

Time's Worth – Examinations for a Care of the Present

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Abstract

With regards to the excesses of our current pandemic, many early philosophical contributions to an understanding of our situation have focused on an unsolvable dichotomy between continuity and discontinuity with regards to the possible novelty of the Covid-19-pandemic. This paper seeks to take the event-character of this global phenomenon as given, to focus instead on the question of what it means to philosophize it, and in turn, to think through our present. How can we write *for* or *near* the present without reducing it to a mere moment, without stifling it in concepts hastily cast upon it? Through a discussion of the symptomatic positions of Deleuze, Foucault, and Derrida on the concept of the event around 1968, this paper argues for a second order ethics of tending to the present as a repeated critical practice that does not renounce being affected by the world it emanates from.

Too many deaths. Too much loss. Too much time, and at once too little. Not enough space to mourn. No respite from the news, lost homes, not enough rest, too much impatience. Over a year has passed since the beginning of our global pandemic, and even as the vaccination campaigns pick up the pace, it is too early to see beyond.

Last summer, severe economic depression, and mass unemployment were met with one of the largest political uprisings against racist, carceral capitalism, especially in the United States. Denying that we are facing a somewhat unique situation in historiographic terms would certainly be absurd considering the severity of the virus and the inadequacy of many liberal polities, and their oft incompetent political personnel. Mediated by a journalism eager for “hot takes” in the early months of lockdown, many renowned thinkers and academics did not do justice to the difficulties of understanding one’s time, let alone the sliver we are part of. Many articles hastily discarded the specificity of the pandemic and stifled it in all-too clear meanings. My endeavor here is not so much a criticism of the individual contributions as it is an attempt to grapple with the problem of thinking our current present.¹

¹ The questions raised by the few contributions cited below in an exemplary fashion would demand a rigorous hermeneutics for these texts – I will merely highlight below and in an anecdotal fashion what I consider disconnections from the singularity of the situation and the problem of writing it, which carve an aporetic binary between continuity or discontinuity for the current pandemic. It is thus a detour from that unsolvable

The abundance of denegation or overblown claims of change in these symptomatic media reactions of the first wave in 2020 may tempt us to condemn them or excuse narrow formulations within them as all-too human reflexes in the face of catastrophe. Merely negating them would however presuppose an epistemic command over the storm (instead of the boat) we are in– or a morality grounded enough for quick condemnation, neither of which are given.

The excess inherent in many of the philosophical responses, as well as the accumulated weight of the pandemic can point us to a possible excess embodied by the pandemic in relation to history, raising the question of its range, as well as that of the possibility of thinking it in historical terms. To properly address it, two questions are central:

(1) What constitutes an event? In which sense can the pandemic to be thought of as an event of its own, different from the context from which it arises and in a productive tension with said context? (2) What can a philosophical response to an event bring to its apprehension? The philosophical responses cited above have mostly denied the singularity of the pandemic, or the specificity of the developments around them. Assuming that our situation is an event – as we shall do in the speculative leap to follow – what can philosophy provide in its light, how can it be worthy of its time?

Philosophy being just as situated as the event itself; it would be absurd to assume these questions could be answered once and for all, let alone in an essay. Yet, in so far as the present constitutes, for us, a certain limit of intelligibility, there is a need to inhabit said limit if it is to be rendered more porous. Instead of merely examining the empirical situation, I seek to approach the problems in a more oblique fashion in order to contribute to the problems at hand

question that is sought out here. Certainly, the context of publication plays a role in favoring assertiveness and strong affects to partake in the economy of attention over nuance and questioning, yet none of these factors rid us of the inherent problem of grasping our time philosophically.

For Giorgio Agamben, for instance, the confinement measures introduced to slow down the transmission of the disease were “frenetic, irrational and entirely unfounded”, yet entirely rational on the level of power, insofar as “the invention of an epidemic offered the ideal pretext for scaling [exceptional measures] up beyond any limitation” (Agamben, Nancy, Esposito & al. 2020). As people all over the world grappled with this new reality, the outside world reduced to a voice on speakers, a text on a smartphone, or, for many academics, a Zoom-Meeting, Agamben considered their lives “reduced to a purely biological condition, one that has lost not only any social and political dimension, but even any compassionate and emotional one”. Placarding his concept of bare life onto the circumstances of the first wave, we may now posit, entailed a loss of empirical precision, discarding the possibility of a myriad of protesters risking, a militarized and overfunded police aside, a return of contagion beyond their masks for the sake of politics and black lives after innumerable deaths – a possibility realized only a few months after Agamben’s article. In the meantime, Alain Badiou deemed the situation “not particularly exceptional” (Badiou 2020), reviving the little mourned formalism of semiotics by deriving from the virus’s name (“SARS 2”), the evidence needed to prove we are in the bad sequel of a situation that is “especially ‘neutral’ at the political level”. And yet the outburst of politics manifest in the current protests, however, would not have been as potent, had there not been weeks of confinement and millions of layoffs. The supposed apolitical nature of the pandemic resurfaces even where it is denied, e.g. in Judith Butler’s contribution (Butler 2020) stressing that “the virus does not discriminate”, advancing a universalism turned negative, with infection and death as proof of our common fate. As Butler claims, the virus shows that capitalism has its limits (one may wonder whether this may not have already been apparent before), which means that other occurrences may be more pressing.

via a methodology derivable from a priorly outlined metaphysics of the event. In so far as there is something we can reasonably call an event, and said thing re-shuffles our experience and understanding of history, there can be a second-order ethics (in the sense of an ethos) of thinking with or through an event, an ethos focusing on the question of how one can think an event rather than on the first order ethical question of what should be done. A certain care for the possibilities of the present, a certain consciousness of the limitations of our answers to it, a mode of attentiveness to the way in which the historical series we are inevitably a part of are prolonged, breached, or displaced by it.

