04 2008

From Knowledge to Belief, from Critique to the Production of Subjectivity

Maurizio Lazzarato

Translated by Camilla Nielsen

I am not sure whether today's political problem resides in an art of critique, since the concept of critique is in itself problematic. Already Foucault showed that two concepts of critique can be found in Kant's work: the first one "questioning the conditions under which true knowledge is possible" and the second one asking: "What is our actuality? What is the actual field of possible experiences?"1 The first concept raises the issue of a theoretical critique of the "limits which knowledge must refrain from transgressing", while the second concept addresses the question of a practical critique referring to "possible transgressions" which Foucault described elsewhere as the art of not letting oneself be governed or of governing oneself.

I would like to elaborate on this second concept of critique. However, I do not really know whether it can be called critique. Isn't what we need an art of the event, an art of the possibilities of being, an art of modes of subjectivisation, an art of not letting ourselves be governed but governing ourselves? I would like to develop this second concept of critique on the basis of Gilles Deleuze for whom a tradition exists in philosophy which sought to replace the model of knowledge or cognition with the model of belief.

If one replaces the model of knowledge with the model of belief the question changes radically because our investigation no longer focuses on the limits of our knowledge but on the possibilities of our action, the possibilities of our modes of being. This change of model has far-reaching political implications the most important ones of which I would like to name.

First of all there is the question: what is belief? – The two large "mines" or "reservoirs" that nourish, process, fire on this „driving power"2, this "disposition to act"3, this power of affirmation and of subjective investment referred to as "belief" are religion and politics. According to William James in religious phenomena our experience is not limited to the "visible" and "tangible" world, it also fits into an "invisible" world – driven by forces (soul, spirit, etc.) whose perception and knowledge eludes us and which makes the visible world incomplete, transforming it into a world that is not totally deterministic.

The indeterminate and incomplete nature of the visible world appeals to a belief whose raison d'être lies in action. The essence of belief lies in believing in the invisible world and affirming it as real and putting to test the ability of the individual to act on this possibility. Religion is geared to our "most intimate forces" that by nature are both "emotionally charged and action driven" (James) or affective (Deleuze und Guattari). This has less to do with personal or psychological powers than with powers that in the language of today's knowledge would be described as pre-individual, transindividual, subconscious, prediscursive: These are intensive forces (of affect and "pure" perceptions. They are not so much a part of us. Rather, they permeate us and at the same time bring about a change and expansion of "consciousness" and thus enhance our "ability to act".

Belief (the "disposition to act ") is also a genetic, expansive power, a "generous capacity" since it believes also in the future and these "possible ambiguities" and an ethic force since it believes in the possibilities residing in our relation to the world and our relation to others. It engages and tests the subject in an action whose success is not guaranteed from the outset. It is thus the prerequisite of every transformation and every creation. It creates a link to the world and a link between individuals which cannot be created by either knowledge or sensations, since the world conveyed to us by knowledge and sensations is always a closed one without real

“exteriority”.

The secularization of religious belief in the invisible world and in its forces could be described with Gabriel Tarde as follows: “The real can only be grasped as an instance of the possible.” The real is not entirely actualized so that our action has an effect “on the possibilities and not on the brute and actual ‘facts’.” The ’invisible’ world the knowledge of which eludes us “since the elements of the world hide the unknown and deeply unrecognizable virtualities that are not even accessible to an infinite intelligence” no longer creates a world beyond but an “outside” one – real and immanent. It is a world that is not “governed by space and time”4, but by the logic of the event which is immanent and heterogeneous in relation to chronological time, breaking with linear progress and creating a new chronology. It charges the world with possibilities and thus appeals to our capacity to act. Experience becomes transformed into an experiment accompanied by risks, driven by the will to put oneself, the others and the world to the test.

Belief and action – most notably political action – are intricately related. According to Deleuze belief points to part of today’s political problems: “The fact today its that we no longer believe in this world.” The ethical-political connection between individual and world and between individual and others has been broken. “Ever since it is the connection that is supposed to become the subject of belief: it is the impossible which can only be returned in belief. Belief is no longer directed to a different or transformed world (...) we need reasons to believe in this world”5 as it is – with the possibilities of act and life that reside in it. Our skepticism is thus not cognitive but rather ethical. Our impasse is political and ethical at once, an impasse that affects our position, our involvement, our exploration of the world, of others and ourselves. What is Deleuze trying to say when he claims that we no longer believe in the world and that we should believe in the world as it is? To believe in a world as it is means to take a stance by means of these possibilities since their actualization is also the subject of conflicts and ramifications and radically different alternatives.

