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# REAL EVENTS – IDEAL EVENTS

## A DELEUZIAN APPROACH TO THE CONCEPT OF HISTORICAL EVENT

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### Abstract

Drawing upon *Difference and Repetition* and *The Logic of Sense*, the present paper aims to show that, in spite of proclaiming itself anti-historical, Gilles Deleuze's ontology offers us a concept of historical event better suited to account for the facticity and reality of what happens in the passing of time than all the others put forth in the History of the philosophy of History. For even though Deleuze defines the historical event as 'impassive' and 'incorporeal', thus as an *ideal entity* he still manages to find a way to institute it as agent of the transformation of history. In this way he escapes the trap of reducing history to the status of a history of ideas to which the classical Philosophy of history falls prey.

*Keywords:* sense, genesis, immaculate conception, quasi-cause, counter-effectuation

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### 1. Deleuze and the question of History

Any recourse to Deleuze's thought in order to approach the question of History might seem bizarre at first sight. What contributions to the Philosophy of history, a hermeneutic philosophy *par excellence*, might have somebody who tells us straightforwardly that: "Thinking is always experiencing, experimenting, not interpreting but experimenting, and what we experience, experiment with, is always actuality, what's coming into being, what's new, what's taking shape?" [1]

What could we learn about History from a thinker who opposes the task of the historian to that of the philosopher and proclaims himself to be the "most naïve philosopher" [2] of his generation? In fact, besides this opposition one will not find in Deleuze's works – both the individual ones and those co-signed with Guattari - more than one or two lines on History.

Yet, the relevance of Deleuze's thought for the Philosophy of history and the Human sciences in general has been acknowledged ever since the 1990s when it was still in the making. In a text dedicated to the second volume of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* Antonio Negri observes: "In radical contrast to

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the present drifting about, the *Thousand Plateaus*, reinvents the sciences of spirit (it being understood that, in the tradition in which Deleuze and Guattari are located, 'Geist' is the brain), by renewing the point of view of historicity, in its ontological and constitutive dimension." [3]

In the last couple of years have already appeared a significant number of books and studies detailing this renewal and others are yet to be published [4-6]. Some good examples in this sense are, for instance, Jay Lampert's *Deleuze and Guattari's Philosophy of History*, which is trying to show how Deleuze's philosophy of time can be taken as a basis for a fundamental step further in determining the temporality of the historical [7]. In his turn, Craig Lundy has shown how the already mentioned opposition between historical and philosophical knowledge becomes an anchor for the elaboration of a new theory of historical knowledge as intensive knowledge [8].

In the present paper we would like to show that Deleuze's ontology and philosophy of the event offers a better answer to the problem raised of the historical event than those formulated throughout the History of the philosophy of History.

## 2. The problem of the historical event

Before all else though, we will have to determine the problem. This task might seem simple at first. To the question 'What is a historical event?' it would seem that we could answer spontaneously: the event that makes history, that event which leaves traces upon the times to come. But if we tarry interrogatively upon these and ask: 'How does the event make history?' and 'What is history?' things get complicated. The more philosophers dealt with them, the more problematical these questions have become. In this sense they constituted the secret force behind the History of the philosophy, of history from its very beginning to our times. The discontent with regard to the answers to these questions is what led to the philosophies of history of G.W.F. Hegel, Wilhelm Dilthey and Hans-Georg Gadamer, the most important formulated throughout time, and is also what animates us today [9].

Staying true to his speculative idealism, Hegel determined the being of history and defined the historical event simply as reason. But can this thesis really be defended?

Even though he did not witness the monstrosities of the two World Wars that swept the 20<sup>th</sup> century Dilthey clearly saw that history is not always rational and that we need to tone down Hegel's tenet. Thus, for him, history has its being rather in meaning, and the historical event is the objective expression, the exteriorization of lived experience sanctioned by an objective law.

This step further from Hegel we take with Dilthey though is not actually a step closer to the peculiarity of history. For, as Hans-Georg Gadamer rightfully observes, this way of determining the being of history reduces it to a history of ideas and misses completely the play of forces constitutive to it. That is why, in his turn, Gadamer redefined the being of history as tradition, accounting for the

play of forces constituting history through the prejudices it carries with itself. That there really is something like a ‘force of prejudices’ we realize through the fact that whenever we let ourselves guided by prejudice we find ourselves in the power of another and act blindly, not really knowing why we are doing what we are doing.