To expand this brief outline, we will first examine the metaphysics of the event through the lens of an untimely debate, namely one that arose in France after the events of May 68 and resurfaced 50 years later with much of the focus on the same question of continuity and discontinuity.² Certainly, my choice of May 68 as a lens is but one point of entry. While it does not provide us with the entirety of philosophical theorems of the event, we nevertheless have an occurrence within history sparking a variety of theorizations, neither perfect nor complete, a parallel which will be of use for our discussion. May 68 allows for the construction of three positional sketches or three characters that can facilitate our thinking of our present situation. We will first examine Deleuze's concept of the event to grasp the metaphysical stakes, then Foucault's social ontology and attempts at writing the event will provide us with a closer linkage to history, as well as a problematic illustration of a practical application. Lastly, Derrida's critical shifts will highlight the event's ambivalence and retroactivity, carrying over into its utterance.

These considerations will then lead into a reflection on a practice of writing the event, more specifically illustrated by the pandemic.

Taking Place – a Metaphysical Sketch

In a short text written in 1984, Deleuze and Guattari state that "May 68 did not take place" [Mai 68 n'a pas eu lieu] (Deleuze & Guattari, Mai 68 n'a pas eu lieu, 1984). It opens by stating all major historical phenomena of modernity are also partly events, irreducible to social determinisms and causal series, something, they say, very much disliked by historians. Certainly, the two thinkers are not denying that something happened during an ominous month in which many sought the beach under cobblestones. However, it seems that what happened is not reducible to the series of circumstances enumerated and narrated by historians.

Time has brought about many historical contextualizations of May 68 in France, yet these contextualizations are all but neutral. They each come with a model that distinguishes between the context and its components, determines their relations and degrees of importance

² Cf. especially the work of Ross (2002). The rare exception in discussing 68 outside of the question of continuity or discontinuity is Patrice Maniglier's recent contribution to the debate (Maniglier 2018).

– in other words, contextualizations are manuals on how to read the slices of history they seek to encompass. This renders them fragile with regards to the time span they seek to cover, and the operation of unification they attempt, the latter being always prone to be displaced by new materials or new geographies. The very fact that we now differentiate between a French, a German, or a Mexican May 1968, to name but a few, already alludes to the vulnerability inherent to any kind of historiography. As Koselleck's work (Koselleck 2004) on writing history highlights, historians are concerned not with *what* has happened, but with what it means for us, within the present. The writing of history is thus both perspectival and limited. Yet, it still risks suggesting that, on a meta-level, a general and universal grasp could be reached through an addition and combination of the partial perspectives. Certainly, the meta-level of combining historical perspectives allows for increased complexity and a broader understanding, and yet, as Deleuze and Guattari seem to point out vis à vis 68, there is a remainder at risk of being lost, a metaphysical dimension that resists contextualization and demands actualization, or: what they call an event. It is in this sense that for them, May 68 did not take place – it opened, in midst of the context that contributed to its advent, a breach of possibility that will remain *virtual*, in so far as the possibilities glanced for a brief moment have not been rendered *actual* through a process of conversion, of re-subjectification.

The metaphysical concept of the event is thus different from the pragmatic understanding of an event as occurrence in time, which often bears an implicit understanding of time as a straight line, confusing the pragmatic utility of the technology of the calendar with time as a metaphysical concept. Indeed, the event is something that seems to affect temporality altogether, that is, our experience of the present, and that of the pasts and futures within it. Further, it also seems to affect spatiality, in so far as the span of time during which it is visible in a certain place, opens up the possibility of a reconfiguration of space beyond mere geography, namely, a reconfiguration of the experience of the relation to any space whatsoever for those affected by the event.

Before 1968 reopened the question of the event in France, the *École des Annales* around Braudel (Braudel 1969) had considered it unimportant, criticizing the then dominant narrative historiography for its abuse of historical events as mere hinges for superficial stories about the “heroes”. The *Annales* school was instead interested in the *longue durée*, analyzing structures and patterns over periods stretching far beyond the discrete events they encompassed. The event was too explosive, leading its contemporaries to overestimate its importance, rendering them prone to delusions about their historical position, individualizing and psychologizing history instead of rendering tangible the mentalities and long-term habits re-emerging soon after the contingency of the event.