To believe in the world as it is also means to deploy the capacity to act against the devices of subjugation and domination in order to not let oneself be governed. It also means to believe in new meanings, constellations, modes of being so that the struggle against the same relations of domination and subjugation can be initiated to be able to govern oneself.

In disciplinary societies communism represented a “living hypothesis” which has mobilized the belief and the most intimate driving forces of “passion and will” of a large part of humanity. For the latter the revolution during the second part of the 19th century and almost throughout the entire 20th century represented the existential and ethical bond between individual and world and the proletarian or the workers’ class – the existential and ethic-political link that holds together all humans.

William James defined “hypothesis as everything that is proposed to our belief” and distinguished between “living hypotheses” (or living options) and “dead hypotheses” (or dead options). The living hypothesis presents itself as “true possibility”, i.e., it irrevocably represents “disposition to act” whereas the “dead hypothesis” by contrast does not constitute a real possibility and thus does not represent a disposition to act.

Why does communism, the revolution, the proletarian as we have known them since the end of the 19th century represent dead hypotheses or options today? Why does communism, as it is still practiced today by Trotzkyists, Maoists, Communists no longer appeal to our capacity to act? Why does belief no longer adhere to this hypothesis?

A dead hypothesis is an “appeal to action that would not have resonated with our consciousness.” A dead option is a hypothesis about the world and the possibilities which do not resonate with our subjectivity. Let’s take a classical topos of the communist hypothesis of the 20th century: the relation between workers and intellectuals which presupposes a whole reality and theory of material production and superstructure, an order and a hierarchy of the functions, roles, connections between workers and intellectuals both in social action and

in the revolutionary act. In the subjectivity of the "intermittent", the researcher, the intellectual who lives under precarious circumstances, etc., the functions, roles and connections between workers and intellectuals and their possibilities for action did not find much echo, for what would be separate under the conditions of the communist hypothesis (the subordination of the wage worker and the autonomy of the intellectual which in the former find a reversal in the freedom of the revolutionary act and in the latter in the subjugation to his class, the bourgeoisie) is entirely reconfigured in the "intermittent". The latter is a hybrid and a radical transformation of both of these functions. It thrives from other forms of subjugation and other forms of autonomy; its action unfolds in a situation of cultural industry, within social segmentation, the devices of subjugation, etc., all of which has little to do with the communist hypothesis.

The "expectation" or the "sense of the future" which according to James partakes "of each aspect of the elements of consciousness" – or as one would say today – of "subjectivity" are completely different in the "intermittent" and in a worker or an intellectual in the communist hypothesis. And by the same token the actual and the virtual of an unemployed person, a poor worker, a work who only occasionally finds employment and even a worker who has a full-time job are very different from the worker of the communist hypothesis.

The possibilities that expectation and the sense of the future can create do not emerge from a void, they are not an ex nihilo creation, since otherwise an act of volition or consciousness would suffice for producing them. "To let belief rest on will is, according to James, a ridiculous undertaking."

The possibilities are simultaneously integrated in the world (and this can be used to create critique) and radically irreducible and heterogeneous in the world (and no critique can be created with something that has no actuality.) One can neither derive them from the world nor can they be created independently of the world as it exists. Action rests on paradox. The belief in the world as it is means to accept and recognize transformations which are first and foremost transformations that pertain to subjectivity, its expectation, its sense of the future and thus the possibilities of action.

What has killed the communist hypothesis is not capitalism, not liberalism as other communists, Trotskyists, Maoists believe. What it kills "for us" is "largely part of a sort of antagonistic action preceding our nature of volition and of passion" (W. James). The recent transformation of subjectivity on the occasion of a global political event (which for reasons of convenience could be referred to as 68) made us return to a different world, to different relations of domination and subjugation, but also to a world surrounded by other possibilities which (a new paradox!) already exist and whose actualization represents a new and unpredictable differentiation.

The communist hypothesis is not only a dead option. It also constitutes an obstacle for the deployment of a political invention. In order to develop a political movement in current capitalism "belief-habits" have to be neutralized which still today nourish the analysis and practices of the advocates of the communist theory (the Trotskyists, Communists).

