

O idiota

The idiot

Resumo: Neste artigo, examinarei um conjunto de tratamentos para a noção de “o idiota” (tocando, ao longo do caminho, em alguns conceitos satélites tais como evento, cosmopolítica, processo e virtual), de formas a explorar os usos potenciais de - o idiota - em “feitos” em ciências sociais. A atração para “o idiota” é que ele endereça para a abertura essencial dos eventos - ou seja, abertura para a possibilidade ou o virtual. Em outras palavras, é um meio para assinalar que as coisas (e eventos) podem ser outros, mas também que, aquilo que as coisas e os eventos “são” é constitutivamente “outro”, uma vez que eles estão em processo de se tornarem. A conclusão disso é produzir o deslocamento de uma visão dos eventos e coisas em termos de problemas que necessitam uma solução(ex: “como nos podemos representá-los apropriadamente”) para uma visão de eventos e coisas como ocasiões de propor - inventar - problemas mais interessantes (ex: “o que está em jogo aqui?”)

Palavras-chave: Ontologia. Problema. Tecnologia.

Abstract: In this paper, I will examine a number of treatments of the notion of “the idiot” (along the way touching on some satellite concepts such as event, cosmopolitics, process, the virtual) in order to explore the potential uses of the idiot in the ‘doings’ of social science. The attraction of the ‘idiot’ is that it provides a resource for addressing the essential openness of events - that is, their openness onto possibility or the virtual. In other words, it is a means for not only making the point that things (and events) could be other than they are, but that what things and events ‘are’ is constitutively ‘other’, in that they are in a process of becoming. The upshot of this is to shift from a view of events and things in terms of problems in need of a solution (eg “how can we grasp - represent - them properly?”) to a vision of events and things as occasions for posing - inventing - more interesting problems (eg “what can be at stake here?”).

Keywords: Ontology. Problem. Technology.

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“But what kind of idiot is this?” Natasya Filippovna exclaimed in indignation, stamping her foot at him. “Well, where are you going? Who are you going to announce?”
(Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*)

“Something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental encounter. What is encountered may be Socrates, a temple or a demon. It may be grasped in a number of affective tones: wonder, love, hatred, suffering. In whichever tone, its primary tone is that it can only be sensed.
(Gilles Deleuze, 2004, p.176)

1 Introduction

In this paper, I will examine a number of treatments of the notion of “the idiot” (along the way touching on some satellite concepts such as event, cosmopolitics, process, the virtual) in order to explore the potential uses of the idiot in the ‘doings’ of social science. The attraction of the ‘idiot’ is that it provides a resource for addressing the essential openness of events - that is, their openness onto possibility or the virtual. In other words, it is a means for not only making the point that things (and events) could be other than they are, but

that what things and events 'are' is constitutively 'other', in that they are in a process of becoming. The upshot of this is to shift from a view of events and things in terms of problems in need of a solution (eg "how can we grasp – represent – them properly?") to a vision of events and things as occasions for posing – inventing – more interesting problems (eg "what can be at stake here?").

So, on one level, this paper attempts to sketch some conceptual parameters for the idiot. However, as opening remarks imply, this is supplemented by an effort to operationalize the idiot as a practicable (though always problematic) means for re-thinking the 'doings' of social scientific research. I say 'doings' not only to connote the performativity of social scientific research, but also because I wish to begin to approach social science research in its complexity. Thus, for instance, the use of the idiot refers not only to its potential role in the analytic engagement with empirical objects and events (a matter of methodology) but also to the encounter with (in the broadest sense) disciplinary others (a matter of interdisciplinary process). Needless to say, this is a disambiguation of highly convoluted – indeed, topological – processes. Nevertheless, reframing somewhat, the idea is to deploy the idiot as a way of beginning to access the complex prospects entailed in the doing social scientific research as it emerges in empirical, institutional, and personal forms.

