



Deleuze and Neoliberalism

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Introduction

The following essay takes the topic of this special issue as an opportunity to not just investigate Deleuze's "Postscript on Control Societies," but to look more generally at the text's place within his work as a whole. Indeed, as various authors have observed, there are a number of aspects that clearly distinguish the essay from the bulk of Deleuze's other writings. First, what the Postscript aims at is a very direct and immediate "diagnosis of the present" (Foucault 1999: 91). Despite its brevity, the essay therefore entails a wide-ranging account of the (social, economic, cultural, and technological) 'system' which was about to take hold when Deleuze wrote the essay (1990) – and which still seems pervasive today. Second, the Postscript represents one of the few instances where Deleuze addresses new media, the digital, cyberspace, and computers: technologies, that is, which in the last few decades have thoroughly transformed the world we live in (cf. Galloway 2012). Third, while Deleuze is usually considered to be a thinker of affirmative creation and a joyous politics of difference and becoming, the Postscript may be the text that most evidently lends itself to discovering not only a more contemporary, but also a somewhat 'darker' Deleuze (cf. Culp 2016). For although it underlines the necessity of "finding new weapons" and developing "new forms of resistance" – pointing out that the question is not "whether the old or new system is harsher or more bearable" (Deleuze 1995: 178) – one can argue that the Postscript's general perspective and tone is in fact more bleak and pessimistic than most of Deleuze's other writings. As Alexander Galloway puts it: "One of the most influential aspects of the 'Postscript' [...] is how it asserts so trenchantly that things are not getting any better. Computers are a curse not a panacea. Planetary neoliberalism is a boondoggle not a deliverance. The snake is even worse than the mole" (2012: 515).

In what follows, I will approach the Postscript's distinctiveness within Deleuze's oeuvre via the notion of neoliberalism (to whose 'planetary' dimension Galloway rightly draws attention here). Obviously, Deleuze does not use this term, neither in the Post-



script nor, it seems, anywhere else.¹ Yet, even a cursory glance through the essay reveals that the concept of ‘control society’ bears striking similarities to what is nowadays commonly referred to as the neoliberal era or the post-Fordist mode of production.² My essay’s intention, however, is not simply to establish Deleuze as just one more critic of neoliberalism. Rather, my argument is that the rise of neoliberalism – or what the Postscript refers to as a “mutation of capitalism” (Deleuze 1995: 180) – constituted a problem for Deleuze that gradually forced him to modify parts of his philosophy since the late 1970s. Although this shift has so far hardly been discussed, I argue that it is already visible in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), reaching its peak in the ‘Control Societies’ essay in 1990.

My reading of Deleuze, then, is admittedly less ‘Deleuzian’ in character than it is inspired by Fredric Jameson’s imperative to ‘always historicize’ (Jameson 2002: ix). I am convinced, however, that this way of approaching Deleuze is not only helpful in determining the political usefulness of Deleuzian theory in the context of today’s global capitalism; it also highlights the actual ‘becoming’ of Deleuze’s philosophy. Deleuze’s work, I argue, should not be qualified as a unified corpus of abstract ontological ideas and principles, but with regard to its effectiveness in responding to concrete developments and prevailing challenges – “problems,” as Deleuze and Guattari write in *What Is Philosophy?*, “that necessarily change” (1994: 28). In the first part of this essay, I will discuss the relationship between Deleuze and neoliberalism with regard to various accusations, according to which Deleuze (or at least a version of Deleuzian theory) is ‘complicit’ with neoliberal beliefs and the ideology of the new capitalism. In the second part, I will concentrate on the period from *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) to *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), seeking to demonstrate that Deleuze and Guattari modified parts of their philosophy in view of the rise of neoliberalism in the late 1970s. In the third part, I will finally investigate neoliberalism’s ‘absent presence’ in the “Postscript on Control Societies,” discussing the way in which the essay diverts from Deleuze’s earlier work.

Deleuze, the Ideologist of Late Capitalism?

To most Deleuzians, there is probably nothing ambiguous or controversial about the relationship between Deleuze and neoliberalism.³ For although Deleuze never used the term in his work, it nevertheless seems evident that the type of society he so ferociously

¹ This distinguishes Deleuze from Foucault, who used the term already in the late 1970s, particularly in his lectures at the Collège de France (cf. Foucault 2008).

