

Cultivating Revolutionary Events

For Gilles Deleuze only practice can fuel the development of theory: “No theory can develop without eventually encountering a wall, and practice is necessary for piercing this wall.”¹ If, as Deleuze argues, practice is the only way to move beyond theoretical blockages then a tactical first step for theory would be to develop a philosophy of the event. This is why activists wishing to become revolutionary should turn to Nietzsche, Deleuze and Foucault. All three philosophers are open in their desire to activate a revolutionary destruction of the State. Deleuze and Foucault build upon Nietzsche and are exemplars of practicing theory. Having emerged from the spontaneous student and worker uprising of 1968, poststructuralist philosophers pursued multiple questions relating to events and their significance in the struggle against power. Foucault saw the revolutionary potential of cultivating events and held that the control of the event is how power is maintained: “the power of a certain class must appear inaccessible to events; and the event, in its dangerous aspect, must be dominated and dissolved in the continuity of power maintained by this class, by a class power which is never defined”.² A reading of Deleuze and Nietzsche gives insight into how the event is “dominated and dissolved in the continuity of power” and provides a first step towards a theory of how the event can be regained as a weapon – its “dangerous aspect” cultivated - against the dominate “class power”.

What do we mean when we talk about an “event”? Nietzsche, Foucault, and Deleuze each have their own description of the event but it is worth starting with

¹ “Intellectuals and Power”, 206

² “Revolutionary Action: ‘Until Now’”, 221

Deleuze. Deleuze held that a key mystery of the event is its “double structure”.³ In one way, an event is composed of its specific physical manifestation that normally only lasts momentarily (temporally). But it is also clear that an event has an existence beyond its physical manifestation: it has a lasting significance that is outside of the present moment. Put simply, the majority of events that we can cite happened in the past, otherwise they are the rare form of the event: one that is currently unfolding. Deleuze explains that:

With every event, there is indeed the present moment of its actualization, the moment in which the event is embodied in a state of affairs, an individual, or a person, the moment we designate by saying “*here*, the moment has come.” [...] But on the other hand, there is the future and the past of the event considered in itself, sidestepping each present, being free of the limitations of a state of affairs, impersonal and preindividual, neutral, neither general nor particular...⁴

The event is, then, composed of two structures. The first structure of the event is its actualization in the material world while the second is its actualization in the individual. Immediately, we become aware of the circular nature of the event’s structure. With each actualization of the event in the present through the actions of an individual there is a second actualization in the individuals affected. Events are always traumatic which is why Deleuze asks, “why is every event a kind of plague, war, wound, or death?”⁵ If each event is experienced as a wound and as war then we begin to see how the event demands an ethics. To understand further what ethical position Deleuze held to be revolutionary we need to return to the event’s special structure.

Al-Qa’ida’s synchronized spectacular attack on the World Trade Center is, as an event whose interpretation as wound and war has been endorsed by the dominant powers, a perfect example of the event’s double structure. Although 9/11 only lasted a few hours

³ “Ethics and the Event”, 81

⁴ “Ethics and the Event”, 81

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it has had far reaching effects because the event has acquired a diversity of meaning for individuals. The event of 9/11 has, Deleuze would say, actualized in us and led us upon a course of action: “To the extent that events are actualized in us, they wait for us and invite us in.”⁶ The second structure of the event, the ability of the event to live within us and to “invite us” towards certain conclusions, is the source of actions. “The event is not what occurs (an accident), it is rather inside what occurs, the purely expressed. It signals and awaits us.”⁷ The event signals us towards action because it acquires meaning within us that gives us the conviction to act. “The actor maintains himself in the instant in order to act out something perpetually anticipated and delayed, hoped for and recalled.”⁸ This can be understood in at least two ways. First, as Deleuze argues, when an individual wills an event they are not willing its specific fleeting appearance (“the present moment of its actualization”) but instead are willing towards a future goal. But more importantly, this quote highlights that events occur when an individual uses the events that have occurred in the past to propel himself into creating. Deleuze’s position on the event and its connection to action is clearly influenced by Nietzsche who held that action emerged out an unhistorical condition that he likened to a force of fate. Both philosophers held that events are the things that allow action that can challenge all that exists.

