

Adventures in the Profane: Sorcery and Schizoanalysis

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This paper ruminates upon an ongoing conundrum in political theology, whereby the secularization of the political is perceived to offer little actual anti-religious resistance to the foregrounding of politics with a transcendent sovereignty. Saul Newman's recent work has suggested instead that profane, irreligious strategies of desacralization and desecration are required to combat the persistence of theology in social-political structures. Here, I aim to hone the understanding of profane and desacralizing acts in a way Newman leaves undiscussed. By drawing on Phillip Goodchild's and Joshua Delpech-Ramey's contributions to a hermetic reading of Gilles Deleuze's philosophy, this paper interrogates profane strategies by exploring what Deleuze, in his work alongside psychoanalyst Felix Guattari, provocatively terms the "politics of sorcery."¹ The goal is to focus on sorcery as a set of practices, to situate it in relation to Deleuze and Guattari's schizoanalytic method, and to contemplate it as an experimental political activity that may offer fresh ways for thinking about resistance to both capitalism and the theological institutions that haunt it. As a form of pragmatics, sorcery provides both a method by which to strategically gamble with chaos and a model by which a bargain with becoming is made explicit. The paper is divided into three sections: the first defines sorcery as a profane practice, the second situates sorcery in the context of Deleuze's work, and the third outlines the general problematic a profane politics of sorcery presents in the context of capitalism. In this final section, the profane operations of capitalism are brought to bear in order to consider the possibility of a kind of capitalist sorcery. If this is the case, what does it mean to pit one profanity against another? Can capitalism be outplayed at its own game?

I. Sorcery and Political Theology

In his critical introduction to political theology, Saul Newman claims that the theologization of the political field can be read as a consolidation of power that draws a religious fervor about a transcendent center – in short, nothing less than the persistence and perfusion of the sacred in all manner of institutions.² To think in terms of or against political theology is to think through the legitimacy and foundations of structures of power and the many ways they arrange and reinforce dogmatic values and belief networks. Throughout his text, Newman argues that "the depoliticization of theology leads only to the theologization of politics;" in other words, secularization, the gradual departure from explicitly foregrounding politics by appealing to a transcendent authority, only sublimates such authority into covert, implicit forms that silently resume their old roles in the scaffolding of power.³ The upshot of this position is that the

¹ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 247. Hereafter cited TP.

² Cf. Saul Newman, *Political Theology: A Critical Introduction*, 17. Hereafter cited PT.

³ *Ibid.*, 16.

subversion of transcendent authority cannot take place by its mere denial: Newman writes that, “while the formal power of religion has been displaced, modern secularism has unleashed new demons, new forms of sacred dogma and belief systems, whether in the reign of technology and scientific rationality or in the new secular political religions.”⁴ At the close of his book, the author suggests that what is instead needed to combat these structures is not a secular politics, but a profane one. A more subtle, careful form of anti-religious thinking is required, one that pursues the unholy without conflating it with the secular. The question of a profane politics becomes: what does it mean to leave or to desecrate the temple, to vandalize theology rather than root it out? Rather than engage directly in a polemic, the aim of this paper is to hone an understanding of profane and desacralizing acts in a direction left largely undiscussed in Newman’s work, and in so doing suggest a shift from political theology to what other authors have called political spirituality.⁵

Initial insight comes from the positioning of profane and sacred acts as opposing processes: the positive construction and establishment of a holy space – including the world it creates for itself – is juxtaposed with its negative desecration and abandonment. Marcel Mauss’ socio-anthropological examination of magical practices defines these activities not “in terms of the structure of rites, but by the *circumstances* in which these rites occur.”⁶ Contra the banal understanding of cultist incantations that runs rampant in today’s cultural episteme, Mauss is clear that “a magical rite is any rite that does *not* play a role in organized cults – it is private, secret, mysterious and approaches the limit of a prohibited rite.”⁷ The line between religious practice and magical rite is not categorically strict; according to Mauss they occupy the same continuum but are defined by oppositional poles: a theological pole of sacrifice and a magical pole of evil spells.⁸ *Magical practices are distinguished from religious ones not by their respective position on this continuum but by their orientation along it, by their relative relation to what is sacred.* Religion directs itself toward the sacred, reinforcing its local structure; sorcery directs itself away from the sacred, instead enacting a transformation of that structure. Mauss writes: “a priest performing a magical rite does not adopt the normal comportments of his profession: *he turns his back on the altar*, he performs with his left hand what he usually does with his right, and so on and so forth.”⁹ Mauss’ work demonstrates magical practices to be a candidate for profane practices, and although this positioning as profane suggests a strictly

