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A Philosophy of Escape

Acid Horizon

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Through this errancy — that straying which the engineers and economizers of life ceaselessly work to render as an error to be corrected or erased — the undefined work of freedom comes into view.

gesture in Foucault's corpus. To disengage from power is not the same as transgressing it. The motion of the pleb is, throughout history, a centrifugal one. This is why power is always reactive. When Foucault tells us resistance precedes power, we must take this assertion seriously. Power must always react to something it finds entirely enigmatic, because such threats expose the emptiness of its supposed relation to necessity.

The utopian managers of life who attest that we must strive towards an "optimization" of everything promise to deliver us a new world. Some of them even promise us entire new planets to lay waste to, like the crypto-accelerationist Nikolai Fedorov and his "common task" to "transform the solar system into a controlled economic entity."²⁸ Of course, this "common task" is hindered by "common drunkenness." The colonization of the stars must itself start with a colonization and total unification of every human body and its functions. Indeed, all techno-accelerationists demand this "multi-unity," where all are optimally thrown into a completely orchestrated world — a utopia of pure managed existence. They make this promise to deliver a new world, simply because they must foreclose on any other way to *live*. If only were we to not stray, they tell us, we could live *under* fully-automated luxury "communism." Of course, this is nothing other than an intensification of the operation of economy and the management of population. The illegalism of dissipation is the shared enemy of the cybernetician and the physioocrat and their respective "common" tasks. Whenever a utopian program is proposed, it is always penned with the promised blood of those it will seek out and deem suboptimal in the new "rational" organization of life. This is the common assurance voiced of the utopian techno-positivist: that freedom is found on the other side of optimization. But the optimization of life is, by design, an eliminative practice. Going astray is never optimal.

²⁸ Nikolai Fedorov, "The Common Task," in *#ACCELERATE: The Accelerationist Reader*, Urbanomic, 2017, 90.

Below is an excerpt from *Anti-Oculus — A Philosophy of Escape*, a new book by the Acid Horizon collective due to appear with Repeater Books this October. Part "psychedelic trip through the eyes of power," part operation of conceptual espionage, *Anti-Oculus* aims to produce a cartography of escape routes from the control systems of cyber-capitalism.

In the following selections, the authors highlight the perilous moment in 19th century medical discourse around "unmanageable" youth where ability and *govern*-ability were finally made to coincide. Wherever disability continues to be rendered intelligible through disciplinary apparatuses, the disabled child will tend to be approached first and foremost as a problem of governance, a victim of the "anarchy of their will and body," which power encounters as an adversary needing to be crushed. As the authors show, a similar — albeit even more bellicose — discourse had already emerged around vagabonds and drifters, layabouts and ex-workers, whose "moral nomadism" threatened to hamper the spiritual regiment of capitalist work-discipline in its efforts to format the soul of the laborer. In each case, Acid Horizon identifies a common lesson about the trajectory of subversive forces. If power must always react to something it finds "entirely enigmatic," this is because such threats "expose the emptiness of its supposed relation to necessity." What power is most at war with, and is most threatened by, is the truth of its own superfluity.

Against today's newfangled optimizers of life, who promise new utopias of automation and space conquest, it is the centrifugal flight of the pleb, with its "illegalism of dissipation," its uncompromising yet undefined errancy, who appears as the true figure of human freedom.

The anarchy of abnormality and the abnormality of anarchy

Édouard Séguin, the French physician who was acclaimed for his work with institutionalized disabled children, wrote a clinical text in 1846 that was widely disseminated across Europe and the United States, *The Moral Treatment, Hygiene, and Education of Idiots and Other Backward Children*. European physicians lauded it as “the Magna Charta of the emancipation of the imbecile class!” J.E. Wallace Wallin, an American physician, seemingly no less impassioned, identified Séguin as a “prophet,” and described his book as “the best work done since his day for the amelioration of the feeble-minded.” The teachers following Séguin’s didactic methodology must “call out to the soul of the child.”¹ For children diagnosed with “idiocy” possess an instinct that is in a “wild state without being integrated.” This does not just mean that the child’s instinct is not properly integrated within their “organs and faculties,” it is also a fundamental lack of integration with this very world and all of its precious moral expectations.

