



Postscript as Preface: Theorizing Control After Deleuze

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Gilles Deleuze's "Postscript on Control Societies" functions as an index of epochal change. It opens with an invocation of the past, situating Foucault's theory of disciplinary power in the nineteenth century, and has been read as theorization of the present, of the shifts in power in the late twentieth century. What, however, of its legacy? Or its future? It seems that now, close to thirty years after its publication, it is possible to ask two series of questions of this notion of control. First, where are we with control now? How has it, as technique of power, changed and developed? Is it even possible to argue that we are in a new era of power, distinct from discipline and control? Second, what tools or resources are there to theorize control now? How has the theory of control developed since Deleuze articulated it? It is worth noting on this point that Deleuze's short text is as fragmentary as it is prescient, constructing almost an impression of control through a few references to Foucault, Burroughs, Science Fiction, and the modern corporation. There is a great deal of room to develop a theory of control, a theory that would go beyond a description of the present, or certain elements of the present, to grasp the mutations and transformation of control in the twenty-first century. These two series of questions, one dealing with the object and the other with the concept, are less separate lines of inquiry than intersecting questions of the legacy of control.

In order to understand something of the transformation of control, it is necessary to pause over Deleuze's own historicization of the concept. Deleuze situates control as something that displaces discipline, just as Foucault argues that discipline displaces sovereignty as a form of power. Discipline operated on necessarily closed places, the school, the prisons, the barracks, as a form of power that controlled by observing and confining. Passing from one to the other was passing through distinct but similar spaces of confinement and observation. In contrast to this, the spaces of control are open and constantly in flux. The life that passes from school to army to work is replaced by a life subject to continuous education, flexible work hours, and distributed surveillance. There is, however, continuity in this discontinuity. One of Foucault's central points with respect to discipline was, as is often noted, that power is all the more pervasive in becoming less corporeal, less focused on inflicting pain, torture, or even confinement, acting on and



through one's perceptions and ideas rather than directly on bodies. The panopticon is stronger than any bars, more secure than any cell, because it is the material production and effect of an idea, the idea of being watched and monitored. It is the material production of a conscience, an awareness of how one acts and is seen. As Foucault states, describing this basic relation, "The soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body" (1977: 30). As much as control is posited as break from discipline in terms of the spatial organization of power, replacing confinement and discreet spaces with the regulation of flows of populations and continuous modulations of power across discreet spaces, it continues the latter's tendency toward the increased internalization and incorporealization of power. Power acts less and less on the body, confining it or caging it, and more and more on one's thoughts and ideas about one's actions. Foucault defined power as conduct of conduct, and control extends that trajectory, as the action increasingly relates to the conditions of conducts.

Deleuze gives two examples of this increased incorporealization of power in control societies. First, and most prominently, there is debt. As Deleuze states, "A man is no longer a man confined but a man in debt" (1995: 181). And second, as a kind of closing remark Deleuze writes: "Many young people have a strange craving to be motivated, they're always asking for special courses and continuing education" (1995: 182). These two remarks define the nadir and zenith of control as a kind of subjectivation. At one extreme is debt functioning as a kind of confinement, a prison that is all the more effective in that it does not directly act on bodies or even minds, but confines one all the more effectively in imposing a matrix of calculation and individualized risk on one's actions and decisions. Debt imprisons without a prison or even a surveillance tower, making us our own guards watching over the risks, costs, and benefits of our life. At the other extreme is motivation presented not as a confinement or limitation but as an internal impetus. In *Anti-Oedipus*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari declared that the central question of politics was the same one that Spinoza had asked: why do the masses fight for their servitude as if it was salvation (1983: 29). Now it is less a question of fighting, of dying for the glory of one man, than of untangling motivation from subjection. As Deleuze writes, "it's their job to discover whose ends these serve, just as older people discovered, with considerable difficulty, who was benefiting from disciplines" (1995: 182). As much as the concept of control displaces discipline it does so in a way in which its constraints, interests, and motivations are not entirely discerned. Following Deleuze's remarks on Foucault, it is possible to say that control is harder to grasp because we are still within its grip. The owl of Minerva has not yet taken flight when it comes to control.