However, this way of defining the being of history is no less problematic than those proposed by Hegel and Dilthey, if not even more. For the tradition in the terms of which the being of history is defined allows no gaps in the flow of time, every moment of discontinuity being always engaged in a process whereby it is continuously synthesized with the past and the future. That is why, for Gadamer, there cannot be anything really new in history. *Truth and Method* notes this explicitly [10].

Two things are to be learned from all these: that the general problem of the philosophies of history is their tendency to reduce history to the history of ideas or of the spirit, disregarding what is actually happening in the flow of time and that if a solution is to be found it is to be looked for in the direction of an ontology that refrains from understanding being and the world in terms of language.

That is why not many thinkers can be of help in formulating a new philosophy of history. Wittgenstein, Merleau-Ponty, Ricœur or even Derrida, the critic of Western ontology -, they all proclaim in unison along with Heidegger that: “When we go to the well, when we go through the woods, we are always already going through the word ‘well,’ through the word ‘woods,’ even if we do not speak the words and do not think of anything relating to language. [...] All being [...] each in its own way, are *qua* beings in the precinct of language.” [11]

At first sight it would seem that Deleuze makes no exception from this. In Chrysippus’ words he too tells us: “If you say something, it passes through your lips; so if you say ‘chariot,’ a chariot passes through your lips” [12].

### **3. Toward a Deleuzian concept of historical event**

Yet, there is a significant difference between the chariot produced in the depths of the body which comes to the surface through the lips and the woods of words through which we are invited by Heidegger to take a stroll. We should not forget the lesson both medieval philosophy and modern transcendental philosophy teach us: there is always a difference in nature between creator and created, between condition and conditioned. Thus, the chariot rising to the surface from the depths of the body cannot be of the order of bodies. Far from it, far from being ontologically identical to them, things are radically different from words. Notwithstanding any hermeneutical presupposition for which this is purely and simply given, for Deleuze, the fact that words may function as names for things and that statements can denote states of facts and render manifest those who utter them is a miracle. That something like this can happen is truly and event or, better still, is the true event.

Following the Stoics, in the *Logic of Sense* Deleuze writes: “First, there are bodies with their tensions, physical qualities, actions and passions, and the corresponding ‘states of affairs.’ These states of affairs, actions and passions, are determined by the mixtures of bodies. At the limit, there is a unity of all bodies. [...] But to the degree that there is a unity of bodies among themselves, to the degree that there is a unity of active and passive principles, a cosmic present embraces the entire universe: only bodies exist in space and only the present exists in time. There are no causes *and* effects among bodies. Rather, all bodies are causes – causes in relation to each other and for each other.” [12, p. 4]

At this level, nothing ever happens. In each and every moment the mixture, the undetermined affirms and realizes its indetermination. If anything is to take place, this happens at the surface. “Everything happens at the boundary between things and propositions.” [12]

What happens, the event, is an effect on the surface of contact between words and things. As surface effect, it cannot be either of the order of things, or of that of the words. The rule of the ontological difference between condition and conditioned applies here as well. That is why, if we think strictly in terms of the possible, we realize that every event has – *must have* – an incorporeal nature. An non-signified incorporeal produced by the bodies as an effect on the contact surface with language, thus neither active, nor passive but, in the Stoic vocabulary, ‘impassive’ – from all these it follows that, in the end, the event is nothing else but *sense*.

This urges us to stop and ask: are we sure that Deleuze’s ontology and its peculiar understanding of the event is better suited for the development of a new concept of historical event than all the others proved to be so far?

By taking the event in general as the product of bodies from the very beginning we inscribe in the intension of the concept of historical event the possibility to account for the actually effective (*wirklich*) course of things. But isn’t this possibility forced to remain an empty one? If sense is ‘impassive’, a mere effect beyond any activity and passivity, then how can it become historical? That is, how can it leave its marks upon the times to come? How can it influence the future?

Even though Deleuze starts from completely different axioms than the hermeneutic ontologies usually taken as ground for the philosophy of history, he too seems to determine the events making history as ideal events, missing once again, albeit this time in a different manner, their reality.