The problem of an event's scale and the instability of the historical unification the *Annales* school highlighted was echoed in the scientific enterprises around structuralism and in Marxism's skepticism about an easy revolution after failed attempts in France and Germany, and Stalinism's problems. The contingent disorder of 68, however, did not fit either of these

frameworks, and it is the trace of this empirical disruption, however brief, that led to a renewed interest in carving out a theory of the event, which will as follows be illustrated via brief reconstructions of the positions of Deleuze, Foucault, and Derrida.³ While Foucault's position in some sense takes the center stage in what is to follow because of its close ties to events in the world, it would be unintelligible without the emphasis of Deleuze on the metaphysical singularity of the event, and incomplete without Derrida's focus on temporality and the necessity of a certain incompleteness. In another way, these positions also serve as illustrations of past attempts to write by or for an event.

In Deleuze's work, the event is theorized through a critique of representation: in *Différence et Répétition* (Deleuze 1968), difference precedes any kind of identity, exposing the impossibility of its repetition, the impossibility of deriving solutions from a model, insofar as that model finds itself displaced by difference in its seeming perpetuation. Published in the same year, his *Logique du Sens* (Deleuze 1969) develops a concept of the pure event, something whose becoming eludes the present, and makes a different metaphysics necessary. This idea of a becoming as excess or exception is then expanded in the later *Mille Plateaux*: "Becoming is not a correspondence of relations. Neither is it a resemblance, an imitation and, at worst, an identification. [...] Becoming cannot be understood as progression or regression following a series. And most of all, becoming does not occur in the imagination" (Deleuze & Guattari 1980: 291, own translation).

The event, in its Deleuzian understanding, is what unleashes becoming, a brief line of singularity as undercurrent to assignable relations, propagating through a re-composition of the multiplicities we ourselves are and partake in. The contingency of an event's becoming, however, is not an utter relativism, there are criteria emerging with the transformations that become possible through an event. Against the given forms, the event is an accidental, non-essential form, that is, a form not tied to an organism or a model, but rather, something caught in a game of intensities and accidents, affecting its situation with a plastic velocity, potentially displacing our habitual form.

The disregard of the event for the given it differs from renders it precarious: it is not a nodal point as in the narrative history criticized by the Annales school, nor a hinge to separate past and present – rather, it is a punctual rupture of time within the present, briefly eroding the dominant organization of history within it, or performing its convulsion, and offering the possibility of its reorganization. This paradoxically makes the event, for Deleuze, at once excessive and insufficient, at once passive and active, at once bound to its time, and yet transcendental, not bound to any subjectivity.

³ I leave out Lyotard, who remains in a Kantian framework certainly considered by all three authors discussed as follows. Lyotard's conception of the event mostly derives from the Kantian sublime, as exposed in his lectures on the Critique of Judgment, (Lyotard 1994). Badiou's notion of the event (Badiou 1988) is part of a complex ontology which draws on such a large set of references that its contextualization would here lead astray from the compact metaphysics of the event sought out here.

This metaphysical conception foreshadows Foucault's more practical reflections on the event no doubt influenced by Deleuze's metaphysics, but differently accentuated.⁴ Foucault's concern stems out of a different engagement with historiography – countering the notion of historical progress in both its liberal and its dogmatic Marxist form, both stemming from Hegel (Hegel 1986), the latter moving through Kojève's reading (Kojève 1947).⁵

Foucault's interest in the event lies in its relation to his social ontology of power, whose methodological assumptions we will briefly need to reconstruct for the sake of comprehension. Foucault assumes that there always are a variety of socially established distinctions, such as that between words and things, between self and other, between knowledge and power, between theory and practice. The specific quality of these distinctions varies historically, given their inherent (re)production by social practices of sense-making.⁶ Foucault seeks to interrogate these distinctions, examining their specific trajectories to highlight, or rather, given the genealogical method, to constitute possible divergences and questions, exposing the contingency of the teleological narrative in which dominant discourses congeal them. Instead of having the distinctions be rigid, binary either/or separations, they are part of the same plain, functioning as limits of the social in so far as they organize what we can know and consider actionable. In other words, they organize our space of possibility. The entire framework is altered by power, understood here as a force, emanating, and running through everything⁷ within history, understood here, just like power itself, as nonteleological and generic. Something powerful in the Foucauldian sense means something carrying the capacity to maintain and/or repeat a certain set of relations through time. Power constitutes, it places things in specific constellations, thereby at once limiting them and posing their possibilities of action. Foucault distinguishes two forms in which power, a latent force in flux for us,⁸ becomes graspable for analysis and critique: knowledges and subjects. In bodies of knowledge, such as texts constituting a discipline, describing certain practices or

⁴ Deleuze's influence is apparent in Foucault's review of the latter's two theses published in 1969 (Foucault 1970).

⁵ Hegel's notion of historical progress is closely tied to the advent of the post-enlightenment modern state, Prussia functioning as a more or less explicit model through the concept of *Sittlichkeit*. Kojève's reading, focuses mostly on the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel 1986).

⁶ I simplify for brevity's sake a more complex theory of discourses elaborated in the *Archeology of Knowledge* (Foucault 1969).

⁷ "Power is everywhere, not because it englobes everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (Foucault 1976: 122), the quote is my own translation, as are all the following quotes taken from their original source.