² Cf. Flaxman 2012: 283: “Deleuze never used the term ‘neoliberalism,’ but if he had, he surely would have done so in the context of control, which describes the emergent, post-Fordist social diagram of contemporary Western societies.”

³ As an example, cf. Marc Rölli’s essay in this special issue.



attacks in the Postscript precisely corresponds to what political scientists, social theorists, and critical economists nowadays refer to under the rubric of neoliberalism.⁴ Moreover, Deleuze explicitly stated in 1990 (in an interview with Toni Negri) that he and Félix Guattari always “have remained Marxists” (Deleuze 1995: 171). By the end of his life, he even planned to write a book about Marx, something which led Fredric Jameson to assert “that Deleuze is alone among the great thinkers of so-called poststructuralism in having accorded Marx an absolutely fundamental role in his philosophy – in having found in the encounter with Marx the most energizing event for his later work” (2010: 183).⁵

What the following examples confirm, however, is that there are other views as well. As with Foucault, whose thinking has been criticized for having “paradoxically functioned to legitimate a neoliberal common sense” (Zamora 2016: 4), the merits of Deleuze’s philosophy have been called into question from an anti-capitalist or Marxist standpoint too. A case in point is the much-quoted statement by Slavoj Žižek that there “are, effectively, features that justify calling Deleuze the ideologist of late capitalism” (2004: 183-84). While Žižek sees resonances between Deleuze’s Spinozism – his valorization of ‘impersonal affects’ and ‘intensities’⁶ – and the cultural-economic logic of late capitalism, Douglas Spencer claims that the neoliberal architecture of the last few decades has been significantly influenced by a discursive appropriation of Deleuzian concepts and ideas.⁷ Along similar lines, Nigel Thrift has observed that a Deleuzian notion of “political economy as composed of a series of modulations is not without its ironies,” since “it increasingly resembles capitalism’s description of itself” (2005: 4). Likewise, Dany-Robert Dufour has argued that what

Deleuze failed to see was that, far from making it possible to get beyond capitalism, his programme merely predicted its future. It now looks as though the new capitalism has learned its Deleuzian lesson well. Commodity flows must indeed circulate and they circulate all the better now that the old Freudian subject, with his neuroses and the failed identifications that always crystallize into rigidly anti-productive forms, is being replaced by a being who can be plugged into anything and everything. (2008: 11)

⁴ On the concept, history, and workings of neoliberalism, cf. Harvey 2009, Mirowski 2013, Brown 2015, Davies 2017, and Slobodian 2018. For my own perspective, cf. Schleusener 2014, 2017, and 2019.

⁵ On the relationship and resonances between Marxism and Deleuze’s philosophy, cf. Thoburn 2003, Read 2003, Jain 2009, and Choat 2010.

⁶ Cf. Žižek 2004: 184: “Is the much celebrated Spinozan *imitatio affecti*, the impersonal circulation of affects bypassing persons, not the very logic of publicity, of video clips, and so forth in which what matters is not the message about the product but the intensity of the transmitted affects and perceptions?”

⁷ It should thus be noted that Spencer is less critical of Deleuze’s philosophy itself than he is of its appropriation in the context of contemporary architecture: “Transcribing Deleuzian (or Deleuzoguattarian) concepts such as ‘the fold,’ ‘smooth space’ and ‘faciality’ into a prescriptive repertoire of formal manoeuvres, Deleuzism in architecture has proposed [...] that it shares with [Deleuze and Guattari’s] oeuvre a ‘progressive’ and ‘emancipatory’ agenda,” while simultaneously claiming “to have advanced beyond a supposedly outmoded and regressive politics of opposition and critique” (2011: 9-10).