Deleuze seems to have known all these quite well and he seems to have pronounced himself explicitly against the idea of taking his philosophy of the event as a basis for the elaboration of a new concept of historical event. In the *Logic of Sense* and *Difference and Repetition* [13] he speaks of the ‘ineffectual’ nature and the ‘sterile splendour’ [12, p. 20] of sense. Here he identifies the event/sense with becoming which he opposes to history. He writes: “The event is coextensive with becoming” [12] “Becoming isn’t part of history; history amounts only to the set of preconditions, however recent, that one leaves behind in order to ‘become,’ that is to create something new.” [14]

And this opposition is not a weak one, between whose terms, with a little perseverance, speculative reason could find a middle term and the possibility of mediation. Quite the contrary, for it is grounded in two mutually exclusive conceptions of time.

As Deleuze shows, inasmuch as the time of the bodies is the Chronos given as a cosmic present embracing the whole universe, the time of events and becoming is the Greek Aion. Inasmuch as the bodies exist in a present that spreads indefinitely in both directions of the line of time, transforming every past and every future in a past-present and future-present, the events exist in a time that ceaselessly divides the present moment in what has already passed and what is yet to come. The time of events is eternity; their fundamental characteristic is to constantly elude the present. That is why, Deleuze and Guattari argue in *Mille plateaux*, the only questions one can ask with regard to an event are “What happened?”, “What is going to happen?” but never “What is happening?” [15]

As one can see, in becoming, the very principle of succession that makes history possible is suspended. “Becoming unlimited comes to be the ideational and incorporeal event, with all of its characteristic reversals between future and past, active and passive, cause and effect, more and less, too much and not enough, already and not yet.” [12]

But the molar opposition between becoming and history is not the only one that seems to be meant to dissuade us from taking Deleuze’s philosophy of the event as an anchor for the development of a new concept of historical event. In the *Logic of Sense* this opposition finds its molecular *analogon* between the event *per se* and its spatio-temporal realization: “Novalis sometimes says that there are two courses of events, one of them ideal, the other real and imperfect – for example ideal Protestantism and real Lutheranism. The distinction however is not between two sorts of events; rather, it is between the event, which is ideal by nature, and its spatio-temporal realization in a state of affairs. The distinction is between the event and accident.” [12, p. 53]

However, what at first sight appears to be an argument *against* the idea of taking Deleuze’s philosophy as ground for the development of a new concept of historical event becomes at closer inspection an argument *for* it. For, later on in the *Logic of Sense* the general and somewhat vague concept of ‘spatio-temporal realization’ of the event is determined as ‘effectuation’ (*effectuation*). For whatever reason in the English translation of *Logic of Sense* the French ‘effectuation’ pointing clearly to the idea of ‘effect’ is rendered through ‘actualization’ missing completely this very important nuance. We will make the necessary corrections in all the passages we quote in what follows.

#### **4. The effectuation of the event and the challenges of Platonism**

Talking about the event ‘battle’ Deleuze writes: “If the battle is not an event among others, but rather the Event in its essence, it is no doubt because it is effectuated in diverse manners at once, and because each participant may

grasp it at a different level of effectuation within its variable present. [...] But it is above all because the battle *hovers over* its own field, being neutral in relation to all of its temporal effectuations, neutral and impassive in relation to the victor and the vanquished, the coward and the brave; because of this, it is all the more terrible. Never present but always yet to come and already passed, the battle is graspable only by the will of anonymity which it itself inspires.” [12, p. 100-101, translation modified]

By presenting the various spatio-temporal realizations of the event as its ‘effectuations’ Deleuze suggests that the relation between event and accident, between the sphere of events and that of bodies is not unidirectional, as it has been affirmed initially. Apparently, irrespective of the clear-cut ontological demarcation between bodies and events and despite the fact that the capacity to produce effects has been initially reserved for the bodies, now we ought to attribute also to the events a force to act and the possibility to leave marks upon the bodies.

Of course, it might very well be that here we are dealing with a slip from Deleuze’s part, a slip that takes the form of a contradiction that needs to be surpassed if it is to save the internal consistency of his work.