2 A handful of idiots...

In ancient Greece, the idiot was the individual who simply would not participate in the politics of the state, preferring to pursue their own private concerns. As Lezaun and Soneryd

(2007) put it "by minding exclusively his own affairs, (the idiot) became *useless* to the *polis*" (emphasis in the original, p. 295). This dimension of the self-oriented, private individual finds its echo in Deleuze whose, according to Frida Beckman (2009), initial 'philosophical idiot' was a character who insists on his own capacity for thought. This is the 'private thinker'... (p. 56). As Beckman explicates, for the Deleuze of *Difference and Repetition* (2004) "The idiot takes the universal capacity to think for granted and ...the philosopher fails to recognise that his self-reflection is based on a very strong presupposition regarding his own natural capacity for thought. The idiot, in fact, naturalises these presuppositions of the Image of thought and conceals them as a pure element of common sense" (BECKMAN, 2009, p. 55).

However, for the Deleuze and Guattari of "What is Philosophy" (1994), the idiot has become a conceptual persona that "wants to turn the absurd into the highest power of thought – in other words, to create" (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1994, p. 62). As they go on to write: "The old idiot wanted, by himself, to account for what was or was not comprehensible, what was or was not rational, what was lost or saved; but the new idiot wants the lost, the incomprehensible, and the absurd to be restored to him" (p. 63). This is the Russian idiot. Beckman notes how Artaud (albeit problematically for Beckman, who finds a better instantiation in Kathy Acker), is the exemplary Russian idiot whose absurdist writings engage the "limitless plane of immanence... (that) also engenders hallucinations, erroneous perceptions, bad feelings" (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1994, p. 49). This disorienting, affective dimension of the idiot is one to which we shall have reason to return. Certainly it was a dimension of one of literature's most famous idiots, Dostoyevsky's

Prince Myshkin. Over and above a narrative role as an “innocent character (that serves as) a satiric instrument for revealing the corruption of society, the inadequacy of its value systems or the stultifying nature of its institutions” (MCDUFF, 2004, p. xxiv), Myshkin “stands out because he eludes the understanding of the (other characters)” (p. xxvi) who “fit him into their own patterns of distrust, self-hatred, lying and fraud” (p. xxvii). In all this Myshkin provokes a range of emotions: frustration, mockery, irritation, anger, rejection, love, acceptance, joy. It is almost as if the amorphous, unsettling affects – the bad feelings – he induces need to be domesticated, that is, rendered into those conventional emotion categories most familiar to the various characters who encounter him (MASSUMI, 2002).

Now, this shift in Deleuze’s use of the idiot is itself unsettling. No longer is it a ‘satiric instrument’, an instrument of radical critique (not least of the Cartesian *cogito*), but a conceptual persona whose role “is to show thought’s territories, its absolute deterritorializations and reterritorializations” (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1994, p. 69). There is an ‘acritical turn’ as Stengers (2010a) puts it – the idiot is now attached to “amore truly immanent principle” (BECKMAN, 2009, p. 57). On this score, Isabelle Stengers (2010a) notes that “What is Philosophy” seems to betray the ‘conventional’ view of Deleuze and Guattari “as the thinkers of productive connections, the creation of deterritorializing processes escaping fixed identities, transgressing boundaries and static classifications” (p. 39). What is especially perplexing for Stengers is that they exercise a very modern partition between philosophy, art and science – we see this in, for instance, the distinction between conceptual personae and aesthetic figures, with their respective emphases on immanence

and concepts, and composition and affects or percepts. However, this division reflects “What is Philosophy’s” self-exemplification of the new idiot as conceptual persona: it perplexes in order to prompt a questioning of the conventional view of Deleuzian creation, a slowing down of the normal modes of practice. The topology of this slowing down is that it allows for another sort of deterritorialization and reterritorialization (see DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1988): the idiot should, therefore be treated as an event (BECKMAN, 2009), or as a process (Michael, in press).

3 An idiot in the hand...

In the last section, we saw how the concept of the idiot has evolved in the hands of Deleuze. From his treatment, and the commentaries of Beckman and Stengers, we derived a number of broad parameters along which to demarcate the idiot. The idiot marks an event that is unsettling, it embodies and mediates an amorphously affective influence that needs to be domesticated or rendered practicable in some way: sometimes this takes the form of mobilizing conventional or habitual categories – emotion categories that ‘close down’ or reterritorialize the event of idiocy. But sometimes, the idiot enables an ‘opening up’ of the event, or as we shall trace in greater detail below, a ‘slowing down’ of default modes of action.

