



# Looking Backward at the Present, 2020–1990: Deleuze’s “Postscript on Control Societies”

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## The Society of Control (*History*)

This special issue of *Coils of the Serpent* constitutes the second part of a double volume dedicated to Gilles Deleuze’s short essay “Postscript on Control Societies,” which first appeared in 1990.<sup>1</sup> The project was motivated by the idea that reflecting on the text thirty years after its initial publication would be a worthwhile and important endeavor insofar as the Postscript signals a shift not only within Deleuze’s oeuvre, but, more importantly, in the social, economic, and political development of late-capitalist Western democracies at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – a shift whose consequences seem to manifest themselves all the more vividly in the world we live in today. Against this backdrop, our sense was that a reassessment of the Postscript would not only contribute to the study of Deleuze’s philosophy, but could also be understood as an exercise in ‘cognitive mapping’ (cf. Jameson 1988), in attempting to orient ourselves in the ‘broad present’ (cf. Gumbrecht 2014) of an era that the Postscript already outlines. What characterizes this era, however, is the fact that such cognitive mapping becomes all the more difficult, as the desire to precisely locate, grasp, or define the present tends to be exacerbated by the reign of the ‘contemporary.’<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the transformation of all temporality into a never-ending, ‘absolute present’ (cf. Quent 2016) not only complicates efforts at historicization, but, as many have argued, also hinders, or even exhausts, the “Utopian impulse” (Jameson 2002: 278) and the very concept of the future (cf. Berardi 2011). Perhaps, we thought, looking back at the Postscript – written at the beginning of both the digital era and the quasi-totalization of the neoliberal model – might aid us in making sense of our

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<sup>1</sup> After its initial publication in France, the English translation of the text appeared in the journal *October* in 1992 (under the title “Postscript on the Societies of Control”). A somewhat different translation – entitled “Postscript on Control Societies” – was later published as part of Deleuze’s 1995 book *Negotiations*. Throughout this introduction, we cite from the *October* version.

<sup>2</sup> Reflective of the difficulties in defining or historicizing the present is, among other things, the ongoing excessive use of concepts that begin with the prefix ‘neo’ or ‘post’ – a trend perhaps most strikingly exemplified by the term ‘post-postmodernism’ (cf. Nealon 2012). On the current omnipresence of the notion of ‘contemporariness,’ cf. the discussions in the context of art (Osborne 2013; Rebentisch 2013), where ‘contemporary art’ has long superseded the idea of artistic ‘modernism.’ Regarding conceptual alternatives to the dominant model of contemporaneity, cf. Avanesian/Malik 2015.



own historical moment. In which ways, we asked, is Deleuze's periodization – his positioning of a 'control society' that, during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, gradually superseded the Foucauldian model of the 'disciplinary society' – still relevant today? Or put more bluntly: are we (and if so, *how* and *in which sense*) still living in a society of control?

### **The Mutation of Capitalism (*Logic*)**

As it turned out, many scholars shared our sense of the Postscript's ongoing relevance. Due to the high number of positive responses, coming from authors of diverse disciplinary background, we decided to divide the issue thematically, assembling a total of fourteen essays in the first volume, whose focus is on the Postscript's significance with regard to the domains of media, culture, and technology (cf. Cord/Schleusener 2020). The second part of the issue now contains twelve additional essays (plus the introduction at hand) dedicated to exploring the Postscript's relevance concerning the realms of philosophy, politics, and the economy.<sup>3</sup>

That Deleuze's essay continues to be relevant in this context can hardly be overlooked. In particular, it has inspired numerous philosophical and theoretical analyses of the politics and economics of contemporary capitalism. Deleuze explicitly links the rise of the control society to a profound "mutation of capitalism" (1992: 6), and though – unlike Foucault in his late lectures (cf. Foucault 2008) – he himself does not use the term, much of what he investigates can be related to what is now generally referred to as neoliberalism. Of particular importance here are his characterization of the 'corporation' and the sentiment – also expressed by Foucault – that it is not only replacing the factory as the principal site of economic activity, but that the corporation is in fact in the process of being generalized into a model for *all* forms of conduct and organization, becoming universalized into the functional logic of the social fabric as a whole. Thus, a 'new spirit of capitalism' (cf. Boltanski/Chiapello 2005), organizing and justifying work around the *project*, has emerged, and with it a new political rationality dominated by the language of individual freedom and autonomy, choice and self-fulfillment. In this context, Deleuze proclaims: "We are taught that corporations have a soul, which is the most terrifying