⁴ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁵ See Drucilla Cornell and Stephen Seely’s 2016 *The Spirit of Revolution: Beyond the Dead Ends of Man* for an extended discussion of political spirituality, which I do not have space to discuss here. This paper also especially draws from Delpech-Ramey and Harris’ 2010 “Spiritual Politics after Deleuze” and the articles that follow it in *SubStance* issue 39.

⁶ Marcel Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*, 30. Emphasis added. Hereafter cited Mauss.

⁷ *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 27. The determination of such spells as evil is illustrative of its opposition to justice’s official alliance with theology, the seat of the Good guaranteed and directed by the transcendent position of a sacred position. Strangers, outsiders, heretics, and priests whose congregations have fled have all variously been branded magicians and sorcerers. Cf. Mauss 37-38.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 28. Emphasis added.

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destructive quality, such a characterization is misleading. The work of magic indeed enjoys a certain positive utility.

Isolated and secretive, working against the border of their sacred institutions, the role the sorceress occupies is necessarily liminal: she may exhibit strange, noncodified behaviors or live literally at or beyond the bounds of a village.¹⁰ This liminality ensures her positive efficacy: rather than constructing a world about a sacred space of transcendence, sorcerous incantations are purposed with effecting transversal *transformations* that both spell the downfall of the world from which they are cast and manifest conditions for creating a new one.

Such transformations depend on relations of exchange with outsider forces or agencies that reside in the relatively chaotic milieu surrounding the local structure from which the magical practitioner stands apart.¹¹ This is the sense in which magical rites necessarily involve an alliance with demons or spirits – impersonal anomalous hosts of beings whose power is harnessed in the course of the rite.¹² Citing anthropologist Edward Leach’s work on Kachin witchcraft, Deleuze and Guattari write that, “the sorcerer belongs first of all to a group united to the group over which he or she exercises influence only by alliance.”¹³ The traditional magician influences her local structures by cultivating a relation with this outsider band: “it is not a particular animal, but a whole species of animal with whom the magician has a relationship.”¹⁴ Moreover, the alliance is intensive, invoking “fascinations in which one is overwhelmed by or possessed of certain affects,” and it is this passion which constitutes the demonic pact and grants the sorceress a power of action at a distance.¹⁵ It is through passionate involvement with what is constitutively outside her community (e.g., packs of animals or subtle involutions of the natural world) that the sorceress is able to effectively work to transform her community. In so far as what lies outside this community is uncoded by the ordered translations and interpretations of its locality, it might be said that, through its alliances, sorcery strikes a bargain with regimes of chaos through the unpredictability of demonic and diabolical movements: the intensification of immanence that this magical pact entails is inexact, yet it is nevertheless both empirical and experimental. In making her alliance with the outside, the sorceress must employ all the techniques cultivated through her experience at this border to engage with the unknown, but she cannot say in advance once and for all where the becoming she incites will lead. Such is the sorcerous gambit.

II. Deleuzian Interventions: Political Sorcery

A general notion of sorcery as a profane historical phenomenon has now been sketched: sorcery is a kind of ritual practice that involves a passage beyond a limit through a passionate

¹⁰ Mauss, 33-37.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹² *Ibid.*, 129-130.

¹³ TP, 246.

¹⁴ Mauss, 45.

