



The Mole and the Serpent: A Totemic Approach to Societies of Control

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Animals are good to think with, or so they say. And animal totems have consistently found a hospitable ecosystem in Continental Philosophy. From Isaiah Berlin's fox and hedgehog, to Friedrich Nietzsche's menagerie of eagles and asses, to Donna Haraway's companion species, different critters have been put to work at the service of The Concept. In Deleuze's influential essay, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," we encounter two particular animals: the mole and the serpent. ("We have passed from one animal to the other, from the mole to the serpent, in the system under which we live, but also in our manner of living and in our relations with others." [2011: 140f]) The former is the emblem of the disciplinary society, which, according to Deleuze's argument, is evolving swiftly into a control society, overseen by the oily coilings of the latter. What to make of this totemic distinction? What can the mole and the serpent tell us about the present moment, thirty years after Deleuze released them into our minds in this context? Since it is hardly more than a suggestive throw-away line in the original piece, we can only speculate.

The mole spends much of its life in darkness. It burrows. It lives underground. It is a mammal, and thus warm-blooded. It is not a particularly social creature. While not fully blind, its eyesight is poor. How do these key characteristics map on to the disciplinary society, described so thoroughly by Foucault? There are certainly some shared themes in terms of enclosure, isolation, myopia.¹ The prison warden, factory manager, or doctor may well be a mole in professional clothing; disciplining the subject "for their own good," via the tyranny of ideological compassion. The snake, in contrast, is cold-blooded, and moves more freely on the surface of the world. It must shed its skin. The emerging control society certainly has no shortage of these. Hedge-fund managers, lobbyists, policy wonks, and bosses who act like your friend, until you inadvertently show your vulnerability to their fangs.

¹ Deleuze writes: "Enclosures are *molds*, distinct castings, but controls are a *modulation*, like a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other, or like a sieve whose mesh will transmute from point to point." (2011: 140) Compare with my own notion of "hypermodulation," as detailed in *Infinite Distraction: Paying Attention to Social Media* (2016).



But beyond individual figures, we may consider these totems as somehow describing the structure of the new episteme. The network created by the tunneling of moles may be a pre-digital form of social connection; dwelling in a 20th-century temporality of physical movement and actual encounters. This is a closed system. The serpent's body, in contrast, could itself be a kind of writhing diagram of postmodern vectors. A reptilian rhizome, ever-opening out onto new and unprecedented connections. In this "progressive and dispersed installation of a new system of domination [...] [t]he coils of a serpent are even more complex than the burrows of a molehill." (Deleuze 2011: 142)

When Deleuze wrote the "Postscript" in 1990, the Internet as we know it had not yet crystallized. We were still a good twenty years away from the full spectrum dominance of social media. But the great analyst of the assemblage was already well aware of the looming ubiquity of computers, and the cybernetic thinking through which they were deployed and arranged. (Hence his emphasis on "the code" and password, superseding, in his view, the signature or number.) So while fully alert to the imminent intensification of computational control, Deleuze's analysis focused on the by-then well-established neoliberal social, economic, and political conditions in which Silicon Valley was on the brink of exploiting for maximal effect. We might even say, from a mediacentric perspective, that Silicon Valley is the great viper nest of our time, releasing a swarm of serpents into our technological environment, all the better to rebuild the same in their own image, and according to their cold rationality (hidden under warm, fuzzy, Californian exterior).² These serpents, in contrast to their infernal biblical ancestor, do not promise knowledge, per se, but the more ambiguous and expansive pleasures of "information." And as the technocrats know, information is power, even when it bypasses knowledge. (This is the conceit of "data" as a sublime algorithmic promise, providing its own analysis, recommendation, and implementation.)³ No Eve or Adam in the 21st century could resist clicking on the pop-up icon of the serpent "to find out more." And thus no surprise that one of the biggest companies in the world today is called Apple.

What I'm suggesting here is that the serpent may be the totem animal of the Spectacle; since the mediasphere has expanded to swallow everything that Deleuze was talking about in his "Postscript." Indeed, we cannot talk about control in our time without foregrounding media and communications. (If we ever could.) The media – both social and not – is a boa-constrictor, squeezing everything in its path, and trying to identify a heartbeat before crushing it. Moreover, the Spectacle, many decades after Debord's brilliant diagnosis, has become an Ouroboros – a snake eating its own tail. Today, we are more likely to take photos of ourselves than anything else. Every single album released in

² Cf. Clifford Stoll's early critique (1996).

³ The various ruses of the control society often are sold to us as an opportunity, or according to a kind of capitalistic gift-economy. Cf., for instance, the Japanese coffee shop that provides free coffee in exchange for your data (<https://digiday.com/retail/japanese-coffee-shop-will-give-free-coffee-exchange-data/>).