Séguin describes the disabled child as one with a mode of being that “removes him from the moral world.”² Within the norm sits an assertion about one’s own moral position in the world. A violent moral condemnation sits at the center of the identification of abnormality in this new institutional pedagogy. There is a political distinction as well. The abnormal child’s diagnosed disposition is one that expresses not symptoms, but rather “natural and anarchical elements.”³ Séguin’s method always first sets its sights on the child’s will. The abnormal child is described as possessing “a certain anarchic form of will.” The normal, “desirable,” adult will is “a will

¹ J.E. Wallin, *The Education of Handicapped Children*, The Riverside Press, 1924, 18.

² Michel Foucault, *Psychiatric Power: Lectures at the College de France 1973–1974*, translated by G. Burchell, Picador, 2006, 210.

³ Foucault, *Psychiatric Power*, 212.

through the framework of basic transgression, however. No matter how helpful Bataille may be in this moment of reflection on the shame we carry as life becomes only the unfolding of its control, there is also a necessary break with such an understanding of childishness. To see transgression in the life of Béasse is to take the lens of legal authority; it is to peer into this life only by passing through the word of the law. For transgression remains entirely bound to law and to the doctrine of exclusion. The boy is asked for an account of himself; it is given, and immediately the punitive matrix works towards reintegration. The simple matrix of transgression and exclusion is inadequate here.

The moral nomadism that remains so thoroughly feared has to be understood through its centrifugal motion, and not simply a direct negation or a reversal of terms. Passing over to the other side of an apparatus that distinguishes between the “good boys” and the Béasses or the vagrant remains insufficient, and only serves to reproduce the assumptions that uphold the apparatus itself. Flipping the apparatus leaves it intact. Pushing beyond its boundary, in the name of transgression, only ensures that the boundary functions properly in its distinguishing of life that is proper or life that is astray, in error, and to be dealt with. Those who primarily approach the question of power critically through the frame of transgression “remain pegged to the general system of representation against which they were turned.”²⁶ To stray is not to simply transgress. It is here where the figure of the pleb becomes the necessary complement to the vagabond and a conception of straying. The measure of the pleb is a “counter-stroke”; it is “that which responds to every advance of power by a move of disengagement.”²⁷ The plebian intensity is one of flight; it finds itself elsewhere. This disengagement is perhaps the most crystalized articulation of a destituent

²⁶ Foucault, *The Punitive Society*, 6.

²⁷ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selections and Interviews 1972–1977*, translated by C. Gordon, L. Marshall, J. Mepham, K. Soper, Pantheon Books, 1980, 180.

Children fall through the stockades of the disciplinary apparatus and the circuitry of the biopolitical regime as well. In many ways, children are the most precious target of disciplinary and biopolitical management. A utopian socialist publication in nineteenth-century France retells an interaction between a judge and a boy charged with criminal vagrancy:

The judge: One must sleep at home. — Béasse: Have I got a home? — You live in perpetual vagabondage. — I work to earn my living. — What is your station in life? — My station: to begin with, I'm thirty-six at least; I don't work for anybody. I've worked for myself for a long time now. [...] I've plenty to do. — It would be better for you to be put into a good house as an apprentice and learn a trade. — Oh, a good house, an apprenticeship, it's too much trouble. And anyway the bourgeois ... always grumbling, no freedom. — Does not your father wish to reclaim you? — Haven't got no father. — And your mother? — No mother neither, no parents, no friends, free and independent." Hearing his sentence of two years in a reformatory, Béasse pulled an ugly face, then, recovering his good humor, remarked: "Two years, that's never more than twenty-four months. Let's be off, then!"²⁴

His reaction seems rather strange, or comically absurd, especially in the face of the horror that is incarceration. However, here one ought to heed the words of Bataille: "When we laugh at childish absurdity, the laugh disguises the shame that we feel, seeing to what we reduce life."²⁵ This errant motion is not to be understood

²⁴ Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by A. Sheridan, Pantheon Books, 1977, 290–291.