This is how Paul Patton sees the situation. In order to save Deleuze’s thought from contradiction he (over)interprets the concept of ‘effectuation’ as ‘mimesis’ in Plato’s sense and thus he paves the way for an explicit comparison between the field of events and the world of ideal forms [16]. Such a hermeneutic decision is not completely groundless. Following Nietzsche, Deleuze assumes explicitly the task of ‘overturning Platonism’ [12, p. 253]. If in Plato the ontological ground of this world and the cause of any of its transformations was the world of ideas, from now on our world is to be ‘grounded’ by the world of simulacra, precisely the world of sense and events [12, p. 72].

But, as Paul Patton himself recognizes, inasmuch as the interpretive hypothesis mentioned solves a problem it also confronts us with another one, just as difficult to solve, if not even more difficult than the first. For one cannot talk about participation without hitting against the wall of aporias exposed by Plato’s dialogues. All those banal everyday events mentioned in the *Logic of Sense* now become signs of an ‘ontological madness’. In this sense Paul Patton is right to ask: “We might wonder how the event of being cut is related to my accident with the razor this morning, or whether there is a pure event of walking down the stairs to my apartment as well as a pure event of walking” [16, p. 38].

## 5. The Immaculate Conception - quasi-causality and counter-effectuation

In contrast to his interpreters though, Deleuze does not see a contradiction that ought to be explained away in the affirmation of both the ‘sterile splendour’ and the force to produce effects but a problem to be approached head-on. In the *Logic of Sense* he asks: “How can we maintain both that the sense produces even the states of affairs in which it is embodied, and that it is itself produced by these

states of affairs or the actions and passions of the bodies (an immaculate conception)?" [12, p. 124] "How are we to reconcile these two contradictory aspects? On one hand, we have impassibility in relation to states of affairs and neutrality in relation to propositions; on the other hand, we have the power of genesis in relation to propositions and in relation to states of affairs themselves." [12, p. 96]

For Deleuze this problem constitutes the 'heart' of the logic of sense [12, p. 97]. For him, its solution should be searched for in the direction of a movement of 'counter-effectuation' and 'quasi-causation'. Such a quasi-causality is an 'unreal' and 'ghostly' causality [12, p. 33] but, nevertheless, a form of causal relation which conditions ontologically the existence of any event, a causal relation on which the very autonomy of the event depends. "The event has a different nature than the actions and passions of the body. But it *results* from them, since sense is the effect of corporeal causes and their mixtures. It is always therefore in danger of being snapped up by its cause. It escapes and affirms its irreducibility only to the extent that the causal relation comprises the heterogeneity of cause and effect – the connection of causes between themselves *and* the link of effects between themselves. That is to say that incorporeal sense, as the result of the actions and the passions of the body, may preserve its difference from the corporeal cause only to the degree that it is linked, at the surface, to a quasi-cause which is itself incorporeal. The Stoics saw clearly that the event is subject to a double causality, referring on one hand to mixtures of bodies which are its cause and, on the other, to other events which are its quasi-cause." [12, p. 94]

But what exactly is this counter-effectuation and quasi-causation? This is certainly the most difficult question one can pose in the margins of Deleuze's philosophy of the event. In order to answer it we will have to turn to the lines of flight of Deleuze's ontology and its basic terms, focusing our attention on what Deleuze calls the 'static ontological genesis' of the event and sense.

In short, and proceeding in a schematic fashion completely foreign to Deleuze's texts, things seem to happen in the following manner: everything begins with an emission of singular points in an impersonal and pre-individual transcendental field. Because this field is impersonal and pre-individual it cannot be determined as consciousness. That is why the emission of singular points is not subjected to a synthesis and takes the form of a heterogeneous series of remarkable points. A remarkable or singular point is defined as a punctual unity *i.e.*, a unity deprived almost entirely of dimensions, which can be remarked or, improperly said, observed. (It is truly improper to speak of 'observation' here because any observation points to an 'observer' which cannot actually exist on the impersonal and pre-individual transcendental field on which we find ourselves.) Concretely, such a heterogeneous series of remarkable points could be the following: the green (of the trees in front of you), the sour (taste of the sip of coffee you just had), the cold (felt through the open window), a noise, the number 500 and so on. As we can see, all these have a bodily substrate but are not themselves bodies. Precisely this is why they can become incorporeal events.