As one would expect, most of these charges have been repudiated by adherents of Deleuze, typically arguing that they are either based on grave misinterpretations of Deleuze's ideas, or that they only apply to "vulgar" simulations of his philosophy (Crockett 2013: 25), but not to its actual content. The problem, however, is a bit more complicated. Of course, none of the above-mentioned critics believes that Deleuze had any real political sympathies for authors such as Friedrich Hayek, Ayn Rand, or Milton Friedman. Yet, there is another, more legitimate question to be asked, one that is less concerned with whether or not we interpret Deleuze's philosophy as an actual manifestation of a pro-capitalist attitude. For neoliberalism is not just a set of policies (entailing privatization programs, fiscal austerity, tax cuts for the wealthy, and the deregulation of markets) that have been implemented practically everywhere around the globe since the late 1970s. Rather, if we follow Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello's argument, the dominance of an economic system like neoliberalism relies on what they call a 'spirit of capitalism,' meaning the ideological and affective affordances in which one's "*engagement in capitalism*" is justified (2007: 8). Here, the authors evidently follow Max Weber, who famously analyzed the role of the protestant work ethic in the development of capitalism (cf. Weber 2001). In view of the economic transformations in the age of globalization and neoliberalism, Boltanski and Chiapello have conceptualized a *new* spirit of capitalism, claiming that what legitimizes capitalism today is not religion, but, rather, capitalism's propensity to absorb and incorporate aspects of the critique of capitalism.⁸ A similar argument is made by Jim McGuigan in his book on *Cool Capitalism*, which he defines as "the incorporation, and thereby neutralization of cultural criticism and anti-capitalism into the theory and practice of capitalism itself" (2009: 38).⁹

So the crucial question about whether or not parts of Deleuze's philosophy might serve as ingredients of capitalist ideology is precisely related to capitalism's ability to incorporate aspects of anti-capitalist critique. The question, then, is not whether Deleuze's philosophy is essentially pro- or anti-capitalist, but whether it is able to resist this type of incorporation, based on the political and philosophical coordinates, the conceptual priorities, premises, dualisms, and qualifications that are essential for Deleuze's image of thought. What Boltanski and Chiapello argue in this respect is that the type of philosophical critique that developed in France around 1968 was initially designed as a critique of

⁸ For instance, Boltanski and Chiapello note that the management literature of the 1990s in many ways echoes "the denunciations of hierarchy and aspirations to autonomy that were insistently expressed at the end of the 1960s and in the 1970s." Therefore, "the qualities that are guarantees of success in this new spirit – autonomy, spontaneity, rhizomorphic capacity, multitasking (in contrast to the narrow specialization of the old division of labour), conviviality, openness to others and novelty, availability, creativity, visionary intuition, sensitivity to differences, listening to lived experience and receptiveness to a whole range of experiences, being attracted to informality and the search for interpersonal contacts – these are taken directly from the repertoire of May 1968" (2007: 97). As Boltanski and Chiapello thus argue, it is especially the version of critique they term 'artistic critique' (as opposed to 'social critique') that has been absorbed by the new spirit of capitalism. On the distinction between the two forms, cf. 2007: 36-40.

⁹ On 'cool capitalism' and its affective logic, cf. also Schleusener 2014.



capitalism but – in its attack on tradition, authority, hierarchy, the state apparatus, the bourgeois family, and generally the idea of linear, fixed, or seemingly immobile structures – easily became assimilated into neoliberal discourse and its own critique of bureaucracy, state planning, government regulation, social security, and fixed or settled types of subjectivity. Somewhat clumsily, Nigel Thrift sums up the argument as follows: “As Boltanski and Chiapello [...] have noted, there are clear homologies between the current Anglo-Saxon ideologies of capitalism and the writings of Derrida, Deleuze and Serres. They both set out a new moral plan based, in part, on the affective and the ludic, they both produce new figures of immanence (for example, the network), and they both attempt to produce new practices which are resolutely inauthentic” (2005: 4).

From *Anti-Oedipus* to *A Thousand Plateaus*

In what follows, I seek to take a more detailed look at Deleuze’s writings in order to evaluate to what extent the above-mentioned critique is justified. I will start with a quote from *Anti-Oedipus* that is frequently used as an example of Deleuze’s supposedly ‘accelerationist’ attitude toward capitalism. Here is what Deleuze and Guattari write:

But which is the revolutionary path? [...] To withdraw from the world market, as Samir Amin advises Third World countries to do, in a curious revival of the fascist ‘economic solution’? Or might it be to go in the opposite direction? To go still further, that is, in the movement of the market, of decoding and deterritorialization? For perhaps the flows are not yet deterritorialized enough, not decoded enough, from the viewpoint of a theory and a practice of a highly schizophrenic character. Not to withdraw from the process, but to go further, to ‘accelerate the process’, as Nietzsche put it. (2000: 239-40)

