The Task of Becoming Minor: On the Politics of Representation

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One of the key issues addressed by political theories on the Left is the question of how those who are excluded from the realm of political representation may speak out and make themselves heard. Referring to Kafka’s *In the Penal Colony* – a text that illustrates particularly well the workings of representation – and to Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “minor literatures” – a term coined by Kafka – the article demonstrates that one way of coping with the difficulties of representation is to make a minor use of language. Contrary to the claim that politics is fundamentally about becoming major, I argue that the task of becoming minor is not only an essential element of emancipatory politics but also provides us with a criterion for differentiating between progressive, emancipatory forms of speaking out and their reactionary counterparts.

Kafka; Deleuze; Foucault; Politics; Representation; Populism


Introduction

The question of representation plays a prominent role not only in recent discussions focusing on the possibilities of political agency but also in the more general debates on the future of liberal democracy as such. In view of ever more trans- and supranational cooperations and parastatal entities that are neither democratically legitimized nor to be held accountable by traditional political procedures, representation as a fundamental principle of liberal democracies appears to lose its significance. Indeed, we seem to experience a severe crisis of representation. From the slogan of the Occupy movement “They don’t represent
us!” to the demand of right-wing populist parties to let the people speak for themselves via direct-democratic procedures such as plebiscites, the principle of representation as a fundamental element of democratic opinion-forming and participation is increasingly being questioned. More often than not, representation is either depicted as a distorting, patronizing, or manipulating instrument in favor of the ruling classes and the political establishment or rejected entirely. According to this line of reasoning, instead of clinging to the idea of representation, politics should be giving more weight to the views of the people and make sure that they are heard.

However, there seems to be a considerable difference between left-wing and right-wing political projects in this regard. While progressive, emancipatory approaches (such as labor movements, anti-colonial struggles, black liberation movements, women, gay and lesbian rights movements, or queer activism) focus on how to give a voice to those who are excluded from the realm of political representation and find themselves especially vulnerable to violence, poverty, exploitation, and discrimination (such as women, people of color, subaltern subjects, prisoners, “illegal” migrants, or refugees), right-wing populist and extremist actors try to short-circuit the representational process by claiming that they alone represent the “real people,” usually defined as a righteous and morally pure entity. In doing so, they increasingly appropriate traditionally leftist political strategies, appealing to the ideas of critique and emancipation, and presenting themselves as the “real victims” of the liberal regime of “political correctness” and of a “false tolerance” toward migrants and refugees. Former minorities, they claim, are now well on their way to becoming the majority, thus threatening the cultural identity of the autochthonous population. Examples of this kind of self-presentation as the “real victim” of liberal, humanitarian politics are rife. Think of white Americans maintaining that they are being turned into a minority in their “own” country, the “Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the Occident” (PEGIDA) in Germany, or the alt-right conspiracy theory about the “Great Replacement” – that is, the alleged plot of an organized exchange of the European population for Muslims by means of immigration and significantly higher birth rates. Such claims are regularly accompanied not only by the assertion of an ethnically and culturally homogenous people but also by the call for authoritarian leaders and law-and-order politics. To put it in a nutshell: Right-wing populist and extremist parties are quite successful in portraying themselves as socially and politically silenced, while in fact dominating the public discourse with their political agendas.

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1 See Jan-Werner Müller, What is Populism? (Philadelphia, 2016).
In the light of the above, I will try to establish a normative criterion allowing us to distinguish between forms of speaking out and making oneself heard that we ought to support, and those we must reject. Against the widespread consensus that politics is above all about obtaining majorities, I will argue that when it comes to imagining emancipatory politics, we must also consider a particular kind of becoming minor. To do so, I will, first, discuss Deleuze and Foucault’s critique of representation and its shortcomings. I will then make a detour to Kafka’s intriguing as well as disturbing story *In the Penal Colony*. This text is relevant for my approach on several grounds: Even though it is *prima facie* a story about guilt, punishment, and redemption, it is, on closer examination, also a text on the complex workings of representation and the inevitability of speaking for and in the place of others. This becomes particularly clear in the ambivalent position of the European traveler who acts, in Kafka’s text, as a representative of a liberal, humanitarian worldview, while turning away with unease from the ordinary people whose language he does not understand and whose desire for authoritarian rule he rejects. Furthermore, written around the collapse of the Habsburg Empire, the story describes a fragile situation of crisis and transition that shows certain similarities to our current globalized world in which the transnational exchange of information, goods, languages, and people goes hand in hand with the strengthening of national, religious, cultural, and ethnic fundamentalisms. In their study on Kafka, Deleuze and Guattari speak of a crisis that “accentuates everywhere movements of deterritorialization, and invites all sorts of complex reterritorialization – archaic, mythic, or symbolist.”

Today, this twofold movement of de- and reterritorialization is most evident in the triumph of right-wing populist parties and far-right groups in Europe and the United States, with, on the one hand, their claim to cultural identity and racial, linguistic, and religious purity and, on the other hand, their emphasis on strict border controls, anti-immigration laws, and national superiority. Referring to Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “minor literatures” – a term coined by Kafka – I will finally argue that the task of becoming minor is not only an essential element of any emancipatory politics but also enables us to differentiate between progressive and emancipatory forms of speaking out and their reactionary counterparts.