With respect to debt as a form of control, the paradigmatic example, at least in the years since Deleuze wrote his essay, would seem to be not just debt, but student debt. Deleuze's essay seems uncannily prescient when it comes to the changing condition of students, at least in the US, who are less subject to the imposition of a singular discipli-



nary apparatus than confronted with overlapping and dispersed powers of family, precarious work, continual retraining, and debt. The student is someone living with parents under their authority, often working, and financing their education by debt. Constrained by the past, present, and future as porous logics of power and control. Debt is the future acting on the present. The more students are compelled to finance their education through debt, the more they are driven to think of that education as an investment rather than an exploration. Of course, the figure of the student underlies the second figure that Deleuze evokes, this time not as someone constrained by debt, but someone who willingly and intentionally engages in an ongoing process of training. Maurizio Lazzarato is the contemporary thinker most dedicated to articulate a theory of control after Deleuze. He has articulated both a general sense of control as a new period of power, situated after discipline, and the specific function of debt as a form of control. With respect to the latter, Lazzarato argues that the relation between confinement and motivation in Deleuze's essay must be understood as a particular production of subjectivity. As Lazzarato writes:

The debt economy, then, is characterized by a twofold expansion of the exploitation of subjectivity: extensive (since not only are industrial work and tertiary sector concerned but every activity and condition) and intensive (since it encompasses the relationship to the self, in the guise of the entrepreneur of the self – who is at once responsible for “his” capital and guilty of poor management – whose paradigm is the “unemployed”). (2012: 52)

This intensive expansion of the exploitation of subjectivity was prefigured by Marx in an early essay on James Mill. What is striking about Marx's text is that debt is not seen as an alienation of humanity through money (in which what is specifically human is lost to abstract calculation) but rather represents the transformation of human individuality into a living embodiment of the spirit of money. Debt transforms every aspect of one's personality, habits, histories, and desires as something calculable. As Marx writes,

Within the credit relationship, it is not the case that money is transcended in man, but that man himself is turned into *money*, or money is *incorporated* in him. *Human individuality*, human *morality* itself, has become both an object of commerce and the material in which money exists. Instead of money, or paper, it is my own personal existence, my flesh and blood, my social virtue and importance, which constitutes the material, corporeal form of the *spirit of money*. Credit no longer resolves the value of money into money but into human flesh and the human heart. Such is the extent to which all progress and all inconsistencies within a false system are extreme retrogression and the extreme consequence of vileness. (1932: n.p.)

What Lazzarato stresses is that this subjectivation takes on a moral dimension. Debt and the ability or inability to pay take on a specifically moral language of guilt and responsibility. It is an inversion of what Nietzsche argued: it is not that morality derives from an economics of debt and payment, but that debt and payment are thoroughly moralized.



Those who cannot pay their debt are seen not just as bad economic risks but are seen as irresponsible. Debt functions as a prison, a mode of confinement, by forcing people to calculate the risks of their actions, on the one hand, and holding them responsible for their decisions, on the other.