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<sup>3</sup> However, it should be pointed out that this division between media, culture, and technology, on the one hand, and philosophy, politics, and economy, on the other, is of a merely 'formal' nature. These domains obviously have blurry boundaries, constantly overlap, and blend into one another – and the essays gathered in the two volumes of this special issue frequently address questions that belong to more than just one of them and do not neatly confine themselves to one side of the mentioned divide. In fact, as Jason Read notes in his contribution to the issue at hand: "It is precisely this division [between the "study of power and bodies" and the "study of media, images, and communication"] that contemporary theorists of control seek to overcome" (20n1). Our allocation is thus inevitably provisional and merely meant to emphasize what we see as the main tendencies or primary foci of the essays.



news in the world” (1992: 6). If some of us may not feel that same sense of terror anymore, this only testifies to the continuous significance of Deleuze’s diagnosis. Indeed, the trend towards a wholesale commodification of social relations and a universalization of the corporation paradigm has only accelerated with the turn to the digital and the advent of what is presently discussed under the rubric of ‘platform capitalism’ (cf. Srnicek 2017).

As, among others, governmentality studies have shown – again, often in reference to both, Deleuze and Foucault – this development entails the rise of the ‘entrepreneurial self’ as the hegemonic form of neoliberal subjectivation, a self oriented towards qualities such as self-reliance, motivation, personal responsibility, initiative, and risk-taking (cf. e.g. Bröckling 2016). Thus, a whole new degree, or kind, of subjection is realized, one in which freedom and constraint come to coincide. Deleuze warns: “Many young people strangely boast of being ‘motivated’; they re-request apprenticeships and permanent training. It’s up to them to discover what they’re being made to serve” (1992: 7). Deleuze recognizes the emergence not only of this new type of subject, but also of another, related, figure: the ‘indebted man’ (cf. Lazzarato 2012) – “Man is no longer man enclosed, but man in debt” (1992: 6). If, moreover, we take into account the ‘psycho-politics’ (cf. Han 2014) connected with these new modes of subjectivation, we must surely add yet another kind of subjectivity which is omnipresent today: the ‘weary self’ (cf. Ehrenberg 2010), plagued no longer by neurosis, but by self-doubt, burn-out, and depression. All of this, along with other observations, such as those regarding financialization, consumerism, and marketing, has made Deleuze’s Postscript into a common reference text in many critical analyses of ‘late’ or neoliberal capitalism.

In a sense, then, to look back at the Postscript, thirty years after its first publication, means “looking backward” at our own present. This is not meant in the sense of Edward Bellamy’s famous utopian novel of that name, in which a fictitious witness looks back at the present from an imaginary future (cf. Bellamy 1888). Rather, what the phrase is meant to highlight is, on the one hand, the prescient nature of many of the ideas laid out in the Postscript and, on the other hand (what is perhaps more important), the fact that the historical moment when Deleuze wrote his essay – one year after the fall of the Berlin wall – marks the onset of what Andrew Culp describes as “our suffocating perpetual present” (2016: 69): an era that, paradoxically, seems to be characterized by both permanent change or acceleration and a sense of stasis.<sup>4</sup> As many theorists of the neoliberal

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<sup>4</sup> Hartmut Rosa, for one, has proposed an account of how these two seemingly contradictory aspects are related to each other, arguing that *posthistoire* is the result of a temporal crisis of the political. According to Rosa, this crisis is most evident in what he describes as a “*desynchronization* between the ‘intrinsic temporality’ of politics and the time structures of other social spheres, in particular the economy and technological development, but increasingly also between political organization and sociocultural development” (2015: 259). For more on this temporal paradox, cf. also Fredric Jameson’s analysis of what he conceptualized as one of several ‘antinomies of postmodernity’ (Jameson 1994).