Schematically, for such a heterogeneous series we could use the following notation:

$\Sigma: a...3...B...d...X...Y...n...M...∞$

where “ $\Sigma$ ” is the emission and ‘a’, ‘3’, ‘B’, ‘d’, ‘X’, ‘Y’, ‘n’, ‘M’ are the singular points going to infinity ( $\infty$ ). We are using both lowercase and uppercase letters but also numbers in order to mark the heterogeneity of the singular points.

For Deleuze though, every such series is subject to an “immanent principle of auto-unification through a *nomadic distribution*” [12, p. 102]. This principle leads to an arbitrary, completely random systematization of the singular points producing the event, which presents itself as a singularity in its transcendental field. “[S]ingularities-events correspond to heterogeneous series which are organized into a system which is neither stable nor unstable, but rather ‘metastable,’ endowed with a potential energy.” [12, p. 103]

If it is to be able to produce the event the systematization must necessarily be arbitrary and random. For any event presupposes by definition an element of novelty, be it even a relative one. If what happens is not something new, then nothing has actually taken place.

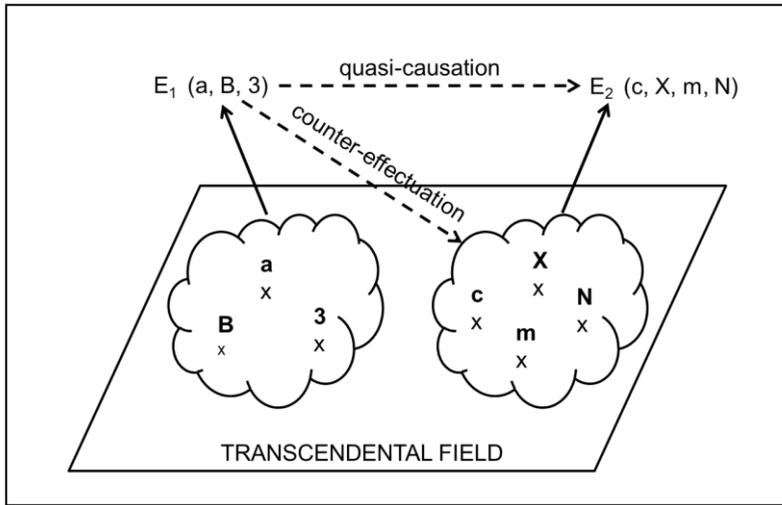
On the other hand, it should be evident that the ‘potential energy’ mentioned by Deleuze in the passage quoted above is what gives the event its force, being what gives it the power to quasi-cause other events. Precisely in this possibility to pass from potential energy to actual force resides the ‘immaculate conception’, the event’s power of genesis. This power appears through the fact that the spontaneous and arbitrary auto-unification of certain remarkable points of the series as this event does not ever leave the other remarkable points floating around in the transcendental field but subjects them to an arbitrary process of systematization giving birth to another event.

By recourse to the system of notation proposed and expanding it we could say: as soon as under the influence of the principle of auto-unification (P) in the emission  $\Sigma$  the singular points ‘a’, ‘3’ and ‘B’ become the event  $E_1$  (a, B, 3), the points ‘d’, ‘X’, ‘Y’, ‘n’, ‘m’ remaining will be, in their turn, subjected to a random systematization thereby leading to a second event  $E_2$  (d, X, Y, n, m). It is obvious that  $E_1$  does not produce  $E_2$  *per se* but it is also clear that, without  $E_1$ ,  $E_2$  would not have existed. It is in this sense that  $E_1$  is the quasi-cause of  $E_2$ .

On the other hand, it is obvious that  $E_1$  does not really touch upon either the points ‘d’, ‘X’, ‘Y’, ‘n’, ‘m’ whereby  $E_2$  is constituted or the bodies emitting them, but inasmuch as the process of systematization of  $E_2$  takes place only after the production of  $E_1$  and because it has been produced, we must say that  $E_2$  exists through the counter-effectuation of  $E_1$  in the transcendental field of the emission (Figure 1).