**The Role of the Intellectuals**

The intellectual’s ambivalent relation to power is the focus of a conversation between Foucault and Deleuze in March 1972. Under the title “Intellectuals and Power,” Foucault and Deleuze discuss the role of the intellectual in political struggles in the aftermath of the May 1968 events in France. Referring to the

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Groupe d’Information sur les Prisons, Foucault argues that the task of the intellectual is no longer to speak “the truth to those who have yet to see it” or “in the name of those” who are unable to express it; rather, the challenge is “to create conditions that permit the prisoners themselves to speak.”

What the events following 1968 and the subsequent formation of new political groups have shown is “that the masses no longer need him [the intellectual] to gain knowledge: they know perfectly well, without illusion; they know far better than he, and they are certainly capable of expressing themselves” (IP, p. 207). If things seem different, then this is because “there exists a system of power which blocks, prohibits, and invalidates this discourse and this knowledge, a power not only found in the manifest authority of censorship, but one that profoundly and subtly penetrates an entire societal network” (IP, p. 207).

In other words, the masses are perfectly capable of speaking for themselves and in their own name; therefore, intellectuals need to suppress the urge to function as representatives: “In my opinion,” Deleuze tells Foucault, “you were the first to teach us something absolutely fundamental: the indignity of speaking for others” (IP, p. 209). Here, Deleuze not only points to the violent and oppressive character of speaking for others but exposes what, in his view, is the fundamental failure of the liberal model of representation. What is at stake is nothing less than a radical critique of every form of representation – be it at the linguistic, the epistemological, or the political level: “Representation no longer exists; there’s only action – theoretical action and practical action which serve as relays, and form networks” (IP, pp. 206 f.).

To put it briefly, Deleuze demands that we draw the practical and political conclusions from the epistemological insight into the end of representation as the central system of knowledge and classification: “We ridiculed representation and said it was finished, but we failed to draw the consequences of this ‘theoretical’ conversion – to appreciate the theoretical fact that only those directly concerned can speak in a practical way on their own behalf” (IP, p. 209). What follows from this is a radical shift in our conception of political change and transformation. While modest forms of political change merely modify the existing system of representation, the revolutionary practice breaks entirely with representation. “[W]hen people begin to speak and act on their own behalf, they do not oppose their representation … to another; they do not oppose a new representativity to the false representativity of power” (IP, p. 211); rather, they put an end to representation as such – as a theoretical and practical, and as an epistemological and political paradigm.

However, Deleuze’s rejection of representation and his juxtaposition of representation and revolution are by no means unproblematic. On the one hand, his
anti-representational stance presupposes that it is always possible to speak for oneself, without any form of mediation or representation; on the other hand, such a position assumes the unmediated self-presence of a popular will just awaiting its articulation. Note also that Deleuze’s dismissal of representation is not as clear as it may seem. When he rejects representation by arguing that “it is always a multiplicity, even within the person who speaks and acts,” and that “all of us are groups [groupuscules]” (IP, p. 206), one might argue that representation has not completely disappeared, but rather has been transformed and modified: from an external relation between pre-established entities – such as the relation between a group and its spokesperson – to an ongoing process at the level of subject formation, which also plays a crucial role in the formation of political identities. If this is the case, the problem is not so much representation as such as an all-too-simple notion of representation that negates and represses the constitutive role of representation in every act of speaking. Thus, according to Bernhard Waldenfels, the issue is not so much that we speak for or in the place of others as that we never really speak in the place of the other but always from our own place. For if every speech is addressed to someone and answers to a mode of being addressed, then it follows that in addressing and responding we necessarily assume the place of those we address and who address us. “Thus, Eurocentrism – like every other kind of ethnocentrism – turns out to be a repressed form of representation.”

There is a need to take a closer look at the complex workings of representation. This is all the more important as “the first step in the reversal of power and the initiation of new struggles against existing forms of power” is the struggle of naming and speaking out, as Foucault makes clear: “to speak on this subject, to force the institutionalized networks of information to listen, to produce names, to point the finger of accusation, to find targets” (IP, p. 214). This assertion, however, takes us back to the question of how this naming and speaking out might be possible for those who are systematically excluded from the realm of language and representation. How can those whose words are inaudible for us, or resemble more the speech of a madman than that of a human being, make themselves heard

5 In this sense, Hardt and Negri are wrong when they, following Deleuze and Guattari, imagine a politics that simply leaves behind, or goes beyond, representation; they are right, however, to claim that we cannot go back to the traditional liberal model of representation. See Michael Hardt / Antonio Negri, Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire (New York, 2004), p. 255.

The Impossibility and Inevitability of Representation

Kafka’s *In the Penal Colony* can be read as a “post-colonial” and “post-representational” text in various ways. It not only features a penal colony marked by moral decline and the deterioration of its legal and juridical system; written in October 1914, only a few weeks after the outbreak of the First World War, and published in 1919, it also points to the ultimate failure of the imperial and colonial ambitions of the German Empire and the Habsburg Monarchy. Right at the beginning of the story, Kafka describes a typical colonial scenario. A European traveler who visits a penal colony located in the tropics is invited “to attend the execution of a soldier who had been condemned for disobedience and insulting behavior towards his superior” (*PC*, p. 75). He is accompanied by an officer who meticulously explains to him the mechanism of “a remarkable apparatus” designed by the deceased old commandant for the purpose of execution. The condemned man himself, who is guarded by a soldier, appears to fulfill all the ambivalent stereotypes of the colonized subject. He is both resistant and submissively devoted, both childishly naïve and perfidiously tricky: “a dull-witted, wide-mouthed being with unkempt hair and a wild expression,” “a stranger,” not “a fellow-countryman and certainly not a person to arouse one’s compassion,” who “looked so submissive and dog-like that it seemed as if one could let him run free on the hillsides, and would only have to whistle at the start of the execution for him to come” (*PC*, p. 75).

