

Igor Krtolica

## Can Something Take Place?

**Abstract** First, starting from a text Deleuze and Guattari wrote in 1984 on the aftermath of May 1968 in France (“May 68 Did Not Take Place”), this article tries to analyze in what way this diagnosis – made in the middle of the 1980s, when what is now commonly called neo-liberalism was unfolding both in America and in Europe – can apply to our current political situation. Secondly, this analysis shows that maybe the very conditions of social critique and social engagement are endangered today more than yesterday, because of the new patterns of social restraint embodied by the evolution of communication (especially television). Thirdly, the author asks the question: therefore, under which conditions social critique and engagement are now possible?

**Keywords:** engagement, Deleuze, Guattari, May 68, event, critic, television, communication

322

The debate on social engagement would not come up if we were conclusively guarded against the ongoing risk of disengagement. Neither would the debate come up *today* if that risk did not relate to new patterns of social restraint which are driving us to invent the forms of engagement that are suited and tailored to the new situation.

In 1984, in the middle of those wintry years when, both in America and in Europe, what is now commonly called neo-liberalism was unfolding, Deleuze and Guattari wrote a text on the events of May 1968 in France, sixteen years after these same events. In this document entitled “May 68 Did Not Take place”, they stated five points. 1<sup>o</sup>) First, they argued that an event is defined as an opening of possibilities and what unlocks in there will remain unraveled. Although set in the past, an event shall never be gone past. “In historical phenomena such as the revolution of 1789, the Commune, the revolution of 1917, there is always one part of the *event* that is irreducible to any social determinism, or to causal chains. Historians are not very fond of this aspect: they restore causality after the fact. Yet the event is itself a splitting off from, or a breaking with causality; it is a bifurcation, a deviation with respect to laws, an unstable condition which opens up a new field of the possible. [...] In this sense, an event can be turned around, repressed, hijacked, betrayed, but there still is something there that cannot be outdated. Only renegades would say: it’s outdated. But even if the event is ancient, it can never be outdated: it is an opening onto the possible. It passes as much into the interior of individuals as into the depths of a society” (Deleuze 2003: 215). In Deleuze and Guattari’s view, the events of May 1968 in

France were of the same kind inasmuch as they opened new possibilities, “new relations with the body, with time, sexuality, the immediate surroundings, with culture, work...” (Deleuze 2003: 216). 2° Secondly, Deleuze and Guattari yet argued that although the event cannot be gone past as such, it needs realization, it requires some forms of institutional embodiments that can actually fulfil the possibilities it opened. Well, now “May 68 Did Not Take Place” (*Mai 68 n'a pas eu lieu*) means precisely that French society failed to materialize the events of May 1968 into such institutions: “The American New Deal and the Japanese boom corresponded to two very different examples of subjective redeployment, with all sorts of ambiguities and even reactionary structures, but also with enough initiative and creativity to provide a new social state capable of responding to the demands of the event. Following '68 in France, on the contrary, the authorities did not stop living with the idea that ‘things will settle down’. And indeed, things did settle down, but under catastrophic conditions. May '68 was not the result of a crisis, nor was it a reaction to a crisis. It is rather the opposite. It is the current crisis, the impasses of the current crisis in France that stem directly from the inability of French society to assimilate May '68. French society has shown a radical incapacity to create a subjective redeployment on the collective level, which is what '68 demands; in light of this, how could it now trigger an economic redeployment that would satisfy the expectations of the ‘Left’? French society never came up with anything for the people: not at school nor at work. Everything that was new has been marginalized or turned into a caricature. [...] Each time the possible was closed off” (Deleuze 2003: 216). 3° Thirdly, from then on Deleuze and Guattari could suggest that the ‘children of May 68’ found themselves caught up in a contradictory situation. For if the event of May 1968 did continue to run through them, to labor them and sometimes heat them up, nothing in their social reality could meet this subjective disposition; and since nothing but silence would echo their subjectivity, they developed the feeling that what was going on did not really apply or relate to them, they started showing strange unconcerned interest to what was happening to them. “They are strangely indifferent, and yet very well-informed. They have stopped being demanding or narcissistic, but they know perfectly well that there is nothing today that corresponds to their subjectivity, to their potential of energy. They even know reforms are rather directed against them. They are determined to mind their own business as much as they can. They keep it open, hang on to something possible” (Deleuze 2003: 217). 4° Fourthly, Deleuze and Guattari argued that their reading of French society in the mid-eighties could apply to the rest of the world, given the events of 1968 were worldwide<sup>1</sup>.