In the work of Isabelle Stengers (2005), the idiot “resists the consensual way in which the situation is presented and in which emergencies mobilize thought or action” (p. 994). Here, the ‘presentation of the situation’ takes place in what Stengers calls ‘cosmopolitical’ events – political events wherein participantac-

tants include both the human and the nonhuman. The idiot stands outside of such events – refusing to enter them, responding in ways which are nonsensical in relation to how the event is consensually understood. Stengers (2005) writes: “the idiot can neither reply nor discuss the issue...(the idiot) does not know... the idiot demands that we slow down, that we don’t consider ourselves authorized to believe we possess the meaning of what we know” (p. 995). The tasks of those who inhabit the cosmopolitical event becomes one of “bestow(ing) efficacy upon the murmurings of the idiot, the ‘there is something more important’ that is so easy to forget because it ‘cannot be taken into account’, because the idiot neither objects nor proposes anything that ‘counts’” (p. 1.001). By attending to the idiot’s nonsensicalness, there is opened up the prospect of a challenge to the ‘standard’ meaning of the event.

Latterly, Stengers (2010b) has argued that these cosmopolitical events incorporate the nonhuman ‘through’ the human: as she puts it, “if we take seriously those nonhumans that are best characterized as forcing thought rather than as the products of thought” then humans take on the guise of “spokespersons claiming that it is not their free opinions that matter but what causes them to think and to object, humans who affirm that their freedom lies in their refusal to break this attachment, even in the name of some common good” (p. 5). However, this attachment is leavened by what Stengers (2010b) calls a “*culture of hesitation*” (p. 27, emphasis in original): in the concrete specificity of the cosmopolitical event, those expert spokespersons for the nonhuman encounter, and hesitate, in the face of “empowered minorities who have become collectively able to object, question and impose as maturing aspects of situations that would otherwise

be mistreated or neglected” (p. 27). This has become a rhizomatic situation that parallels the dynamics of Callon et al’s (2001) ‘hybrid forums’ or the topologies of Irwin and Michael’s (2003) ‘ethno-epistemic assemblages’.

It would seem that in pursuing that which facilitates a slowing down or a hesitation of the cosmopolitical, Stengers has shifted her emphasis from the ‘idiot’ to the ‘minority’. However, I would suggest that we need to keep hold of the idiot’s greatest asset – its nonsensicalness, its absurdity. While *empowered* minorities are necessarily present, the idiot is routinely excised, ignored, or swallowed in the run of conventional emotions.

In what follows, I will not be addressing the many complexities of the cosmopolitical event per se, but focus on a different event – the event of social science. By this I mean the doing of social scientific work whether that be empirical or analytic. What I am interested in is the way that idiots inhabit the empirical social scientific event and how we might analytically recover them in order to slow things down, to hesitate, to query the thought that “we possess the meaning of what we know”.

Before this however, we need to do a little ground-clearing around the notion of the event. Mariam Fraser’ (2010) compares the event in Whitehead and Deleuze. At base, for Fraser the event is an actual occasion made up of the coming together – concrescence (WHITEHEAD, 1929) – of disparate entities that social and material, human, nonhuman, and the more-than-human, macro, meso and micro, cognitive and affective, conscious, pre-conscious and unconscious. Fraser identifies that what is distinctive in the Deleuzian event is that it is a moment where these constitutive entities rather than simply ‘being together’, ‘become together’, that is to say, they are

transformed in the process of that interaction or, rather, intra-action (BARAD, 2007).