8 This image of the condemned man is thwarted by his apparent will to knowledge, which follows an ostensive logic of gazes and gestures. Given the indifference of the soldier and the condemned man to the explanations of the officer – “for the officer spoke French, and certainly neither the soldier nor the condemned man understood French” – it is all the more striking “that nevertheless the condemned man made every effort to follow the officer’s explanations” (*PC*, p. 77), thereby imitating and parodying the movements and gestures of the traveler. “With a kind of somnolent persistence he kept turning his gaze wherever the officer happened to be pointing, and now, as the officer was interrupted by a question from the traveller, like him, he too looked at the traveller” (*PC*, p. 77). On parody and mimesis as colonial strategies of resistance, see Stuart Hall, “The Spectacle of the ‘Other’”, in: *Representation. Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London, 1997). On a comprehensive “postcolonial” reading of Kafka see John Zilcosky, *Kafka’s Travels: Exoticism, Colonialism, and the Traffic of Writing* (New York, 2004).
At the same time, Kafka’s *In the Penal Colony* impressively unfolds the complex workings of representation, delegation, and speaking for others. Not only is the officer the “sole representative [Vertreter]” of the long-established execution procedure and “at the same time the sole representative of the old Commandant’s legacy” (*PC*, p. 86), for which he tries to win the traveler as an advocate and intercessor; he also stands and speaks for an apparently both archaic and modern version of punishment, speech, and writing that seems to anticipate not only the technological possibilities of memory, archive, and reproduction but also the technological machineries of the extermination camps of the 20th century. The troubles of representation and speaking for others are also reflected in the person of the traveler. Although “travelling simply as an observer and not with the smallest intention of changing the legal constitution of a foreign country” (*PC*, p. 86), he seemingly never speaks for himself. He acts not only as a representative and envoy of Europe and the project of enlightenment but also – whether he likes it or not – as a representative, delegate, and intercessor of the condemned man, the soldier, the officer, and the commandant.

In short, the traveler embodies, as it were, the scandal of representation, of speaking and acting for others, which is just as impossible as it is inevitable. For him, there is no neutral position; his speaking is always already – be it in the most banal remark: “yes, I observed the execution”, or “yes, I heard all the explanations” (*PC*, p. 91) – a performative act of judgment. Without actually speaking, he speaks for the condemned man; he judges and condemns (the officer) without being appointed as a judge; and yet at the same time he evades his responsibility by finally fleeing the island.

The main focus of interest in Kafka’s story is “a remarkable apparatus” (*ein eigentümlicher Apparat*). What makes this apparatus remarkable is the fact that it does not simply kill the convict, who does not know the sentence that has been imposed on him, but rather inscribes the sentence with fine needles upon his body in a twelve-hour procedure until death occurs. Thus, the act of inscription is at once the announcement and the execution of the judgment. This also means, however, that the act of inscription is a genuine act of communication; and as in every act of communication, “malfunctions do occur,” as the officer has to concede. However, these malfunctions can – in contrast to the many pitfalls of everyday communication – be “put right straight away” (*PC*, p. 76). In short, what makes the apparatus so remarkable (*eigentümlich*), peculiar, and worthy of being noticed and remembered, is its ability to fabricate a script and to create a memory. Here, it is important that we bear in mind the ambivalent meanings of the German *eigentümlich*. For *eigentümlich* (deriving from *Eigentum*, “property”) signifies not only “belonging exclusively (to),” “proper (to),” “characteristic (of),” “inherent (to),” and “specific (to)” but also “peculiar,” “singular,” “strange,” “queer,”

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9 The English edition misleadingly translates the German “Vertreter” as “champion”.

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“odd,” thus comprising both what is one’s own and its apparent opposite. Accordingly, the German eigentümlich evades the opposition between the own and the foreign, the known and the unknown, the proper and the improper. Indeed, it seems to dwell in the very undecidability of these oppositions.

Thus, to be “in the penal colony” – either as a soldier, officer, or traveler – means above all to be exiled from home, from that which exclusively belongs to us and seems typical of us, from our own native language, so that, strangely enough, the all-too-heavy uniforms in Kafka’s story come to represent that which we do not want to lose contact with: “Surely these uniforms are too heavy for the tropics [Tropen],” said the traveller, instead of enquiring after the apparatus as the officer had expected. “Indeed,” said the officer, washing hands dirty from oil and grease in a waiting bucket of water, “but they mean home; we don’t want to lose contact with our home country.” (PC, p. 75) What becomes apparent here is not only the alienating and proliferating power of the tropics the colonizer feels entitled to control and dominate but also the disseminative force of rhetorical tropes. It is certainly no coincidence that the German Tropen means both “tropes” and “tropics.” In this sense, the penal colony is not only a tropical island but also an “island of tropes,” a place where no proper, literal language seems to exist, and where the persuasive power of rhetoric undermines any clear and distinct meaning and usurps every act of communication.