However, Lazzarato's insistence on the individualizing and moralizing nature of debt overlooks the mechanisms through which debt is issued and collected. Marx's portrait of an individual and personal assessment of debt is out of sync with the way in which debt has been transformed in the twentieth century (McClanahan 2017: 79). Debt has not only become a reality for many, becoming necessary to not only home ownership and education, but also to offset declining wages. More to the point, the way debt has been transformed closely matches the general social transformation of individuation that Deleuze associates with control. Whereas discipline is situated at the intersection of masses and individuals (dividing human beings into discrete groups, prisoners, soldiers, workers, etc., while individuating them through files, case histories, etc.), debt does not constitute a collectivity, a mass, since the individuals in debt do not function as a group in any discernible sense. Rather, they are unknown to each other and to themselves. Debt also does not deal with the person as person, as individual, but only selects aspects of credit history or other salient features that are in turn combined with others to develop statistical models. As Deleuze writes, "Individuals become 'dividuals,' and masses become samples, data, markets, or 'banks'" (1995: 180). What defines debt as a system of control is less a moralization and an individuation than an inability to recognize debt as either a collective condition, or even an individual fate. Unlike working, which necessarily involves at least a minimal socialization through the others one encounters in the workplace, debt is an entirely invisible community. Moreover, at an individual level, debt, especially as it is associated with unavoidable costs such as housing, health care, and education, appears less a promise or a contract than an unavoidable fact of life. If debt constitutes a prison of sorts, it is largely an invisible one.

Borrowing a distinction from Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, we could argue that debt functions more as a kind of "machinic enslavement" than a form of "social subjection." As Deleuze and Guattari define these terms:

There is enslavement when human beings themselves are constituent pieces of a machine that they compose among themselves and with other things (animal, tools), under the control and direction of a higher unity. But there is subjection when the higher unity constitutes the human being as a subject linked to a new exterior object, which can be an animal, a tool, or even a machine. (1987: 131)

With respect to debt as a form of control, the constituent pieces are the bits of data that make up dividuals and data banks, always passing beneath the individual. If there is any moralization of debt, a guilt and anxiety about one's individual risks and a categorical



demand to repay any debt, it would be at the level of social subjection, at the level of ideology, narrative, and values addressing individuals as responsible citizens and workers. In this way the extraction of wealth through debt is a continuation and radicalization of a process already at work in the labor process. In the exploitation of labor power, there is a distinction between the machinic enslavement of labor, the necessary transindividual exploitation of cooperation, social relations, and subjectivity, and the social subjection of the individual worker, the representation of the selling of labor power as a commodity exchanged between equal individuals. As Lazzarato writes,

Capital, therefore, does not simply extort an extension of labor time (the difference between paid human time and human time spent at the workplace), it initiates a process that exploits the difference between subjection and enslavement. For if subjective subjection – the social alienation inherent to a particular job or any social function (worker, unemployed, teacher, etc.) – is always assignable and measurable (the wage appropriate to one’s position, the salary appropriate to a social function), the part of machinic enslavement constituting actual production is never assignable nor quantifiable as such. (2014: 45)

One could add to this, and this is part of the “dispersive” tendency Deleuze mentions in his essay, that the strategy of capital is to obscure the machinic, collective dimension of labor as much as possible. The invisibility of debt is just a more extreme version of the tendency to obscure the collective dimension of work. As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri write, “productivity is ever more hidden as the divisions between work time and the time of life become increasingly blurred” (2012: 12). Collective work places, such as factories and even call centers, are replaced with individuals working at their desks, and entire industries, such as transportation and housing, are transformed from relations of production to relations between individuals, or even parts or aspects, and machines. In each case what is obscured and effaced are the necessary collective conditions of the individual laborer who shows up at the workplace, or logs into the platform that organizes work. Debt obscures the collective conditions of work, housing, education, and medical care, while contemporary labor conditions obscure the collective performance. As Deleuze writes of capitalism in the age of control, “What it seeks to sell is services, and what it seeks to buy, activities” (1995: 181). Production, including the production of the conditions of production, is necessarily obscured.