To be sure, there are a number of different ways of how one can read this passage, which, on the one hand, has been interpreted as an example of Deleuze’s romanticization of capitalism, and, on the other, has become something of an emblematic quote for those critics of capitalism who self-identify as ‘accelerationists.’¹⁰ While I generally agree with Steven Shaviro, who has convincingly argued that the passage has “been taken out of context and interpreted much more broadly than Deleuze and Guattari ever intended” (2015: 13), I nevertheless think that it says a lot about the whole context of Deleuze’s critique of capitalism that comes to the fore in *Anti-Oedipus*, and which, to a large extent, is based on his reading of Nietzsche. Despite its various merits, I would argue that the

¹⁰ With regard to ‘accelerationism,’ the question of how to qualify the passage is of course further complicated by the fact that one can distinguish between a ‘left-wing’ (cf. Srnicek/Williams 2015) and a ‘right-wing’ (cf. Land 2011) version of accelerationism. For a general introduction to the various strands of accelerationist thinking, cf. Mackay/Avanessian 2014. As examples of a nuanced critique, cf. Noys 2014 and Shaviro 2015.



type of critique Deleuze developed during those years can hardly be said to already consider the emerging forces of neoliberalism, and still less to serve as an adequate instrument to counter these forces. While it is clear that the program of *Anti-Oedipus* is premised on a critique of capitalism, the book simultaneously affirms its deterritorializing tendency – a theme which had already been taken up by the economist Joseph Schumpeter, who popularized the notion of ‘creative destruction’ as part of his theory of economic innovation (cf. Schumpeter 1954).¹¹ Seen in this context, it is not hard to imagine that neoliberals could easily embrace the above-quoted passage, in the sense that what is criticized here is not capitalism’s deterritorializing, accelerationist propensity (which has become all the more visible since the rise of neoliberalism), but that it functions, simultaneously, as a force of reterritorialization: “Capitalism,” Deleuze and Guattari write, “institutes or restores all sorts of residual and artificial, imaginary, or symbolic territorialities [...]. Everything returns or recurs: States, nations, families” (2000: 34). In passages like these, it becomes rather clear that, at least in *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari favor deterritorialization over reterritorialization, the forces of movement over those of stasis. Consequently, they understand the capitalist process as a “twofold movement of decoding or deterritorializing flows on the one hand, and their violent and artificial reterritorialization on the other” (2000: 34).

This constellation, I believe, in many ways resonates with Deleuze’s take on Nietzsche and, in particular, with his understanding of pastoral power and the latter’s distinction between active and reactive forces. In *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, for instance, Deleuze sees the power of the priest in his capacity to transform active into reactive forces, thereby decreasing the power of acting – understood in Spinozist terms¹² – of the subject he controls (cf. Deleuze 1983). Power (in the sense of rule or domination) is thus basically conceptualized as a procedure of obstruction and “affective limitation” (Masumi 2015: 31) here. In the context of neoliberalism, however (as Foucault and others have pointed out), power typically relies on procedures of stimulation, activation, and incentive – a theme which Deleuze picked up much later, and which manifests itself most clearly in his ‘Control Societies’ essay. In the 1960s, however, the context was yet very different. In fact, the critique of power that Deleuze develops with reference to Nie-

¹¹ Strictly speaking, this whole train of thought can be said to have its roots in the *Communist Manifesto*. Cf. Marx/Engels 2002: 223: “Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned.”

¹² Cf. Spinoza 1996: 70: “By affect I understand affections of the body by which the body’s power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained.” Along with Nietzsche, Spinoza and his ‘pragmatic’ conception of the body’s capacities – their reliance on processes of affection – has been a seminal influence on Deleuze’s thinking and, in particular, his conceptualization of a ‘micropolitics of desire’ or ‘politics of affect’ (cf. Deleuze 1988 and 1992). For more on this, cf. Schleusener 2015 (especially 52-66, 100-06, and 198-210) and Małeckki/Schleusener 2015.



tzsche is designed to mark the modern sovereign as a 'triumphant slave,' who functions as the servant of established values. "Nietzsche describes modern states as ant colonies", Deleuze writes, "where the leaders and the powerful win through their baseness, through the contagion of this baseness and this buffoonery" (2001: 76). By reactualizing Nietzschean ideas, Deleuze thus attacks a faceless and essentially bureaucratic type of power that operates on the basis of a generalized conformity (the masters here are seen as "leaders" in an "ant colony"). Generally, this critique is fairly compatible with the neo-liberal critique of conformity, bureaucracy, and traditionalist hierarchy, while it is hardly adequate to capture the more flexible types of governmentality that we encounter in the context of today's capitalism.

