

# 'There is no scope for futurology; history will decide'

## Félix Guattari on molecular revolution

RODRIGO NUNES AND BEN TROTT EXAMINE FÉLIX GUATTARI'S TRIP TO BRAZIL IN THE EARLY 1980S, AND THE WAY HE ANALYSED THE TRANSFORMATIONS TAKING PLACE AT THE TIME, ASKING: HOW CAN THEY RESONATE WITH THE EXPERIENCES OF TODAY?

**THE RISE** of a new political generation at the turn of the century put a swagger in the step of people doing 'movement politics'. The resurgence of the global left had essentially taken place outside political parties and institutions, sometimes openly against them. There was not only a tremendous optimism about the possibility for change, but a similar conviction that this time it was not going to be a top-down affair.

In 2001 the world's only existent superpower changed gears in its foreign policy. The new, unilateral political landscape provided a temporary solution for the management of what seemed like a global crisis of systemic legitimacy. It sent ripples across much of the globe, signifying a severe cramping of the space in which movements had been thriving. They became squeezed between growing criminalisation, a clampdown on civil liberties and a militarisation which left them up against a degree of force they could not match. Across much

of Europe and Australasia, this translated as a macro-political shift to the right. It was the same process, but with inverted signs, that took place in Latin America. The quagmire effect of the 'war on terror' on a US administration, which would otherwise have been far more 'interventionist' in the region, helped create the conditions in which popular opposition to neoliberalism translated into victories for the institutional left. Desires and demands of diverse movements became inscribed in legislation and policy experiments,

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and new room for manoeuvre was opened. At the same time, in various cases, movements found themselves in a 'lesser evil' double bind whereby governments banked on unconditional support as a way of 'keeping out the right wing', even when making highly unpopular decisions.

This alone should be enough to demonstrate that the relations between *movement* and *institution* are too complex to be posed in ideological terms. If one pole is automatically 'good' and the other 'bad', or one side 'real' politics and the other only its 'fantasm', you miss the most important, and essentially practical, point: both are real, and relate to each other in real ways; and however much those doing 'movement' politics may wish to ignore it, the field of possibilities open to them is always affected by institutions. Conversely, however much institutional politics may cover it up under the narratives of governmental 'decisions', the acts of 'great leaders' are always conditioned by the field of constantly transformed social relations in which movements, well, move.

Today's conjuncture suggests a real possibility that the political sequence opened by 9/11 may be coming to an end with the twilight of neo-conservatism in the US. Much of this hope for change has been invested in Barack Obama, a charismatic figure onto whom



today the lord of lateness is on my side

the symbols of 'young outsider', 'ethnic minority' and 'multicultural background' have been projected.

To be sure, he hardly represents radical transformative politics. His record is that of a left-of-centre Democrat. Even if you take his pledge for 'change we can believe in' at face value, there are obvious limits to what he promises (and generally to what can be done within the constraints of the Washington beltway). Yet the reactions he has stirred, and the meanings with which he has been

invested, suggest the possibility of a transformation in *sensibility*, a change in the way 'politics' is seen and related to. Most importantly, this implies a potential which is not necessarily limited to its object, nor entirely eliminated by the probable disappointment which will follow an equally probable victory.

Yes, of course we've seen this film before: (1) change is promised; (2) a lot is banked on the promise; (3) the promise is betrayed, or left partly unfulfilled. But isn't just falling back on the

comfortable, age-old narrative, that institutional politics always betrays transformation, simply stating the obvious, disguised as world-weary experience? Moreover, it precisely avoids asking what movements can/should do in a space that is opened up, for however short a moment. It is a way of dodging the practical problems of political work, similar to saying that revolutions are not desirable because they always fail or turn out bad.

In an interview, Gilles Deleuze once ridiculed those who had

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'discovered' that revolutions turn out bad: revolutions always fall short of their stated objectives, not to mention the desires invested in them. But a revolution must be distinguished from a *becoming-revolutionary*: the moment when people undergo a radical transformation as a result of their increased, shared capacity to shape the world in which they live. This is not exhausted by the failure to achieve any particular goal, and can go beyond any betrayal.

