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A Micropolitics of Uses

Can a use become an active presence in our surroundings, in the same way as buildings and installations? We are using the descriptive term of use, not user. Too often, critics are tempted to apply the term 'use' to the single subjectivity of the user and to draw a simple deduction from this. Summarised in this way, use would simply concretise and materialise the intention of the user or of a collective of users. We, however, believe that it is possible to question the presence and action of a use (though without neglecting those individualities who, we can assume, have initiated or formulated these actions). This hypothesis opens up two perspectives.

On the one hand, it invites us to consider use as an agency, which follows its own logic, independently of those subjects that propel, traverse or contradict it. Therefore, we can assume, that a use makes use of a "constitution"¹ that is specific to itself, made up of realities that are material, or imaginary, relational or spatial, intellectual or affective... If use is as much an active figure within the city as buildings, public spaces or traffic infrastructure, then use too will leave its own trace, 'objectively' leaving its own trace. This hypothesis prompts us to retrace or relate these uses through those fragments of speech or those fragments of reality that these uses reveal. Unlike buildings or spaces, use often eludes the work of mapping; so it becomes vital to chronicle, to tell the tale of these uses – to construct a story from them, with them, without these stories becoming bound up within a single interpretative frame. Use takes form imperfectly; it cannot be reduced to a single way of being used. The 'constitution' of a use is inseparable from the multiplicity of accounts that it gives room to (of sociologists, photographers, fictions, conversations), it is indivisible from this insistent murmuring that bears witness to the presence of use.

On the other hand, this hypothesis leads us towards an "ecology of signs". Necessarily, a use produces a sign, whether sporadically or inadvertently. Each sign offers a partial view, a temporary glimpse through which it is possible to approach a reality, a particular moment, of a given situation. Each sign opens up a path of sorts: something foreseen, offering a view,

¹ In *Il faut défendre la société (Cours au Collège de France, 1976)*, éd. Gallimard, 1997, p. 173, Michel Foucault employs the term "constitutional" in the following way: "it is about finding something that has both consistency and historical context; something that is not so much about the order of the law, as the order of force; something that is not really about the order of writing, so much as the order of balance. Something which is constitutional, almost in the way as understood by doctors, that is to say: as power struggle, equilibrium and the play of proportions, stable asymmetry, congruent inequality."

drawing attention. Can we grab hold of this opportunity? In what ways are we receptive? Open, available? What is it that catches the attention of the passer-by, of the sociologist, of the architect or the video artist? This is real micropolitical defiance, being able to discover, to experiment, to build on this sensibility. This ecology of signs, this micropolitics of sensitivity², prevents the observer from simply reading reality through its most obvious, most accessible, its loudest, most visible forms.

This article is a response to an invitation from the creative-initiators of the Adaptive Actions project, via Jean-Francois Prost – an invitation to learn about their initiative and to extend, displace, re-shape, from our perspective, a sociology of activity. It would have been out of the question for us to take on the overriding position of commentator, in relation to the countless urban experiments that have been taking place within the framework of this initiative. It would have been utterly inappropriate for us to try to theorise or conceptualise a project that, on its own terms, is perfectly sufficient in itself. Instead, we place ourselves firmly alongside Gilles Deleuze³ in considering that our sociological work isn't a commentary on the initiative of Adaptive Actions itself but a way of engaging with those questions and theories that are raised or embodied within these actions, or in any case, embodied within those actions that caught our eye. For us, Adaptive Actions assumes the role of a “release” “pivot” or even of a “catalyst”. Adaptive Actions forces us, as sociologists, to explore through our own words and concepts, theoretical perspectives and practices that are opened up by this initiative.

The Polyvalent Tactics of Uses⁴

Buildings and spaces are never entirely confined to the function that is assigned to them by their builders. They are immediately confronted by that inaugural and transgressive event that is its use (any use). Necessarily, a use or a utilisation is an event. They happen. They emerge and reveal admissible and acquired modes of operation. Buildings and spaces are, therefore, permanently exposed to the risk of transgression, diversion, overspill; or, to put it another way, they are inevitably confronted by those multiplicity of uses which, every day emerge out of them, among them, but which are, all the same, deployed in opposition, against them. What they (these buildings and spaces) initiate or awaken (a use, a utilization, a mode of employment) is inclined to turn against them and in, turn, to disturb or to contradict them. What their reality destines them to (to be used, to be put into practice) equally determines that

² See the work of David Vercauteren (edited with Thierry Müller and Olivier Crabbé), *Micropolitiques des groupes (Pour une écologie des pratiques collectives)*, HB éditions, 2007.