⁸ This does not imply that power as such is invisible – rather, if power generates visibilities, they are but shimmers of an immanence of light, synonymous to multiplicity as such in Foucault: "It is that light is neither an environment in which lines and colours bask, nor the element through which the gaze joins them. It is divided into two realms barely whispering to each other: there is a light white, sovereign, whose profound thrust delivers the being of things; and on the surface there's sudden sparks, fleeting games, lightning coming to lay on the surface of objects, forming a sudden, transitory touch, hastily extinguished, biting an angle or a bulge, but leaving, in their former presence, the things they cause to shimmer, intact, obstinately there – without ever being penetrated. This second light is never in the intervals nor in the depth of things: it arises on each one in a hasty blossom." (Foucault 1963: 140).

understandings, the workings of power become intelligible with regards to the ways in which these workings constitute subjects, which bear distinct ways of thinking about themselves in a given epoch. Power brings about the visible and what I shall call the voice-able (*l'énonçable*): there are places in which the workings of power are visible (such as the prison and its practices) and discourses in which they are voice-able (such as law writ large and specific references to crime within it). The partition between the visible and the voice-able is contingent and dependent on the workings of the machine that is the social at a given time, yet they are irreducible to some form of *Zeitgeist*, instead, they mark the conditions of possibility of the very concept of an epoch. Furthermore, if a place is at a given moment part of the visible, it does not mean it can immediately be seen, nor does something being voice-able imply immediate legibility, as no one stands outside the game of forces. However, neither the visible nor the voice-able are hidden.⁹ No thinker stands outside of history, which is why it needs to be interrogated in specific ways, to yield possibilities outside of what is deemed possible by the dispositives of our time, dispositives through which we are subjected and which we, at once, tend to (re)produce.

Dispositives, to introduce another Foucauldian term, are quasi-forms:¹⁰ they combine a variety of social distinctions and are powerful so long as they can repeat themselves throughout time, thereby maintaining a certain stability, on a varying scale. Differently put: Dispositives are groups of transformation binding a variety of social distinctions together, they can expand or shrink, they can move certain distinctions or knowledges to the foreground and others to the background. For instance, the reason why the institutions of the school, or the army, in a specific historical conjuncture, resemble that of the prison, is because the dispositive “prison” is able to affect and connect the areas produced by the distinctions upon which they were founded (e.g. educated/non-educated, military/civil), producing similarities and continuities instead of rigid separations. Dispositives do not replace one another, their dominance varies historically, as well as their ascent, yet the apparition of a new dispositive does not constitute the death of the prior one – rather, we must understand dispositives to be in varying frictional interaction, conflictuality and mutual dependence. In certain places, they

⁹ It is crucial to stress this point to mark the difference with a vulgar kind of Marxism: speaking of something being hidden always implies someone specific that hides it. This does not mean that there are not in fact certain things being hidden, such as one might want to argue in case of the political economy of media in the United States or national histories – however such hiding is the product of a specific historical conjuncture and not the determining or essential key for rendering our present conundrum intelligible – rather, the schema of victim and culprit is in fact reproducing a binary which might very well contribute to the current logic of power.

¹⁰ I use the term quasi-forms in so far as dispositives are of course neither atemporal nor aspatial (nor ideal), but tend to behave as such in the historical conjuncture in which they are situated: they pertain to a specific state of relations in a specific spatiality, yet they subjectify those falling under dispositives in a naturalising fashion, producing a certain appearance of the given and the natural -in this sense, they constitute historical *a-priori*, forming a state of the given that seems universal. As a tool of analysis, they are of course ideas in the Kantian sense, but in their workings, they function as quasi-forms. Furthermore, a form can be pragmatically defined as that which organises matter, forms or finalises functions or adds goals to an ensemble.

are intertwined and mutually poietic, at other times they stand in contradiction. Dispositives can thus be understood as layers with shifting degrees of transparency. In another sense, they are of course genealogical constructions, Foucault's method consisting in the construction of a path within the present differing from its dominant articulation. The latter can be understood via the construction of dispositives, epistemological entities illustrating the ways in which our very understanding of what is possible and what is to come is impacted by a dominant spread of formulated pasts. Genealogy is about the recovery of a split between what we hold to constitute the present and its unformulated alternatives: if throughout history, crossroads abound, dispositives within the present erase the memory of these past pasts, past presents, and past futures still constitutive of the now as passing, which is why the present must be broken along with the seemingly given.

Considering these methodical differences, we can see how for Foucault the event is less incommensurable than for Deleuze for whom the relationship between event and history is less fleshed out, given different areas of inquiry.¹¹ The event, for Foucault, is something that cannot be defined, in terms of historiography, without examining the series of regularities from which it breaks. An analysis of the variations of a series is needed in order to comprehend the singularity. The event then, would be a metastasis of a series: it suspends any teleological narrative of evolution, and provides a standpoint from which narratives about its circumstances can be questioned, rendering visible new variations, highlighting the tensions around its locus, the conditions of its possibility. Anchoring the Deleuzian singularity to questions of historiography accents the way in which an attention to an event's exceptionality breaks with any kind of self-evidence of historical constants. The event thus allows for a re-discovery of the game of forces, of the game of power and of the relations between the dispositives considered active in a given conjuncture of history. Instead of being the opposite of a structure, the event becomes a part of the meta-event that is a historical series with its own duration and succession (the series, as contingent, replacing the more problematic concept of structure). The blurring effects of an event, its multiple causalities, bring about the possibility of a reorganized space and thereby, a renewed perspective on the historical a-priori of an epoch. While Deleuze highlights a certain ineffability of the event, Foucault stresses its multifaceted character, whereby the ineffability is always relative and indeterminable in advance. From this follows that an event, however it may appear as a hinge, is always more than that. It reminds us of the frailty of the series' we take for granted.