Despite the tendency to consider social subjection as displacing machinic enslavement, the trajectory between the two is more rectilinear than linear. As Deleuze and Guattari write, “It could also be said that a small amount of subjectivation took us away from machinic enslavement, but a large amount brings us back to it.” (1987: 458) To understand this progression, one has to understand the relationship between each form of subjection and technology. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari identify television as the intersection between subject and enslavement:



For example, one is subjected to TV insofar as one uses and consumes it, in the very particular situation of a subject of the statement that more or less mistakes itself for a subject of the enunciation (“you, dear television viewers, who make TV what it is...”); the technical machine is the medium between two subjects. But one is enslaved by TV as a human machine insofar as the television viewers are no longer consumers or users, nor even subjects who supposedly “make” it, but intrinsic component pieces, “input” and “output,” feedback or recurrences that are no longer connected to the machine in such a way as to produce or use it. (1987: 458)

The relationship that Deleuze and Guattari set up between enslavement and subjection with respect to the television, in which an increased reduction of human beings to parts of the machine, to input and output, makes possible an expansion of personalization and subjection, has only accelerated with the development of the technologies of the early twenty-first century. The development of the internet, especially in the age of social media, has made it possible for a surge of subjection, pages dedicated to one’s particular tastes, proclivities, and moods, that rests upon invisible layers of machinic enslavement, as every search online and every activity is transformed into data.

Deleuze places the transition from discipline to control along a transformation that is as much one of machinery and technology as it is of the techniques of power and subjection. Disciplinary power is associated with the thermodynamics of the industrial revolution, while control is associated with computing and information technology. Lazzarato refines this periodization to argue that control is associated not just with flows of information but also with any technology that operates across dispersed spaces and temporalities. The decline of the confined spaces of discipline means that control operates on crowds disseminated across space and time, in other words, the public (Lazzarato 2004: 74). In identifying control with the public, and the technologies of radio, film, television, and the internet, Lazzarato takes two steps backwards into the nineteenth century in order to take a step forward into the twenty-first. The steps backwards are historical and theoretical. First, Lazzarato incorporates in his history of technology and power the press, radio, film, and television, technologies that were already operating across open spaces during the age of disciplinary confinement. These technologies never made it into Foucault’s history of discipline and are only obliquely referenced in Deleuze’s essay on control. Theorists of power and theorists of media often function in each other’s blind spot if not in utter opposition.¹ Second, Lazzarato turns back the clock theoretically as well, turning to Gabriel Tarde’s theory of publics in order to theorize control. As Lazzarato writes,

¹ As an example of the latter, there is Foucault’s offhand dig in *Discipline and Punish*, “Our society is one not of the spectacle, but of surveillance; under the surface of images, one invests bodies in depth; behind the great abstraction of exchange, there continues the meticulous, concrete training of useful forces; the circuits of communication are the supports of an accumulation and a centralization of knowledge” (1977: 217). The study of power and bodies is here opposed to the study of media, images, and communication. It is precisely this division that contemporary theorists of control seek to overcome.



Tarde grasps at their emergence three phenomena which could be used to characterize societies of control and their massive deployment beginning in the second part of the twentieth century: 1) the emergence of cooperation between minds and their functioning by fluxes, networks, and patchwork; 2) the rise of technological apparatuses of actions that operate at a distance, that increase and amplify the power of the action at a distance of monads: telegraph, telephone, cinema, television, and the internet; and 3) the processes of subjectivation and subjection corresponding to the formation of publics, which is to say the constitution of being together that takes place through time. (2004: 75, my translation)

If control is defined by forms of power that necessarily work across dispersed social space, then its tools are not just debt, distributed surveillance, or even the decentered corporation but also the technologies that act on the imagination, affect, and desires, shaping desires and thus the condition of possible actions. What Lazzarato stresses is that control must be thought as a form of power that acts on the possibility of actions. If the panopticon kept the prisoner controlled by creating in him or her an awareness of being watched, framing every possible action by its possible repercussions, then the mediated forms of control also act on actions by shaping a sense of what is possible or desirable. Control is part of a noopolitics, a politics that acts not on actions but thoughts about the possibility of actions (Lazzarato 2004: 85). Noopolitics is then the culmination of a trajectory that passes through discipline and control: power becomes all the more pervasive, all the more effective, as it becomes all the more abstract, acting not directly on bodies but on ideas and thoughts, on the possibility for action.