Indeed, all terms, figures, and personae seem to be inscribed into Kafka’s text in a twofold sense. At first sight, the officer and the traveler belong to two different epistemic systems and regimes, thus representing two conflicting worldviews: One is “the liberal, humanitarian outlook of the European traveler;” the other is “the officer’s fanatical, quasi-religious dedication to the torture-machine.” Put differently, we are confronted with the opposition between Occident and Orient, between reason and barbarism, or, as Foucault puts it, between, on the one hand, the “universal communication of knowledge and the infinite free exchange of discourses in Europe” and, on the other hand, “the monopolised and secret knowledge of Oriental tyranny.”

At a second glance, however, it becomes obvious that the traveler and the officer share at least a common language. It is their discourse alone, the “vehicular, urban, governmental language” of the colonizer, that becomes loud and
audible; and only the two of them are able to switch between the different codes, languages, and systems. Thus, we learn that the language in which they communicate is French, although it is probably neither the officer’s nor the traveler’s native language. It is, rather, the dominant governmental language they mutually come to accept as lingua franca, which in turn is understood neither by the soldier nor by the condemned man (see PC, p. 77). Note also that their conversation encompasses the whole range of linguistic modes of expression, from eloquent silence to whispering to shouting, while the vernacular, territorial, regional language of the soldier and the condemned man remains an indeterminate muttering or soundless giggling, interrupted only once by the two men’s loud laughter, which immediately turns into a “silent laughter” (PC, p. 96). In other words, although the soldier and the condemned man are constantly speaking with each other, none of their words are audible for us or become effective. Within the hegemonic system of representation, their words are “considered null and void,” as Foucault puts it with regard to the division of reason and madness, “having neither truth nor importance, worthless as evidence in law, inadmissible in the authentification of deeds or contracts.”

**Insurrectionary Speech Acts**

Against this background, those rare moments in which the condemned man and the soldier dare to speak out become even more important. At first, this happens as an absurd-comical and brutish act of resistance by the condemned man towards his superior: “Throw your whip away, or I’ll eat you up [Wirf die Peitsche weg, oder ich fresse dich]” (PC, p. 80); and then it happens again when the soldier, after the acquittal of the condemned man and the self-execution of the officer, addresses the traveler in an explanatory manner concerning the grave of the old commandant: “Here’s the teahouse. … The Old Man is buried here” (PC, p. 98).

Without doubt, it is the “impossible” insurrectionary speech act of the condemned man that is of particular interest here. When the officer states the principle of all his judicial sentences and decisions – “Guilt is always beyond doubt [Die Schuld ist immer zweifellos]” (PC, p. 80) – he expresses the ultimately unrealizable desire that there should never be any doubt – neither in the act of speaking nor in language itself. Speech is presented here as a quasi-divine performative act of a single voice that produces what it designates. “Other courts are unable to follow this principle,” the officer declares, “for they are made up of many persons” and are therefore ambivalent and “also subject to courts higher than themselves” (PC, p. 80). However, since no worldly court and no language –

language of businesses, commercial exchange, bureaucratic transmission,” see Deleuze / Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, p. 23.

14 Foucault, “The Order of Discourse”, p. 53.
juridical or other – can ever fulfill this condition, speech and guilt are, from the start, intrinsically linked to each other. In other words, we are guilty as soon as we speak. Thus, the violation of duty of which the condemned man is guilty is less that he failed to do his service by falling asleep in front of the door of his superior than that he speaks, that he uses language in a way he is neither legitimized nor authorized to: “Instead of getting up and begging forgiveness, the man seized his master round the legs, shook him, and shouted: ‘Throw your whip away, or I’ll eat you up’” (PC, p. 80).

This speech act is disturbing in a twofold sense: Instead of begging for forgiveness, which would have been the adequate and appropriate reaction, the act encompasses a rebellious imperative (“Throw your whip away”) as well as an impossible threat (“I’ll eat you up”). On the one hand, the speech act of the condemned man is an act of resistance, suspending the logic and force of the military order at least for a short moment; on the other hand, it can be understood as an affirmative act of self-appropriation through which the condemned man assumes and resignifies the doglike position that is assigned to him by his superior. Thus, his impossible or catachrestic speech act undermines not only the relations of authority and power but also the limits between the serious and the non-serious as well as the human and the non-human.

What is unacceptable for the officer is not so much the disobedience of the soldier as the ambiguity and uncontrollability of discourse, the constant sliding of the chain of signifiers and the withdrawal of meaning in an open-ended process of substitutions. Without doubt, the language of the penal colony is a language of tropes, falsehood, delusion, and masquerade, but the real problem is not so much the possibility of falsehood as its interminability: the substitution of one lie for another, and so on indefinitely: “Only confusion would arise,” the officer justifies his course of action, “if I had summoned the man and interrogated him first. He would have lied, and if I had succeeded in refuting his lies, he would have replaced them with fresh lies, and so on. But now I’ve got him, and I shan’t let him go. – Does that explain everything?” (PC, p. 80) Of course it does not. But this is a rhetorical question, and the officer is not looking for an answer. For according to his deadly logic, the aim and end of punishment, as it were, is to put an end to language and speech itself, establishing an absolute and unconditional discourse that does not allow for any answer, contradiction, or talking back. Such a discourse would no longer be speech but writing – a form of writing that directly inscribes itself upon the body, without any mediation of the ear or the voice of the other. Therefore, according to the officer, it would be pointless and useless if not unlawful, to tell the condemned man his judgment, instead of hearing or reading it, “[h]e will feel it in his own flesh” (PC, p. 79).