The idiot, insofar as it 'enters into' the social scientific empirical event, can serve to 'transform' the other elements that make up the event. This is especially interesting in the present discussion when one of the elements that is potentially transformed is the social scientific researcher. Under these circumstances, there is a possibility that the researcher can question what they believe they are 'busy doing' and begin to entertain the prospect that there is 'something more important'. In Fraser's (2010) explication of the Deleuzian event, this reflects the view that the event is an occasion for 'inventive problem making' in which the parameters of the issue at stake can fundamentally shift. That is to say, in the event, as the elements mutually change, so does the event – it can become an 'issue' that can be addressed in either of two ways. On the one hand, it can become a problem in need of a solution ("What is Prince Myshkin doing? Make things clear!" Or "what has happened in this interview? Something is amiss. There is a problem and we must account for it!" Or "why does Gino refuse to talk about what really matters?"). As we saw above, sometimes the resolution entails a recourse to familiar categories: Myshkin is a fraud and a scoundrel; my skills as an interviewer fail me, but I will learn to be a better interviewer (see Michael, 2004, in press a): Gino is an idiot (in the pejorative sense – see CALLON; RABEHARISOA, 2004). On the other hand, the 'issue' can prompt a re-visioning of the event and the invention of a more important question (Why do we treat Myshkin so badly? How do non-humans transform a social scientific interview into an occasion of institutional differentiation? How does Gino's recalcitrance re-assert a traditional familial assemblage? As we have seen,

for Stengers we need to cultivate a capacity to articulate these better problems. We shall suggest one possible means for such invention of better problems below.

Finally, we can note that the concept of the event deployed here assumes it to be fundamentally – to express what Massumi (2002) calls transitivity, but can also be framed in terms of virtuality (and potentiality – also see DELANDA, 2002; BENNETT, 2010; however, HARMAN, 2010 for a critical nuancing of the idea of the openness of the event). The event 'opens out' onto different possibilities. This is clearly evidenced in the shift from finding a solution to the 'issue' of an event (ie closing down the event and its meaning), to treating the event as an occasion for inventive problem-making (ie sustaining the openness of the event). Of course, this should hardly come as a surprise when one imagines, following Mol (2001) and Law (2004) that the social scientific research event is not so much representational (it does not simply depict more or less accurately some social event or other) as performative (it enacts that social event, and indeed, is enacted by that event – see HORST; MICHAEL, 2011). The idiot, it will be suggested below, is a means to sustaining and exploring this openness of the social scientific event.

4 Handling the idiot....

The idiot's nonsensical actions in the social scientific event are multifarious but we are not necessarily overtly aware of them. We might vaguely sense that something is amiss, but we cannot always put our finger on it. Michael (in press a) lists a number of ways in which research participants 'misbehave': they can fail to keep an engagement such as an interview or a

focus group event, or else remove themselves from an ethnographic setting); they can fail to participate 'appropriately' because they are too tired, or drunk, or ill; they can refuse to engage by willfully remaining silent or going off-topic; they can be disruptive by being aggressive or antagonistic; or they can undermine or ironize the social scientific event by messing about, for instance, playfully competing with other participants to give the most extreme or the silliest response to a question. Notice, that to speak of this actions as 'misbehaviours' is to set up the social scientific event in which they occurred as a problem in need of a solution.

However, before such unhappy social scientific research events can be formulated as problems, they have to be 'noticed' as such. It can be suggested that when such 'deviations' from the research event take place, they are often simply ignored (this can take several forms from 'being missed', to not being recorded, to be sidelined from the analysis – see Michael, in press). Even when they are formulated as a problem, then they are often accounted for in the genre of self-criticism (I am a poor or inexperienced or unlucky researcher). In all this, the problem is presupposed: good data were not collected, good analysis failed to take place. The solution is to better one's 'skill-set' or seek out more training or select a less recalcitrant sample or pick a more amenable case study.

And yet, the idiot has had an affect. To emphasize, here 'affect' denotes the impact by objects and actions upon a body with its individual, specific capacities – capacities that span the sensory, the reactive, the visceral, the aesthetic and so on (MASSUMI, 2002; BENNETT, 2010). The affects operate below the surface of consciousness and while they might serve as aggravations or irritants, they are not always

made manifest. When they do emerge they can take the form of emotions which, if we take constructionist accounts of emotions seriously (eg HARRE, 1986), means they are conventionalized – they are mediated through various pre-existing emotion categories. To reiterate, these emotion categories can be fairly standard ones: they translate affects into the locally typical emotions of annoyance or anger or sense of failure or embarrassment (as we have seen in the case of poor Prince Myshkin). However, as Michael (2011) has pointed out, there is also an opportunity here to be attentive to the complexity and amorphousness of these affects, indeed, to invent new emotion categories even – an invention that opens up the event.