Now, after this *tour de force* through Deleuze’s ontology, we can understand that the philosophy of event it offers does not force the reduction of historical events to the status of ideal events deprived of any influence upon reality (*Realität*) as it seemed at first sight. The Deleuzian event intervenes directly in the concrete reality of things despite its ideal, *i.e.*, incorporeal and impassive nature, or, better put, *because of it*. Through this Deleuze’s

philosophy of the event is a step beyond of all the other philosophies of history formulated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



**Figure 1.** The quasi-causation of the event and its counter-effectuation.

## 6. Conclusion – the history of the eternal events

But, can it really be taken as basis for the development of a concept of *historical event*? Can it really account for a thing caught up in the flow of time? Wasn't the event coextensive with becoming and, due to this, opposed to history?

Indeed it was, but if one takes a closer look at Deleuze's work one will see that the opposition between becoming and history implies neither that becoming does not make history, nor that it does not have one. No matter how paradoxical this may sound, there is also a history of the eternal events. Deleuze notes it explicitly: "The metamorphoses or distributions of singularities form a history." [12, p. 56] And this affirmation is not at all singular: "If the singularities are veritable events, they communicate in one and the same Event which endlessly redistributes them, while their transformations form a *history*." [12, p. 53]

But how can there really be a history of the eternal events? The key to this question is given by the concept of *repetition*. From Hegel we learned that this is the true driving force of history for, as we have been shown in *The Philosophy of History*: "By repetition that which at first appeared merely a matter of chance and contingency becomes a real and ratified existence." [17]

But, as Deleuze argues in the margins of Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*, the idea of repetition confronts us from the very beginning with a problem. "Hume takes as an example the repetition of cases of the type AB, AB, AB, A... Each case or objective sequence AB is independent of the others. The repetition (although we cannot yet properly speak of repetition) changes nothing in the object or the state of affairs AB. On the other hand, a change is produced

in the mind which contemplates: a difference, something new *in* the mind. Whenever A appears, I expect the appearance of B. Is this the for-itself of repetition, an originary subjectivity which necessarily enters into its constitution? Does not the paradox of repetition lie in the fact that one can speak of repetition only by virtue of the change or difference that it introduces into the mind which contemplates it? By virtue of a difference that the mind *draws from* repetition?" [13, p. 70]

In the context of our discussion of the ‘immaculate conception’ of sense and the event this idea that repetition does not change anything in the object but introduces a difference and produces something new in the mind that contemplates it means: even though, by repetition, certain bodies will recreate a mixture and a causal chain that already existed, nevertheless, they will not lead to an emission of singularities identical to that brought about by the previous causal series. That is why it will neither produce the same events.

Taking a last recourse to the proposed system of notation and expanding it further we could say: if at the moment  $t_1$  the cause C produces  $\sum$ : a...3...B...d...X...Y...n...M... $\infty$  leading to the events  $E_1$  (a, 3, B) and, through quasi-causation,  $E_2$  (d, X, Y, n, m), at the moment  $t_2$  the same cause C will produce  $\sum'$ : a...K...3...B...c...d...X...Y...n...Z...M... $\infty$  leading to the events  $E_1'$  (a, K, 3, B) and, through quasi-causation,  $E_2'$  (c, d, X, Y, n, Z, M).

- $Ct_1 = \sum$ : a...3...B...d...X...Y...n...M... $\infty \rightarrow E_1$  (a, 3, B) ---  $\rightarrow E_2$  (d, X, Y, n, m)
- $Ct_2 = \sum'$ : a...K...3...B...c...d...X...Y...n...Z...M... $\infty \rightarrow E_1'$  (a, K, 3, B) ---  $\rightarrow E_2'$  (c, d, X, Y, n, Z, M)

Precisely this passing from  $t_1$  to  $t_2$  constitutes the history of the eternal. And precisely due to the fact that it can account for the transformations and all the changes that take place in the bodies, the Deleuzian event, be it incorporeal and impassive as it was defined, can itself be taken as a historical event as such.

So, as it appears, Deleuze’s ontology does not offer us just a starting point or a basis for the development of a philosophy of history. It itself is one. And one better suited to account for the actuality and reality of what happens in the passing of time than all the other philosophies of history developed.

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