³ In cinéma 2 – L'image-temps, les ed. Minit 1985, p. 365. “Film theory is not ‘about’ film, but rather about the concepts raised by film.”

⁴ We transpose, onto this area of uses, the well-know formulation of Michel Foucault "La polyvalence tactique des discours". Michel Foucault insists on the “complex and unstable game where discourse can, at the same time, be both the instrument and affect of power, but also obstacle, block, point of resistance and the point of departure for an oppositional strategy”, *Histoire de la sexualité 1 – La volonté de savoir*, éd. Gallimard, 1976, p. 133.

which unsettles and challenges them. A use represents, simultaneously, that which actualizes the function of any given building and space and that which, at the same time, comes to frustrate it. A use is made up of this duality, it is set within this duality. It is firmly inscribed within the functional and utilitarian framework that is implied within any installation or building without admitting reduction or assimilation. It can work towards the functional renewal of the existing as a way of calling into question. Implied within this mode of operation, without being subjected to it, is a use that is equivocal and reversible. It is what we term, after Michel Foucault, as the “polyvalent tactics of uses” – a principle that follows the same use (to use, to practice, to utilize), a use which “can be put to service to a variety of ends, within confrontations, among adversaries, each and every one.”⁵ We are all too familiar with those rich reserves of ingenuity that urban politics resorts to in order to contain and force the use of a city into a functional optics: invasive aesthetication, the over-signification of urban marketing, the super-saturation of places with programmed and labeled initiatives. How is it possible then, on this same ground, of uses, to demolish these influences? To adopt a different perspective? To work these vital torsions and diversions? A use is necessarily disputed, contested, controversial - a struggle (in Michel Foucault’s formulation). But a dominant urban politics will often take up – take up these uses - without even having to struggle for them, for lack of any protagonists who might challenge and contest on this same ground. The adept skateboarder is one of those rare non-submissive breeds of the city centre - or hyper-centres. They elevate this “polyvalent tactics of uses” to an altogether different level. Skateboarding can take place in any type of built environment and where most urban environments and their ‘furnishings’ which ordinarily block or prevent the free use of public space, for the skateboarder this represents, by contrast, a wonderful opportunity to experiment with tricks and moves. This undisciplined art resists - despite the will of the “decision makers” to assimilate this into a sport and to relegate it, to peripheral zones, to skateparks. The truth is that there is no use that cannot be reclaimed or instrumentalised.

An Insistent Banality⁶ that starts to undermine the normal routines of space and practice

A use never imposes itself as a single will: it travels, progresses, traversing the gravitational pulls of the everyday, often running up against norms of operation. This insistent banality is a sign of its strength. This quiet tenacity helps it persist. “Even when, or rather above all when, these exceptional acts have been created, it is necessary to return to everyday life to verify and confirm the validity of its creation [...] It is therefore this, everyday life, which measures and gives rise to changes that operate ‘elsewhere’.”⁷ Use meets the everyday where it

⁵ Phillipe Artières, Mathieu Potte-Bonneville, *D’après Foucault (Gestes, luttes, programmes)*, éd. *Les prairies ordinaires*, p. 348.

⁶ We borrow this term from Judith Butler, *Humain, inhumain (Le travail critique des normes)*, éd. Amsterdam, 2005, p. 57.

