The Pathologization of Difference in Authoritarian Systems

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Authoritarian systems do not operate solely through repression, mass arrests, and coercive force. They also seek to prescribe acceptable ways of thinking and to proscribe forms of conduct deemed unacceptable. From this perspective, the regulation of *nonconforming behaviors*—that is, behaviors that fall outside the political system's control, such as protest or conduct that does not conform to prevailing social codes—may be carried out not only through legal and political mechanisms but also through medical, psychological, and social categories. The classification of particular forms of behavior as *normal* or *abnormal* may itself become embedded within broader relations of power and authority. This article analyzes the psychiatric mechanisms of control that have recently emerged in Azerbaijan from precisely this perspective. The new legal framework, which expands the circumstances under which the state may refer an individual for psychiatric examination without their consent, raises the question of when and how *nonconforming behaviors* come to be framed as medical problems. The central concern here is not to assess the mental health status of particular individuals. Rather, the key question is: *Which forms of behavior are being reframed as objects of medical surveillance and intervention?*[1]

As the theoretical framework for this article, I draw on the concept of *desiring-production* developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.[2] Critiquing the *Oedipal model* that occupies a central place in Freudian psychoanalysis, Deleuze and Guattari argue that desire does not arise solely from familial

relations or from the triangular structure of father, mother, and child. Rather, desire is a productive and creative force generated within social, economic, and political relations. At the same time, every social system seeks to organize these fluid flows of desire through particular codes, to render them governable, and to align them with the existing social order. Through the process they describe as *reterritorialization*, free and multidirectional flows of desire are recaptured within familiar social categories and formations, including the family, the state, norms, and identities. From this perspective, when divergent forms of life and behavior do not conform to prevailing social codes, they may be represented not merely as forms of political or cultural difference, but also as *abnormal*, *problematic*, or *pathological*.

In authoritarian systems, the pathologization of divergent forms of social and political expression functions as a mechanism for governing desire and behavior. The issue at stake is not merely the psychological condition of individuals, but, more broadly, the relations of power that determine which subjects are permitted to speak, which desires are recognized as legitimate, and which forms of life are deemed socially acceptable.

To explain how desire operates through productive connections, Deleuze and Guattari employ the concept of desiring-machines. The human body and its organs—the mouth, hands, eyes, and others—do not merely perform biological functions; they also operate as productive machines that connect, interrupt, and redirect various flows. In this sense, desiring-machines are not metaphorical devices but elements of a material process of production in which desire continuously forms connections between bodies, objects, and social relations. Deleuze and Guattari illustrate this process through the example of the breast and the mouth. The breast, for instance, functions as an organ-machine that produces a flow of milk, while the mouth connects to this flow, interrupting and receiving it. In this way, two distinct organ-machines become coupled, giving rise

to a particular relation of production between them. For Deleuze and Guattari, desire operates precisely through such connections between flows and machines: it is not a passive state or a representation of something absent, but an active and productive process constituted through these material connections.[3] At the same time, institutions such as the school, the family, the state, and the media also function as social machines. These machines shape the ways in which individuals come to desire and continuously reproduce existing social relations. Social systems, therefore, do not merely constrain desire; they also produce, organize, and channel particular forms of desire. Because individuals live within particular social systems, their perceptions of reality, as well as their needs and desires, are shaped through the relations and codes produced by those systems. For example, the political desires of individuals living under different political and economic regimes cannot be understood solely as the outcome of personal choice. If we take an authoritarian system as one possible example, we can observe that such a system not only restricts the free press and alternative channels of information but also produces a particular representation of reality through media, educational, and symbolic structures that serve and reproduce the existing order. Through these "machines," the system also shapes what society comes to regard as possible, desirable, or meaningless. Under such conditions, rather than demanding democratic participation, free elections, and political accountability, individuals may come to perceive the political forms offered by the existing system as normal and natural. If we refer to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of desiring-machines, commonly expressed attitudes toward the political system—such as "What difference would someone newly elected through genuinely competitive elections make anyway?" or, when speaking about politicians, "They are all the same," referring to both the opposition and the government—should not be understood merely as expressions of individual apathy. Rather, they can be interpreted as forms of desire and political

imagination that are produced, structured, and circumscribed through particular social and political mechanisms. From this perspective, power is not merely a repressive force that compels individuals to adopt particular ideas; it also functions as a mechanism of desiring-production that shapes what individuals are able to imagine, what they are able to desire, and which futures they are able to conceive as possible.

