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“A concept is a brick. It can be used to build the courthouse of reason. Or it can be thrown through the window.”

Brian Massumi, Translator's Foreword: Pleasures of Philosophy. – In: Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari (1987), A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia. London: Continuum, p. xii.

The comparison of concepts to bricks is, I think, very apt. After all, we often use bricks as an analogy for elementary constituents of some greater whole. Atoms are to matter what bricks are to a house. In the same vein, concepts are the bricks of a system of ideas, a "courthouse of reason".

However, the author of the quote alleges more than this somewhat obvious claim. In a way, he argues for the duality of brickhood – that concepts can have not only the constructive power of being the building-blocks of an ideological system, but also a destructive power, a radical nature, the ability to be "thrown through the window" in an act of riotous fervor.

Is this the case? If so, can these two natures of the brick-like concept be reconciled? How do they interact? And what is the precise mechanism by which a concept is "thrown through the window"?

I. The courthouse of reason

A concept, one might say, is the name given to some general phenomenon. Thus, for instance, one observes that there exist many small, grey, four-legged, grain-eating creatures which are quite similar to each other, almost identical, in their form. So a concept is devised to describe this collection of creatures as a whole, namely, the concept of "mice". By collecting more observations and noting the correspondences between them, one eventually arrives at the more general concepts of "rodents", "mammals", "species" and so on. These (and many more) are then used to construct the organised system of, in this case, biology.

However, concepts are more than simply names. If that were so, they would only be a tool of simplifying discourse, a way to avoid repeating lengthy descriptions of phenomena. But to name something is also to state that the thing has some bearing on reality. That is not to say that we can only name that which really exists; after all, an atheist can certainly talk about the concept of God, a physicist about faster-than-light travel or a mathematician about $2+2$ equaling 5. However, it is required that we can at least meaningfully converse about a concept in the frame of "if it were so, then..."; otherwise there would simply be no use-case for that concept. For instance, if we return to the earlier biological example, to utilise a concept of "mice" is to claim that there exist (or at least could exist) some common properties of all mice that would justify such a grouping.

Therefore the walls of the courthouse serve primarily a social purpose, not just an onomastic "ease of conversation" one. A literal courthouse provides a systematic means of

settling disputes and deliberating on cases in the precise context of the law. The courthouse in Massumi's quote serves a similar purpose in allowing discourse to proceed in a meaningful and productive way. But, not unlike a real courthouse, there is always some uncertainty about the stability of the very foundations of the system.

II. The weathering of the walls

Let us then, for a moment, embark on a seemingly tangential foray into the history of chemistry. For as long as humans have been studying chemical substances, there has existed a fundamental division of them into two kinds – those which are found in nature and produced by plants, animals etc. (*organic* compounds) and those which are found as minerals or synthesised in the laboratory (*inorganic* compounds). However, in the 19th century, it was shown that many known organic substances could be synthesised from inorganic starting materials; moreover, new organic compounds were starting to be produced that were not (and probably could never be) found in nature. This conclusively disproved that there is no inherent *élan vital* in substances classed as "organic". New attempts were made to define what makes an organic compound in terms of its chemical composition, but these are so riddled with exceptions and edge-cases that they can be utilised only in the most general instances.

Now, this could make one think that the classification of compounds into "organic" or "inorganic" would be abandoned as soon as it was discovered that it has no basis in real chemical properties, or that at the very least it would only serve a symbolic role, as "just names". But this is not the case! The vast majority of universities teach organic and inorganic chemistry as separate courses, the two fields have separate scientific institutes and, more importantly, separate mental compartments in chemists' brains.

At the same time, this separation has no grounding in physical reality. There is no test, no experiment or measurement that can be done on a sample of substance to conclusively prove whether it is organic or inorganic. The answer must be sought in the social structure of chemistry. But even there the only completely accurate definition is the tautological one: organic chemistry is the study of organic compounds, and organic compounds are those that are studied by organic chemistry. (A similar argument was made by Judith Butler for the performative nature of gender, but I believe that, in this case, the particular chemical example is more powerful, because the "courthouse" of the natural sciences is often seen as more stable and rational than those which are already built on fundamentally social concepts.)

If we accept this idea (not dissimilar to Ludwig Wittgenstein's analysis of language) that the meaning of a concept can be indivorceable from and determined by its social usage, then we have to learn to live with a fundamental instability and indeterminacy in all systems of discourse, even the ones which seemingly stem directly from physical reality. Some (perhaps most, or maybe even all) concepts become simulacra, representations of no particular physical object or property; names which name only themselves.

But this is not yet the main point of the titular quote. Now that we have seen how the "courthouse of reason" can become unstable, we can examine the radical destructive power of concepts.

III. The smashed window

It is no coincidence that such a quote occurs in the foreword to a work by Deleuze and Guattari. After all, the French intellectual tradition is known for its potent criticism, having developed the method of deconstruction (Jacques Derrida), the concept of the simulacrum

(Jean Baudrillard) and many more. Perhaps Massumi, by using the analogy of a brick, was trying to evoke associations with the philosophically significant unrest in France in 1968 and its famous slogan of *sous les pavés, la plage*. In any case, the comparison is on point.

It must be noted that the act of throwing a brick through a window is not simply an expression of frustration and an act of destruction. In this analogy, the brick would probably be directed at an institutional building, a symbol of power, order and structure; indeed, perhaps a courthouse. One interpretation of the act itself is that it espouses a contradiction in the system itself: that it holds immense power and yet cannot resist the simplest destructive expression, a brick being tossed at a window. For a moment, the power structures become inverted and institutions are at the mercy of those who are subordinated. Thus the destructive power of a brick would more precisely be termed the deconstructive power.

A concept can function in much the same way. As stated previously, a concept contains the claim that there exists some phenomenon, some connection between distinct objects. This phenomenon might be incompatible with a particular system of ideas, and thus claiming (and demonstrating) its existence would be the throw of a brick through the window of that system's courthouse. For instance, Deleuze and Guattari themselves provide an analysis of the psychological structure of a capitalist society that clashes with the notion of capitalism as an association of rational agents, which is a basic assumption in many economic and social theories. This process has some resemblance to Karl Popper's idea of the evolution of scientific theories by falsification, only applied to broader structures of ideas and broader criteria of what counts as falsification.

Furthermore, this effect is amplified when the ideological structure is not strictly grounded in precise definitions and assumptions, but rather "floating" in a space of socially performative concepts. Then the very revelation of that fact, such as the one given previously in this essay with regards to chemistry, becomes a smashed window – especially when the structure itself posits that it is inherent to the nature of reality, as natural sciences often do.

IV. Conclusion

The comparison of a concept to a brick is not an analogy about construction materials. It is an analogy about society. Massumi's choice of the courthouse, when many different buildings are built with bricks, is not coincidental – it reflects that the systems of ideas which are constructed from concepts are often the basis of social structures, those same structures which manifest inside courthouses.

In the same way as social structures, systems of ideas can be divorced from a representation of the world and reduced to "*it is so because it is so*". And, in the same way as social structures, a brick (a concept), when precisely aimed, has the opportunity to strike a window and to expose the contradictions and instabilities of a system.