⁷ Henri Lefebvre, *Critique de la vie quotidienne – II. Fondements d’une sociologie de la quotidienneté*, L’Arche éd., 1961, p. 50.

disperses, fades, alters itself. It is proof of the everyday that it affirms its own autonomy. It is through the mediation of small initiatives, that recur and repeat, that freedom is made manifest. How many times has a landscaping project brutally reconfigured a space, without the least consideration for the pedestrian's use of a place, requiring the "countless pedestrian"⁸ to deviate from their path. But use resists: barriers are broken, lightly trodden fields are, on certain days revealed as a path furrows its way again in its place and makes visible the persistence and stubborn nature of a use. It is this insistence, humble and murmuring, that represents, truly, the polemical resources of the *weak*. It also represents the polemical resources of the *dominated*. What can it oppose? Its obstinate presence. Its never-ending presence. Its presence that makes its presence felt, immediately. Its practice which says exactly what it does⁹, which it restates, over and again. That which renders it menacing and improper, surprisingly so. Why does the presence of youngsters hanging about on an estate, why is this so disturbing? Because their presence has become too insistent, their daily familiarity now become too threateningly everyday, their language too insistently 'murmuring'? These youngsters serve to remind us, however simply, that the right of sociability is for us to render ourselves present to one another, to sustain regular encounters in spaces that are common to us. If this/their "blatancy" irritates us, is this then a sign that the everyday as it appears to us now has become unbearable? What does it mean when the everyday practice of an everyday use becomes so troubling to us that it forces us to discipline, to regulate, to dislocate, to aestheticise, in a way, to keep at a distance? Urban politics redoubles its efforts to ensure that the city is not caught in its own ordinariness. It equips, makes eventful, renews, embellishes, animates. Foucault invokes the lives of infamous men. Nowadays, we would say that uses become scandalous insofar as they become familiar, absorbed into the everyday, that moment when they become common, or common to use, the point at which they render themselves obvious, needing neither intermediary nor intercession. Their insistent banality, renders them as emblems that are truly present - and it is this powerfully affirmative character that "upsets".

Between Added-on Existence and a Reality Deficit

A use builds on its own dimensions, on its own fixtures, within those spaces and buildings in which it makes itself manifest. It grafts a new perspective onto these spaces. It intersperses and puts modes of operation out of order. It ascribes from the outset an additional life of sorts, that is unexpected, pressing, sometimes unwanted. A use breathes new intensities of life: of astonishment or irritation, of tensions and pleasure. Sometimes it seems so improbable that these views just surface, suddenly. Their disconcerting character can discourage attention too;

⁸ According to Michel de Certeau's formulation.

⁹ Michel de Certeau, *L'invention du quotidien – I. Arts de faire*, coll. Folio, 1990, p. 122.

seeing avoided out of fear of being compromised. A use can, therefore, persist on the threshold of visibility and legibility. Too maddening to actually be seen. Too strange to be appropriated and deciphered. Just because it is there, present and active within a situation, does not mean that it will attain a whole and complete reality. As Michel de Certeau emphasises, a society is made up of “certain exorbitant practices, organising normative institutions, and countless other practices, that remain ‘minor’, in spite of non-organising discourse, it maintains those premises or those lingering hypotheses (institutional, scientific), different for this society as for others.”¹⁰ Reality is always a hasty unification, which makes certain theories redundant and neglects many other traces of life and activity. Which is why it so often remains in deficit, falls short of itself, in relation to those life forces that it activates within itself, those experiences that it traverses. To curb this kind of logic, which proceeds by denial or dismissal, it is necessary to assume a form of “constitutive critique” which grabs hold of that which, in a given situation, outlines and makes clear, to organise what remains obstructed, to unfold what has been blocked, hidden, solidified. It is not about making a use say more than it states, or to have it reveal more than it shows. There is a singular arrogance in the critic who presumes that they have the power to reveal what the protagonists were unaware of, that they have access to a meta-language, granting them the capacity to read and to see from above what the actors themselves say or see. “Too often in practice, sociologists – and in particular, critical sociologists, behave as if they were reflective and distanced observers, confronted by protagonists who are naïve, uncritical, unreflective. [...] Protagonists are entirely capable of proposing their own theories of action, in order to explain how forms of existence reveal themselves”¹¹. When confronted by a use that is unexpected or extraordinary, the observer (artist, architect, sociologist, passer-by, inhabitant) engages with unpacking and arranging it. The observer tries, perhaps, to connect these uses to other phenomena that they have observed in this place. The observer starts to contextualise. Perhaps they are led to refer this situation to previous experiences. In any case, they assign this use a supplementary reality; contributing to its realisation, by giving it form, making sense of it, even if this is arrived at only partially or uniquely through their own singular point of view. This use then starts to generate a reality for the observer, even if this occurs in ways that are noticeably or radically differently to those of the protagonists, particularly if those who act do so largely silently and discreetly, in different temporalities even. Sometimes a use is only noticed as the mediation of a trace that is left behind, a pile of rubble left in the staircase which draws attention to an opening leading out to something only to be guessed at, a mattress and a couple of blankets left behind, in retreat, in a street which reminds us that

¹⁰ *Idem*, p. 79.

