



Money, Technology and Capitalism in Deleuze's "Postscript"

JENS SCHRÖTER

Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn, Germany

Introduction

"Perhaps it is money that expresses the distinction between the two societies best." This statement from Deleuze's (1992: 5) famous "Postscript on the Societies of Control" (first published in French, cf. Deleuze 1990) should be taken seriously. Much has been made of the implications of this essay, especially for the description of contemporary digital culture: e.g., tracking as an example of the "control mechanism, giving the position of any element within an open environment at any given instant" (ibid.: 7). The central role of money and Deleuze's specific ideas regarding the transformation of capitalism in (or as?) 'societies of control' have received comparatively little attention. Seb Franklin (2015: 3-10) has already discussed Deleuze's famous essay in relation to questions of socio-economic order, but he did not explicitly discuss the role of money. This is all the more surprising if we consider that Deleuze called himself a Marxist: "I think Félix Guattari and I have remained Marxists, in our two different ways, perhaps, but both of us. You see, we think any political philosophy must turn on the analysis of capitalism and the ways it has developed" (Deleuze 1995: 171). Among others, Choat (2010: 125-55) has underlined that Deleuze's thought was always very close to Marx (cf. also Thornburn 2003). It is therefore not surprising that Deleuze assigns money an important role in the description of control societies.

In the following essay, I will analyze the Postscript's dense and sometimes enigmatic passages on money and capitalism, seeking to relate them to different theoretical and historical approaches to the subject. By doing this, I hope to draw a clearer picture of what 'societies of control' mean for the ongoing discussion about 'capitalism' – and vice versa. This essay is part of my recent research, in which I seek to better understand the role that money plays in different theoretical discourses, such as Actor-Network-Theory and various strands of media theory (Schröter 2008, 2016, 2018).



Regarding money, Deleuze writes:

Perhaps it is money that expresses the distinction between the two societies best, since discipline always referred back to minted money that locks gold in as numerical standard, while control relates to floating rates of exchange, modulated according to a rate established by a set of standard currencies. (Deleuze 1992: 5)

This sentence is complicated to say the least. Deleuze argues that ‘discipline always referred back to minted money that locks gold in as numerical standard.’ Historically, this is true if we locate disciplinary society in the 19th and early 20th century.¹ This was the period when the gold standard was central, and even though it was already effectively abandoned after WW I, the standard ultimately ended only with the collapse of the Bretton Woods regime in 1973 (cf. Hardach/Hartig 1998). Deleuze obviously refers to these circumstances when he argues that ‘control relates to floating rates of exchange, modulated according to a rate established by a set of standard currencies.’ After the collapse of the Bretton Woods regime, the set of fixed exchange rates between currencies with reference to the dollar (which was tied to gold) was given up in favour of ‘floating rates of exchange.’ Deleuze surely does not intend to say that the transformation from disciplinary society to control society is strictly tied to that monetary transformation, because this would mean that the transition would have taken place exactly in March 1973 – and that all of a sudden, disciplinary institutions like schools would have disappeared or been dispersed throughout society.

The relation between economic history and the two formations described by Deleuze, then, seems to have a wider meaning. Money, Deleuze argues, expresses the distinction between the two forms of societies *best* – but in which sense? That people in disciplinary society are on a trajectory through family, school, barracks, factories etc. seems to not be related to the question of whether or not monetary value is tied to gold. But Deleuze claims that ‘discipline *always referred back* to minted money that locks gold in as numerical standard’ (my emphasis). Is this because the gold standard can be understood as a kind of ‘disciplining’ of money? Moreover, why should especially ‘minted money’ be related to gold, if – before 1973 – the same was of course (and even especially) true for paper money as well?²

¹ This is just a working hypothesis: It is far from clear whether it is plausible to establish a clear succession from disciplinary societies to societies of control.

² There are two ways in which the value of money can be related to gold: One is the material value – this applies to minted money, insofar as it is made of gold itself and carries no nominal value; but there are no modern currencies to which this applies. The other is the gold standard, meaning that every currency-token – be it minted, or paper, or whatever – can be exchanged for a defined quota of gold. Deleuze can only mean the latter.