In authoritarian systems, power first dislodges subjects' desires and discontents from their existing frameworks and subsequently reterritorializes them within new codes aligned with the interests of the regime—that is, it reorganizes desire by attaching it to fixed frameworks, identities, and symbols defined by the state. Through this process, a model of the compliant subject, characterized by attachment and obedience to an authoritarian-centered political order, is produced. How, then, do these mechanisms of desiring-production and reterritorialization operate through Azerbaijan's socio-economic machines? What forms of desire are produced for society by pro-government media outlets, appointed or politically managed parliamentary representatives, official institutions, and the institutions of preschool, secondary, and higher education? In the Azerbaijani context, pro-government media and the educational apparatus tend to displace citizens' socio-economic grievances from the center of political attention, while reterritorializing and stabilizing desire around narratives of foreign-policy success and the rhetoric of a "victorious nation." A particularly visible example of this reterritorialization of desire, as well as of the management of public opinion, can be observed in the political system's responses to electoral processes and international criticism.

Despite criticism from international organizations concerning the competitiveness of elections, media outlets give extensive coverage to polling results indicating high levels of public trust in President Ilham Aliyev. During one of his foreign

visits, in response to a question concerning media freedom, Aliyev stated that “there is no free media in the world.”[4] His statement is an attempt to normalize and legitimize the government’s restrictive approach toward independent media domestically by presenting the absence of genuinely free media as a universal condition rather than as a specific feature of Azerbaijan’s political environment.

If these and similar measures are understood as mechanisms aimed at preserving the continuity of an authoritarian system and prolonging its durability, it becomes easier to understand why the media and other official institutions continuously participate in the production of desire within society. In Deleuze and Guattari’s terms, desiring-machines generate particular flows that can contribute to the reproduction and persistence of authoritarian rule. In this context, the *flow* may be understood as the continuous circulation of ideological, emotional, and informational forces through social consciousness and everyday life. The media and the state apparatus, functioning as socio-political machines, pursue this objective by coding, organizing, and directing these flows. Their function is not limited to securing obedience; it also involves representing existing relations of power as natural, normal, and devoid of viable alternatives. In this sense, power does not merely restrict individual behavior. It also produces a regime of desire in which certain political realities are rendered desirable and conceivable, while alternative political possibilities are represented as unrealistic, illegitimate, or threatening. For example, one of the forms of political expression acceptable to the regime is a public discourse shaped by media-generated flows in which society is encouraged to say, rather than “Aliyev is a dictator,” that “our president is the president of a victorious nation.” Similarly, instead of describing a parliamentary representative as a “fraudulently elected MP,” public discourse may be redirected toward the cynical assumption that “what difference would it have made even if

they had been democratically elected?” Such formulations illustrate how political dissatisfaction can be displaced and reorganized within narratives that diminish the perceived significance of democratic procedures themselves. A recurring example of this mechanism can be observed when criticism of the political system is met by media outlets or state officials with the claim that “Ilham Aliyev is the president who liberated Karabakh.” In this way, the image of the president as a “liberator,” reproduced through the media as one of the system’s principal social machines, functions as a discursive shield against critical voices. The objective of power, therefore, is not merely to prohibit particular opinions, but also to produce a social and emotional environment in which certain forms of political thought become increasingly difficult to articulate, imagine, or sustain.