However, and quite surprisingly, the very script in which the sentence “Honour thy superior!” is inscribed upon the body of the condemned man is not easy to decipher: “Read it,” said the officer. ‘I can’t,’ said the traveller. ‘But it’s perfectly clear,’ said the officer. ‘It’s very elaborate,’ said the traveller evasively, ‘but I can’t
decipher it.’ ‘Yes,’ said the officer with a laugh, putting the case back into his pocket, ’it’s not a script for schoolchildren’s copy-books. One has to read it over a long period. You would certainly be able to make it out for yourself in the end.’” (PC, pp. 82 f.) The reason for the illegibility of the script is that it has been decorated and embellished beyond recognition in order to prolong the execution. While the “real,” “actual,” or “proper” script (eigentliche Schrift) would kill the convict immediately, its excessive rhetorical embellishment makes possible a deciphering with closed eyes: “Of course it shouldn’t be a simple script; after all, it’s not supposed to kill immediately, but only within a space of twelve hours on average; the turning-point has been calculated to come at the sixth hour. So the actual script [eigentliche Schrift] has to be surrounded by many, many flourishes; the real script [wirkliche Schrift] encircles the body only in a narrow girdle; the rest of the body is intended for decoration.” (PC, p. 83)

In other words, because of the many rhetorical flourishes, the procedure is prolonged to such an extent that the sentence inscribes itself not only upon the body but also upon the mind of the condemned man, with its tropic-tropological turning point occurring around the sixth hour. According to this paradoxical logic, it is precisely the temporal deferral caused by the rhetoricity of the script that is the condition of possibility for deciphering its actual, proper meaning and, thus, for gaining knowledge and salvation without any mediation. “Indeed, nothing further happens; the man simply begins to decipher the script; he purses his lips as if he were listening. You have seen it is not easy to decipher the script with one’s eyes; but our man deciphers them with his wounds. Admittedly, it is hard work. He needs six hours to accomplish it.” (PC, p. 84)

Thus, the ultimate promise of the remarkable apparatus is that it might be possible to communicate directly through the materiality of the script and the body. This bodily script would not be a derived, secondary, or perverted form of human speech; rather, as a “sign language of the stronger,” it would be its most fundamental form.15 Not surprisingly, Kafka’s writing apparatus recalls Nietzsche’s cruel mnemotechnics, which is necessary to create a memory for the human animal and to breed an animal with the right to make promises. Just as the sentence inscribes itself upon the body of the convict, until he recognizes and misrecognizes it as his own, “[m]an could never do without blood, torture, and sacrifices when he felt the need to create a memory for himself.”16 But while in Nietzsche this cruel and violent process ends with the sovereign individual, “the man who has his own independent protracted will and the right to make promises,”

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“whose trust is a mark of distinction, who give[s] [his] word as something that can be relied on,” in Kafka we are confronted with a threefold speechlessness: the dullness of the “poor, downtrodden people” awaiting the resurrection of the old commandant and his authoritarian regime; the submissiveness of the soldier and the condemned man running behind the traveler “in silence, for they dared not shout out” (PC, p. 99); and the apathy of the traveler who evades any kind of involvement by fleeing the island.

If we now return to the distinction between reformist and revolutionary politics as suggested by Foucault and Deleuze, the condemned man can be construed, prima facie, as the man of action and revolution, while the soldier seems to arrange himself mimetically with the dominant regime of representation. But neither the soldier’s mimesis nor the condemned man’s catachresis are ultimately successful. While the condemned remains silent despite his verdict of acquittal, the speech of the soldier lacks force and power: he reports and describes, but he cannot produce or transform a situation. In the end, both are left behind in silence on the tropic-tropological island, without a language of their own. The only language they understand is, so it seems, a violent sign language of injuries. It therefore makes perfect sense that the traveler’s silent threat with a “heavily knotted rope” suffices to prevent them from following him, even though they would “still have been able to leap into the boat” (PC, p. 99). In other words, the soldier and the condemned man have to acknowledge not the physical superiority of the traveler, but that they do not have a “proper” language to show the “signs of equality.”

This situation recalls Herodotus’ tale of the Scythian slave revolt as adopted by Jacques Rancière to illustrate the foundations of politics. After the Scythians fail to crush the uprising of their former slaves by force of arms, they lay their weapons aside and approach them equipped only with their horsewhips. Struck by this sea change, the slaves throw their arms away and flee without fight. Thus, all that is necessary for the Scythians to defeat their slaves is to “show the signs of their difference in nature;” for, what the slaves “cannot do is transform equality in war

17 Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morals, pp. 59 f.
into political freedom.” The same holds true for the soldier and the condemned man. Of course, they speak in their vernacular, territorial, regional language, but their words remain either unheard or without effect. Neither in the repressive system of the penal colony nor in the liberal, humanitarian system of the European traveler can their interests and rights be asserted; and a new system is currently not in sight. We could even go a step further and say that it is solidarity as such that cannot be expressed, since there is no language in which it can be audibly articulated, an aspect that is also reflected in the helplessness and apathy of the traveler.

This seemingly aporetic situation also appears in the unsatisfying ending of Kafka’s story. Or as Kafka puts it: “Two or three of the final pages are botched, and their presence points to some deeper flaw [Mangel]; there is a worm somewhere which hollows out the story, dense as it is.” However, this flaw or insufficiency is perhaps not so much a flaw as an essential element of Kafka’s text in particular and of language in general. For it can be argued that without this insufficiency every meaning would be already fixed, every interpretation determined in advance, and every act of speaking up made impossible from the start. Thus, as outlined above, there would be no speech at all, but only the mere exchange of commands and injuries. In the final analysis, this means that Kafka’s *In the Penal Colony* is a text not only about the impossibility and inevitability of representation and speaking for others but also about the impossibility of an “own,” “proper” language that could be fully controlled and mastered by us.