Considered from this angle, it is not difficult to contend that some of the critics quoted earlier do indeed have a point. Insofar as their critique is directed against Deleuze himself, however – and not against his contemporary adherents or against improper kinds of appropriation – it might, in some sense, seem belated. For as I intend to demonstrate, Deleuze's diagnosis and critique of capitalism is not a static one but develops in accordance with the unfolding of historical forces and events. Hence, my intention is not to attack Deleuze's philosophy but, rather, to more adequately historicize it. Among other things, what this procedure reveals are the difficulties in approaching Deleuze's work as a unified set of ideas and principles (like an always suitable 'toolbox'), without taking account of the actual problems and contexts that led to their creation. Indeed, it is my sense that by the late 1970s and early 1980s, Deleuze had started to develop an awareness of the phenomenon we now call 'neoliberalism,' something which turned out to pose a problem for his thinking. It would thus make sense to analyse the shift from *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) to *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) precisely against the backdrop of the onset of neoliberalism in the late 1970s. As David Harvey writes, "Future historians may well look upon the years 1978–80 as a revolutionary turning-point in the world's social and economic history" (2007: 1).¹³ It is interesting, in this respect, that hardly anyone has so far investigated the way in which Deleuze and Guattari's approach changed from *Anti-Oedipus* to *A Thousand Plateaus* in this specific context. Yet, there are a number of notable dimensions in which *A Thousand Plateaus* can be said to differ from *Anti-Oedipus*. One aspect that is fairly obvious is that in *A Thousand Plateaus* there seems to be a "more cautious and sober tone", as Eugene Holland writes, while "the revolutionary enthusiasm of *Anti-Oedipus* appears to be dampened" (1999: ix). My claim is that it is worthwhile to situate this shift in the context of the emergence of neoliberalism.

¹³ What Harvey refers to here is Deng Xiaoping's effort to liberalize the Chinese economy, Paul Volcker's appointment as chairman of the Federal Reserve, and the elections of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, who first systematically implemented neoliberal policies in Great Britain and the USA.



What is significant in this regard is the fact that, as sociologists like Richard Sennett or Hartmut Rosa have shown, the culture of neoliberalism is effectively marked by a substantial *acceleration* of traditional temporal structures (cf. Rosa 2015) and a turn toward more and more *flexibility* in all aspects of social life (cf. Sennett 1999). Under the conditions of global capitalism, mobility thus seems to have lost its cultural value as a means to escape from repressive social assemblages and overstep rigid boundaries, since mobility itself has become the general rule to which almost anyone now has to conform. This shift, I argue, becomes visible if we look carefully at how Deleuze and Guattari reflect about mobility in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Of course, as the book developed over a period of many years, it would be inappropriate to interpret it unilaterally as performing a clear break with the ideas articulated in *Anti-Oedipus*. My point, therefore, is a more modest one. What I argue is simply that *A Thousand Plateaus* contains various traces of a new sensibility that can be related to the changed socioeconomic context, especially with regard to the phenomenon of mobility. For instance, in terms of their notion of the line of flight, Deleuze and Guattari now state that there always is the danger that the line of flight might mutate into “a line of pure destruction and abolition” (2004: 254). Furthermore, there is a similar statement on the distinction between smooth and striated space: “In the aftermath of striation”, Deleuze and Guattari write,

the sea reimparts a kind of smooth space, occupied first by the ‘fleet in being,’ then by the perpetual motion of the strategic submarine, which outflanks all gridding and invents a neonomadism in the service of a war machine still more disturbing than the States [...]. The sea, then the air and the stratosphere, become smooth spaces again, but in the strangest of reversals. (2004: 530)

Now, what is striking about these and similar passages is that the whole idea of flight and mobility – deterritorialization, the smooth space, and the line of flight – is not qualified as exclusively affirmative or positive anymore. Of course, statements as the one cited above are not direct comments about neoliberalism or the new capitalism. But by referring to a “neonomadism in the service of a war machine still more disturbing than the States,” it seems obvious that some of the conceptual coordinates of Deleuze and Guattari have significantly shifted. And with regard to the general context of neoliberalism and globalization, it is not a coincidence that these shifts explicitly touch upon aspects like mobility, global space, and sovereignty beyond the limits of the nation-state (cf. Schleusener 2011).