1 Deleuze will remind it in a long comment of his book on Foucault : “To read some analyses, you would think that 1968 took place in the heads of a few Parisian intellectuals. We must therefore remember that it is the product of a long chain of world

“This is true of the entire world. What we institutionalize in unemployment, in retirement, or in school, are controlled ‘situations of abandonment’, for which the handicapped are the model. The only subjective redeployment actually occurring on a collective level are those of an unbridled American-style capitalism, or even a Muslim fundamentalism like in Iran, or of Afro-American religions like in Brazil: they are reversed figures of a new orthodoxy (one should add here European neo-Papism). Europe has nothing to suggest, and France seem to no longer have any other ambition than to assume the leadership of an Americanized and over-armed Europe that would impose from above the necessary economic redeployment” (Deleuze 2003: 217). 5°) But this reading was not a pessimistic one since Deleuze and Guattari were making a point that, fifthly, there survived a field of possibilities that is likely to be realized. “Yet the field of the possible lies elsewhere: *along the East-West axis*, in pacifism, insofar as it intends to break up relations of conflict, or over-armament, but also of complicity and distribution between the United States and the Soviet Union. *Along the North-South axis*, in a new internationalism that no longer relies solely on an alliance with the Third-World, but on the phenomena of third-worldification in the rich countries themselves (for example, the evolution of metropolises, the decline of the inner-cities, the rise of a European third-world, such as Paul Virilio has theorized them)” (Deleuze 2003: 217).

A year later, in 1985, in *The Time-Image*, the second volume of his study on cinema, Deleuze would raise this diagnosis on his time to the rank of ‘modern fact’. “The modern fact is that we no longer believe in this world. We do not even believe in the events which happen to us, love, death, as if they only half concerned us. It is not we who make cinema; it is the world which looks to us like a bad film. [...] The link between man and world is broken” (Deleuze 1985: 223). Yet, the following year, in 1986, in an introduction to the book *Ciné-Journal* by film critic Serge Daney (“Letter to Serge

---

events, and of a series of currents of international thought, that already linked the *emergence of new forms of struggle to the production of a new subjectivity*, if only in its critique of centralism and its qualitative claims concerning the ‘quality of life’. On the level of world events we can briefly quote the experiment with self-management in Yugoslavia, the Czech Spring and its subsequent repression, the Vietnam War, the Algerian War and the question of networks, but we can also point to the signs of a ‘new class’ (the new working class), the emergence of farmers’ or students’ unions, the so-called institutional psychiatric and educational centers, and so on. On the level of currents of thought we must no doubt go back to Lukacs, whose *History and Class Consciousness* was already raising questions to do with a new subjectivity; then the Frankfurt School, Italian Marxism and the first signs of ‘autonomy’ (Tronti); the reflection that revolved around Sartre on the question of the new working class (Gorz); the groups such as ‘Socialism or Barbarism’, ‘Situationism’, ‘the Communist Way’ (especially Felix Guattari and the ‘micropolitics of desire’). Certain currents and events have continued to make their influence felt.” (Deleuze 1986: 123).