The world of the communist hypothesis is a world of power relations, social roles, of strictly defined and hierarchical functions relating to work and the workers' class, and the possibilities at one's disposal to liberate oneself from them which must be actualized. These possibilities are strictly defined by codified sequences of political action (labor union and political action) converging in a "final struggle" (seizure of power, dictatorship of the proletariat, transition, etc.) This belief does not find any echo in the soul, since it now only represents clichés, authoritarian and dogmatic habits.

Communism believed in universal history and in the future of the proletarian and the revolution, which it implied. The revolutionary ruptures, the concatenation of events and their meaning are only steps in a process whose final purpose is defined and structured by history. The passage via communism informed its final stage

before the "final" reconciliation. Action based its standards, rules and orders from transcendent values, even if transcendence presented itself as something secularized, even if belief (the disposition to act) no longer aimed at a world after this life but at a world to be transformed here on Earth. The belief in the communist hypothesis made time subordinate to universal history, action subordinate to process. The disjunction of time and history implies a radical change in the mode of action since it allowed a future to emerge that eludes chronological time, history. Belief in the world as it is then means that action is based on modalities of the event which comes from history and falls back on history without being historical itself.

Contemporary struggles are confronted with new problems. They are triggered and deployed in a capitalism that doesn't have much to do with what is described by the communist hypothesis, since action unfolds in the context of the disjunction of time and history.

The rupture with the subordination of time under history not only appeals to a certain capacity (such as knowledge) but to the indeterminate nature of our capacity to act so that the question "what is happening?" or "what is going to happen?" become an obsession with power. How and where should belief as defining and regulating means of the "disposition to act" be located? How can trust/belief, which is the germ of any new creation, any rupture and opening toward action be used and promoted? And how can it he controlled and chicaned so that it does not extend beyond the limits of enterprise and the market and not be transformed into a process of subjectivisation (the "intermittents" represent only a partial experiment in this respect)?

This takes place by way of devices that are both hypermodern and neo-archaic and work on the basis of what William James called the "plastic zone" which is configured as "conveyor belt of uncertainty, as a point where past and future meet", as a zone of "moving present" of the event. This plastic zone (or "zone of uncertainty") in which "singular differences" emerge which trigger "social changes" lies at the center of the political battle of contemporary capitalism since it implies a conflict over the actualization of possibilities and the production of subjectivity.

Limited as this may be, it "is sufficient for accommodating the entire range of human passions" whereas the spectrum of the average attributes of a "people" or a society – "inert and stagnant as far as they reach" – constitute an "unlimited acquired wealth excluding all uncertainty". The hypermodern devices confirm that not only the "plastic zone" exists, that we have to be circumspect in dealing with it, to expand, promote, finance it, as a plastic zone of enterprise and the market or for enterprise and the market. The devices actually also imply that if possibilities exist they exist only within the context of the market and enterprise. The hypermodernity of capitalist deterritorialization prescribes that we invest subjectivity, its "generous capacity" and its future sense in alternatives that are none since to the extent that choices exist these are alternatives that have already been set down and codified.

According to Foucault neoliberal governmentality produces a freedom, i.e., possibilities and opportunities for choices regarding these possibilities. However, the production of "freedom" is differential and highly selective. It is very unequally distributed between social groups and individuals and can only be practiced within the constraints and subordinations of enterprise and within the conditions set down in advance by the market. It constitutes the framework for belief and channels it in the direction of "production" and "consumption" through a number of devices which we have already analyzed.

The neoliberal "reforms" irrefutably show the following: What gives something sound and color, what characterizes the neoliberal universe, is not "freedom" and it is also not possibility or choice. In the core of capitalism, that is, on the market and in enterprise it is not antagonism and rivalry between free people, which imply risk, courage and trust, which is at stake but rather the competition of all against all, whose main source is fear.

“Reforms” destroy certain freedoms, certain ideas and certain practices of risk, of choice and trust to apply others which in turn are subject to new forms of control and management. The reforms are supposed to distribute the differentials of freedom and to increase the trust in employment and governmentality on the side of the upper classes of the governed and to spread uncertainty and precariousness among the lower classes. The general strategy applying to both insiders and outsiders consists in introducing more competition, more insecurity, more fear.