Deleuze proceeds to argue:

Types of machines are easily matched with each type of society – not that machines are determining, but because they express those social forms capable of generating them and using them. The old societies of sovereignty made use of simple machines – levers, pulleys, clocks; but the recent disciplinary societies equipped themselves with machines involving energy, with the passive danger of entropy and the active danger of sabotage; the societies of control operate with machines of a third type, computers, whose passive danger is jamming and whose active one is piracy and the introduction of viruses. (1992: 6)³

This closely resembles a famous and controversial quote by Marx: “The hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill society with the industrial capitalist.” (1955: 122) However, there seems to be a crucial difference: While for Deleuze the machines ‘express’ a social formation that ‘generates’ them, for Marx the machines ‘give’ a particular social formation, embodied in social roles like ‘the feudal lord’ or ‘the industrial capitalist.’ It may seem, then, that Marx is more of a technological determinist than Deleuze.⁴ Yet, Marx’s concept of technology is more complex than a simple determinism (cf. MacKenzie 1984; Wendling 2009), and even the seemingly clear quote on the hand-mill and the steam-mill turns out to be more complex when read in context (cf. Rosenberg 1976: 74). I cannot delve further into this discussion at this point – the most I can say is that Deleuze identifies a problem which is also characteristic for Marx’s discourse, namely the relations between social forms and technology. He formulates this in a manner that resonates with Actor-Network-Theory: “But the machines don’t explain anything, you have to analyze the collective apparatuses of which the machines are just one component.” (Deleuze 1995: 175)

Interestingly enough, it seems to be the same with money, as it ‘expresses the distinction between the two societies best.’ The technologies ‘express’ the social forms – disciplinary society ‘equips itself’ with ‘machines involving energy,’ say, the steam-mill, while societies of control ‘operate with machines of a third type, computers.’ But: Just as it is not easy to understand why disciplinary order should ‘refer’ to the gold standard, it is also not easy to grasp why disciplinary society should be tied to a certain type of machines: A prison is a prison, regardless of whether your economy works predominantly with machines based on energy or with those based on information – and prisons are very much in use, especially in the US, where information technology abounds as well.

³ Cf. also Deleuze 1995: 175: “One can of course see how each kind of society corresponds to a particular kind of machine – with simple mechanical machines corresponding to sovereign societies, thermodynamic machines to disciplinary societies, cybernetic machines and computers to control societies.”

⁴ In his book on Foucault, Deleuze explicitly states that “the machines are social before being technical.” (1988: 39)



To be sure, there might be a historical and contingent coexistence between different forms of discipline or control and certain types of machines – but is there more to it? In the case of the societies of control the connection is more plausible, because the much quoted ‘control mechanism, giving the position of any element within an open environment at any given instant,’ the process of “continual monitoring” (Deleuze 1995: 175), seems to be possible solely with digital network technologies (think of smartphones, etc.). Deleuze argues that the connection consists of ‘social forms capable of generating [...] and using’ certain machines: if a control society structurally needs positional control about an element in an open environment, it might select network technologies that are able to do that. Let’s read on:

This technological evolution must be, even more profoundly, a mutation of capitalism, an already well-known or familiar mutation that can be summed up as follows: nineteenth-century capitalism is a capitalism of concentration, for production and for property. It therefore erects the factory as a space of enclosure, the capitalist being the owner of the means of production but also, progressively, the owner of other spaces conceived through analogy (the worker’s familial house, the school). As for markets, they are conquered sometimes by specialization, sometimes by colonization, sometimes by lowering the costs of production. (Deleuze 1992: 6)

It becomes clearer that disciplinary society, and this argument is of course close to similar arguments made by Michel Foucault, is necessary for a certain form of capitalism, producing certain closed and confining spaces, disciplining the bodies of workers (for example by using Taylorist methods in factories). But even from this passage it does not become evident why this operation should, firstly, be tied to the gold standard and, secondly, to energy-transforming machines (the factory discipline, the energy transforming machines and the gold standard might indeed form a contingent ‘collective apparatus’). A convincing example would perhaps be the Fordist assembly line as a kind of technological organization of work in factories, which connects the disciplined, Taylorised bodies to the rhythm of the machinery. Of course, one could say that the assembly line is an energy-transforming machine insofar as it is powered with steam and channels the movements of the workers (but the Taylorist discipline of the body is also an informational process).