For Deleuze events serve as sequences on a line of flight. When willing the event, an individual wills “not exactly what occurs, but something *in* that which occurs, something yet to come which would be consistent with what occurs, in accordance with the laws of an obscure, humorous conformity: the Event. It is in this sense that the *amor*

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fati is one with the struggle of free men”.⁹ In willing the event, the individual projects desire onto the real world. Events are tied to a sense of fate because their emergence cannot be understood historically: the event never fully actualizes what the actor willed. Nietzsche understood this and therefore laid critique against historical-scientific forms of knowledge. For Nietzsche the event was an expression of desire and a moment of forgetting. To analyze the event historically (ie, to produce knowledge only about the first structure of the event) means to kill the event and to impede the emergence of events. Thus, he wrote “On the uses and disadvantages of history for life” in which he exclaimed “Overproud European of the nineteenth century, you are raving! Your knowledge does not perfect nature, it only destroys your own nature. Compare for once the heights of your capacity for knowledge with the depths of your incapacity for action”.¹⁰ For Nietzsche there was a direct correlation between understanding events in a historical sense and the formation of a consciousness that was dominated by an inability to create events. In fact, he held that historical knowledge was promoted to impede creation: “In this struggle, however, we shall have to discover a particularly unpleasant fact: *that the excesses of the historical sense from which the present day suffers are deliberately furthered, encouraged and – employed.*”¹¹ Nietzsche’s interest in studying the historical was to denounce it in favor of the unhistorical which he believed would strengthen the emergence of events. Nietzsche’s advise is to “form within yourself an image to which the future shall correspond and forget the superstition that you are epigones.” Nietzsche wanted to create a philosophy that gave birth to an “empire of

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¹⁰ “On the uses and disadvantages of history for life”, 108

¹¹ “On the uses and disadvantages of history for life”, 115

youth”.¹² Youth, in Nietzsche’s eyes, are most able to cultivate a reoccurring revolt against what currently exists. Deleuze too is primarily concerned with creating a philosophy that catalyzes action and his interest in the event is in the event as the second structure: a wound that compels us towards action.

For Deleuze, the event’s second structure as a wound that compels us towards action also suggests an ethical position. “Either ethics makes no sense at all, or this is what it means and has nothing else to say: not to be unworthy of what happens to us.”¹³

Deleuze continues:

Nothing more can be said, and no more has ever been said: the become worthy of what happens to us, and thus to will and release the event, to become the offspring of one’s own events, and thereby to be reborn, to have one more birth, and to break with one’s carnal birth – to become the offspring of one’s events and not of one’s actions, for the action is itself produced by the offspring of the event.¹⁴

To become worthy of what happens requires responding to the event without moral judgments. “To grasp whatever happens as unjust and unwarranted (it is always someone else’s fault) is, on the contrary, what renders our sores repugnant – veritable *ressentiment*, resentment of the event. There is no other ill will. What is really immoral is the use of moral notions like just or unjust, merit or fault.”¹⁵ The inability to forget disfigures the event; it makes it emerge out of bitterness and hatred and it creates more bitterness and hatred. “Only by spreading *ressentiment* the tyrant forms allies, namely slaves and servants. The revolutionary alone is free from the *ressentiment*, by means of which one always participates in, and profits by, an oppressive order.”¹⁶ The revolutionary

¹² “On the uses and disadvantages of history for life”, 116

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“participates in, and profits by, an oppressive order” because they are able to transform what happens to them into events that then make possible future events that attack the oppressive society created the wound. “The actor thus actualizes the event, but in a way which is entirely different from the actualization of the event in the depth of things.”¹⁷ An oppressive order will always breed the revolutionary because the revolutionary sees something within events that allows creation that challenges the oppressive order. Further, revolutionary’s action will always spawn revolutionary action.

Deleuze’s philosophical emphasis is ultimately the same as Nietzsche’s: fermenting revolt. Further, Deleuze shares Nietzsche’s conviction that action requires a momentary forgetting. Deleuze expresses this through an embrace of experimentation: “Politics is active experimentation, since we do not know in advance which way a line is going to turn. Draw the line, says the accountant: but one can in fact draw it *anywhere*”.¹⁸ Drawing a line of flight is what is important even if this line could be drawn anywhere. In other words, Deleuze understands the potential difficulties and injustices that can result from an embrace of action – but responds by insisting that it is here that an ethics can be developed which would guide action. One aspect of this ethics is a rejection of responding to events with *ressentiment*; another is pragmatic acknowledgement of the dangers of embracing creation.