These considerations about writing history from the standpoint of the event did not merely remain theoretical: in the summer and fall of 1978, Foucault travelled to Iran after learning about growing tensions and political prisoners through his work as part of the prisoners' rights movement in France. Having been written at the beginning of an uprising whose totalitarian turn was not foreseeable at that time, his essays for the *Corriere della Sera*

¹¹ It is however not entirely absent, as the concepts of the virtual and the actual in *Difference and Repetition* comprise some of the complexity that cannot be reconstructed here, for brevity's sake.

(Foucault 1994: 670-783) can be considered an attempt of writing *by* an event. Viewing history as the practice of reinventing the present, Foucault was searching, in the streets of Teheran, for an embodiment of that reinvention, for which the act and experience of rebellion were more central in terms of a transformation of what lags behind, namely, the subject and its habits, its empty repetitions. Particularly interesting for his approach was the ambivalence of the uprising itself, its multitude of political currents meeting and diverging at once. Indeed, history, in midst of the event, emerges as a paradox, insofar as the revolt marks a refusal of its elements to submit to it. Foucault certainly did not get everything right in his writings on the Iranian revolution – as Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi makes clear (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2016: 56ff.), Foucault’s view on Islam passed through the lens of the French Islamic studies, overemphasizing Sufism within Shia Islam. Yet, despite a certain desire to ascribe “otherness” to the events in Iran leading him to neglect its entanglements with Western modernity, he granted an openness to the event’s possibilities beyond the Western teleology of progress, and was attentive to the shifting regime of truth in its midst, enacted by subjectivities that were, before things turned sour, agents of resistance. In his later lectures at the Collège de France, Foucault focuses particularly on the relation between truth and reality, as well as its inferences on what constitutes a problem, examining practices and techniques allowing the subject to let go of the bonds that hold it, through an attention to events, but also their production, in acts of truth-speaking or parrhesia, utterances endangering a regime of truth through situated interventions.

Drawing on a reading of Heidegger (Heidegger 2006),¹² Derrida thinks the event as a certain collapse of temporal logic, while carrying the specific futurity of arrival. *Saying* the event however, despite it being utterly singular, can never occur without mediation, and this mediation brings with it, as is the case for language, “a measure of generality, iterability and repeatability” (Derrida 2007: 446). Any saying of the event de-singularizes it – and the rhetoric or poetics of it then regulate that dimension of singularity. Further, each utterance of saying the event beyond mere information (whose bareness is insufficient to constitute it), engages in not-knowing, bypasses the threshold of what can reasonably be known, carrying a certain impossibility. Just like a gift is only one as a surprise – when the giving is unknown to either the giver or the gifted, and the separation of the two briefly blurred, the event also carries an impossibility. This impossibility stems from the context of its emergence and from the passivity that takes over when an event becomes an event. It is a necessary condition for the event’s dialectical transgression. The experience of the impossible *as* impossible *in* the event breaching it engenders a change in the mode of possibility. Further, the impossible arrival of

¹² Heidegger distinguishes between *Ereignis* (the event), *Begebenheit* (a superficial external occurrence) and *Erlebnis* (lived experience). *Ereignis* bears a passive, impersonal, yet existential dimension, different from the appropriation of the world in the ontic subject-object relation, which Heidegger calls *Vorgang* (which I would translate as “pre-pathing”, *vorgehen* means preceding, but can also be nominalised to describe something occurring with method, while *der Gang* means “the path”). *Ereignis* is what allows for the emergence of beings as being, while it also bears a loss of control which Heidegger coins as *Enteignis*.

the event which nevertheless occurs, is what preserves it in part from the gluttony of historical teleology. However, this holds another problem, as that which keeps the event from disappearing is also what constitutes other events - its uniqueness must therefore have a generic quality. In so far as iterability and return are already present in midst of its singularity, Derrida conceives of the event as a spectral trace: “repetition must already be at work in the singularity of the event, and with the repletion, the erasure of the first occurrence is already underway – whence loss, mourning, and the posthumous, sealing the first moment of the event, as originary. [...] Death is on the scene, in a way” (Derrida 2007: 453).

The foreclosing of an event’s origins (in so far as origins are always multiple), brings about a transcendental shift in the relation between the possible and the impossible, collapsing the two, highlighting the way in which the impossible is the very experience of the possible, enveloped by narrative and habitual loops. It is this jumble that haunts the event, the trace of impossibility and the possible being but one in a time out of joint, in which traumas of the past return with hope for a future. The particularity of this encounter between possibility and its death in the singular form of the event cannot be erased, only denied in denegation or displaced by a working-through.¹³

It is through Derrida’s emphasis on the specific conjuncture of times and (im-)possibilities in the event that we can grasp the ways in which it functions retro-actively: another past becomes possible through the singular repetition of its trace, another future becomes possible in so far as the futural completion of the past is announced in the event’s specific temporality.

Given the tentative conceptual apparatus vis-à-vis the event developed above, we are now equipped with means of reconsidering the question of the event with regards to the pandemic – or in extension, our contemporary situation.