**From Literature to Politics**

One way to deal with this aporetic situation is to think of Kafka’s text as a paradigmatic example of a “minor literature,” a concept he outlines in a diary entry from 25 December 1911, and which is idiosyncratically adopted by Deleuze and Guattari in their study *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1975). According

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23 Kafka’s phrase “kleine Literaturen” was translated by Marthe Robert into French as “minor literatures” which was subsequently adopted by Deleuze and Guattari (see Pascale Casanova, “Literature as World”, in: *New Left Review* 31 (2005): 71–90, p. 84). The English edition translates “kleine Literaturen” as “the literature of small people”
to Deleuze and Guattari, a minor literature – or rather “minor literatures” (Kafka deliberately uses the word in the plural, “kleine Literaturen”) – is not simply the literature of a linguistic minority but the literature “which a minority constructs within a major language.”24 An example of such a minor language was the German spoken by the Jews of Prague in the Austrian empire, while Czech itself was a minor language in relation to German; “and Kafka, a Czechoslovakian Jew writing in German, submits German to creative treatment as a minor language.”25 This also means that the opposition between minority and majority is not just a question of numbers,26 as well as that there is no minor language as such: A minor language always only exists in relation to a major language that itself can become a minor language.


24 Deleuze / Guattari, Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature, p. 16; hereafter abbreviated as K.

25 Gilles Deleuze / Félix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia (Minneapolis, 1987), p. 104. This double diaspora made the writing of the Prague Jews impossible in all respects. Kafka himself even speaks of three “linguistic impossibilities” that afflicted the writing of the Prague Jews: “The impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing German, the impossibility of writing differently” (Kafka, Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors, Letter to Max Brod, June 1921). Or in the words of Deleuze and Guattari: First, “the impossibility of not writing because national consciousness … necessarily exists by means of literature;” second, “the impossibility of writing in German,” insofar as their German was a minority language detached from its homeland (even though it was the language of a dominant minority, “an oppressive minority that speaks a language cut off from the masses, like a ‘paper language’ or an artificial language”); and finally, the impossibility of writing otherwise, “writing other than in German,” because they felt “an irreducible distance from their primitive Czech territoriality” (K, p. 16). In this context, Casanova underlines the significance of Kafka’s discovery of “Yiddishkeit” at the end of 1911 through the Polish theater actor Yitzchak Lowy (Casanova, The World Republic of Letters, pp. 269–273).

26 See Deleuze / Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, p. 105: “Majority implies a constant, of expression or content, serving as a standard measure by which to evaluate it. Let us suppose that the constant or standard is the average adult-white-heterosexual-European-male-speaking a standard language. … It is obvious that ‘man’ holds the majority, even if he is less numerous than mosquitoes, children, women, blacks, peasants, homosexuals, etc.”
Subsequently, Deleuze and Guattari differentiate three main characteristics of minor literatures: First, in minor literatures language is deterritorialized, which is to say that language is detached from its supposed home country and subjected to a series of displacements and relocations; second, “everything in them is political,” because in minor literature “its cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics;” and third, in minor literatures “everything takes on a collective value,” insofar as “what each author says individually already constitutes a common action, and what he or she says or does is necessarily political, even if others aren’t in agreement” (K, p. 17, my emphasis). Accordingly, minor literatures are literatures that deterritorialize language, that connect the individual directly to the political, and that – without assuming the self-presence of a speaking subject – produce “collective assemblages of enunciation” and “an active solidarity in spite of skepticism” (K, pp. 17 f.). Understood in this way, the adjective “minor,” as Deleuze and Guattari argue, no longer qualifies “specific literatures but the revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature” (K, p. 18). Consequently, the task of writing, as understood by Kafka, is precisely the task of “becoming-minor;” it is to “make use of the polylingualism of one’s own language, to make a minor or intensive use of it” (K, pp. 27 f.).

This brings me back to my initial question concerning the problem of representation and the ambivalent role of the intellectual within political struggles. For it can be argued that the task of becoming minor applies not only to literature but also, more generally, to the realm of the political. As we have seen, however, Foucault and Deleuze denounce any kind of speaking for others as patronizing and degrading. Since the people can speak perfectly well for themselves, as they claim, it is rather a matter of creating the necessary conditions for this speaking by fighting the “system of power which blocks, prohibits, and invalidates this discourse and this knowledge” (IP, p. 207). In the final analysis, this means, according to Deleuze, that we have to abandon representation as such and, instead, favor a concept of theoretical and practical action.

As has been shown, this account turns out to be highly problematic for several reasons: First, it presupposes the existence of a popular will that can be directly articulated; second, the people or the masses are imagined as a homogeneous, unified entity without ruptures and faults; and third, immediacy is viewed as a value in its own right, to the effect that what is directly articulated is considered

27 See also Kafka’s phrase that “literature is less a concern of literary history than of the people” (Kafka, The Diaries: 1910–1923, December 25, 1911), which, of course, does not mean that it represents the people.
28 Consequently, the “intellectual’s role is no longer to place himself ‘somewhat ahead and to the side’ in order to express the stifled truth of the collectivity; rather, it is to struggle against the forms of power that transform him into its object and instrument in the sphere of ‘knowledge,’ ‘truth,’ ‘consciousness,’ and ‘discourse’” (IP, pp. 207 f.).
legitimate per se. Such a conception comes dangerously close to current emerging right-wing populist movements in Europe and the United States, which declare liberal intellectuals, the political establishment, and the censorship by the liberal regime of “political correctness” their enemies.