Daney: Optimism, Pessimism and Travel”), we would find out that the loss of the world was also the definition of television: “the world is lost, the world itself ‘turns to film’, any film at all, and this is what television amounts to, the world turning to any film at all, and, as you say here, ‘nothing happening to human beings any more, but everything happening only to images’” – “that’s just what television amounts to, the whole world turning to film” (Deleuze 1990: 107–110). Of course, it is not insignificant that this diagnosis on the current situation was indeed formulated in texts engaging both political philosophy and aesthetics, dealing with the two major mass media in the twentieth century, namely cinema and television. Our not believing in this world is definitely a subjective disposition, our current subjective disposition. Yet, this subjective disposition proceeds from a new form of social restraint, from new forms of power which have a direct effect on the way we perceive and feel, which shape “postures, attitudes, perceptions, expectations” (Deleuze and Guattari 1980: 262). Well, now audio-visual mass media are those that primarily work this way to fashion and chisel individuals that are adapted to the social standards. And it is down to television to play the part of this inner relationship between, on the one hand, the proliferation of clichés in which our world becomes a bad film, and on the other hand the function of social engineering, both being closely linked together so that people’s reactions and responses are pre-tuned to the social demands. This is incidentally Deleuze’s second definition of television: “television is the form in which the new powers of ‘control’ become immediate and direct” (Deleuze 1990: 107).

325

At the end of the 1980s Deleuze will call this new form of power ‘communication’. What defines communication is the transmission of information in which information designates a series of order-words. Thus, every time we are informed “we are not asked to believe but to behave as if we did” (Deleuze 2003: 298–299), as in “police or government announcements, which often have little plausibility or truthfulness, but say very clearly what should be observed and retained” (Deleuze and Guattari 1980: 96). That is, in other words, the gap has turned into depths: Not only we’ve stopped believing in this world but we are not even requested to believe in it, only to pretend, which is to say behave accordingly to what we are told. The short history of television fully proves this diagnosis right. The truth is television has always been the field of transmission for public opinion, the place where social consensus circulates. However, the conversion in the early 1980s from a national public television to a privately owned commercial television marked a passage of this media now devoted to the social construction of brains that are fitted to the demands of the market. This becomes even more self-evident when looking at the recent history of reality TV which, at the beginning involved, in the artificial conditions of a recording studio, producing a laboratory-reality that would be useful for

the voyeuristic observation of average individuals through the conducts and manners of whom we were notified to identify with. But reality TV quickly turned into an open-air personal coaching operation meant to specifically choose the candidates who would be most in keeping with the requirements of individual performance as dictated by the labor market, while in the meantime weeding out the other applicants. The study of social consensus (in which television is yet again a privileged means of communication) cannot disregard a study of capitalism. It is the production, the distribution and the consumption of conformist attitudes that are suited to the market's demands, it is the fostering of the company-form down to the scale of the individual, what Michel Foucault discussed in 1979 in his lectures on *The Birth of Biopolitics*. The famous selection of the rivals which has instituted the typical traits of democracy since Athens now only conforms to the cost-effectiveness standards – but it is introduced in the guise of self-fulfilment.

326

The well-renowned study of work psychology Alain Ehrenberg published in 1998, *The Weariness of the Self* (*La fatigue d'être soi*), shows how this new form of power produces some subjectivity's new illnesses in return, the pathologies of depression. Ehrenberg writes that "depression starts succeeding as soon as the disciplinary design of conducts, the rules of authority and compliance with standards to what is forbidden which used to designate a prospect to classes and both sexes, depression rules when these designs have given way to the norms that encourage each and every one to personal initiative demanding one should fulfil themselves. [Depression] takes the form of an obsession with liability in which the prevailing feeling is that of inadequacy or inefficiency. The depressed person does not measure up, he is tired of having to become himself" (Ehrenberg 1998: 10-11). When this helplessness haunts him, when he suddenly feels his future has been taken away from him and when he finds out he has been displaced into the past, the depressed individual has become a has-been, an outmoded individual of no significance. Therefore, "depression is a pathology of our time (the depressed individual has no future) and a pathology of motivation (the depressed individual lacks energy and is stuck in a slump)" (Ehrenberg 1998: 294). This is similar to what Deleuze had diagnosed in the early 1990s when, in a short publication on Beckett, *The Exhausted*, he named 'fatigue' this new subjective disposition ("The tired hasn't got any more (subjective) possibility: he therefore cannot realize the smallest (objective) possibility" (Deleuze 1992: 57), but also, conversely, when reporting on control societies he warned against the general request to constantly remain motivated ("Many young people have a strange craving to be 'motivated', they're always asking for special courses and continuing education; it's their job to discover whose ends these serve" (Deleuze 1990: 247).