In the context of the cosmopolitical event, the role of the idiot has a certain immediacy, and the culture of hesitation needs to be fully available if the process of slowing down, or querying the consensus is to have any chance of taking place, let alone succeeding. In the case of the social science research event, there is perhaps less urgency – the murmurings of the idiot, as noted above can be marginalized through various tacit practices or subdued through the operation of any number of conventional emotions. However, there is a possibility that the idiot's murmurings can continue to have an affect resonance: that beneath the deafening silence or symphonic emotions, those murmurings gently resonate. The question arises, how do they become accessible as idiotic, as opening up the original social science research event.

One possible way in which the idiotic can be recovered is through the anecdote (MICHAEL, 2011, in press b). Now, the immediately pertinent aspects of the anecdote can be formulated as follows:

- It is an ambiguous genre that is both literary (a constructed story) and factual (a report or document of actual events).
- It enters into and acts upon the historical record: the very reportage and circulation of an anecdote has effects – it is performative.
- It connotes how the anecdotalized event itself contributes to the making of its author who remake that event. Topologically, the author emerges from the 'event' that renders the incident 'anecdotal'.

The anecdote told of a particular past idiotic event is a partial effect of that particular past event. A prior event that has been rendered into an anecdote serves in its own anecdotalization, even as the telling of that anecdote renders that past event recoverable or narratable. This is because events impact affectively upon the persons involved (in the present case the social scientific researcher) and as such they are in part constitutive of those persons. At some point the person can go back to the event, re-narrate it, challenge the conventional view of, and the standard emotion attached to, that event. The social science research event that was once painfully remembered as being marred by participants' misbehaviour and conventionally put down to inexperience is revisioned as an occasion for – an invitation to – participants to 'misbehave' in particular idiotic ways. In other words, it was an event that overspilled the impoverished formulations of social science. It could be argued that this revisioning simply reflects the subsequent analytic resources accumulated by the researcher. For instance, elsewhere I have anecdotalized an interview marred by the 'idiotic misbehaviours' of a participant and her companion animals in terms of the complex, parasitical

interactions of hybrids (MICHAEL, 2004). This could be put down to my subsequent academic engagement with, for instance, actor-network theory. However, one might equally argue that what allowed actor-network theory to take an intellectual hold of someone who was at the time a radical social constructionist were the affects engendered by that original idiotic event (MICHAEL, in press b).

One might distill the foregoing as follows: the idiot ventriloquizes the researcher and the event anecdotalizes itself. However, note that this is a process. There is nothing here that guarantees that this is the final eventualization of the original event. Some time in the future, another aspect of the idiot of the 'original' event might reveal itself and another anecdotalization might be set in motion. At stake here is that the transitivity – the virtuality – of the event is sustained: the event remains open and its conventional and consensual readings remain contestable. Indeed, the idiotic reading of the original event – which itself amounts to a domestication – likewise should remain open and contestable.

Thus far, the discussion has addressed the idiot in a reactive register. An idiot is encountered, and the response is to seek the best way to mobilize its promise. However, we might also ask if it is possible to deploy the idiot: to invent an idiot and send it out into the world to tease open closed events, to trouble the conventional and challenge the consensual.

5 Handing over the idiot...

So where might we find a resource for this proactive idiocy? I would suggest that what is sometimes called 'Speculative Design' is an excellent candidate. My first encounter with this

approach to (interaction) design was itself idiotic. Tobie Kerridge's Biojewellery project provoked a mixture of frustration and annoyance (for a detail account of this project website go to: url: <http://www.biojewellery.com/> - last visited 21 November 2010). This was a public engagement with science and technology project and yet bore little resemblance to what I understood, from a Science and Technology Studies (STS) perspective, to be a public engagement with science and technology (PEST) project. In brief, Biojewellery involved volunteer couples who donated live jawbone cells (while having wisdom teeth removed). The cells were cultured and then shaped and decorated with precious metals to form rings that could be exchanged between the members of each couple. As has been noted elsewhere (MICHAEL, in press a), the project lacked several of the crucial elements that are usually associated with STS PEST (such as a focus on a more or less well-defined controversy or an attempt to systematically collect and analyse public views on the issue). It took a while to re-articulate the initial affects provoked by (the idiocy of) Biojewellery from conventional ones of frustration and annoyance (and let us not forget disgust), and to 'open up' - that is, expose the virtual in - the event of that initial encounter with Biojewellery. Biojewellery was operating with models of the public, of knowledge, of politics, of scholarly purpose that made me want to slow down and reflect on the presuppositions that underpinned STS PEST.