This same logic of competition, of fear and suspicion is exuded and disseminated by the institutions that are supposed to secure the rights of wageworkers and the population. The transition from mutualization to private insurance which destroys the welfare state is not simply a change in the economic and social modalities of government but first and foremost a change in the way passions and most notably belief/trust are governed.

The reforms represent the device of a reorientation of subjectivity which consists of both the cooptation of the driving force of belief and its shift. The point is to fabricate belief (trust) in relation to the potential of the enterprise and the markets to cover risks and to identify mutualistic modalities of protection as the collectivist remainders of a time that has been overthrown and now no longer merits any trust. For the reforms to be successful the institutions must be freed from the social protection of “mutualistic” passions, affects and modes of beliefs, which have made possible these institutions and reproduced them (solidarity, equality, collective action, etc. which in spite of ideas of parity have preserved some of their origins). In the same way collective forms of insurance such as pensions paid through redistribution are meant to elicit fear because of the alleged insolvency.

If one can summarize the formula for the development of today’s struggles in Deleuze’s words (“believe in the world the way it is”) then today’s capitalism can be expressed as follows: “Be afraid and have no trust in the world, the others and yourself.” On the micro level management reality goes to great pains to speak of responsibility, autonomy, creativity, pride, trust, team spirit on both the entrepreneurial and social level. However, this does not stop the dominant passion which is carefully produced and maintained from being fear.

Fear constitutes less an inhibition of action (passivity) than a reversal of the forces of passion and volition and the “disposition of action” against others, against the world, against oneself. Fear also appeals to the disposition to act and to the spirit of invention, since neo-archaisms that are to set down belief (reference to traditional values, to religion, authority, individual and collective genealogies, filiations, etc.) are to be fabricated by a number of legal, economic, financial and discursive devices. Fear mobilizes the disposition to act, the most intimate energies, the powers of volition and passion, the active tendencies of subjectivity but only to turn them against immigrants, foreigners, the poor, the unemployed, women as well as against the possibilities that their worlds contain.

More than just a neutralization of the capacity to act (passitivity) fear results in a reversal of its temporal direction. The punk movement succeeded in precisely grasping the profound nature of its temporality the moment that neoliberal governmentality appeared on the scene, whereas Foucault in the same period was not able to grasp it with the same eloquence: “We are living towards the future” (W. James) of our everyday experience became transformed into “No Future!”.

In the colonization of the present fear changes the time arrow of our disposition to act: the life of our societies unfolds against the backdrop of our duty to remember, they are captives of their past which in each phase was invented from the outside. The neoliberal governmentality brings forth a reversal which is classical in the history of domination and subjugation: the transformation of hope into fear, the power of generosity and the power to give into resentment, trust into suspicion. Action remains the principle and the standard of neoliberal governmentality but it is an action that already existed, that was already produced. The sense of

expectation and the sense of the future mobilizing our capacity to act and the fundamentally favorable conditions for their actualization in "cognitive capitalism", in "cultural capitalism" or in the society of knowledge have returned to past, to memory, to what was once.

History returns but not as in the philosophy of history, i.e., as something that is pervaded by revolution or by progress but as something that is already consummated and that serves as principle and standard of present act from the background of history. The event is not what is to take place, what is taking place, but it is what has already taken place. The standard, the measure of history has become the „task of memory", whose greatest adept in President Sarkozy. Slavery, the Shoah, massacres and genocides, the victims of the Nazi system, the cultural revolution, Pol Pot, etc. are the events that limit and influence the action of democratic individuals today.

For the so-called society of knowledge this represents a point of culmination which in reality means that salvation is certainly no longer to be found on the side of knowledge but rather in the process of subjectivisation, i.e., in the ethical-political process, which unfold from the current configurations of power and domination relations of "cognitive capitalism" as well as from the possibilities created and actualized by the (micro- and macro-political) struggle against these forms of domination.

When we describe the possibilities of today's capitalism (whether we call them cultural, cognitive, epistemological, etc. is irrelevant) we have not said nothing about the modes of subjectivisation emerging from this reality, since what is being described here are "ambiguous possibilities" that are precisely the subject of the conflict-laden actualization. If subjectivisation comes from history and falls back on history, it evolves in the "plastic zone", the "zone of uncertainty" which adds something unexpected to of the world by appealing to our subjectivity – something that flashes up, traversing history and reconfiguring it.