It is, of course, too early to speak of what the situation opened by an Obama presidency might or might not be. Instead, we'd like to reopen a discussion on the interplay between movements and institutions, desires and demands, practices and policies, micro- and macro-politics by looking at a different historical moment. In the early 1980s, at the end of two decades of military dictatorship, Félix Guattari travelled to Brazil on the invitation of fellow psychoanalyst and cultural critic, Suely Rolnik, who wanted to expose him to the boiling culture of changes – in racial, gender, political and personal relations – taking place. They organised a series of meetings, interviews and talks across the country, debating those changes with people who were directly engaged in producing them. Some of these were edited and reworked by Rolnik into a book, *Molecular Revolution in*

*Brazil*, only now made available in English, and from which we have taken the following extracts.

Part of Guattari's interest lay in seeing how micropolitical changes in sensibility and subjectivity could find support in a focal point provided by the charismatic figure of an outsider relayed by the mass media – Lula – and be given a certain consistency through the formation of the young Workers' Party (PT). Of course, both Lula and the PT finally won the elections in 2002, and it didn't take long for cries of 'betrayal' to ring out. Soon after electoral victory, one of Lula's aides, Frei Betto, explained, "We are in government but not in power. Power today is global, the power of big companies, the power of financial capital." But to merely repeat the narrative of betrayal is to miss what is really important in what has happened, is still happening, and will always happen again in the future: the relations between global, non- or para-State powers and what can be achieved in the framework of the nation-State; and the dynamics between movements and institutions, or micro- and macro-politics. Once an open field of concrete relations is reduced to an empty division between 'good' (movements) and 'bad' (institutions), it is this complexity – which is always unique to each case – that is entirely erased.

Rodrigo Nunes & Ben Trott

**Question:** Don't you think it's a bit over-optimistic to consider that this kind of good faith by the parties in relation to autonomy is possible?

**Guattari:** There's always the risk that the parties will crush the minorities. It's not a matter of optimism or pessimism, but of a fundamental, definitive questioning about all the systems of party, union, group, and sectarian group involved in the course of a liberation struggle. There's nothing that provides an a priori guarantee that they won't again transmit the dominant models in this field. Not their program, nor the good faith of their leaders, nor even their practical, concrete commitment to minorities. So what might intervene to prevent this kind of "entropy" (a term that I don't much like, but I'll use it) in this field? Precisely the establishment of devices (which we can call whatever we like-analytic devices, devices of molecular revolution, of singularization, and so on), devices on the scale of the individual or the group, or even broader combinations, which would make us raise the issue of the collective formations of desire.

Lula on page 42?



see stuff on "co-aptation" on page 45?

cf discussion of homosexuals on page 43?

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**Luiz Swartz:** *I would like to make an observation. It seems to me that the great paradox in your whole explanation lies in the question of the coexistence of parties with autonomous movements. In your first statement you said that certain kinds of struggle should be routed through that kind of organization, the parties. And that another kind of struggle takes place autonomously. And now you've put the question in terms of the party being an instrument that has to be used at a certain point, and not used again afterwards. It seems to me that there's something very important here: perhaps there's an incorrect evaluation of the strength of the party. The party, in my opinion, doesn't lend itself to being used as an instrument, because it eventually acquires a bureaucratized, disciplinary dynamic of its own that practically prevents the continuity of these molecular struggles.*

**Guattari:** I think the treatment of these issues calls for great prudence, because history shows us that this kind of view can have disastrous consequences. First of all, I would like

you to understand that I'm not saying that the PT is the eighth wonder of the world (...). I know that there are many problems precisely in relation to the articulation of these minorities with a certain relatively traditional conception of organization. I also know that a trace of what I would call "leaderism" is being established, leaderism that is embodied in the media, and that triggers off a whole series of mechanisms, precisely in the field of collective subjectivity. This, of course, always introduces a certain risk of reification of subjective processes. However, when all is said and done, I believe that even so, there is great novelty, great experimentation, in what is being done here in the PT. It's not my place to give lessons on revolution, for the good reason that, in my view, there are no possible lessons in this field. Nevertheless, there is at least one thing that I think Europe can try to transmit: the experience of our failures.

In France, after 1968, there was an intense movement of waves of molecular revolution on all levels

(...). But the problem was that none of those modes of action was able to pass to another level of struggle.