²⁵ Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, translated by S. Kendall, State University of New York Press, 2014, 47.

that can obey." The will of the "idiot" is one that "anarchically and stubbornly says 'no.'" Séguin's recommendation is one that places the instructor in a position of complete control. The instructor's intervention must result in a physical apprehension of the body that can allow for its mastery. It remains a mystery as to how psychiatrists struggled with why a child may become "anarchic" with such instructors. However, for the moral and physiological method of institutionalized treatment, the stakes are very high. This child, for Séguin, can only be returned to the moral world and safely within the "law" of production through institutional moral and physiological treatment.⁴ The prevention of "degeneration" of the condition of a disabled child is generalized to the security of the population and intertwined with a form of social defense when Séguin provides a brief, but important, account of "imbecility."

In his 1866 text, *Idiocy: And Its Treatment by the Physiological Method*, Séguin attempts to make an explicitly socio-political distinction between the "harmless idiot" and "imbeciles, insanes, epileptics, etc.," whose "rights upon society are different from [theirs]."⁵ While the child diagnosed with idiocy possesses an anarchic will, this will can be redirected and molded into one that can obey. Central to this moral treatment is the "enforcing of the moral and social duty of working."⁶ For Séguin, introducing the child diagnosed with idiocy into an institution can reach out to the weakened "moral powers" of the child and return them to the moral world. This physiological and moral intervention "restores the harmony" of the trinity of "activity," "intelligence," and "will."⁷ The management and reorientation of the will of the patient is as crucial to Séguin as any other element of the moral treatment of the "idiot." When institutionalized, idiocy can be placed under the

⁴ Édouard Séguin, *Idiocy: And its Treatment by the Physiological Method*, New York Printing Company, 1866, 239.

⁵ Séguin, *Idiocy*, 65.

⁶ Séguin, *Idiocy*, 239.

⁷ Séguin, *Idiocy*, 83–84.

gaze of the Superintendent of the institution. The Superintendent is tasked with “measuring [...] the vitality of the children by the physiological standard of their activity.” If the superintendent identifies problems in what the child wills themselves “to do or refuse to do,” they must “call for due hygienic interference and instant modifications in the training.”⁸ Séguin fascinatingly even laments that, in the United States, state governors are tasked with being “the guardian of the idiot.” In a move completely in line with the emergence of the disciplinary society, Séguin recommends that the Governor, and in “England the Sovereign,” should “delegate [their] guardianship to the Superintendent of the State institution” because they alone are competent to “advise about what might profitably be expended for the improvement of the child.”⁹ The child deemed an “idiot” can be saved only if its disharmonious will is rendered docile, governed, and governable. No such salvation is possible for the imbecile. The “idiot child” is sensible to “reproach, command, menace, even to imaginary punishment [...] his egotism is moderate.” The “imbecile” does not have that same moderation.

The anarchy of Séguin’s institutionalized child can, with a strict regimen and the complete authority of the Superintendent, be quelled; but if imbecility takes root in a child, the “moral nature” is completely vanquished. The “imbecile [is] self-confident, half-witted, and ready to receive immoral impressions, satisfactory to his intense egotism.”¹⁰ Séguin’s “idiot child” is depicted, in a very specific sense, as a victim of the anarchy of their will and body, such that pity does not extend to those diagnosed as “imbeciles.” Séguin generalizes the condition this way: “today he is an imbecile, tomorrow he may be a criminal.”¹¹ Far from “emancipated,” these pathologized children are rendered anarchic risks to the security

⁸ Séguin, *Idiocy*, 287.

⁹ Séguin, *Idiocy*, 73.

¹⁰ Séguin, *Idiocy*, 69.

¹¹ Séguin, *Idiocy*, 70.

who lives outside of the norm, which is an affront to the system of “ethical and political coercion that is necessary for the body, time, life, and men to be integrated, in the form of labor, in the interplay of productive forces.”²² The illegalist of dissipation is, at once, the enemy of both the capitalist owner of the means of production and the “sad militant” who can only identify the specter of revolution in the leveraging of labor-power.