In contrast, I have argued that we cannot escape the process of representation. We always already represent others – whether we like it or not. Thus, the problem is not representation as such but rather its repression – either by rejecting the inevitability of representation and the concomitant responsibility it imposes on us (this is what the traveler does in Kafka’s In the Penal Colony by fleeing the island) or by assuming a discourse or a knowledge that appears as soon as it is freed from the oppressive power of censorship (this is what Deleuze and Foucault suggest). If, however, it is true that we always already speak on behalf and in the place of others and that we do not have at our disposal a neutral, quasi-universal language that would allow us to switch between different codes, idiolects, and languages without patronizing or silencing others, then it becomes crucial to make a minor or polylingual use of our language, even if or precisely because “it is a major language or has been.” According to Deleuze and Guattari, this means that we must strive “to oppose the oppressed quality of this language to its oppressive quality, to find points of nonculture or underdevelopment, linguistic Third World zones by which a language can escape.” In other words, what is at stake is the “possibility of making of [one’s] own language … a minor utilization” and to become “a sort of stranger within [one’s] own language” (K, pp. 26 f.), while at the same time resisting the phantasmagoric desire for reterritorialization (archaic, symbolic, religious, etc.) – as exemplified by the messianic prophecy at the end of Kafka’s story that promises its faithful followers the resurrection of the old commandant and the recapture of the colony.

**Toward a Becoming-Minor**

Against this background it now becomes clear that the concept of becoming-minor is not only directed against essentialist ideas of cultural identity and purity but also provides us with a normatively significant criterion for differentiating between emancipatory forms of speaking out and making oneself heard and their reactionary and reterritorializing counterparts. Progressive, emancipatory approaches seek to extend the realm of the visible and hearable for those who are

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29 Note that Benjamin – quoting Pannwitz – argues in his famous essay “The Task of the Translator” that the “basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue. … He must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language” (Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator”, in: Selected Writings. Volume 1: 1913–1926 (Cambridge, Mass., 1996), p. 262).
especially vulnerable to violence and discrimination – not by simply expanding the scope of language, but by making a minor use of language, thereby exposing a strangeness and vulnerability inherent not only in each individual language but in language itself. In contrast to this, right-wing populist, alt-right, and far-right groups – despite their differences and occasional disagreements – ultimately share the same objective: “to assume a major function in language, to offer themselves as a sort of state language, an official language” (K, p. 27). This attempt to assume at all costs a major function in language is nothing more than the self-destructive desire for a language in which every meaning is unequivocal and every statement instantaneously becomes law, without any mediation or representation – like the judgment In the Penal Colony, which is experienced even with closed eyes, because all know: “now Justice is being done” (PC, p. 87).

The disturbing ending of Kafka’s story makes strikingly clear where such a desire ultimately leads to – namely, to the self-destruction of the remarkable apparatus and its “sole representative,” the officer. The well-known statement “America First,” which undermines its claim to superiority as soon as it is asserted (otherwise, there would be no need to state it at all), is just one prominent variation of this desire. It is a desire that is usually accompanied by the aspiration to become invulnerable, which, because it can never be realized, in turn leads to an excessive heightening of the vulnerability of others. Bearing this in mind, we can see that the notorious claim of right-wing populists and extremists to freedom of speech and the “courage of the truth,” along with the claim that they alone are the mouthpiece of the “real people,” is not meant to give a voice to the people, let alone to those who are especially exposed to violence, disenfranchisement, and discrimination, but rather to totalize speech and language itself by short-circuiting the work of representation and translation.

Contrary to this desire for putting an end to representation as such and for assuming a major function in language, emancipatory politics must stress the task of becoming-minor. Here, according to Deleuze and Guattari, “becoming-minor” does not mean that we should seek to become a minority or join an already existing minority in a given society – for example, women, black people, Jews, etc. What is at stake is, rather, a becoming-minor that also affects the so-called “majority:” a becoming-woman that also affects non-women, a becoming-black that also affects people who are not black, etc. The same applies to minor languages: they are not simply sublanguages, idiolects, or dialects but the becoming-effective of a minor use of a major language that in turn affects the entire language. In fact, to dwell in a language that is not one’s own is not just a problem of

31 See Deleuze / Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, p. 106, and Gilles Deleuze, “Philosophie als Vielfalt.”
minorities, especially immigrants and their children, “but also a problem for all of us: how to tear a minor literature away from its own language, allowing it to challenge the language and making it follow a sober revolutionary path?” (K, p. 19).

Surprisingly, however, Deleuze and Guattari locate the political potential of such a becoming-minor not so much in insurrectionary or political speech acts as in the literary works of authors “termed ‘minor,’ who are in fact the greatest, the only greats.”

Thus, if we do not want to lose the political significance of Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of becoming-minor, we also have to think of those forms of speaking up and making oneself heard that explicitly take place in the domain of the political. Possible examples of such a minor use of political language and speech are the public intonation of the American national anthem in Spanish by “illegal” immigrants in the United States or the use of the “human microphone” during the Occupy protests.