The only link with that other level of struggle, the struggle of other sectors of the population, continued to be the old systems of sectarian groups, the old party and union systems. What happened was that the nonintellectuals who took part in those movements became intellectuals of a kind during the experiments. So there was a gradual agglutination of those nonintellectuals—some militant immigrants, for example, who, by the very nature of the movement, eventually became isolated from the rest of the immigrant population. (...) The problem with this kind of experiment does not have to do with the establishment of an intensive contact between intellectuals and a particular group. But if those groups are actually isolated from all the other social movements, if there is an absence of essential links, they eventually lead to processes of specialization and degeneration. It's like a kind of wave ceaselessly breaking on itself.

**MICROPOLITICS** For Guattari and his long-term collaborator, Gilles Deleuze, with whom he wrote *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*, 'desires' (productive, living, material flows) are always in excess of any stable system in which they can be articulated (the state, capital, but also a social or political group). Micro-politics largely refers to this excess, to the fact that there are always new connections, flows, and desires that take place. 'Micro' and 'macro' is not a matter of scale, but of levels – the first has to do with transformations in sensibility and ways of relating, the second with conscious positions, demands, open struggles. This does not mean that a 'micro' transformation cannot happen to a large number of people – for instance, in the way in which a figure in the mass media can serve as a relay for subjective transformations to communicate with each other.

**MOLAR AND MOLECULAR** In chemistry, a 'mole' is the name given to a (large) unit of molecules dissolved in a solution. For Deleuze and Guattari, 'molar' and 'molecular' form a paired concept: not exactly opposites, connected yet distinct, whose use is 'dependent on a system of reference' (whether an object is seen from its 'closed' or 'open' side) and scale (the cell is molecular in relation to the organism, the organism is molecular in relation to the social group etc.). To the extent that it refers to larger aggregates, the political meaning of molar tends to be associated with the level of governance, the state, political parties, but also social movements, policies, demands: what is extensive and can be measured. The molecular generally refers to the micro-political level, to processes which take place below the level of perception, in 'affects' (impersonal sensations which transform a body's capacity to act and be acted upon). To think of politics as composed of both molar and molecular transformations, and of the two levels as distinguishable by right but not distinct or separate in fact, provides a model for thinking the complexity of relations through which political movement and struggle takes place.

**Néstor Perlongher:** *I think that not enough importance is being given here to the problem of political statements, in the following sense: the big problem of the connection of these small micropolitical movements (...) is the statement with which those micropolitical movements are articulated. If this is true, I think that the power of those declarations is being underestimated. The conventional guy, whether he's a worker or not, becomes totally unglued when a pretty, intellectual fag appears, speaking on behalf of the PT. A guy like that isn't going to connect with this kind of statement. (...) So what I ask is: up to what point are we from the micropolitical, minority, molecular movements going to defend these archaic statements like democratic censorship, or the reduction of the idea of revolution to a modification of the economy, which leads, as has been seen, to overexploitation and superdictatorship?*

**Guattari:** I don't suppose you're going to prepare a notebook of complaints for Lula, asking him for proof that he has an accurate conception of what the fate of homosexuals, blacks, women, the psychiatrized, and so on is going to be. What Lula has to be asked is to contribute to the overthrow of all molar stratifications as they exist now. As for everything else, each person has to assume his responsibilities in the position he's assembled socially. I don't think that Lula is the "Father of the Oppressed," or the "Father of the Poor," but I do think that he's performing a fundamental role in the media, and that's essential at this point in the electoral campaign. He's the vehicle of an extremely important vector of dynamics in the current situation, such as the well-known power that he has to mobilize people who are totally apolitical. In this respect, Lula is not identifiable with the PT. The role that Lula is performing in the media is very important, because nowadays one can't consider the struggles at all the levels without considering this factor of the production of subjectivity by the media.

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"two dimensions"?

**Sonia Goldfeder:** *In your view, how does the participation of minority groups in a process of social mutation take place? Should they be coopted by society as a whole, or should they remain apart in order to maintain their difference?*

**Guattari:** It's necessary to distinguish two levels of reality. Firstly, the level of present reality, in which minority groups are marginalized—their ideas and their way of life are repressed and rejected. Secondly, the level of another reality, where there is a linking up of the left, and where these groups are taken into account, listened to, and have some weight in society. Homosexual groups, for example, obtain new legislation, or groups of psychiatrized people question current methods. All this forms part of a normal, traditional logic of power relations, pressure groups, and so on. Does this mean a cooptation of everything that's dissident in the movement? That's the kind of thing I can't answer. Will Lula's PT coopt the whole dissident movement that can be seen in part of its grassroots support? I hope not. I only know that among the final points of the PT program there's one that speaks specifically about "respect for autonomy." This kind of affirmation in a political program is extraordinary. I've never seen it anywhere.