There is yet no sign indicating that the situation has changed much over the last twenty years – or that it has got better. What about the grandchildren of May 68? For them as for the generation of their parents, it would be impossible to say that the possibilities have closed up because these are still laboring them, although they still haven't found any institutional embodiment or any particular place to develop in collective modes of existence. On the other hand, the field of possibilities has become smaller: If one may sometimes feel that 'there is no alternative', it is perhaps because the fight seems to be one-sided, even more unfair today than it was yesterday. Indeed, how can one fight against the economic forces of neoliberalism and stock-market speculation, how can one fight against the political powers of communication and populism, against the police and military powers of the security order, how can one fight against the religious powers of fundamentalism or against the media powers of an arrogant conformism? Given these conditions, how can we resist? Yet, has philosophical thinking ever been placed in a different situation than this one here? In 1990 Deleuze stated that philosophy cannot wage war against these forms of power, but that it nonetheless engages in negotiations with them, and more than that it engages in a guerrilla warfare against them.

But what could this paradoxical option really mean? Engaging in negotiations but without exchanging, without communicating? It is clear that the opposition between negotiating and communicating first betrays some sort of suspicion and distrust, not only of the circumstances in which we are condemned to express ourselves (the submission of mass-media to the authority of audience rating) but, above all a distrust of communication as such, a distrust of the demand and command to express ourselves.

"We sometimes go on as though people can't express themselves. In fact they're always expressing themselves. The sorriest couples are those where the woman can't be preoccupied or tired without the man saying 'What's wrong? Say something...', or the man, without the woman saying..., and so on. Radio and television have spread this spirit everywhere, and we're riddled with pointless talk, insane quantities of words and images. Stupidity's never blind or mute. So it's not a problem of getting people to express themselves but of providing little gaps of solitude and silence in which they might eventually find something to say. Repressive forces don't stop people expressing themselves but rather force them to express themselves. What a relief to have nothing to say, the right to say nothing, because only then is there a chance of framing the rare, and ever rarer, thing that might be worth saying. What we're plagued by these days isn't any blocking of communication, but pointless statements" (Deleuze 1990: 176–177).

In 1990 in an interview with Toni Negri, Deleuze will drive this point home: "Maybe speech and communication have been corrupted. They're thoroughly permeated by money – and not by accident but by their very nature. We've

got to hijack speech. Creating has always been something different from communicating. The key thing may be to create vacuoles of non communication, circuit breakers, so we can elude control” (Deleuze 1990: 238).

We have no reason to believe that these are threats *only* to television and common speech, and that they do not apply to the expression of critical thinking. Contrary to what we can sometimes hear, there may not be such an undersupply of critical thinkers, neither an insufficient supply of journals to help their idea circulate, nor a lack in public space where these ideas could be welcome. Probably, what is missing most is time to produce and receive critical thinking, we need this time-out that blends with the event itself and which the supremacy of instant communication will suppress. The problem is not, as some would have it, that the world is getting up in speed but that this time-out is shrinking and dying out. This is not about singing the praises of slowness, as speed and slowness are more complementary than in an adversarial situation. This is about the necessity of a time-out which is a common feature of both head-spinning speeds and the greatest slowness.