¹⁵ Delpech-Ramey, Joshua, “Deleuze, Guattari, and the ‘Politics of Sorcery,’” *SubStance* 39, no. 1 (2010): 14. Hereafter cited Delpech-Ramey.

intensification of immanence; a practice whose effects ultimately result in an unspecifiable transformation of that local structure from which the agent has departed and to which they return “with bloodshot eyes.”¹⁶ Many of its aspects nevertheless remain opaque. The aim now is to bring this general picture into focus and inch toward a conception of political sorcery by explicating magical practices in the context of Deleuze and Guattari’s political philosophy in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.

Seen above, the problematic introduced by political theology turns on diagramming and problematizing the persistence of sacred spaces of transcendent authority, and, in particular, examining the ways these manifestations reinforce systems of (hegemonic) power. In shifting to Deleuze and Guattari’s political work, the analysis will in turn shift from a tracing of these hegemonic powers to one that maps an economy of the transformations and interactions they undergo. In their view, capitalism and its modes of representation should not simply be analyzed as ensembles of power but rather as flowing assemblages of desire. In part, this is because for these authors, the burning political question is not how the grip of power can be broken, but rather why political subjects come to desire their own repression and how fluid economies of desire come to be coded and stratified by social formations.¹⁷

For these authors, libidinal economy and political economy are one and the same but operate according to differing regimes. Desires produced through capitalism’s flows of exchange are captured by *state apparatuses* (assemblages that centralize power) that serve as regulative models with which to represent and express legitimate beliefs.¹⁸ Consequently, their claim is that a socio-political analysis that would prioritize structures of power over the economy of desire that produces these very apparatuses cannot get a grip on the source of the real harms of capitalism: the canalized flows of desire that constitute the fluid body of capital itself. The upshot here is that the intervention of a Deleuzian spiritual politics into political theology shifts the terrain of our analysis from a dynamics of power to one of *desire*.¹⁹

To construct a notion of political sorcery, its relation to the pragmatic method of description these thinkers call *schizoanalysis* must be explored. Deleuze and Guattari’s schizoanalytic method maps heterogenous blocks of becoming they call *assemblages*. Each assemblage is territorial, meaning that it expresses a sprawling system of signs whose content is a pragmatic system of actions, all amidst a milieu it continuously interprets. The becoming of each assemblage unfolds according to its *detritorialization*, or the way in which it is carried off by the movements of desire that put these passions and signs into communication.²⁰ The either profane or sacred treatment of transcendent authority takes place here, in the deterritorialization of a given assemblage.²¹ Indeed, the distinction Deleuze and Guattari draw between negative and

¹⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 41.

¹⁷ For an extended discussion of this shift from a politics of power to an emphasis on flows and desire, Cf. Smith, Daniel W. “Flow, Code, and Stock: A Note on Deleuze’s Political Philosophy,” in *Essays on Deleuze*, 160-172.

¹⁸ TP, 464.

¹⁹ Cf. Goodchild, Phillip, “Philosophy as a Way of Life: Deleuze on Thinking and Money,” *SubStance* 39, no. 1 (2010): 29. Hereafter cited Goodchild.

²⁰ TP, 504-5.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 116.

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positive deterritorialization corresponds respectively to the figural orientation of the priest and the sorceress.²² The practices of the priest – conversion, sacred interpretation, and the counter-sorcery of exorcism – are directed toward the temple; the occult rites of the sorceress seek instead to leave it. The priest reterritorializes lines of desire that would flee the territory of the assemblage onto a sacred icon, administering interpretations of actions and passions according to the transcendent authority of a despotic signifier.²³ The sorceress, on the other hand, intentionally deterritorializes desire; she cultivates an alliance, an exchange of passion with those demonic multiplicities that either flee the vortical capture of the priest or freely seethe outside the territory of the assemblage, untranslated by the semiotic regime of the priests.