This dissipation is a thread that can be traced through so many newly securitized apparatuses of production. Foucault himself saw it echoing among the Parisian youth post-1968. In a roundtable discussion, Paul Virilio — seemingly worried about the proletariat becoming “marginal” in the post-industrial world — asks, “what happens if this marginalization becomes a mass phenomenon? [...] In the nineteenth century it was a tiny segment of society; now let’s admit that now these characteristics apply to millions of people in the suburbs.” Foucault’s response flips the premise of the question when he replies:

What if it is the mass that marginalizes itself? That is, if it is precisely the proletariat and the young proletarians that refuse the ideology of the proletariat? [...] They are the young workers who say: why should I sweat my whole life for \$2000 a month when I could... At that point, it’s the mass that is becoming marginal.²³

These are all modes of wandering outside the imposed regime of the norm. These are all methods of going astray, of entering into a zone of abnormality. It is for this reason that, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and possibly still today, the moral nomadism of the dissipator, whose mode of being is one perpetually in error, strikes such a unique fear.

²² Foucault, *The Punitive Society*, 196.

²³ Michel Foucault, *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961–1984*, translated by L. Hochroth and J. Johnston, Semiotext(e), 1989, 92–93.

of their activity. Those who go astray are always deemed to be on a warpath. “[B]etween the two worlds there can be only war, hatred, and fundamental hostility.”¹⁹

However, one finds that even the fully employed exist in a shadow of an ever-present inward-facing delinquency. Through the eighteenth century, a shift took place regarding the various illegalisms the upper class could tolerate from the working population. As the emergent bourgeois class took control of the juridical and police apparatuses, the illegalisms of this new working class became the central target of repression and control. The prison, the army, the police: these all develop into means of breaking up lower-class illegalisms — some of which the bourgeois and feudal orders were party to. With these systems in place, theft, machine-breaking, rioting, and the formation of clandestine associations will all be targeted and fundamentally suppressed. With fraud and smuggling quelled and largely controlled, both by these forms of policing and new processes of production, a new need arises: the “need to set up an apparatus that is sufficiently discriminating and far-reaching to affect the very source of this illegalism: the worker’s body, desire, need.”²⁰ This illegalism deprives the owner not of his physical wealth, machines, buildings, or commodities. The dissipater “is someone that undermines, not capital, not riches, but his own labor-power.” It is “no longer a bad way of managing one’s capital, but a bad way of managing one’s life, time, and body.”²¹ Dissipation is not an event, like the destruction of a machine, but a mode of existence. It is an ethos ultimately at odds with the espoused productivist morality of the disciplinary society. It is one that strays from the moral expectation and framework of labor itself. It is a relationship with oneself that deprives the factory owner of one’s own labor-power. The dissipater is one

¹⁹ Foucault, *The Punitive Society*, 55.

²⁰ Foucault, *The Punitive Society*, 173–174.

²¹ Foucault, *The Punitive Society*, 191.

of the social well-being and, in the case of Séguin’s articulation of “imbecility,” asocial enemies.

Unsurprisingly, Séguin’s recommendations became the model and “inspiration” for “publicly and privately supported institutions” tasked with the education, confinement, and sequestration of disabled children in America in the early twentieth century.¹² For Séguin, and his subsequent adherents, ability and governability coincide. The disabled child is considered a problem of governance, both of themselves and of others. Disability is a problem produced and rendered intelligible through disciplinary apparatuses. Disability is conceived as a problem of governance and governability.