328

“I don’t think the media have much capacity or inclination to grasp an event. In the first place, they often show a beginning or end, whereas even a short or instantaneous event is something going on. And then, they want something spectacular, whereas events always involve periods when nothing happens. It’s not even a matter of there being such periods before and after some event, they’re part of the event itself: you can’t, for example, extract the instant of some terribly brutal accident from the vast empty time in which you see it coming, staring at what hasn’t yet happened, waiting ages for it to happen. The most ordinary event casts us as visionaries, whereas the media turn us into mere passive onlookers, or worse still, voyeurs” (Deleuze 1990: 217–218).

Bourdieu was the living proof of a double impossibility that affects the expression of criticism: the impossibility for the philosopher to remain in his academic and scholarly ivory tower, the impossibility for him to criticize the media inside the media, to condemn television on television<sup>2</sup>. So what can we do, then? How, on the one hand, can we set up a blank space in which something could happen, in which something could take place and out of which a thought that deserves to be uttered may bloom, without this same blank space being mistaken for some ivory tower? And, on the other hand, how can we formulate this idea, how can we hold and maintain this resistance speech against the social powers, how can we do it without falling into that media pulp, into that generalized comparability of personal opinions? In short, how can we make criticism and silence run through each other? This debate on the expression of critical thinking cannot part from

2 See Bourdieu 2002. On television, see Bourdieu 2002: 409–416.

another debate about its content. Where, today, does that field of possibilities lie? How can we wrest an idea from snowballing clichés, an idea that would not bear that look of déjà-vu?

As for the mode of expression of criticism, it would be a mistake to underestimate the political scope of the analysis Deleuze made of mannerism in the 1980s, from *A Thousand Plateaus* in 1980 to “Bartleby; or The Formula” in 1988 to *The Fold* and the “Letter to Serge Daney” in 1986. It is true that mannerism is quite a complex category. First, in the history of art it is a controversial aesthetic category (between the Renaissance and the Baroque) but it is also a clinical category used to refer to some positions that are typical of schizophrenics (a high-flown distancing of the world and others). But as suggested by Deleuze’s analyses, this category generally applies to a series of reactions to a social situation that tends to be unbearable to live in. During the sixteenth century these were the glaring contradiction of Renaissance Europe: a yearning for harmony and balance reaching for the universal on the one hand, and on the other hand violent wars, the violence of religious wars and peasant wars, the massacres that accompanied the invasion of Central Europe by the Turks, the development of the colonies in America. In the second half of the twentieth century, the consequences of an all set of factors are now breaking about “the idea of one single misery, internal and external, in the world and in consciousness” (Deleuze 1983: 282): the Second World War and its aftermaths, the swaying of the American Dream, the awareness of ethnic and sexual minorities, the development of advanced capitalism, the building up of audio-visual clichés both in the real world and our mind, etc. – a whole open series of factors which do not relate to a global situation or to one that could apply to the whole world but factors which relate to a fragmented world, to a dispersive reality. In any case, the ‘manners’ of the artist as that of the schizophrenic entail a tactic of the balk, some displayed unwillingness, a split personality to be regarded as a response to the impossibility to join in the world as to free oneself from it. This is a response that more thoroughly refers to a tactic aimed at neutralizing the world and the identities it is purporting to allocate us all. A humorous reaction and a very critical one that creates a distance which goal is to temporarily suspend the difference between resistance and escape, between engagement and disengagement<sup>3</sup>. Or, as Bartleby would have it: “I would prefer not to...”<sup>4</sup>. There is no reason to believe that mannerism cannot apply to philosophy or to the critical stance in general. Rather the contrary, in a situation where no one believes in the world that

3 See Sibertin-Blanc 2016: chap. 13.

4 “At each occurrence, there is a stupor surrounding Bartleby, as if one had heard the Unspeakable or the Unstoppable. And there is Bartleby’s silence, as if he had said everything and exhausted the language at the same time” (Deleuze 1993: 91).



looks like a bad film and a film we feel does not apply to us, where the connections between the citizen and the world have been severed, where the common comforts have become worthless, mannerism implies this operation through which this relation proves to be mainly a problematic one, one which possibility is not given and one that a language that is confronted to the silence within will eventually reap and collect.