Tending to the Present

In Deleuze, Foucault and Derrida, we find a rejection of structures as something more profound or primal than the event. Further, we have a specific affective charge, an element of radical surprise, an unleashing of forces otherwise expressive in different constellations, the meaning of the latter being undermined by the multiple time of the event. Time as a manifold becomes graspable as a trace with the emergence of a different past, a past preserved, and a different future, both being, in the event, still to come, more specters than characters. This “weak messianic” force, to use Walter Benjamin’s terminology (Benjamin 1991),¹⁴ lies in the

¹³ This is further fleshed out with regards to political events in *Spectres of Marx* (Derrida 1993).

¹⁴ In his text Benjamin develops a political model of historiography is developed, whose reflections, while in the language game of dialectical materialism, offer a reflection of the event before the letter whose influence, via Foucault’s reception of Adorno, would certainly merit a study of its own.

conjuncture it offers, in the tangibility of possibility and impossibility as entwined that is gifted, without any intentionality; and in the contingency of history, by the surplus of what cannot be said, yet circumscribed by the event.

However, a certain vagueness remains with regards to what *exactly* qualifies as an event, as well as a blueprint-model of political revolution. Yet, all three figures considered here refuse both the possibility of clear, eternal criteria and the narrative teleology inevitably constructed after the fact, considering it reductive of the plurality the event carries. I suggest that the texts of these authors can themselves be considered attempts to unlearn a desire for coherence without sacrificing the inherent collapse of the virtual into the actual (or vice-versa) which the event harbors. Pointing to the limits of our reconstructions, as Foucault's genealogical epistemology attempts via the notion of the dispositive as tangible construction, is in no way a renouncement with regards to the importance of philosophy in terms of understanding the present – quite on the contrary, it is an insistence on the necessity of a beyond, a beyond of philosophy, but also, a beyond of knowledge, a beyond we must allow to speak through our writing.

When we look at the interventions with regards to the pandemic briefly mentioned early on, we can see how the denial of the pandemic as an event in the metaphysical sense elaborated before robs it, in the case of Agamben and Badiou, of a horizon of possibility. Treating the pandemic as an epiphenomenon of capitalism (as Butler does) maps the latter onto the easy universality of everyone being technically prone to infection. We are left with either an utter limitation, or an immediate dissolution.

Certainly, the hasty universalities conjured by the discourses around the virus render one tempted to immediately shut down a narcissistic generalization of bourgeois confinement in stating that there is nothing radically new about this –the virus does not simply do away with societal differences which are enveloped in varying ways in its ripples. Having a concept or a name, a representation for what we are living through does not imply an absence of internal differentiability, or singularity. Further, it is not as if everything was rendered possible in a macabre sacrifice of lives to the deities of the market or in the sacrifice of an already broken normality for months of confinement.

A pandemic is not a blank page and we may wonder if the blank page itself is not a narcissistic fiction, created after the fact, a negativity only thinkable after there being something positive, a false infinity. If we must succumb to the image of a page, we ought to realize it is crumpled, bearing weight, creating dust, inflicting cuts to hasty fingers at its edges, discolored by the hands that once had held it. The pandemic as unlimited possibility is a fiction of authorship, implying the control of a neutral independent agent writing by sheer force of will. Alas, in front of the page we are just as crumpled, already written and spoken by a world whose problems and meanings we never were consulted on.

The exceptionality carried by the event does not lie on the side of representation: we neither lack narratives of past plagues, metaphors of virality or dreams of capitalism's end and

an escape from ecocide, nor are we short on disasters, catastrophe, and apocalyptic prophecy – the problem is acknowledging the difference between the event and its representational readings, acknowledging that any reading will inevitably grapple with them and risk being led astray from the singularity of the situation. Similarly, it would be dangerous to treat our dreams (and nightmares) emerging throughout the event as mere fabrications, as shadows on the cave's wall. Rather, they are constellations demanding a different alertness, vague whispers urging our awakening. Listening to their murmurs, both individually and collectively, would demand an art or a striving for techniques preventing us from equating them with our situation without banning them from it altogether, an active serenity towards our vulnerable, verbose brittleness. It is this frailty which, in the denial of the pandemic being an event, bears the mask of denegation.

As we have seen, repetition is not absent from the singularity of the event. Much rather, the two are intertwined in the same way the narratives of past plagues are echoed through social media, effacing the fact that those affected by these plagues were unable to vent in the same way as many are now able to, via the plastic companionship of a wifi-router. Along with the access to the ticking clock of deaths on a screen is another notable difference. The archival explosion, along with its fever, renders us prone to overemphasize a community that is, to put it with Nancy (Nancy 1986) only ever imagined (but not any less real) and its virtualities of mutual aid, Victorian courtship, frightening domestic violence, and unnamable loss. This emphasis on an easy first-person plural renders us inattentive to the relationship between the virtual and the actual graspable in the spiraling limbo of confinements.