As Yves Citton argues, the technologies that disseminate ideas, affects, and attentions across diverse spaces cannot function without an older technology, that of narrative itself (2010: 17). Narrative and stories are power means for shaping attention, molding affects and desires. As we saw with respect to debt, there is a narrative of personal responsibility that makes debt effective and functions as part of its confinement, even if actual relations of debt have discarded the individual person in a sea of individual profiles and aggregate banks. Which is to say that as much as the machinic enslavement of control operates on individuals reduced to a series of flows of information, inputs and outputs aggregated into banks and data, the social subjection of control increasingly engages individuals through fantasies of individual agency and responsibility. For Citton, a noopolitics, a politics of thought, is necessarily a mythocracy, a politics of not so much myths, but of the stories and scripts that circulate between popular culture and politics. What occupies the mind, what demands attention and entralls us, are stories.² If power in the age of control is increasingly defined by its incorporealization, its action at a distance, then narratives are an increasingly important aspect of this “conduct of conduct,”

² One of Citton's earliest publications, “Noo-politique spinoziste? (Recension de deux livres récents sur Spinoza, Lorenzo Vinciguerra et de Pascal Sévérac),” takes up the question of “noopolitics” from Lazzarato, arguing that Spinoza's thought makes possible a noopolitics that functions on affects and the capture of desire (2007: n.p.).



or meta-conduct (Citton 2010: 53). Narratives function as a particular apparatus of capture, to use Deleuze and Guattari's term: they capture attention by addressing already existing desires, affects, and sensibilities, but then they shape and script future anxieties and desires by channeling them into determined narratives (Citton 2010: 58). The intersection of these two dimensions constitutes a kind of "immanent transcendence" in that what appears to be spontaneous and popular, immanent to the desires of individuals, is itself structured or formed by narratives that are disseminated from on higher, are transcendent to the social order.³ Our seemingly spontaneous reactions, our fears and desires, are as much a product of the narratives we consume as productive of them. Mythocracy functions by a kind of metalepsis in which values and ideals of the fictional world are mapped unto the real (Citton 2010: 87).

Machinic enslavement and social subjection appear then as two sides of control, two ways of looking at control, in each case acting in very different ways. The first operates through techniques of division and combination that operate beneath the individual's lived experience, compiling individual points of data, and beyond its awareness, as this data is combined in new aggregates. The second necessarily addresses the individual as individual, forming the backdrop and basis of the sense of experience. No less important to this subjection, to this control, are the narratives and stories that the individual is interpellated into (Citton 2010: 68). The story of individual responsibility for the debt one is owed may have very little to do with the way in which debt functions, but it has everything to do with the way in which it is experienced. Even attempts to politicize debt, to make it a public (as in the case of the "We are the 99%" tumblr page), stumble against the embarrassment and shame individuals feel for not being able to pay off their debts (McClanahan 2017: 82). Narratives of individual responsibility, hard work, and individual agency are part of the social subjection of control. Debt is lived as an individual responsibility even as it functions as an impersonal flow of data and calculations.

Lazzarato and Citton present two post-control politics, two variations on control. Noopolitics and mythocracy both continue and extend the tendency of incorporealization and diffusion that defines control. As much as they can be situated with respect to the distinction between enslavement and subjection, we could also say that they are differentiated in terms of base and superstructure. The increased possibility to record, store, and analyze data is the material base of control, while the increased ability to produce, disseminate, and tailor narratives is its superstructure. Or, more accurately, they

³ Citton draws his notion of "immanent transcendence" from Frédéric Lordon's interpretation of Spinoza. As Lordon argues, given that affects, and with them desires, are strengthened by others, by what Spinoza calls the imitation of affects, and that people are, for the most part, ignorant of the causes of their affects, this creates the conditions whereby individuals fail to recognize the cause of their affective comportments, taking as natural and spontaneous what is instituted (2008: 126). Immanent transcendence is an answer to Spinoza's question, repeated by Deleuze and Guattari, "Why do people fight for their servitude as stubbornly as though it were their salvation?"