The Society of Control

However, it is perhaps not until his “Postscript on Control Societies” published in 1990 – and a few passages in the late 1980s, where he already refers to the control paradigm (cf. Deleuze 2007: 326-27) – that Deleuze ‘directly’ (though without ever using the term)



analyzes and attacks neoliberalism. The point of departure in Deleuze's essay is Foucault's conception of the 'disciplinary society,' which, as he explains, was superseded by the new regime of control after World War II. This shift, he argues, corresponds with a significant "mutation of capitalism" (1995: 180) and is informed by a general "break-down of all sites of confinement – prisons, hospitals, factories, schools, the family" (1995: 178).¹⁴ The disintegration of these institutions gives rise to new forms of control, whose mode of operation manifests itself as a continuous 'modulation.' Here, Deleuze mentions the example of wages: "the factory", he writes, "was a body of men whose internal forces reached an equilibrium between the highest possible production and the lowest possible wages; but in a control society, businesses take over from factories," striving "to introduce a deeper level of modulation into all wages," "an inexorable rivalry presented as healthy competition" (1995: 179). Hence, while the 'factory' can be understood as embodying the type of organization and rule among disciplinary societies, the 'business' serves as the model for post-disciplinary societies, whose socioeconomic context is the post-Fordist mode of production and the neoliberal accumulation regime. Analogous to Sennett's 'flexible subject' (cf. Sennett 1999), Deleuze thus portrays the individual in control societies as wavelike and 'dividual,' being not only the object of a constant modulation, but also constantly involved in a kind of self-modulation. "We've gone from one animal to the other," Deleuze states,

from moles to snakes, not just in the system we live under but in the way we live and in our relations with other people too. Disciplinary man produced energy in discrete amounts, while control man undulates, moving among a continuous range of different Orbits. *Surfing* has taken over from all the old *sports*. (1995: 180)

What we can see, then, is how much Deleuze's understanding of power has shifted from his Nietzschean take on the power of the priest. While his earlier conception was premised on an understanding of power as (affective) inhibition and obstruction, power is now – in line with the demands of the 'new capitalism' (Sennett 2006) – a force that modulates and mobilizes, activates and incentivizes. Along these lines, Deleuze's qualification of mobility seems to have become significantly more balanced, diverging from the mostly affirmative attitude present in his earlier work with Guattari.¹⁵

For Deleuze, the Postscript therefore also provides an opportunity to reassess, modify, and rewrite his own philosophy.¹⁶ Above all, this concerns the notion of the 'nomadic

¹⁴ In view of the massive rise in incarceration rates from the 1980s onward (particularly in the US and in Europe), this account is at least questionable with regard to the prison. Cf., for example, Wacquant 2009.

¹⁵ With regard to the example of freeways, this somewhat more sober look at mobility is also underlined in "What is the Creative Act?" (a lecture given in 1987): "Control is not discipline. You do not confine people with a highway. But by making highways, you multiply the means of control. I am not saying this is the only aim of highways, but people can travel infinitely and 'freely' without being confined while being perfectly controlled. That is our future" (Deleuze 2007: 327).

¹⁶ On this idea, cf. also Benjamin Noys' article in this special issue. In the first volume, a similar argument is made by Andrew Culp with regard to the relationship between Deleuze and cybernetics (cf. Culp 2020).



subject,' which once was celebrated by Deleuze, and even more so by his followers (cf. Braidotti 1994). Now, in the guise of the all-too-flexible 'snake,' it has become a conceptual persona that represents, rather than undermines, the new cultural imperative and economic status quo.¹⁷ Similarly, the Postscript rewrites a number of other Deleuzian concepts too. A case in point is the notion of the 'dividual,' which, as Michaela Ott has highlighted, Deleuze used affirmatively in his cinema books (cf. Deleuze 1986 and 1989) "to accentuate the constant changes in framing proper to certain films, whose portrayal of ever changing audiovisual elements and ambiguous expression of affect cannot be called individual" (2018: 35). In the Postscript, however, Deleuze's use of the concept is decidedly more "gloomy" (Ott 2018: 137), as it now refers to the snakelike flexibility of the actors and 'entroyees' (Pongratz/Voß 2003) in neoliberal control societies: "We're no longer dealing with a duality of mass and individual. Individuals become 'dividuals' and masses become samples, data, markets, or 'banks'" (Deleuze 1995: 180).¹⁸