Writing on the pandemic cannot merely be an act of limitation, akin to the classical modality of critique developed after Kant. The discourses around the pandemic certainly need limits, but any limit impossible on them must be understood as mobile in equal measure, as situated and, possibly, as something as contingent as the discourses themselves. Speaking the event in so far as it is one, will only ever be limited, yet the spatiality of the noumenal cannot be understood as immobile, flat geography. Rather, it is dynamic, requiring us to constantly interrogate anew the relation between that which escapes, and that which we can speak *around*. In so far as we cannot impose definite limits on what an event allows or forbids, any attempt to write it finds itself in this interval; the term hinting at a certain need for a repetition of our own practice.

Where we discover limits, we also discover their mobility in relation to a dynamic context, which can be said even about the ultimate limit many sought to affix to the phenomenon of death. Yet, while our own death retains, as Heidegger would put it, a radical isolation (Heidegger 1967: §46-53), it clearly becomes apparent to those willing to leave the project of ontology, that death is neither a-social nor a-historical, and like any idea, internally differential: a multitude of meanings can be inferred from the escape of anyone's last breath. As the pandemic shows, death in its midst can take on a different meaning as real loss or a number among many, gaining a generalized opacity through the impossibility of resorting to typical

practices of mourning or relating the individual singularity of loss to the collective inability to mourn in a time out of joint. Counter to Agamben, we are not witnessing a mere repetition of death's abstraction in modernity, for this abstraction is itself mediated by the discourses and affects we are living through as the normal is bracketed, rendering the question and difficulty of mourning a situated one, just as much as a confined life is not simply bare life.

Doing justice to the event, in light of the mobility of our frame and its social factors, implies a practice of holding up the existence of the event's limits and their mobility at once. This may at first sound aporetic, but this is only so if we think of practice as something punctual, rather than something stretched out in time, repeated. Stemming from the Greek root "pera", which means to go beyond, further, longer or elsewhere, the idea of practice stood, in Homer and the Tragedies, for both a good and a bad result, as well as a load to bear (Ritter, Gründer & Gabriel 1971-2007: 1277-1306, Vol. 7).¹⁵ Practices contract time through sustained repetition, yet their repetition alters them progressively, blurring their origins, so that method changes from something at first rigidly applied to a progressively blurred mode of attention. The inherent repetition re-inscribes singularity into a variety of series, in turn allowing for the emergence of new forms as emergent effects. While new praxes can very well emerge out of an event, there will always be an enmeshment with existing ones, as the singularity of the event does not carry over into the instances of its repetition but rather displaces their multiple origins, in turn altering the meaning of the event.

What this means concretely is that there already is a form of theoretical writing about phenomena such as the pandemic – we have seen just how much this form already exists by the sheer fact Slavoj Žižek was able to publish a book on the Coronavirus (Žižek 2020) before the first wave slowed down. Certainly endowed with a shamelessness characteristic of the manifold of his publications, Žižek exposes the false dichotomy between bare life and political life and the hopelessness Agamben's critique relies on, yet imports a certain Christian messianism indicative of a resistance to the jumbled temporalities and singularities of the present moment. Nevertheless, in its symptomatic character, it raises the question of the alteration the event produces on our practices, and the need to allow oneself to be altered to alter in return. While philosophy is commonly known for its de-contextualisation, the pandemic draws attention to the ways in which the mobility of the ideas it sets out to produce is itself reliant on a relative stability of context. If the context begins to flicker, possibilities seep through, and it is at once a matter of trespassing beyond the frame suspended, punctured and stretched by the event, as it is a matter of tending to its window of possibility by allowing it to disturb and affect our writing, by resisting the temptation of flattening or unifying its tassels of virtuality without examining the texture and direction of their strings.

This kind of care for the event is not a practice of moderation that would attempt to preserve an equilibrium by preventing either an overblown virtuality or a reductive denegation,

¹⁵ The article further presents an extended history of the concept.

insofar as an equilibrium is not possible in a time out of joint, and insofar as these two are not polar opposites. Neither of the two accounts for the event's singularity, while both probe the extent to which an event can be considered as such. An overblown virtuality or a reductive denegation can be treated as moments in which the singularity of the event is negatively inscribed in reaction to its excess, so long as they are part of a practice revisiting its own vulnerability in a repeated disconcertion of its own conditions of possibility. In such a disconcertion we are incessantly faced with the danger of a self-enclosure in thought, tempted to forget that it is always the world that gives us to think, and not, as the authorial fiction would have it, the other way around.

Final Remarks

This essay sought to examine two questions. One pertained to the metaphysics of the event, and one to what it means to write it, specifically in the context of this pandemic. Against the question of continuity and discontinuity raised by many of the philosophical contributions to the pandemic, this essay advances the argument that it is worthwhile to treat the event-character of this global phenomenon as given, not only for pragmatic empirical reasons, but also as a speculative leap allowing us to raise the question of how philosophy can write *nearby* or *for* it – which amounts to an ethics of thinking the present.

To flesh out a metaphysics of the event, we started with the question, raised (to this day), of 1968 – allowing an examination of three positions that can be said to draw consequences from it, Deleuze, Foucault, and Derrida.

Deleuze, in his metaphysical project seeking to rid difference of its logical reduction via representation, stresses the singularity of the event, its excess, unleashing a becoming, carving a virtuality within the actual and giving, however briefly, an actuality to the virtual. A contingent emergent effect, the event is a form waning in its apparition, due to its accidental character, its lack of linkages, its absence of a model. Yet, as an apparition, it carries a velocity capable of (but not necessarily) displacing the frame of habitual forms. As a punctual rupture of the present, a shimmer of collapse, the event for Deleuze is a line of flight, illustrative of his transcendental empiricism.