Let me give another example of the way that a speculative design prototype can idiotically challenge the conventional view of an event - and this idiocy is something that cannot necessarily be foreseen by the designers. Bill Gaver and his team at the Interaction Research Studio at Goldsmiths, University of

London developed a series of threshold devices that were designed to explore the parameters of domestic space (GAVER *et al.*, 2008). One such object - the local barometer - comprised a number of small screens distributed around a volunteer's residence. These displayed advertisements scraped from an on-line small ads website. The ads were selected via an anemometer - measuring wind speed and direction - that was attached to the roof of the property. Advertisements were thus blown into the home on the dual bases of windspeed (the stronger the wind the further way the source of the object being advertised) and wind direction (wind from the north would mean that advertisements from a northerly neighbourhood were blown in). This local barometer could be considered idiotic insofar as it made little sense to use such an arbitrary principle on which to base selection of ads. One of the objectives was to explore how neighbourhoods were imagined - the sorts of economic and social assumptions that were tacitly attached to the different neighbourhoods surrounding the residence. Initially, the volunteer found the local barometer aggravating - indeed, it was conventionalized as yet another medium by which the 'unwelcomed commercial' could enter the home. However this gradually shifted as the volunteer began to take note of certain advertised items of interest (for instance, items which held special meaning for him, or contravened his cognitive map of the neighbourhoods). However, of particular interest for the present paper was the rather unexpected finding that the volunteer began to read the weather through the advertisements: the neighbourhoods from which the advertised objects originated began to signify weather conditions. The more 'interesting problem' that came to be invented through the idiotic objects of the local baro-

meter concerned the conceptualization of the neighbourhood. From a sociological construct this took on a more heterogeneous character – it combined the socio-economic and the meteorological, the commercial and the barometric. In other words, the 'more interesting problem' domain that emerged centred on nature culture or technonature (eg WHITE; WILBERT, 2009).

Now, the discussion of the peculiar idiocy of the local barometer is an STS one – it is an attempt to come to grips with the oddness embodied in the prototypes of Speculative Design. This interdisciplinary encounter between Speculative Design and STS, and what subsequently has become a full-blown collaboration (see the project Sustainability Invention and Energy Demand Reduction: Co-Designing Communities and Practice – <http://www.ecdc.ac.uk>) can be illuminated by Barry's (BARRY *et al.*, 2009; BORN; BARRY, 2010) recent discussions of the logics of interdisciplinarity and in particular the logic of ontology. In brief, for Barry one of the most interesting prospects of interdisciplinarity is that the collaboration between divergent disciplines can generate new objects of study. This is because, when things go well, new connections are brought in to object of study by the disciplines. The relationalities out of which the object is composed – and hence the object itself – multiply and alter through collaboration. As we have seen above, this encounter between disciplines can be an idiotic one. Practitioners of one discipline can simply not grasp – find nonsensical – the objects of study of the other discipline. If the affective response to this idiocy can translate into a new object of study – a new, indeed, inventive framing of the pro-

blem. In the case of the collaboration between Speculative Design and STS, inventive problem making has entailed the peculiar invention of the idiot that has been set out in this paper.

6 Concluding remark: idiot-to-hand...

This paper has attempted to draw a particular trajectory through various formulations of the idiot towards a version that cannot in the end be 'methodologized'. At best, this paper has pointed toward an idiot that is part process, part sensibility, part ethos. In the end, the presence of the idiot – its emergence is always surprising because at the moment it has managed to 'force' one's thinking (in this case, where thinking relates to the doing of social science research), to slow it down, to open it up, it is also transforming the thinker (the social science researcher). The idiot-to-hand necessarily bites the hand that feeds it...

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