Lastly, a comparable conceptual transformation can be identified with regard to the shifting connotations of the notion of the 'password' (or *mot de passe*). In *A Thousand Plateaus*, the term was used to point out an alternative to the so-called 'order-word' (or *mot d'ordre*), any word or statement that prompts a particular action based on a "social obligation": "Every statement displays this link, directly or indirectly. Questions, promises, are order-words" (Deleuze/Guattari 2004: 87). Yet, Deleuze and Guattari also outline the possibility of turning 'order-words' into 'passwords' and thereby allowing for a passage or transition:

There are pass-words beneath order-words. Words that pass, words that are components of passage, whereas order-words mark stoppages or organized, stratified compositions. A single thing or word undoubtedly has this twofold nature: it is necessary to extract one from the other – to transform the compositions of order into components of passage. (2004: 122)

¹⁷ The figure of the snake is undoubtedly a rewarding metaphor in this context, as it not only embodies neoliberalism's cultural ideal of ultimate flexibility, but also refers to the European Union's former "Exchange Rate Mechanism," in which currencies were "allowed to vary in value or 'float' within limits set by their notional rate against a weighted basket of other participating currencies" (Deleuze 1995: 203; Translator's Notes).

¹⁸ For more on the argument that Deleuze's notion of the dividual changed from his cinema books to the Postscript, cf. Ott 2018: 136: "In 'Postscript on the Societies of Control,' Deleuze assigns a historical date to becoming-dividual, equating its emergence with the media technology transition from analogue to digital, from the disciplinary system of territorial and systematically demarcated units to the control system of a technological and finance-capital-occasioned continuum of inseparable modulations and self-transformations. [...] It appears almost as though Deleuze now experiences his affirmation of temporality and transformation as a curse. After all, he complains that, in opposition to analogue systems that set up milieus largely independent of one another – even if they seek to adapt to one another in line with an overarching norm – in the digital system, everything connects with, and is translatable into and computable with, everything else" (translation slightly modified).



Now, in the Postscript, the understanding of the term has significantly shifted. Here, Deleuze argues that, different from the disciplinary society, in control societies “the key thing is no longer a signature or number but a code: codes are *passwords*, whereas disciplinary societies are ruled (when it comes to integration or resistance) by *precepts*.¹⁹ The digital language of control is made up of codes indicating whether access to some information should be allowed or denied” (1995: 180). As the ‘password’ is now fully integrated into the linguistic infrastructure of the regime of control, all associations with a potentially empowering conception of ‘passage’ or the ‘line of flight’ – which the term still carried in *A Thousand Plateaus* – seem to have disappeared. As Andrew Ballantyne puts it: “we slide from a world controlled by *mots d’ordre*, to one controlled by *mots de passe* – from commands to permissions – and the world restructures itself around us” (2005: 246).

The Postscript, however, not only delineates a changed socioeconomic and political reality. It also signals a new direction in Deleuze’s philosophy, one that, rather late in his life, he did not have the opportunity – or aspiration – to more fully develop. It would perhaps be too much to claim that his way of furtively modifying his concepts and ideas in the Postscript amounts to a full-blown ‘self-criticism’ (cf. Althusser 1976), a ritual he undoubtedly despised. Yet, if we read the few pages of the essay carefully, what we discover is a cautious adjustment of his philosophy to a changed historical reality. In a sense, it might even seem as though what he presents in this short text is a preemptive, in-advance response to some of the (Marxist) points of criticism quoted at the outset of this essay.²⁰

Conclusion

What I hope to have demonstrated in this essay is that it is worthwhile to analyze the way in which Deleuze modified parts of his philosophy against the backdrop of socioeconomic history and, in particular, the development of neoliberal capitalism. While it would be easy to retroactively accuse Deleuze of his philosophy’s ‘complicity’ with a number of aspects of neoliberalism’s cultural ideal, this would also be rather pointless. In any case, such criticism would have more in common with the sort of ‘presentist’ moralizing existing among some circles of ‘woke’ activists than with the idea of historicization in Jameson’s sense (cf. Jameson 2002). For what should count here is not the

¹⁹ ‘Precept’ here is simply a different translation of the French *mot d’ordre*.