Against this background, we have recently witnessed the entry into force of a measure allowing individuals detained by the police to be subjected to psychiatric assessment without their consent. This development can be interpreted as another instance of the reterritorialization of desire by the state and capital. Individuals whose conduct exceeds the boundaries of what the system recognizes as rational, or who do not conform to its disciplinary language, may be recast within a psychiatric framework. In this process, the subject is returned to a category that the system can recognize, classify, and govern: that of the psychiatric patient. If an individual’s desires or forms of self-expression move beyond the boundaries established by the system, they may come to be perceived as a threat to the existing social structure. When newly articulated or publicly displayed forms of desire—for example, unconventional, unpredictable, or seemingly chaotic behavior on social media—resist incorporation into the system’s prevailing codes, such behavior may be delegitimized and presented to the public through psychiatric labels. In this sense, psychiatric categorization can function not merely as a medical practice, but also as a mechanism through which

socially disruptive or nonconforming forms of conduct are rendered intelligible, manageable, and politically neutralized. In such cases, psychiatric categories may function not only for therapeutic purposes but also as discursive instruments through which particular forms of behavior are socially and politically delegitimized. An empirical manifestation of this theoretical mechanism can be observed in the recent case of Günəş, a TikTok personality and singer known on social media as *İlanlı qız* ("Snake Girl"), as well as more broadly in practices within Azerbaijan's law-enforcement system whereby individuals may be discredited through psychiatric labeling. According to a report published by *Baku.ws* on 2 August 2026, Günəş was detained by police officers and investigated in connection with what the report described as her "inappropriate behavior" on social media, as well as images in which she appeared in revealing clothing. The report further stated that she was placed in a psychiatric hospital for examination and assessment of her health condition.[5]

Although the behavior of the TikToker who was reportedly placed in a psychiatric hospital did not constitute an explicit form of political protest, it may nevertheless be understood as violating the behavioral order produced by society and, within an authoritarian context, reinforced by the state. Examples include constructing forms of self-expression on social media outside prevailing moral conventions, appearing in revealing clothing, filming videos with a snake wrapped around her neck, singing, and presenting herself without conforming to dominant social expectations regarding acceptable behavior. Interpreted through Deleuze and Guattari's account of desire and coding, this woman's self-expression can initially be understood as undergoing a process of *decoding* from established social and moral codes. Her clothing, bodily self-presentation, and public behavior do not conform to dominant constructions of *normative femininity* and socially sanctioned female conduct. Yet this process of

decoding is not allowed to remain outside mechanisms of regulation for long. The system subsequently redefines her through a new set of codes, including *mental disorder*, *inappropriate behavior*, and the language of medical-psychiatric intervention. In this way, a form of self-expression that initially moves beyond established norms is reintroduced into a domain governed by the system through psychiatric categorization. The fact that the first reported application of this measure involved a woman is also analytically significant. The case may therefore be examined not merely as an individual incident, but as an example of how social norms are constructed and enforced through the regulation of the female body. When a woman transgresses the boundaries of what is defined as *normative female behavior*, the system may do more than sanction the individual concerned. It can also produce a broader disciplinary boundary that signals to other women which forms of conduct are socially acceptable and which may be classified as abnormal. In this sense, psychiatric intervention can operate as a gendered mechanism of social discipline. The psychiatric regulation of women's self-expression thus has the potential to extend beyond the individual case and become part of a wider disciplinary process. What is communicated is not only how members of society are expected to behave, but also which desires may be expressed publicly and which are to be silenced. A similar pattern emerges when we examine how this mechanism of discursive discipline has been covered by independent media. As highlighted in Meydan TV's analysis of psychiatric legislation and its implementation,[6] such measures can be interpreted as serving purposes that extend beyond medical treatment. From this perspective, the authoritarian apparatus seeks to remove critical, disruptive, or seemingly chaotic forms of protest from the ideological and political domain and to *pathologize* them, recoding such behavior in the public sphere as a form of *abnormality*. Psychiatric classification thus becomes a means through which politically or socially disruptive conduct may be stripped of

its political meaning and rendered intelligible instead as a medical or psychological problem.

Thus, by coding forms of behavior that it cannot fully regulate through psychiatric categories, the existing political system not only seeks to protect itself against perceived threats but also produces a new relation to desire by encouraging the internalization of mechanisms of self-control. In this sense, individuals may increasingly regulate their own conduct in anticipation of the boundaries imposed by the system. As a result, desires and forms of conduct that emerge outside the established order—that is, beyond the forms of desire coded and authorized by the authoritarian system—may be classified as *abnormal* and subsequently reintroduced into the social field under psychiatric labels. Through this process, behaviors arising from unauthorized or nonconforming desires are not merely suppressed; they are recoded as signs of psychological abnormality and presented to society within a psychiatric framework.

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