could be considered as a machinic assemblage of content and a machinic assemblage of expression, to use Deleuze and Guattari's language, or, to simplify things a bit, bodies and minds. The emphasis is, as it was for Spinoza, on the fact that these two sides are two ways of looking at the same thing (Citton 2017: 198). What links them in this case is not, as it was for Spinoza, the infinite order of the universe but the technological transformations in which increased data and the ability to process it runs hand in hand with the increased ability to construct and disseminate narratives that address and pinpoint individuals. The difference between television and social media is that the first appears as obviously scripted and constructed while the algorithms that structure what appears online are often invisible, passing either beneath the individual at the level of the individual, or passing beyond the individual at the level of banks of data. The more the structure or script seems to be invisible, the more what we see, hear, and feel appears to us as a spontaneous product of our desires. As Citton argues, one of the major shifts from television to social media is the increased invisibility of the structuring principles of selection and filtering; television always appeared to be the product of directors, producers, and a network, but Google search results, social media streams, etc., appear to be the product of our own spontaneous desires (2017: 74). Control is all the more effective when it not only acts on the conditions of actions, distancing itself from the immediacy of contact and coercion, but when it does so in a manner that is virtually indistinguishable from our own desires, or, as Deleuze wrote, "motivations." It is harder and harder to know where control stops and we begin.

Lazzarato and Citton extend Deleuze's concept of control into the twenty-first century, bringing a prophetic concept in contact with transformations that Deleuze could not possibly foresee. In doing so, they demonstrate the internal tension of the concept. Understanding control means understanding a form of power that is so incorporeal, so diffuse, that it is virtually impossible to detect. Theorizing control is then a matter of not just understanding how the technologies and media that permeate our daily life affect and determine us, but also of how the very desires, affects, and imaginations that constitute our subjectivity are products and part of control. Lastly, it is important to recall Deleuze's caveat that it is easy "to set up a correspondence between any society and some kind of machine," but more difficult to discern the "social forms" that produce and make use of machines (1995: 180). As much as technology offers an easy shorthand to grasp both the extraction of information and the personalization of content that defines control, it is harder to discern the social forms that act in and through the visible technological shifts. Here, Deleuze's remarks about the corporation and capitalism are indicative of not just the often overlooked thread of Marxism in Deleuze's thought, they also provide a sketch of the political economy of control. Control can be understood as the particular power form corresponding to the real subsumption of society by capital, as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have argued (1994: 260). With real subsumption, capital no longer is imposed externally through the wage and commodity form, but neces-



sarily reshapes the labor relation according to its demands. As we have seen above, these demands entail the increasing tendency to incorporate all of life into capital's orbit, as debt makes education, health, and housing increased sources of profit, while simultaneously reducing the social dimension of labor itself, isolating and fragmenting individuals. However, as Deleuze's remarks indicate, grasping a crisis at the heart of this relation, this increasing extension of capital's scope is coupled with a desperate search for profits outside of the site of production. In the end, this is the paradox of control; its complete permeation of subjectivity and social space must be seen as also a virtual exhaustion and depletion of power. To add one more prophetic observation of Deleuze's text, one could argue that the essay's invocation of debt, services, and offshore production can also be read as a sketch of deindustrialization, of a capital that extends to all spheres of life because it can no longer generate profits from the sphere of production. The extension into social life, into the recesses of subjectivity, is less the motion of an all-powerful capital subsuming all society than a search for profits from every last social relation. With control, capital has no outside, but it is also nothing but outside – constantly exposed to the desire, imagination, and social relations that are its condition but are also its limit. This is the task left to us in theorizing control thirty years later: to see every point of extension, including that into subjectivity itself, as a limit.

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