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Obituary: Felix Guattari

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Pierre-Felix Guattari, psychiatrist, born 1930, died La Borde near Blois France 29 August 1992.

TRUE TO his first name, the psychiatrist Felix Guattari was a happy man, known to his friends (and enemies) as 'the happy psychotic'. His other name, Pierre, suits the flinty intransigence of his process of thought. He was one of France's leading innovators in the field of psychiatry - a militant therapist of the anti-psychiatry school he helped to found, and whose activities scandalised conformist establishment analysts. He was also a brilliantly intuitive social philosopher who collaborated closely with his great friend the philosopher Gilles Deleuze on various books, notably *L'anti-Oedipe* (1972), their best-known work, widely translated, which became the couchside book of a whole generation of students of psychology. He was an articulate environmental ecologist who campaigned for the Greens and Generation Ecologie during the last regional elections.

Guattari's mentor, Dr Jean Oury, the co-founder of the psychiatric clinic of La Borde, near Blois, south-west of Paris, had known Guattari since 1945, when the latter was only 15 but already militating for the establishment of youth hostels. Oury invited him to join the clinic, where he remained until Oury found him dead of a heart attack in his room there on Saturday. Even in his early sixties Guattari was the same happy human being as he was at 15. His apparent dreaminess concealed extreme attention, his assumed nonchalance masked a deep dedication. Oury declared: 'He was always the same simple adolescent boy I had known in 1945. He never changed. He never cared about honours or titles . . . What obsessed him was research, and his life was a constant work in progress.'

Guattari joined the French Communist Party just after the Second World War, but was expelled because of his pro-Chinese position, after which he became close to militant extreme left-wing Italians until they lapsed into terrorism. He was an enthusiastic animator of psychiatry seminars. He also directed the review *Recherches*, which he founded.

Guattari had been a member of the *Ecole freudienne de Paris* since its foundation in 1964, and Jacques Lacan himself had been his analyst for seven years until Guattari became dissatisfied with the institution's stultifying bureaucracy and the domination of Lacanian methods. Guattari became a passionate critic and opponent of the present air of decline in the world of conventional psychiatry, and at La Borde espoused the cause of institutional psychotherapy. He had learned that in the disgusting folly of war mad people were able to cure themselves spontaneously of their symptoms by doing useful service in their community, in which encounters between Resistance fighters, clinical staff and patients led them to a better understanding of the reality of madness and the significance of opening it up to the outside world. The power traditionally wielded over the patient by the doctor was put to question in a mingling of all possible types of treatment - psychoanalysis, electroshock, group therapy, pharmacology.

One great influence on Guattari, and on La Borde as a whole, was Michel Foucault's *Histoire de la folie* (1961). Another was the Italian Marxist Franco Basaglia, who fought for the suppression of psychiatric hospitals and the integration of schizophrenics into ordinary social life. But La Borde was different from the experiments of British anti-psychiatrists like David Cooper and R. D. Laing, for whom madness, especially schizophrenia, should not be considered as a sickness but as the intimate expression of the sufferer's experience of life, a passage towards rebellion against the family and established order.

Acutely aware of the decline of psychoanalytical therapy, Guattari declared that the true causes of the crisis in western psychiatry lay in the theoretical bases of psychoanalysis: 'For me, the workings of the subconscious are not dependent upon the individual as such, but upon the various social elements the individual has been exposed

In a typically mixed compendium of articles, *Psychanalyse et transversale* (1972), Deleuze wrote an introduction beginning: 'Pierre-Felix Guattari does not bother himself with problems concerning the unity of the Moi.' And he went on to ask: 'Will the day ever dawn when we shall study with equal earnestness and intellectual rigour the definitions of God given both by Antonin Artaud and by Descartes or Malebranche?'

As a result of his experiences at La Borde, Guattari took as his main target psychoanalytic conformism, and attacked unrelentingly the dogmatic background of Lacanism - its inhibiting logicism, its mathematicisation, its messianic jargon. To this task he gave of himself always with true generosity of heart and soul, and a prodigious physical and mental energy, creating terms of reference, constructing new systems, inventing rudiments of a working language in the spirit of Leibnitz's monumental works.

Guattari's arguments are sometimes hard to follow, and hard to accept, but one is always rewarded in the end, and spiritually refreshed. His anti-neurosis, anti-necrosis stand is a positive antidote for the terrible times we live in. It was Guattari who in 1990, in an unforgettable television documentary, revealed to the horrified world the inhuman incarceration of the mad on the Greek island of Leros, and helped to ameliorate the conditions of their detention. At the time of his death, he was working with Paul Virilio on discussions on the lamentable 'ethnic cleansing' in the former Yugoslavia's tragically pointless civil war.

In his journals *Les années d'hier* ('Yesterday's years', 1986), covering the years 1980-85, we find Guattari's endless curiosity about the world and its beings attracted to ever wider sociological and political areas. It shows us a man who never stops creatively questioning his beliefs and assumptions. In this respect he was one of the rare contemporary philosophers possessing the gift of being able to deconstruct and reconstruct at one and the same time. This trend was further developed in a short but important book, *Les Trois Ecologies* (1989).

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For Guattari, when we consider all the technological and social upheavals our planet is now desperately trying to deal with, it becomes useless to treat ecological problems only on a practical basis: 'It is the relationship between subjectivity and its exteriority - whether social, animal, vegetable, cosmic - that is now being compromised in a sort of generalised movement towards implosion and regressive infantilism.' More than ever before, nature cannot be dissociated from culture, and environmental ecology separated from mental ecology. These three ecologies of nature, culture and the mind should constitute an all-embracing ecological system or an 'ecosophy (a combination of philosophy and ecology) of a new kind, at once practical and speculative, ethico-political and aesthetic, replacing the archaic forms of religious, political and associative engagement'.

Guattari met Deleuze in 1969. This meeting was an intellectual coup de foudre that was to result in such huge conceptual collaborative works as *Mille Plateaux* (1980) and which marked the beginning for Deleuze of a second philosophic period that he says could never have happened otherwise. As writers, they are both blessed with literary grace and humour, enchanting stylists, as all philosophers need to be if non-specialists are to obtain at least aesthetic pleasure from a study of their writings.

Like the greatest scientists, Guattari was also a lovable human being whose playful absorption in art, cinema, popular culture, music and literature immeasurably enriched his practice of psychiatry, happily transforming it into a marvel of sympathetic, revivifying communication in the parched landscapes of academic analysis. Deleuze, in an interview in 1988, said: 'We do not collaborate in the usual sense of the word, like two individuals bent on one task . . . we did one book alongside another book written at the same time . . . We were more like separate but parallel streams that eventually joined in a third, which then became us.'

Now one of those streams has dried up. But Guattari will live on through his own works and those he wrote alongside *The Friend*, one of the 'conceptual personages' he and Deleuze created in their delightful *Qu'est-ce que*

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