Perhaps the argument becomes clearer if we contrast it with the following paragraph, in which Deleuze again describes the societies of control:

But, in the present situation, capitalism is no longer involved in production, which it often relegates to the Third World, even for the complex forms of textiles, metallurgy, or oil production. It’s a capitalism of higher-order production. It no longer buys raw materials and no longer sells the finished products: it buys the finished products or assembles parts. What it wants to sell is services and what it wants to



buy is stocks. This is no longer a capitalism for production but for the product, which is to say, for being sold or marketed. (1992: 6)

This seems to be a correct description of contemporary capitalism: Many companies outsource material production into countries in the global south, while services and marketing become the central industries in the rich countries, and ‘financialization’ is a dominant mode of capital accumulation. These traits had already been extensively discussed (e.g. the ‘postindustrial society’ by Alain Touraine in 1969) when Deleuze published his famous article in 1990 and thus were not genuine discoveries made by him. Something else is irritating as well: It seems that disciplinary society is not at all succeeded and superseded by societies of control – the point, rather, is that disciplinary society is outsourced to the global south, where ‘the factory as a space of enclosure’ is a very harsh, real working condition for many men, women and even children, producing the shiny ‘control mechanism, giving the position of any element within an open environment at any given instant,’ as for example an Apple iPhone (cf. Sandoval 2015). In this sense, disciplinary society is the infrastructure of the society of control. Although the question of whether societies of control really follow (even if in a slow and gradual transition) *after* disciplinary societies, or if these two forms, in a way, coexist, is discussed in the existing literature; as far as I can see, the question of whether the distribution between disciplinary and control society coincides (at least roughly) with the difference between the global north and the global south is hardly ever raised.

Moving on to the next paragraph:

[Contemporary capitalism, J. S.] is essentially dispersive, and the factory has given way to the corporation. The family, the school, the army, the factory are no longer the distinct analogical spaces that converge towards an owner – state or private power – but coded figures – deformable and transformable – of a single corporation that now has only stockholders. Even art has left the spaces of enclosure in order to enter into the open circuits of the bank. (Deleuze 1992: 6)

This also is a convincing observation: Everything is subject to statistical procedures. Rankings and similar forms are everywhere (cf. e.g. Mau 2017), and so everything is – at least in principle – measurable and quantifiable and thus connectable in one way or another to the logic of economic value (which is the principle of abstract quantities per se). Everything (including universities) becomes subjected to the logic of the corporation, meaning: everything has to be (at least potentially) profitable. Capitalism is indeed becoming ‘dispersive,’ because the ‘control mechanism, giving the position of any element within an open environment at any given instant’ actually does not only give the ‘position’ of any element, but analyses the element, collects data and – if appropriate – targets



the element with advertising and so forth.⁵ Every mobile point can in principle be connected to the “joys of marketing” (Deleuze 1992: 7). “Individuals have become ‘*dividuals*,’ and masses, samples, data, markets, or ‘*banks*.” (ibid.: 5).⁶ Only art seems to face a new kind of enclosure: It has left the disciplinary space of the museum, but its insertion into the ‘circuits of the bank’ leads to a new kind of invisibility in freeport-storage.⁷ The fundamental invisibility of the abstract money of the society of control, no longer tied (phantasmatically) to gold, seems to erase the visibility of art itself.

So, Deleuze continues:

The conquests of the market are made by grabbing control and no longer by disciplinary training, by fixing the exchange rate much more than by lowering costs, by transformation of the product more than by specialization of production. Corruption thereby gains a new power. (1992: 6)

Deleuze is right: Since every element in an open environment can be tracked and analysed, capitalism can seize control of the unconscious, that is, of unstructured and unarticulated desires – it is not necessary to format desire (via advertisement) anymore to make it compatible to supply. However, we have to ask: why is the computer industry going to such lengths to place individualized advertisements? And why are there phenomena like self-tracking – certainly a “frightful continual training” (Deleuze 1995: 175), which seems to be an internalized continuation of disciplinary training? Moreover: Lowering costs is of course still a central operation of capitalism, especially through the aforementioned outsourcing of ‘factory enclosures’ into the global south – and it is hard to understand what it might mean that the central capitalist operation of today is ‘fixing the exchange rate.’ If this refers to exchange rates between different currencies, then it is not correct, because exchange rates fluctuate with global market processes. It is also not quite clear what Deleuze means when he says that the ‘transformation of the product’ takes the place of the ‘specialization of production,’ since market differentiation is clearly a trait of recent capitalism...