We have seen another horrific example of how one can tilt from hypermodernity to neo-archaism – and this with at impressive speed thanks to the power of subjectivisation. In the United States of Bush the hypermodernity of the so-called "creative class", the hypermodernity of the forms of knowledge, of the new technologies, the innovative models of education, consumption, production, loans, production, etc. are not capable of offering resistance to a ridiculous, shaky lie which ushered in and legitimized the war in Iraq. Hypermodernity has created a "belief", a reversal of subjectivity and thus a disposition to act which is not in anyway inferior to phenomena representing collective contagions, i.e., "superstition", "ignorance" which our societies based on acculturation and knowledge are assumed to have liberated themselves from. Let me reiterate: belief comes before knowledge but also extends beyond it.

The forms of knowledge, the information technologies, the democratic devices, the education and acculturation of the population, etc. have not created a barrier. On the contrary, they have reinforced "belief" and the disposition to act in the context of both reactionary and possible hypotheses. How can we understand the fact that the most hypermodern society of our planet brings forth, accepts and legitimizes the neo-archaisms of the most dim-witted neoconservatives? The speed of reversal has to do with the fact that, according to Deleuze and Guattari, we are dealing with two inseparable faces of the movement of capitalism. The neoliberal government is – according to a further intuition of Deleuze and Guattari – a device of anti-production, since the redirection of subjectivity that it produces consists of standardization, streamlining and homogenization. By countering all of this with criticism we cannot oppose this surge of the world of belief.

To conclude: How can we mobilize belief, the disposition to act in this new political configuration? By believing in the world, as Deleuze says.

The believe in the world and its possibilities means to risk an action that is no longer subject to external normativity, transcendence but posits and addresses "processual, polyphonic and autopoietic" devices,

constructs its own rules, its own protocols, its own modes of organization, its own specific hypotheses and partial hypotheses which it can use to always test what is and what takes place. To believe in the world as it is and in its possibilities means to not engage in transcendent and totalizing processes of subjectivisation but in processes that are not already bound to a model, conforming to one, but processes that address, study and analyze their own development. To believe in the world as it is means that the synthesis, the unity is just as problematic as the event since both the former and the latter actualize, split and differentiate in the moment in which they appear, just as affirmation does not represent a synthesis. To believe in the world as it is also means to risk one's own disposition to act in the disjunctive synthesis of heterogeneous modes of action (being against and being together, micro and macro political, political change and change in what can be grasped by means of the senses) and the impossibility of believing that the various elements and the various modes of subjectivisation can be totalized in a harmonious whole and in a final reconciliation.

We can easily see what we do not believe it today through the subjective engagement in today's struggles and their modes of expression. We do not tie our own subjectivity to a universal, all-encompassing knowledge that creates a synthesis out of world and its contradictions. The forms of knowledge emerge in the rift between the pathic and the cognitive and their word is spoken in the interval between the discursive and the non-discursive. To be able to find an echo in today's subjectivity action must unfold both on this side and the other side of language and representation. "Our experience also consists of variations of speed and direction and resides more in these transitions than at the destination of the journey." And it is accompanied by a "more that is yet to come" and a "maybe" whose realization is still open. For this reason the slogan of 1968 – "let's be realistic and demand the impossible" has not lost its political and existential significance.

In light of the necessity to believe in the impossible and the inconceivable, the scope of critique is very limited, since it must become part of a structure of new forms of knowledge, new practices and new political techniques (the art of not letting oneself be governed but governing oneself, the art of the production of modes of being and modalities of subjectivisation). In becoming part of this structure critique even runs the risk of being anti-productive.

---

1 Michel Foucault, *Dits et Ecrits*, Folio, p. 1506.

2 Michel de Certeau, *L'Invention du quotidien, 1, Arts de faire*, p. 260.

3 William James, "The Will to Believe", An address to the Philosophical Clubs of Yale and Brown Universities, published in 1897. (This classic lecture can be found in numerous anthologies. Lazzarato quotes from a French translation published in William James, *La volonté de croire*, Paris: Les Empêcheurs de Penser en Rond 2005; this volume comprises also a number of other articles by W. James [translator's note]).

4 Félix Guattari, *Chimères*, no. 23, p. 63.

5 Gilles Deleuze, *L'image-temps*, p. 223.