To reject this attempt because of a fear of cooptation isn't justified in the name of an incapacity to completely express our desire in the situation, in the name of a mythical ethics of autonomy, in the name of the cult of spontaneity. This is an attempt of great importance (...).

TODAY I  
FAIL TO  
GET THINGS  
DONE



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**'LULA' AND THE WORKERS' PARTY (PT)** The Brazilian *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (Workers' Party) was founded in 1980 by workers and intellectuals. Luiz Inácio da Silva (Lula), leader of the metal worker strikes of the late 1970s, was one of the founders and is currently President of Brazil, elected in 2002 and again in 2006.

**MINORITY** 'Minority' can be understood in reference to the molar/molecular distinction. Whilst 'major' is taken to represent a relatively fixed, stable, perceptible and measurable mode of being, the 'minor' is what is potentially capable of unsettling it, being open to movements of becoming that open the major to new compositions and make deterritorialisations possible.

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*PT??  
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**WAR MACHINE** The [nomadic] 'war machine' has nothing to do with the military-industrial-complex. It is opposed to the 'State machine' as exteriority is opposed to interiority. The latter always works by incorporating what is outside it, putting it to work. The former is a positive (non-antagonistic), productive, restless movement that, while always creating the territories where it gathers some temporary consistency, is always going beyond the sedentarism (stillness) and centralisation that characterise the State.

**Suely Rolnik:** I've been thinking about how the book should deal with the considerable space that the discussions about the PT took up during the trip. Perhaps it isn't appropriate to reproduce the "electoral campaign" facet, for the simple reason that it's no longer a topical issue. But at the same time, it could be important to do so as long as it's in a way that reveals, and even emphasizes, what in my view was central in your investment in the PT: not to focus on the PT itself, as something sacred, but on the kind of device that the PT represented at that time. A device that made possible the expression of issues concerning formations of desire in the social field; and, above all, a device that made possible the articulation of that plane of reality with the plane of the struggles that require broad social and political agglutinations. I would even say that the agglutination of these two planes was the leading figure in your campaign for the PT. What was unusual about your position was precisely the fact that you called attention to the need and possibility for that articulation to take place. And throughout the trip you never stopped recalling the fact that, recently, this tendency to downplay the broader social struggles has caused damage at least as serious as the disregard for the problematics related to desire.

In addition to having made it possible to highlight this kind of issue, the discussions about the campaign also helped us to tune in to the frequency of a completely deterritorialized official political voice in the voice of Lula (a kind of free radio station, but with the peculiarity of broadcasting directly from within the official media). Those discussions also helped to make it possible to see, in the PT at that time, a collective assemblage that was drawing the political scene outside its traditional domain. In short, a "war machine." But now things are different. In addition to the fact that we are no longer in the electoral campaign, there's no guarantee that the PT still is and is still going to be

that device, which makes the presence of this element in the book questionable, at least with that emphasis. That's why I was saying that it would only be interesting to preserve it in order to share the understanding that the existence of this kind of device is essential in order to make the processes of singularization less vulnerable. Therefore it's necessary to be sensitive to its emergence in a great variety of social fields-not only in political parties, of course, and not only in the PT.

