

# What is Intellectual Freedom Today? An Invitation to Think the Event

Clayton Crockett

One way to think about the question of intellectual freedom is paradoxically, to suggest that the highest expression of this freedom consists in the recognition that there is no such thing as intellectual freedom. This is analogous to Martin Heidegger's suggestion that the highest form of philosophical thinking involves the realization that most of the time we are not yet thinking. Our intellectual ideas and values are for the most part determined by other forces, including academic-institutional concerns for processing students into graduates, raising money for programs, projects and ideas, including through and from non-profit organizations, and internalized goals of career rewards in terms of professional rewards, including recognition. Today, most but not all intellectual labors are coopted by and filtered through the university, although there are still exceptions. Most institutions are intrinsically conservative, because they tend to conserve the nature and purpose of their existence, and we identify with these institutions insofar as we are affiliated with them.

I think what was sometimes called postmodernism or poststructuralism emerged as both a symptom of and protest against the tightening of control of intellectual freedom in the late twentieth century. The conditions of intellectual existence are different in the twenty-first century, of course, but I think that we still need to grapple with the ideas of French thinkers like Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva and Jean-François Lyotard,

and to realize how much continuity exists between their writings and later Continental theorists like Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben, Antonio Negri, Quentin Meillassoux, and François Laruelle.

In this short piece I consider the alternative concepts of control and event. Even though it was published in the early 1990s, I still think that Deleuze's short essay, "Postscript on the Societies of Control" is important. Here Deleuze contrasts disciplinary societies, as analyzed by Foucault, with newer societies of control. Disciplinary society is based on external physical constraint, like a prison or a factory, whereas control operates in more subtle and internalized ways. He says that "enclosures are *molds*, distinct castings, but controls are a *modulation*, like a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other."<sup>1</sup> Enclosures are the result of practices of discipline and containment, whereas controls appear to be more free but in fact are more insidiously constraining. Many intellectuals are no longer so explicitly enclosed, but we are in debt. It's not that disciplinary power disappears; it just recedes more and more into the background, to be invoked and deployed only when necessary. Control coopts the event, because it modulates and moderates it.

According to Derrida, all the way back in 1966 in his article "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," "perhaps something has occurred in the history of structure that could be called an 'event.'"<sup>2</sup> The concept of the event, taken from Heidegger's *Ereignis* — usually translated as an appropriating event or an event of appropriation — becomes the sign of French poststructuralism. One way to read French poststructuralism is as a commentary on the ways in which philosophical thinking is both captured by structures of economy, politics and power, and how at the same time this thinking exceeds these structures by way of the event.

We desire to control the event, to control for the event, and at the same time the idea of the event is what by definition exceeds our control. Intellectual freedom is the possibility to think an event, even if that formulation is too abstract. One way to name our controlling condition is neoliberal capitalism, and one way to name an event is as an insurrection against neoliberal capitalism. How can we truly imagine a situation or way of life beyond corporate capitalism and its drive for more consumer goods, a way of life that is increasingly using up and destroying our natural resources and stimulating large-scale climate change? What would an event be without capitalism to frame and deploy it? Most of the time we can only imagine this negatively, as an apocalyptic destruction. But the invitation here is to think the event without control and as otherwise than simply catastrophic.

<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," *October*, Vol. 59, Winter 1992, pp. 3-7, quote p.4.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p.278.