Be that as it may:

Marketing has become the center or the ‘soul’ of the corporation. We are taught that corporations have a soul, which is the most terrifying news in the world. The

⁵ And this can also be put to political uses, as the ‘social scoring’ in China shows.

⁶ Cf. Franklin 2015: 9: “In short, the *dividual* is the subject *digitized*. And control is the episteme of the *dividual*.”

⁷ Cf. Heidenreich 2016: “It is safe to say, however, that never before now have so many artworks been produced to remain hidden, all enclosed in disenchanted wooden boxes, suspended in a permanent circuit of exchange, in a place called a ‘freeport’ because it is free of customs duties and taxes of all kinds. Since no one is allowed to see the art, it is also free of audience and spectators, an anti-theatron; it is a place of un-seeing.”



operation of markets is now the instrument of social control and forms the impudent breed of our masters. (Deleuze 1992: 6)

This is a paragraph that is not easy to understand. It starts with a plausible observation: Marketing has become central, at least in the sense that everything transposed into the commodity form has to compete. Every university, every 'individual' etc. now takes on the form of the market. Facebook is the site for individuals to present themselves as original, individual, funny; Facebook is a machine for self-marketing, in order to compete with others. Hence, marketing is the central cultural technique of our times. The statement 'corporations have a soul, which is the most terrifying news in the world' may not only mean that a specific corporation has a corporate identity – we may even read this as meaning that nowadays every person, having a 'soul,' is turned into a corporation (in German there is the phrase 'Ich-AG,' meaning 'I-corporation' or more literally 'I-stock-company'). This is indeed 'the most terrifying news in the world,' insofar as the very core of subjectivity is already subjected to the logic of the market. And thus, it is absolutely correct to analyse the market as the main 'instrument of social control.' The phrase 'impudent breed of our masters' clearly addresses the point that the selection of the markets prefers the most ruthless characters – but it is important to underline Deleuze's point that the markets 'form' these characters. It is not the other way around, in the sense that people are in themselves egoistic and ruthless, only looking out for their own interests, and that therefore markets are the natural result of every human society (as our dominant ideology would have it).

Finally, Deleuze writes: "Control is short-term and of rapid rates of turnover, but also continuous and without limit, while discipline was of long duration, infinite and discontinuous." (1992: 6) Deleuze emphasizes firstly the permanent acceleration inherent to capitalism, an argument that also concurs with Marx:

The more that the circulation metamorphoses of capital are only ideal, i.e. the closer the circulation time comes to zero, the more capital functions, and the greater is its productivity and self-valorization. If a capitalist works to order, receives payment on the delivery of his product, and is paid in his own means of production, then his time of circulation approaches zero. (Marx 1992: 203)⁸

This fundamental accelerative tendency of capital is indeed one of the main reasons why control societies 'operate with machines of a third type, computers,' because the processing of information can be very much accelerated – and the faster an entity can process information, the more likely it is to win the permanent molecular war called 'mar-

⁸ Virilio's (2006) permanent insistence on acceleration is obviously based on the need of capital to reduce its circulation time to zero.



ket competition.⁹ Since capital has an intrinsic tendency to accelerate, it tends to produce crises of control, and its acceleration might destabilize societal structures and produce resistance (the ‘passive danger of entropy and the active danger of sabotage’). In fact, James Beniger introduced the notion of control already four years before Deleuze published the Postscript; in his pathbreaking study *The Control Revolution*, Beniger argued that the emergence of ‘machines of a third type, computers’ was directly related to a crisis of control, already beginning in the 19th century, when the ever-accelerating forces of capital produced one ‘control crisis’ after the other. This is exactly what Deleuze sees as one of the important features of Marxian theory: “What we find most interesting in Marx is his analysis of capitalism as an immanent system that’s constantly overcoming its own limitations, and then coming up against them once more in a broader form, because its fundamental limit is Capital itself.” (1995: 171) Deleuze insists – and this is a highly important aspect completely absent e.g. from Franklin (2015) – that the *structural crisis of capital* necessitates the overcoming of capitalism – otherwise the ‘automatic subject’ (Marx) of capital would destroy all life on earth. Deleuze states this explicitly:

Man is no longer man enclosed, but man in debt. It is true that capitalism has retained as a constant the extreme poverty of three quarters of humanity, too poor for debt, too numerous for confinement: control will not only have to deal with erosions of frontiers but with the explosions within shanty towns or ghettos. (1992: 6-7)