²⁰ It is also worth noting here that Deleuze explicitly stated his repugnance at how some of his (and Guattari’s) concepts were taken up by a certain ‘Deleuzism’ that evolved after the publication of *A Thousand Plateaus*. In a 1983 letter to Joseph Emmanuel Voeffray, for instance, Deleuze writes: “Notions like ‘rhizome’ or ‘becoming-animal’ had enough impact for people to use them in a way that defies all logic and in a way that disgusts Félix and me. It is very odd. I sometimes feel like I’m being roasted by idiotic parasites” (Deleuze 2020: 91).



philosophical or political ‘purity’ of Deleuze’s thinking but, rather, the question of which aspects of his work are still relevant for thinking and conceptualizing the world we currently live in – a world that has been significantly transformed since the “neoliberal revolution” (Harvey 2007: 39) of the late 1970s and 1980s.²¹ While I do not doubt that a wholesale affirmation of all aspects of Deleuzian philosophy would be (to say the least) politically counterproductive in this context, I hope to have also shown that many of his ideas, especially those articulated in the Postscript, are still very relevant, even though his reflections about the society of control are by now thirty years old.

While my task was primarily to contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between Deleuze and neoliberalism, another, more general aspect of my essay was to show how Deleuze’s philosophy is not a unified body of abstract philosophical concepts and principles, but that it makes sense to historicize its development. Along similar lines, Deleuze himself has stated that one needs to apprehend the philosophical creation of concepts as not just a practice of truth-seeking, but in the sense that concepts always offer solutions to problems which need to be perceived and, as it were, ‘constructed’ in the first place, and which “necessarily change” over time (Deleuze/Guattari 1994: 28).²² On that note, Deleuze’s remark in the Postscript that “It’s not a question of worrying or of hoping for the best, but of finding new weapons” (1995: 178) is significant in two distinct ways. On the one hand, Deleuze demonstrates that the rise of neoliberalism must be understood as a development that poses new types of problems which demand new responses and new forms of critique. On the other hand, however, this can also be read as a statement about his take on philosophy in general, whose task *always* is to ‘find new weapons,’ that is, new instruments of analysis and critique. The effectiveness of a philosophy, then, not only concerns the way in which it presents itself as a coherent body of abstract ideas and ontological principles, because what is at least as important is its diagnostic and pragmatic dimension: its effectiveness in terms of its ability to make visible, relate and provide answers to, contemporary problems. In other words, the task of philosophy is not to solve the problems of the past, but to create concepts that are able

²¹ Of course, another thing that would be of great significance is a thorough analysis of the success of the whole intellectual formation that came to prominence after 1968, in the general context of poststructuralism or postmodernism. While it would be a simplification to categorically see these intellectual currents – along with today’s ‘postcritique’ (cf. Felski 2015) – in the service of capitalist or neoliberal ideology, it would nevertheless be worthwhile to systematically analyze and rethink the marginalization of Marxist theory and the concept of class during these years, within the left and the intellectual scene as a whole. Especially since the financial crisis of 2008 and the following ‘debt crisis’ in Europe (cf. Mirowski 2013 and Blyth 2013), but also in the context of the rise of rightwing populism (cf. Mouffe 2018) or current discussions about climate change (cf. Klein 2014) and the Anthropocene (cf. Moore 2016), it seems that the academic status quo is to at least some extent changing.

²² “A concept always has the truth that falls to it as a function of the conditions of its creation. [...] If one can still be a Platonist, Cartesian, or Kantian today, it is because one is justified in thinking that their concepts can be reactivated in our problems and inspire those concepts that need to be created. What is the best way to follow the great philosophers? Is it to repeat what they said or *to do what they did*, that is, create concepts for problems that necessarily change?” (Deleuze/Guattari 1994: 27-28)



to intervene in the problems of the present, that is (in more proper Deleuzian terms), “the now of our becoming” (Deleuze/Guattari 1994: 112).

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