The positivity of sorcery's line of flight indicates the direction of what Deleuze and Guattari call absolute deterritorialization. Indeed, sorcery is formally introduced in their work as a model for approaching becoming in a way that goes beyond structuralism's tendency to characterize change as evolutionary or filial, a characterization which they argue can only model a mimetic, reproductive notion of change; sorcery provides instead a means by which to think radically creative and hybrid involutory transformations. Their concept of becoming is fundamentally heterogeneous, expressing itself as the singularity of an alliance that marks a border between multiplicities; an alliance, moreover, which is constituted as a contagious exchange of passion: each multiplicity pouring into and transforming the other through a gate synthesized by sorcerous pact.²⁴ Becoming takes place through an "unnatural participation" embodied by the liminal position the sorceress occupies with the outsider packs and spirits she courts.²⁵ Extending this concept of sorcery as far as possible provides a model for absolute deterritorialization: sorcery's attempt to pronounce its "final word" by announcing an alliance that would encompass every dimension, to become everybody/everything, inaugurates the *plane of consistency*: "the intersection of all concrete forms," upon which "all becomings are written like sorcerer's drawings... the ultimate Door providing a way out."²⁶ Such is the task of both sorcery and schizoanalysis: a "whole process of selection of assemblages according to their ability to draw a plane of consistency with an increasing number of connections."²⁷ These operations select blocks of becoming according to their ability to connect to other blocks, expanding a consistent, yet heterogeneous plane of becoming – e.g., fighting, fleeing, or dancing together, but not synchronously.

To suggest, as Deleuze and Guattari do, that there is an entire "politics of sorcery" is to direct us to appreciate the operations of the profane as a dimension of the political which is "elaborated in assemblages that are neither those of the family nor of religion nor of the State."²⁸

²² In the case of relative rather than absolute deterritorialization, this difference is essentially one of proportion: negative if reterritorialization prevails, positive if deterritorialization does.

²³ TP, 117.

²⁴ TP, 237-8, 242.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 240.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 251.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 513. Compare this to their assertion elsewhere in the conclusion: "At the level of pragmatics, [rhizomatic multiplicities] are utilized by sorcery." TP 506.

²⁸ TP, 247.

A politics of sorcery would be a kind of pragmatics which deals with those weighted exchanges that take place along the semi-permeable limits of profane political formations. It contributes to a practical knowledge of how such kinds of political units may be articulated (by drawing a plane of consistency) and how they may be disarticulated (when the sign of deterritorialization flips negative). In sum: as schizoanalysis, sorcery is an experimental act of creation on the one hand and a precise method of destruction on the other. Its creation is a plane of consistency: a deterritorialization of desire that increasingly connects to other deterritorializing flows. Its destruction is a desecration: a profaning of the assemblage from which it departs by the contagious affect that pours in through the sorceress' unholy pact.

III. Profane Politics, Capitalist Sorcery, and the Preparation of Rites

It is now possible to examine the adequacy of a politics of sorcery in confronting the theologization of politics. In shifting to the work of Deleuze and Guattari, stable structures determined by an authoritative transcendence take a back seat to the flows of desiring production they regulate. This means that on this analysis, the flows of capital that serve as such a spawning ground for States and other theologically structured institutions must take center stage. Crucially for these authors, the capitalist mode of representation, too, is schizoanalytic. As Phillip Goodchild puts it, "The extraordinary theoretical breakthrough achieved by Deleuze and Guattari is in seizing the capitalist mode of representation... The gamble involved here is that it will be possible to accelerate the production of flows, to intensify desire, to outplay capitalism at its own game."²⁹ Schizoanalysis interpreted as a sorcerous activity thus suggests that capital, too, enacts its own magical rites.³⁰

The upshot of a Deleuzian intervention here is that *the complicity of profane movements in the flows of Capital itself and the dependency of theological models on these very flows leaves no ground on which to declare profanity a panacea for the specters that theologization presents*. Just as secularization (by virtue of its own covert sacralization) offers no escape to theology, profanity is threatened by its capture and cooptation by Capital (by virtue of its own covert desecration). This only turns over another question: what does it mean to pit sorcery against sorcery, to outplay capitalism at its own game? This paper concludes by sketching this problem.