era have pointed out, what is decisive about the period is the increasing mobility of capital and labor, the trend toward flexibility, lifelong learning, short-term planning, technological innovation, and political-economic turmoil. In this regard, the neoliberal mode of production can be viewed as the most perfect embodiment of the well-known Marxist dictum that under capitalism “all that is solid melts into air” (Marx/Engels 2002: 223). At the same time, however, there is the tendency to relate neoliberalism to a feeling of stasis, meaning the sense “that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it” (Fisher 2009: 2). Since change and transformation today mostly occurs within the parameters of a socio-economic system that is perceived as permanent and devoid of any ‘outside,’ the neoliberal epoch has been variously linked to the ‘end of history’ (cf. Fukuyama 2009), the “dystopian imagination” (Berardi 2011: 17), or “the slow cancellation of the future” (Fisher 2014: 2).<sup>5</sup> Along these lines, Fredric Jameson has famously stated that it is nowadays “easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism” (2003: 76).

A widespread, if not the dominant, ‘structure of feeling’ (cf. Williams 1977: 128-35) today thus seems to be what Paul Virilio referred to as ‘polar inertia’ (cf. Virilio 2000), the German translation of which captures this contradictory experience of the present even better: *rasender Stillstand* (‘frenetic standstill’) (cf. Rosa 2015). As thinkers such as Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams have pointed out, a crucial object or site of contemporary political struggle therefore precisely has to be the structure of feeling. In other words, one central element of any alternative or counter-hegemonic political project now ought to be, on the one hand, the rigorous contestation of the TINA ideology (‘There is No Alternative’) as well as of the dominant ‘distribution of the sensible’ and the im/possible<sup>6</sup> (cf. Rancière 1999); and, on the other hand, the construction of new political imaginaries – in short, the ‘(re-)invention of the future’ (cf. Srnicek/Williams 2016).

### **The Issue (*Program*)**

The contributions assembled in this issue all apply themselves to the exploration and critical analysis of the ‘broad present’ outlined above. In different ways, each one of them engages in an act of ‘looking backward,’ bringing the contemporary neoliberal era and Deleuze’s Postscript into dialogue. This practice sheds new light on the former as much as on the latter. In the opening essay, Julius Greve ponders on the form and genre of Deleuze’s Postscript, pointing out that the text can be read as either diagnosis or manifesto. In this vein, whereas some contributions mainly focus on the (diagnostic) identifi-

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<sup>5</sup> According to Franco Berardi, the neoliberal era thus marks the end of an age ‘that trusted in the future’ (cf. 2011: 15-68).

<sup>6</sup> For more on this crucial topic, cf. the forthcoming special issue of *Coils of the Serpent* on “Im/Possibility.”



cation and investigation of contemporary mechanisms of control, others primarily take up Deleuze's (manifesto-like) injunction "to look for new weapons" (1992: 4). Still others, rather than building on Deleuze's concepts and arguments, are more concerned with their historicization or, in fact, with the elaboration of a decidedly critical perspective on the Postscript.<sup>7</sup> In doing so, the essays address a wide range of philosophical, political, and economic issues, including debt and 'noopolitics' (Jason Read), the relationship between the thinking of Deleuze and Foucault (Patricia Ticineto Clough, Marc Rölli), neo-liberalism and finance (Simon Schleusener, Joseph Vogl, Benjamin Noys), the possibility and means of critique and resistance (Martin Saar, Lea Allers/Franziska Martinsen), control and the postcolonial (Dirk Wiemann, Simone Bignall), or temporality and preemption (Armen Avanesian/Anke Hennig). With its focus on temporality and, in particular, the future, the last article in this issue points to a theme which, in one way or another, can be traced through virtually all the contributions assembled here: Just like Deleuze's Postscript itself, the articles, implicitly or explicitly, eventually invite us to look not just backwards but also ahead, and to reflect not only on 'what has become' but on 'what is becoming' and 'what may still be becoming' too. In other words, they also examine possible pathways through, against, and, perhaps, beyond control.

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<sup>7</sup> In particular, cf. the contributions of Dirk Wiemann and Simone Bignall, who criticize the Postscript's mode of periodization from a postcolonial perspective.



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