In the first case, illegal immigrants, who do not have a politically audible voice, make a minor use of the dominant language not only by intoning the American national anthem in Spanish but also by problematizing the “We” of the nation as a plurality that needs to be renegotiated.

In the second case, the task of becoming minor manifests itself in the productive performative contradiction that the joint practice of the “human microphone” both performs and names when the “I” of the speaker is echoed and amplified by the multitude of the crowd.

What becomes apparent here – besides the split between the subject

sophie et minorité”, in: Critique 369 (1978): 154–55. Consequently, according to Jan-Mohamed and Lloyd, “‘becoming minor’ is not a question of essence (as the stereotypes of minorities in dominant ideology would want us to believe), but a question of position – a subject-position that can only be defined, in the final analysis, in ‘political’ terms, that is, in terms of the effects of economic exploitation, political disfranchisement, social manipulation, and ideological domination on the cultural formation of minority subjects and discourses” (Abdul R. JanMohamed / David Lloyd, “Introduction: Toward a Theory of Minority Discourse”, in: Cultural Critique 6 (1987): 5–12, p. 11).

32 Deleuze / Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, p. 105.

33 Other examples are (with certain limitations) the proliferation of the hashtag #Metoo to raise awareness of sexual assault and harassment, or, though on a different level, Didier Eribon’s autobiographical study Returning to Reims (Cambridge, Mass., 2013), in which, interweaving the subjective language of autobiography with the objective language of sciences, he reflects on the role of the intellectual and analyzes the fault lines between class identities and sexual identities.


35 See Gerald Posselt, “Representing Consensus and Dissent: On the (Anti-)Representational Politics of the Occupy Movement”, in: EPEKEINA. International
of enunciation and the subject of the statement – are not only the bodily and material conditions of speech that constitute every speech act as a bodily act but also the fact that my speech is only my speech insofar as it is always already the speech of everybody else. Thus, the echo of the multitude exposes, as it were, the split of the subject. Or to put this point in Lacanian terms: “language comes from the Other, and the idea that I’m master of my discourse is only an illusion.”

These examples also highlight that the task of becoming minor does not necessarily entail a micro-politics that is limited to particularistic power struggles. According to Oliver Marchart, such a micro-politics would be no politics at all, for “in order to be reasonably describable as political, a particular project has to possess the tendency [to] becoming-major, even if it will never be able to achieve the status of full universality … . An agent who aims for the opposite, meaning a particularistic project of self-minorisation, and eventually of self-ghettoisation, would effect a standstill in the movement towards universality and thereby induce the project’s resignation from politics.”

Even though I largely concur with this description, it is not an objection to the task of becoming minor. In fact, I want to argue that becoming minor, far from being a minority politics or a “particularistic project of self-minorisation,” is an essential element of any emancipatory project of political subjectivation, coalition building, and collective political agency. For it is only by making a minor use of one’s language that a claim to universality can be articulated without patronizing and colonizing others. In other words, the tendency of becoming major as a necessary moment of politics must, at the same time, be supplemented by the task of becoming minor, and vice versa. This also resonates with Judith Butler’s notion of cultural translation, as proposed in her exchange with Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek. According to Butler, cultural translation does not mean the transfer of a specific concept of universality between different cultures, as this

38 In a similar vein, Žižek argues that “each particular position, in order to articulate itself, involves the (implicit or explicit) assertion of its own mode of universality,” while, in turn, universality is always already contaminated by the particular and constituted by implicit exclusions. See Judith Butler / Ernesto Laclau / Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London, 2000), p. 315.
would amount to the “use of the doctrine of universality in the service of colonialism and imperialism.” Rather, cultural translation ought to be understood as the continuous “labour of transaction and translation which belongs to no single site, but is the movement between languages, and has its final destination in this movement itself.”

However, and in addition to, Butler’s account of cultural translation, the task of becoming minor, as proposed here, is not simply a movement between languages that has its final end in the movement itself. Rather, it is a movement or becoming that affects all languages involved. Furthermore, it is important to understand that no language, however minor, is immune to the tendency to become major, which, of course, does not relieve us from the necessity to counter this tendency. Various kinds of deterritorializations, as we experience them in the current era of globalization, tend to engender new forms of ethnic, religious, nationalist, or cultural reterritorializations. This is apparent in the sweeping electoral success of populist movements in Europe and the United States, the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom, or the re-emergence of nationalism and independence efforts within the European Union. Consequently, the task of becoming minor, of making a minor use of language, is neither an achievable goal nor an end in itself, but rather a continuous reworking of language such that solidarity can be articulated.

As a result, we have to differentiate between, first, particularistic projects of self-minorization that cannot reasonably be called “political”; second, the tendency of becoming major by putting an end to language and speech – and, thus, to politics – itself; and, third, the task of becoming minor by making a minor use of language, even if – or precisely because – it is a major language or has been. This distinction is important. For if the only condition of politics were the tendency of becoming major, then there would be no way to differentiate between, on the one hand, progressive, emancipatory political projects and, on the other hand, nationalist, racist, and xenophobic ambitions. If, however, we accept the proposition that becoming minor is a necessary prerequisite for any emancipatory political project, we might gain a criterion for evaluating different forms of speaking up and making oneself heard – even though the task of becoming minor cannot, by...
definition, assume the form of a political program or agenda. Thus, what is needed for a renewed political Left are not only new political alliances, strategies, and agendas – though they are, of course, essential to any reasonable political project – but also a political language – of both political theory and political action – that makes a minor use of itself.\(^{42}\)

**References**


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