On the one hand, Deleuze embraces a “just ideas” position in which what is valued is new thought along with the freedom of the individual to choose which ideas they prefer. For example, he advises: “You should not try to find whether an idea is just or correct. You should look for a completely different idea, elsewhere, in another area,

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¹⁸ “Many Politics” (MP), 137

so that something passes between the two which is neither one nor the other.”¹⁹ Or: “treat my book as a pair of glasses directed to the outside; if they don’t suit you, find another pair; I leave it to you to find your own instrument, which is necessarily an instrument for combat”.²⁰ But Deleuze is aware of the danger of lines of flight that can turn into lines of destruction. Further, he is cautious in estimating the ability of an individual to remove the “rigid segments” that have been imposed upon them. These “rigid segments” are the ones that Hegel embraced. For Hegel, the State is the harmonious construction of rational thought applied to questions of the right and ethics. Hegel describes the state as a structure in which “through the strict proportions in which every pillar, arch, and buttress is held together, produces the strength of the whole from the harmony of its parts”.²¹ Deleuze notes that “the segments which run through us and through which we pass are, in any case, marked by a rigidity which reassures us, while turning us into creatures which are the most fearful, but also the most pitiless and bitter.”²² Although we may wish to remove these rigid segments that we can see were formed to prevent action that would harm power, it is unclear that this is possible without destroying ourselves:

Even if we had the power to blow it up, could we succeed in doing so without destroying ourselves, since it is so much a part of the conditions of life, including our organism and our very reason? The prudence with which we must manipulate that line, the precautions we must take to soften it, to suspend it, to divert it, to undermine it, testify to a long labour which is not merely aimed against the State and all the powers that be, but directly at ourselves.²³

¹⁹ “A Conversation: What is it? What is it for?”, 10

²⁰ “Intellectuals and Power”, 208

²¹ “Elements of the Philosophy of Right”, Preface, pg 16

²² MP, 138

²³ MP, 138

Ultimately, the possibility of removing the rigid without destroying ourselves is a strategic question for Deleuze in the sense that it can only be answered through an experimental practice: “The question has always been organizational, not at all ideological: is an organization possible which is not modeled on the apparatus of the State, even to prefigure the State to come?”²⁴ For Deleuze this is a difficult question given thought’s relation to the State. The first step to thinking outside of the State is not theoretical – it is practical. This is why Deleuze justifies the embrace of creation as a “right to desire”.²⁵ Although we may not know whether our revolution will destroy ourselves or society: neither does the State know that its actions will not lead to the destruction of itself. “American politics is forced to proceed by empirical injections, not at all by apodictic programmes.”²⁶ Instead, it is through a prohibition on the right to desire change that the State maintains its control. And it is here that Nietzsche, Foucault and Deleuze all agree: every moment is an opportunity to lay aside doubts about whether revolutionary action will succeed. Further, every moment is an opportunity to attempt the revolution:

Instead of gambling on the eternal impossibility of the revolution and on the fascist return of a war-machine in general, why not think that *a new type of revolution is in the course of becoming possible*, and that all kinds of mutating, living machines conduct wars, are combined and trace out a plane of consistence which undermines the plane of organization of the World and the States? [...] The question of the future of the revolution is a bad question because, in so far as it is asked, there are so many people who do not *become* revolutionaries, and this exactly why it is done, to impede the question of the revolutionary-becoming of people, at every level, in every place.²⁷

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²⁵ MP, 147

²⁶ MP, 146

²⁷ MP, 147

For Deleuze this revolutionary-become of people is unstoppable because the State cannot control the formation of revolutionary actors who respond to the event in a way that challenges the State. The best any of us can do is hope to inspire action in ourselves and others that will place us on a path of revolutionary-becoming. This is why the activist with dreams of the revolutionary should turn to Nietzsche, Foucault and Deleuze for a philosophy that strengthens their ability to act in a way that will have the most damage on the State and the conceptual systems that form a symbiotic relationship with the State.