Deleuze and Guattari cite four dangers facing deterritorializing lines of desire. The greatest of these, the one that makes all the others "pale by comparison," is when desire turns to "abolition pure and simple, the *passion* of abolition."³¹ This danger represents a (sorcerous) path of absolute deterritorialization that, instead of transforming and "augmenting its valence" by connecting to other flights of desire and drawing a plane of consistency, abolishes all other flights of desire by converting them into its own destructive path. In the case of capitalism, this flight of abolition is taken by Capital itself as a deterritorializing body of desiring-production that

²⁹ Goodchild 30.

³⁰ Isabelle Stengers and Philippe Pignarre's *Capitalist Sorcery: Breaking the Spell* offers another valuable perspective on this reading of capitalism which this paper does not have space to present here.

³¹ TP, 231, 229.

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manifests only in the mutated products that cover the earth as an encompassing field of narcissistic images.³² In short, the passion of abolition lies in Capital's desire to produce nothing other than itself – “when money begets money.”³³ The passionate alliances of Capitalist sorcery appeal to the impersonal, demonic flows of Capital, but it would be a mistake to conclude that acts of “capitalist sorcery” harness or deal with Capital in a way entirely analogous to the traditional magician. Marx defines capitalism “by invoking the advent of a single unqualified global Subjectivity, which capitalizes all of the processes of subjectification.”³⁴ In capitalist sorcery, the persona of the sorcerer is configured by the deterritorializing flows of Capital itself that seize and solicit us every time we conjugate our desires and beliefs in the production of money.

Consider Marx and Engels' *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, where they write, “[the bourgeoisie is] the sorcerer, who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells.”³⁵ Capitalism constitutes a fundamental disruption in the balancing of powers involved in the sorcerous pact – Deleuze and Guattari emphasize that the sorceress' passionate alliance with the outside flows and forces is not an agape love turned toward the world as a homogenous outside, but instead represents an alliance with a *particular* outsider, a particular band.³⁶ It must therefore be said that for these authors, the terms of any demonic pact are initially symmetric and reversible: every demon is already a sorcerer and every sorcerer already a demon. The operations of capitalism abolish this symmetry in favor of the body of Capital; under capitalism, the mutual flows of passion are transformed into a one-way street: capital's body flourishes as its willing or unwilling participants shrivel away.

The complexity of these relations calls for further analysis. The modest effort of this paper has been to explore the limits of what a profane politics may offer and what challenges beset it. Ultimately, I do not wish to dismiss out of hand the problems that political theology raises, only to suggest that they cannot be addressed solely by the gross pursuit of profanity. Neither, however, is the claim here that the pursuit of a profane politics is fruitless. These strategies simply demand a more careful approach and no small degree of precision. States and the secularized theology that reside there persist as regulatory models for Capital's desiring-production; they are essential instruments in maintaining its line of destruction. Joshua Delpech-Ramey, in his work on political sorcery, is quite right to raise the *possibility* of utilizing sorcery as a model for a utopian politics, as a way of envisioning radical forms of solidarity across the cosmos, but the real dangers of capitalism require that sorcery do much more than engage in “the creative rehabilitation of political institutions.”³⁷ The soil out of which our institutions grow is sour and must be tilled. Perhaps, contra Newman, the task of a profane politics is not simply to

³² TP, 510.

³³ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 227.

³⁴ TP, 452.

³⁵ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 226.

³⁶ The pairings of Captain Ahab and Moby Dick, or Willard and his white rat, Ben, are both examples these authors use to illustrate this relation. Cf. TP 233, 248.

³⁷ Delpech-Ramey 16.

remove or desecrate theological apparatuses (for they will simply grow back!), but contra Delpech-Ramey, neither is its task merely to set up radically different institutions (for the soil will surely corrupt them...). Fresh ground, space to grow; a profane politics of sorcery must be as radically destructive as it is creative, its secretive pacts as diabolical and adversarial as they are passionate and connective. Tilling the soil means destroying, recycling, and repurposing the mutated materials in which Capital reproduces itself, that is, its products and its production.