Foucault, concerned with historiography, eschewing the Hegelian and Marxist question of historical realization (of Geist, progress, or communism), develops a complex social ontology in which a frame of societal distinctions limits and organizes our space of possibility. Said frame is altered by power understood as a nonteleological and generic force that constitutes and displaces, solely addressable in the forms of knowledges and subjects. Genealogy, as a method of inquiry, examines this game of forces that determines what constitutes a problem for us, through repeated disconcertions of the present via its confrontation with its discarded pasts, still looming in its midst. Dispositives, as epistemological tools and groups of

transformation, are specific epochal vectors of regulation in frictional interaction. In light of such a social ontology, the event becomes an indicator of a variation, breaking from a series of regularities, yet carrying it forth in a displaced suspension, rendering the series and its suggestions of historical continuity problematizable in a different way. In its rupture, the game of forces can be discovered anew, and the disrupted series can itself be seen as an event of a higher order, shedding light on the historical a-priori that could not be uttered prior to its advent. As a multifaceted tool of intelligibility, Foucault's conception of the event was illustrated by Foucault's own attempt at writing near the Iranian revolution, highlighting the frailty of such a practice.

It is said frailty which becomes particularly graspable in Derrida's formulation of the event: as a spectral trace of forlorn pasts, the event is as much announcing novelty as it is announcing loss. Already bound up with repetition, it carries a radically singular temporality, a time out of joint, during which the threshold between the possible and the impossible becomes addressable *as threshold*, allowing for a shift in the mode of possibility that applies retroactively to the past, and in turn, to the futures laid out by the composition of the series that constitute the past. Yet, articulating an event *as event* necessarily brings in a possibly lethal generality, as our only way of expressing a singularity is by basking long enough in language's walled garden – or resorting to other media at hand. The event, following Derrida, retains, qua event, something that cannot be mediatized, that risks being muffled by the discourses around it, yet must nevertheless be voiced if the event is to have any posterity. Possibility and death embrace one another in the ineffable surplus of the event, and paradoxically, both must be passed through if we are to keep an event alive as encounter.

With this dense metaphysics of the event, we were able to return to the question at hand, which confronted us with the necessary incompleteness of the framework when it comes to precise criteria for determination. The desire for coherence, an itch growing stronger the weaker we come to feel, could be questioned through these positions, highlighting the need to guard oneself from it if we are to seize anything at all about the present – for it is by this beyond that we are forced to think, or we would not need to think at all.

Writing the event then, means tending to said beyond, preventing its sacrifice in the name of knowledge. Caring for the event, however, cannot merely be a blind utopianism of possibility, for that very optimism would be unable to comprehend its radically singular nature, reproducing instead a narcissistic phantasm of creation, rightly criticised by many philosophical commentators on the pandemic. Keeping a space open between the representation of the Covid-crisis, its narratives and metaphors, and the associated imagination cannot merely consist in the acknowledgment of a difference between the pandemic imaginary and the phenomenon as such – rather, what is needed is an attention to the ways in which said imaginary does grasp something. This something, however, is not an extension of the domain of representation or an inquiry into the identity of the pandemic, but an art of care for the event and, within it, our passing presence and present.

It is this care for the present in the form of an art of writing the event, in the form of an ethos, that could be the philosophical answer to the pandemic. This art, in the sense of *techné*, cannot merely repeat the past gestures of limitation, not only because limits in general are mobile and dynamic (as was shown through a brief detour on Heidegger's being-towards-death), but also because a limitation of that position would risk negating the situated multiplicity of the event. Another layer of complexity was then added in seeing how even limits that are not treated as absolute require a certain stability of context. Hence, an ethos for the event can only be a practice, something sustained, contracting time in its repetitions, causing emerging effects to ripple through its progressive erasure of origins.

Allowing oneself to be disturbed and affected in our writing and thinking, acknowledging one's own incapacities vis à vis the event and risking its theorization nevertheless, is not a matter of moralism nor the quest for an implicit equilibrium, as it requires a questioning of one's own frameworks, permanently at risk of becoming self-enclosed, inevitably tempted to rob themselves of their own conditions of possibility to become but loops unwilling to face the ineffable splinters of the present.

Hearing past the wildness of hopes and the protrusions of paranoia, a philosophy of the pandemic beyond the consideration of its metaphysical dimension *qua* event might just be one realizing that the reality of our pandemic situation is further contaminated by the virality of language, and that instead of answers, what we need most, perhaps, is the right questions, along with a vocabulary, a poetics that re-inscribes the virtualities of the event in the struggles it inevitably affects and infects – struggles that will act out what exactly we have been living through, what we will need to think, what we have lost – and what it is we are living for.

Wir stehen umschlungen im Fenster, sie sehen uns
zu von der Straße:
es ist Zeit, daß man weiß!
Es ist Zeit, daß der Stein sich zu blühen bequemt,
daß der Unrast ein Herz schlägt.
Es ist Zeit, daß es Zeit wird.
Es ist Zeit.

Paul Celan, *Corona*, 1952

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