¹¹ Bruno Latour, *Changer de société – Refaire de la sociologie*, éd. La Découverte, 2006, p. 82-83.

someone lives in this place, a stack of fossilised wood on a beach making room for the festive occupation of this space once the holidaymakers have gone. Consequently, a sociological account, a photograph or a video footage can help retrace what is left behind, as small points, or in helping to assemble those things that are present in a dispersed fashion. The work of observation actually proceeds through the mode of a “constitutive critique” which measures the existence of a use and tries to assemble and unfold it. Like the work of the laboratory technician - analyzing DNA through the amplification of a tiny sample.¹²

Multiplicity that is Internally Deployed

For the pedestrian, the city can be thought of as a strategy of proliferation, from the point of view of the driver, as a strategy of connection; so that where for the former different roads are effectively all the same (the journey from one point to another can be organised in different ways from the shortest to the most convoluted journey), the latter generally find themselves caught up in an organisational system that is channeled to a far greater degree.¹³ The user of public transport, for their own part, expects that a journey will limit them in terms of timetabling, and route; but what is lost in autonomy of movement is gained through the addition of other possibilities: to read, to chat, to escape. The most limiting strategy holds an extraordinary potential for liberty, the condition for freeing oneself from a primary use (here, of movement), to invest in other activities, to shift into different levels of reality (thinking, dreaming, exchange)... A use is therefore a heterogeneous agency around which it is difficult to set down a priori limits. Use is not defined as itself, as such. It does not embody within itself an irreducible logic that can be applied to any context, adapting itself equally to every situation. It does not include its own operation. A use represents above all else, a way of relating to oneself and to others, to one's own way of life and to the life contexts of others. It is endlessly, revived and stimulated by those interactions to which it adapts, or to which it is opposed. It is permanently connected to a multiplicity of ‘exteriorities’ which confront its resources and potential. Is it capable of modifying a situation? Bifurcating it? Exceeding it? What can it rely on? What can it discover within itself, as resistance, as adaptation, when a challenge confronts its environment? When functional constraints harden, does it immobilize in face of this, in a sterile and inhibiting encounter, unable to start up those lines of flight or contortion? Or is it possible to revisit the situation from a different point of view, in order to drive new perspectives out (of hiding)? If a use, however, is strongly exposed to several exteriorities that challenge and obligate it, it is there all the same precisely because of its interiorities, because of those multiplicities that are deployed in itself: desires, habits, familiar

¹² Idem, p. 198.

¹³ Emmanuel Belin, *Une sociologie des espaces potentiels (Logique dispositif et expérience ordinaire)*, De Boeck Université, 2002, p. 242.

objects, rituals, schemes of action... it is therefore doubly exposed: it refers to, is connected with, combines with the outside as much as it does to the inside, to innumerable "entities", whether material or symbolic, relational or functional. It is activated as much by that which would prevent it from acting. This is what lends it its profoundly ecosophic¹⁴ character: a use is above all a mode of inter-relation, a way of playing out one's relationships with the environment. If we borrow a technological term, we would say that a use is made up of several 'plugins'¹⁵, plugins that it is prone to discover, to capture, to intercept¹⁶ and which it will eventually implant and acculturate. This could be some found material on a building site re-used for the construction of a shelter. It can also be an 'opportunity' - to grab hold of and that will, in turn, contribute to the consolidation of a project, of a practice.

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¹⁴ Félix Guattari, *Les trois écologies*, éd. Galilée, 1989.

¹⁵ In data processing a plugin is a "small" piece of software grafted onto a programme to support and supply it with new functions.

¹⁶ This metaphor is borrowed from Bruno Latour, *op. cit.*, p. 303-304.