Although he does not speak of ecological disaster, he speaks of the embarrassing fact that although capitalism becomes ever more productive, it produces ever more debt (think of the so-called ‘financial crisis’ and the resulting extreme debt of all, especially the southern, states in Europe) as well as poverty and inequality, because it produces what Marx called a ‘relative surplus population’ by the ever accelerating development of productive forces.¹⁰ We can see the auto-destructive crisis of capital – and therefore of all life on earth – right now, right before our eyes (for radical readings of crisis theory in the context of the so-called ‘critique of value,’ cf. Larsen et al. 2014).

Deleuze’s important discovery of the transition from disciplinary to control societies can be summed up as a concentrated description of the last stage of capitalism, in which the permanent crisis is so overwhelming that only totalitarian regimes of dividual control (some of them called ‘social media’) can – for a while – stabilize world society before

⁹ With this in view, the emergence of recent theoretical tendencies like ‘accelerationism’ is not surprising.

¹⁰ There is a recent discussion, however, on whether the developments of the last years show a reduction of global poverty. The complex discussions on the recent developments of global and digital capitalism are not easy to sum up (cf. Staab 2019).



total ecological, economic and political collapse (see the recent emergence of fascism all over the world), while the still necessary material production is outsourced to terroristic regimes of neo-sovereign or neo-disciplinary societies in the global south. That money expresses the transition to crisis-control 'best' (as Deleuze argues) makes sense if one interprets the collapse of the gold standard as an expression of economic crisis:

The astounding process in which not only products are devalued in competition, but also money itself, across the whole society and worldwide, has a very simple cause: the fact that with the monstrous development of technological productivity, material wealth can no longer be expressed in the money commodity of gold. Until World War I there was still a universal gold standard, that is to say that the banknotes of all important industrialized countries could be directly converted into gold. Since then, material productivity has exceeded the money commodity, gold, to an ever-increasing extent. The umbilical cord of the gold standard was finally cut at the start of the 1970s with the abandonment of the Bretton Woods system — that is, even the dollar, the global currency, was irreversibly decoupled from the gold standard. But this means nothing other than the successive suspension of money as a commodity, for paper money, released in volumes with no gold backing, no longer contains any real substance of value, with the single exception of the negligible amount of labor involved in its manufacture. This has come to hold universally for paper money, and also for money that exists purely for the purposes of accounting, and all the more so for the fantastic and purely juridical creations out of nothing such as the artificial world money of the Special Drawing Rights (SDR) of the International Monetary Fund, which can only circulate between the central banks. But the disappearance of the substance value of money only reflects the overall tendency for value to disappear, the fact that material production goes beyond the limits of value. (Kurz in: Larsen et al. 2014: 55; cf. also 189-93)

Societies of control are the societies in which computers in different forms (robotics, simulation, networks, artificial intelligence etc.) control production and at the same time erase value. This conflict between the digital forces of production and its social forms leads to economic crises and renders the gold standard obsolete. If we remember Deleuze's argument 'Types of machines are easily matched with each type of society – not that machines are determining, but because they express those social forms capable of generating them and using them,' then this should surprise us: When computers are 'generated' and 'used' by control-capitalism, how can a crisis resulting from the conflict between the digital productive forces and the capitalist social form – the reduction of necessary labour – come about? Deleuze only imagines as 'passive danger [...] jamming,' and 'piracy and the introduction of viruses' as active dangers. Perhaps Deleuze has no appropriate notion of crisis that could explain why control societies today – regardless of the existence of flexible control – turn more and more to fascism (after the big crisis in 2008).

Societies of control may well be the last stage before ecological disaster and global fascism – but there might still be a chance: "The key thing may be to create vacuoles of



noncommunication, circuit breakers, so we can elude control.” (Deleuze 1995: 175) If we can disrupt the regime of affirmation and permanent communication, we might also disrupt the self-communication of capital. With a conservative or right-wing ‘politics of affirmation,’ however, we will only end up with fascism – we thus need a radical critique of the seemingly natural forces of money, markets and the state. In this sense, computers should be freed from the ‘social forms capable of generating them and using them’ and should be turned into instruments of new forms of social and economic coordination (cf. Kathöfer/Schröter 2019; Morozov 2019).

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