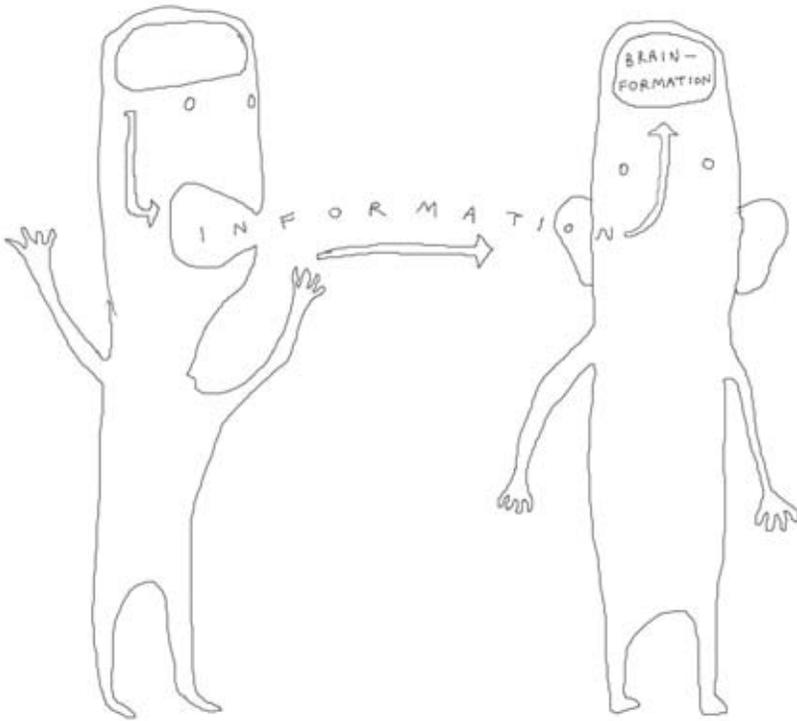
**Guattari:** It seems to me important that the problems of the organization and the constitution of a new kind of machine for struggle should be concealed as little as possible. Even as a failure-which, after all, may not be the case-it seems to me that the experience of the PT is primordial. How can we make the new components of subjectivity emerge on a national scale (in terms of the media)? What is important here is not the result, but the emergence of the problematics. There is no scope for futurology; history will decide. There are two possibilities: either the PT will be completely contaminated by the virus of sectarianism, in which case each autonomous component will "make tracks," and the PT can go to hell; or else the process that seems to be being triggered off in some places will tend to neutralize these sectarian-style components, and it may even happen, according to Lula's hypothesis, that, depending on the strength of the movements, those components may eventually dissolve. Everything will depend on the local circumstances and the usefulness or not of the instrument of the PT. If all this goes "down the drain" if the PT becomes another PMDB and Lula becomes a leader of heaven knows what, then that's it, it's over. It would only mean that the consistency of the process didn't take hold in this kind of assemblage, and that the struggles of molecular revolution will continue through other paths.

*"vector of dynamics" - p42*

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*'plane of autonomy'?? - see 47*

TODAY IS MOST INFORMATIVE



**PMDB** From 1965 to 1979, the military enforced a two-party system in Brazil, where the MDB (Brazilian Democratic Movement) gathered all the politicians who opposed the regime (and who hadn't been persecuted or had their political rights suspended). This made it into a strange amalgam of forces ranging from regional oligarchs to liberals and infiltrated leftwing elements. When a plural political system was reintroduced, many of these forces broke away and formed their own parties – many PT founders were MDB members at some point. The newly named PMDB stayed the largest Brazilian party, but without any politics of its own: a hugely contradictory, often corrupt, loose association of interests that uses its size to negotiate with each government. It is part of Lula's parliamentary base.

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"struggles at all the levels..."

What I think is important in Brazil, therefore, is the fact that the question of an organization capable of confronting political and social issues on a large scale is not going to be raised after some great movement of emancipation of minorities and sensibilities, because it's being raised now, at the same time. It is clear that it isn't a question of creating some kind of collective union in defense of the marginal, a common program, or some kind of reductive unifying front. That would be utterly stupid, because it certainly isn't a question of the minorities and marginal groups making an agreement or adopting the same program, the same theory, or the same attitudes.

That would take us back to the old mass movement conceptions of the socialists and the communists. It's not a question of adopting a programmatic logic, but a "situational logic." On the other hand, it also doesn't mean that tendencies seeking to affirm their singularity should abandon machines such as that of the PT. If that happened, gradually we would find only one kind of singularity in the PT: that of the "hard line" professional militants (...). That's where the problem lies. Of course, I'm not trying to outline a philosophy of this issue. But it seems to me that it's necessary to invent a means that allows the coexistence of these two dimensions. Not just a practical means, a means of real intervention in the field, but also a new kind of sensibility, a new kind of reasoning, a new kind of theory.



**THE ARBORESCENT AND RHIZOMATIC** 'Arborescent' means tree-like and describes centralised and hierarchical structures, where the only connections between the various parts that make up the whole pass through its single core. In botany, 'rhizomes' are horizontal roots systems, usually underground. They do not have a centre and tend to be characterised by numerous transversal connections. They are not static. Yet these are two tendencies that can be distinguished in thought rather

than completely opposite realities: arborescent structures contain and can become rhizomes, and vice-versa. The text you are reading is probably best read rhizomatically. There is no single clear argument, beginning or end, but rather a distribution of connected thoughts and questions to be taken up and deployed in different contexts. The lines and notes connecting words, sentences and segments of text only illustrate a small number of some of the most obvious connections.

see page 40 - "molecular"  
and Lula??