2019 sounds like an album from 1995, 1985, or 1975. As Mark Fisher may have said, the snake sheds its skin, but the new one looks eerily familiar.⁴ (As I write, flares are back in fashion, for the umpteenth time.) Think also of the popularity of reaction videos on YouTube. Surely we can only be a few days before reaction videos to reaction videos start trending. Consider also *Goggle Box*, on UK TV: a show where people at home watch the reactions of people in their own homes, watching an unseen TV show. Narcissus no longer even needs the pond! Meanwhile, the tentacles of the Spectacle reach into every crevice, and probe every orifice.⁵

One new game show is especially symptomatic here. Called *Paid Off*, its gimmick is to give young Americans an opportunity to compete in front of the nation, *Hunger Games*-style, for the chance to have their student debt canceled. (A debt they should never have had in the first place, in a world which would actually care about education, or the economic justice and welfare of its citizens.) One could not think of a more cynical attempt to exploit the new mutation in capitalism – both economic and existential – whereby “Man is no longer man enclosed, but man in debt.”⁶ As Deleuze notes so presciently, as if anticipating the grotesque inevitability of a Trump presidency: “[T]he most idiotic television game shows are so successful [...] because they express the corporate situation with great precision.” (2011: 140) The fascination exercised by reality TV, even among the intelligentsia, must at least in part be due to the reptilian pleasures of watching people behaving like vipers, with no stakes or risk for the viewer. We can all cast ourselves in the role of moles, judging the feeding frenzy from the right side of the screen; temporarily safe from the fangs of our fellows.

Thirty years later, we may say that Deleuze could not have predicted the extent to which the rapidly consolidating control societies were also deliberately cultivating an out-of-control situation of worldly chaos. Here, Giorgio Agamben’s important reading of “the state of exception” comes into play (cf. 2005), along with Naomi Klein’s canny understanding of “the shock doctrine,” or disaster capitalism (cf. 2008). The more things imitate the physiology of the snake, and spiral out of control, the more old-school moles can come in and start reasserting authority via the magic power of number and signature. (One wonders, in passing, if we can even talk of “control societies” when the very

⁴ Cf. Mark Fisher’s various writings on “the slow cancellation of the future” (2018).

⁵ Donna Haraway provides a positive reading of slithering things in “Tentacular Thinking: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene,” where she writes: “We need another figure [beyond Gaia] [...] to erupt out of the Anthropocene into another, big-enough story. [...] I want to propose snaky Medusa and the many unfinished worldings of her antecedents, affiliates, and descendants. Perhaps Medusa, the only mortal Gorgon, can bring us into the holobiomes of Terrapolis and heighten our chances for dashing the twenty-first-century ships of the Heroes on a living coral reef instead of allowing them to suck the last drop of fossil flesh out of dead rock.” (2016: n.p.)

⁶ It is important to register the ongoing gender disparity when it comes to both income and debt, something that is lost in Deleuze’s universalist formulation here.



notion of society – in the wake of Thatcher and Reagan – has been systematically, cynically, and deliberately dismantled.⁷)

Control society does not simply supersede the disciplinary society. Rather it extends, intensifies, and complicates it. The mole lies hidden in the molecular.⁸ Indeed, it would be an insult to the millions of people in prison – millions more people in fact, every year, correlating with the boom in highly-profitable private prisons – to argue that disciplinary society is behind us. The same applies to the premature pronouncement of the end of the factory, in the age of Amazon and Foxconn; or the end of the clinic, in the age of Adderall and Xanax.

In other words, we are dealing with an old enemy in new clothing. We are dealing with moles wearing snake-skin suits!

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⁷ When Margret Thatcher insisted that "there is no such thing as society," she was making one of the most consequential performative utterances in history: describing a state of affairs she herself was determined to bring about.

⁸ Karl Marx reserved a special cameo for the mole as an "underground" figure, poised to burst back into the daylight, and augur a revolution. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, he writes: "But the revolution is thorough. It is still journeying through purgatory. It does its work methodically. By December 2, 1851 it had completed one half of its preparatory work; it is now completing the other half. First it perfected the parliamentary power, in order to be able to overthrow it. Now that it has attained this, it perfects the *executive power*, reduces it to its purest expression, isolates it, sets it up against itself as the sole target, in order to concentrate all its forces of destruction against it. And when it has done this second half of its preliminary work, Europe will leap from its seat and exultantly exclaim: Well burrowed, old mole!" (1994: 198) (This is considered a reference to the scene in Shakespeare's play when Hamlet addresses his father beneath the stage as "old mole.") *Old Mole* was subsequently the name of a radical Marxist newspaper in Cambridge, MA, in the late sixties. Cf. Hardt/Negri 2000: 57: "[W]e suspect that Marx's old mole has finally died. It seems to us, in fact, that in the contemporary passage to Empire, the structured tunnels of the mole have been replaced by the infinite undulations of the snake."



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