330

What are today's examples of those problematic relations? Or, similarly: Where does the field of the im-possibilities lie? In a recent publication "The German Dream: Neoliberalism and Fortress of Europe" Sociologist Eric Fassin and Journalist Aurélie Windels asked "What is the nature of the link between the reign of neoliberalism and political xenophobia in Europe?" (Fassin and Windels 2016). They showed how Germany, by taking advantage of the economic and the migrant crisis that are swaying Europe today, have taken over what was the main idea of the American dream – namely its imperialist logic: the union of an expansionist liberal economic policy and a migratory policy bent on hospitality for the wretched of the earth, so that in the end Germany have made its power desirable. Following a double axis East-West and North-South, the possibilities are yet somewhere else: moving the war and sovereignty issue away by supporting a policy of power-lessness (*im-puissance*) such as Etienne Balibar had put forward in 2003 in his book entitled *Europe, America, War*; to make this powerlessness attractive by thwarting the division between the wretched of the earth from the Middle-East and Africa on the one hand and, on the other hand those who pretend it is their responsibility to look after other people's lands, by establishing a symmetrical effect between those who are claiming their 'right' to migrate and those who are claiming their 'right' to welcome them or block them out; shifting both these rights to the common ecological principle which determine them, the im-possibility to inhabit and share a world that was not created for us.

Translated in English by Frédéric Dupont

### Literature

- Bourdieu, Pierre (2002), *Interventions, 1961–2001*. Marseille: Agone.
- Deleuze, Gilles (1983), *L'Image-Mouvement*. Paris: Minuit.
- Deleuze, Gilles (1986), *Foucault*. Paris: Minuit.
- Deleuze, Gilles (1985), *L'Image-Temps*. Paris: Minuit.
- Deleuze, Gilles (1990), *Pourparlers (1972-1990)*. Paris: Minuit.
- Deleuze, Gilles (1992), *L'Épuisé*. Paris: Minuit.
- Deleuze, Gilles (1993), *Critique et Clinique*. Paris: Minuit.
- Deleuze, Gilles (2003), *Deux Régimes de Fous. Textes et Entretiens (1975–1995)*. Paris: Minuit.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Félix (1980), *Mille Plateaux. Capitalisme et Schizophrénie 2*. Paris: Minuit.

- Ehrenberg, Alain (1998), *La Fatigue d'Être Soi. Dépression et société*. Paris: Odile Jacob.
- Fassin, Éric and Windels, Aurélie (2016), "The German Dream: Neoliberalism and Fortress of Europe", *Near Futures Online* 1 "Europe at a Crossroads" (March 2016).
- Foucault, Michel (2004), *Naissance de la Biopolitique*. Paris: Seuil/Gallimard.
- Sibertin-Blanc, Guillaume (2016), *Droits de suite schizoanalytiques*. To be published.

Igor Krtolica

Može li se nešto dogoditi?

Rezime

Najpre polazim od teksta koji su Delez i Gatar napisali 1984. godine o posledicama majskih događaja 1968. u Francuskoj ("Maj '68 se nije dogodio"), da bih u svom prilogu pokušao da analiziram na koji način se njihova dijagnoza – izvedena sredinom osamdesetih u vreme razvoja sada uobičajenog neoliberalizma u Americi i Evropi – može primeniti na našu trenutnu političku situaciju. Drugo, ta analiza ukazuje da su možda upravo danas više nego ikad ugroženi uslovi društvene kritike i društvenog angažmana s razvojem novih obrazaca društvene prinude sadržane u evoluciji komunikacija (posebno televizije). Treće, stoga se pitam, pod kojim uslovima su društvena kritika i angažman danas uopšte mogući?

**Ključne reči:** angažman, Delez, Gatar, Maj '68, događaj, kritika, televizija, komunikacija