This relationship between anarchy and abnormality also functions in the opposite direction. Cesare Lombroso, an Italian eugenicist criminologist, famously argued that “biological, anatomical, psychological, and psychiatric science” could provide “a way of distinguishing the genuine, fruitful, and useful revolution from the always sterile rot and revolt.” Lombroso describes revolutionaries such as Karl Marx and Charlotte Corday as possessing “wonderfully harmonious physiognomies.” Contrarily, in his analysis of a photo of forty-one anarchists arrested in Paris, “31 percent of them had serious physical defects. Of one hundred anarchists arrested in Turin, thirty-four lacked the wonderfully harmonious figure of Charlotte Corday or Karl Marx.”¹³ Those stray bodies, those who wander outside the immediate register of the norm, through their anarchic disruption of biopolitical salvation, expose the brutality of the regime that promises the elimination of all that is deemed errant in life. This is where the normalizing power of the governing of disability becomes explicitly thanatopolitical; it is where the “right to let die” becomes the defining imperative of the sovereign

¹² Wallin, *The Education of Handicapped Children*, 19.

¹³ Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the College de France 1974–1975*, translated by G. Burchell, Picador, 2003, 154.

in modernity. The defense against abnormality is, ultimately, established through its identification with the anarchic. *In abnormality, there is a thread that runs through to a political assertion of anarchy; and in anarchy, there is a thread that runs through to a medico-juridical assertion of abnormality.*

Wandering deviance

It is in these acts of error, of going astray, that an opposition to an arrangement — even if momentary — can be put forward. One way this errancy manifests is by wandering astray through the ethical-political rejection of the subject-function that has been ascribed to them, namely the worker or the serf. The vagabond is among these figures who slip to the edges of these formative processes of subjectivation and present a material problem to the political and economic forces of cohesion.

In *The Punitive Society*, Foucault follows the work of the French physiocrat and jurist Guillaume-François Le Trosne, and his policy prescriptions for vagabondage and begging. The vagabond has a peculiar position in the social body. They are not described “in relation to consumption, to the mass of goods available, but in relation to the mechanisms and processes of production.”¹⁴ Foucault finds in the physiocrat’s depiction a vagabond who is not to be decried because they attack items of consumption — theft had existed long before this problematization of nomadic vagrancy in the French countryside. The vagabond is not simply a thief. The vagabond instead must be dealt with and penalized because they attack the ethical mechanisms of production. It is in the vagabond’s refusal to work and their vagrancy that the crime is found; not in any one particular action that can be juridically singled out in time, but in going astray as such. Le Trosne believes them to be an enemy com-

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Punitive Society: Lectures at the College de France 1972–1973*, translated by G. Burchell, Picador, 2015, 45.

parable to a foreign army: “they live in a real state of war with all citizens.”¹⁵ In *Madness and Civilization*, vagabondage is likewise a target of interception by corrective apparatuses in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. “For a long time, the houses of correction or the premises of the Hôpital Général would serve to contain the unemployed, the idle, and vagabonds.”¹⁶ The actual governmental issue lies in their strange positionality; the vagabond is corporeally among the honest workshop attendants, and yet, they are ambling elsewhere. The vagabond dwells in the same world and space as the society, yet they have nothing to do with it. They are certainly *in* society, yet, as Foucault notes, they do not *belong* to it. These nomadic vagrants would also be directed to workhouses, but in England even this largely punitive action faced opposition. Daniel Defoe argued that such an action was “putting a vagabond in an honest man’s employment.”¹⁷ Their activity and their existence become inseparable in their identification as a social enemy.

Le Tronse’s warlike position towards these bodies indicates that they are an internal, hostile, and foreign world; one that must be eliminated. It is not simply an action but a modality of existence that is identified as the problem. And considering that, at the advent of each economic crisis, vagabondage increased, everything must be done to capture or hide these escapees of the productive cycle. “There are aspects of evil that have such a power of contagion, such a force of scandal that any publicity multiplies them infinitely.”¹⁸ They are just beyond the immediate grasp of the apparatus, and always at risk of contaminating the productive process with the viral intensity of a different world and a different form-of-life. The ontological status of the astray is at stake in every instance

¹⁵ Guillaume Le Trosne, *Mémoire sur les vagabonds et sur les mendiants*, P.G. Simon, 1764, 9. Our translation.

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, *Madness & Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, translated by R. Howard, Pantheon Books, 1965, 50.

¹⁷ Foucault, *Madness & Civilization*, 52.

¹⁸ Foucault, *Madness & Civilization*, 67.