the problem which orientates, conditions and engenders solutions, but these do not resemble the conditions of the problem." (Deleuze 1968, 212) Now there is an interesting rupture, isn't it. I feel very much at home in it. Oh, and this one is for Hegel: "History progresses … by deciding problems and affirming differences." (268)

G: But how is the *problem* connected to *affirmation*?

CDC: See, Deleuze, who is at this point more my friend than yours, Deleuze wants the total destruction of negation.

G: The total destruction? Come on.

CDC: It's true. Sort of. He is struggling to create a concept that isn't just different but "different in itself". To rethink it as an active force, it needs to operate in a different mode. Like: It's boring to bring the subject in the role of the central force of affirmation. It is also boring to affirm a specific argument, thing, element, aspect, or moment – if you do this, you will find yourself still captured by negation.

G: Okay, Affirmation has a different quality than negation. It is a different thing. I get it. But what is it?

CDC: Let's see. (Browses through the book.) In the beginning he states that the negative can't capture the phenomenon of difference. Difference and affirmation, on the other hand, are connected explicitly: "Difference is the object of affirmation or affirmation itself." (52) And again a few pages later: "Affirmation itself is multiple, that it is a creation but also that it must be created as affirming difference, as being difference in itself." (55)

G: But how does this multiple affirmation operate? And how is the affirming of differences related to our problem?

CDC: I'll show you. In *Difference and Repetition* are these quite odd paragraphs I really like, when Deleuze talks about chance and the throw of the dice. There you'll find their relation, for example. See, here. "When chance is sufficiently affirmed the player can no longer lose. (…) This affirmation takes place to the degree that the disparates which emanate from a throw begin to resonate, thereby forming a problem." (198)

G: Let me repeat this. The affirmation of chance takes place – thereby forming a problem. And if we connect this to what you said in the beginning: "it is the problem which orientates, conditions and engenders solutions".

CDC: That's it.

G: That's it. And now I *understand!*

CDC: What do you *understand?*

G: This is what Virginia Woolf does in "Three Guineas"! Instead of making her argument posing her view or conviction, she follows a variety of contradictory voices which she blends into each other. She is forming a problem. This is why she decides to discuss education and wages of women in relation to the question of war. In discussing those issues together, she creates a different problem. It isn't a problem for females anymore. Weaving those voices in, she dislocates the problem. It becomes the problem of an unjust society, and is far more than just a bit of unfairness against women.

CDC: Yes, she is a quite elegant destructor. I think I was always a bit in love with her.

G: My blessings, I am definitely over you. - Now there is one question left: How can we make a problem appear. Or how can we make something a problem for all? I think media plays an important part here, listen. She writes: "Those photographs are not an argument; they are simply a crude statement of fact addressed to the eye."

CDC: Maybe it is also important that you address them in some sort of way?

G: Stop speaking to me in this ironic voice. I don't like it. And I want to talk about the role of media first. Gilbert Simondon says in his critical study of human progress, "technology alone is" (2010, 233) …

CDC: I was afraid you would mention him. Good that there is no time. You tend to get a bit too religious for me, when it comes to technology.

G: What … oh no! You're right: I have to leave otherwise I'll miss the train to the airport. See you on Skype next week? We have to continue this.

CDC: Last time you said this, it took you a year to come back to me, apart from some lousy short emails. But yes. See you on Skype. And next time, bring some biscuits.

References

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