"struggles at all the levels"?

If we insist on dealing with the problems of a political practice from a classical viewpoint—a tendency, a group, or a method of organization versus autonomous groups that do not want to know about leaders, or to articulate themselves—we shall find ourselves in a total impasse, because we shall be revolving around an eternal debate that sets modes of apprehension of the domain of centralism against "spontaneism" or anarchism, considered as sources of generosity and creativity, but also of disorder, incapable of leading to true transformations. It does not seem to me that the opposition is this—between a supremely efficient, centralized, functional device on the one hand, and autonomy on the other.

The dimension of organization is not on the same plane as the issue of autonomy. The issue of autonomy belongs to the domain of what I would call a "function of autonomy," a function that can be embodied effectively in feminist, ecological, homosexual, and other groups, but also — and why not? — in machines for large-scale struggle, such as the PT. Organizations such as parties or unions are also terrains for the exercise of a "function of autonomy." Let me explain: the fact that one acts as a militant in a movement allows one to acquire a certain security and no longer feel inhibition and

guilt, with the result that sometimes, without realizing it, in our actions we convey traditional models (hierarchical models, social welfare models, models that give primacy to a certain kind of knowledge, professional training, etc.). That is one of the lessons of the 1960s, a period when, even in supposedly liberating actions, old clichés were unconsciously reproduced. And it is an important aspect for consideration, because conservative conceptions are utterly unsuitable for developing processes of emancipation.

The question, therefore, is not whether we should organize or not, but whether or not we are reproducing the modes of dominant subjectivation in any of our daily activities, including militancy in organizations. It is in these terms that the "function of autonomy" must be considered. It is expressed on a micropolitical level, which has nothing to do with anarchy, or with democratic centralism. Micropolitics has to do with the possibility that social assemblages may take the productions of subjectivity in capitalism into consideration, problematics that are generally set aside in the militant movement.

In my view, it is necessary to try to construct a new kind of representation, something that I call a new cartography. It is not just about a simple coexistence of

centralized apparatuses and processes of singularization, because, at the end of the day, the Leninists always had the very same discourse: on one side the Party, the Central Committee, and the Politburo, and on the other, the mass organizations, where everyone does his own little job, everyone cultivates his garden. And between them are the "transmission belts": a hierarchy of tasks, a hierarchy of instruments of struggle, and, in fact, an order of priority that always leads to manipulation and control of the struggles of molecular revolution by the central apparatuses.

The construction of machines for struggle, war machines, which we need in order to overthrow the situations of capitalism and imperialism, cannot have only political and social objectives that form part of a program embodied by certain leaders and representatives. The function of autonomy is not that of a simple degree of tolerance in order to sweeten centralism with a pinch of autonomy. Its function is what will make it possible to capture all impulses of desire and all intelligences, not in order to make them converge on a single arborescent central point, but to place them in a huge rhizome that will traverse all social problematics, both at a local or regional level and at a national or international level.

"consistency" - p44

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p44?

The extracts reprinted here are taken from Félix Guattari and Suely Rolnik (2008) *Molecular Revolution in Brazil* (Semiotext(e)). Alongside several of his essays, the book contains interviews and talks given by Guattari, recomposed and edited by Rolnik. The extracts were selected by Rodrigo Nunes and Ben Trott who also wrote the Introduction and accompanying explanatory texts. Both are editors of *Turbulence*. Rodrigo Nunes revised the translation of the English language edition of *Molecular Revolution in Brazil*.

Suely Rolnik is a cultural critic, curator, psychoanalyst and professor at the Universidade Católica de São Paulo, where she conducts a transdisciplinary doctoral program on contemporary subjectivity, and at the Programme of Independent Studies of the Museum of Contemporary Art of Barcelona. Félix Guattari was a French activist, psychoanalyst and philosopher, with a long-term involvement in the experimental La Borde clinic, institutional analysis, and different movements. Best known for his collaborative works with Gilles Deleuze, particularly *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*, he also authored books such as *Chaosmosis* and *The Three Ecologies*.