



The rise of stagnancy and emergent possibilities for young radicals: Deleuze and the perils of idolatry

Andrei Botez and Joel Hietanen

It's only another fold

You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them. (Exodus, 20: 4-5)

What, asked the philosopher Bruce Benson, do the philosophers Nietzsche and Derrida have in common? They were both concerned about idolatry (Benson, 2002), or the act of creating images, indeed objects of substitution, stand-ins in place of the one that is to be understood as beyond the realm of humanity; simulations of the Real beyond reality. With ease, we could add Gilles Deleuze's philosophical oeuvre to Benson's list, for he, in his insistence on the immanent and the emergent, never attempted to conceal his disdain for idolatry. Indeed, the idolaters are people of 'artificial lives', the ones who *make* essences, stable *representations* to mask the emergent flow of forces and intensities. It is they, not the artful, who are the true mystics, the fanatics, and the superstitious (Deleuze, 1991b: 74). They who so desperately have faith in their 'stable representations' are the ones who have truly come to privilege hallucinations and fantasies (Deleuze and Guattari, 2000: 25).

In contrast to what one might have learned to assume, being *radical* is conceptually founded on *staying close to the roots* (Lat: *rad-ices*): you shall not make for yourself an essence, an idol (εἶδωλον). Do not become a false god. To be radical means giving up on hallucinations, and fantasies, on mysticism and superstitions. To be radical means: do not bow down, do not worship. This carves us a fold in academia

where the question of what finds stability becomes apparent: what is it that is worshipped here, that which maintains positions of power and triumphantly parades the Idols of truthfulness? In the words of Nietzsche, it is the *truthful* man who seeks to condemn the expression that is life, s/he who sees life as an evil and a sin to be atoned for; truth's terrorizing inclination to judge (Deleuze, 1989). What has the ability to stay so it can be recognized as a means with which to judge?

As the theologian Richard Neuhaus, the founder and editor of the highly influential journal *First Things*, noted, it was André Malraux who said – shortly before he died in 1976 – ‘The twenty-first century will be religious or it will not be at all’ (Neuhaus, 1997). A few years earlier, in 1970, Michel Foucault published a short essay entitled ‘Theatrum Philosophicum’. In it, he declared, perhaps somewhat flippantly: ‘one day, perhaps, this century will be called Deleuzian’ (Foucault, 1977: 165).

Was Malraux right in his assertion? How could he say such a thing after Nietzsche's madman had shouted ‘God is dead!’ a century earlier? Additionally, how could Foucault say such a thing after he himself declared, in his 1966 book ‘The order of things’, that, by analogy with Nietzsche, man is dead? True, while Malraux was pointing to the 21st century, Foucault was reimagining the 20th. However, the temporal distance was only apparent as Deleuze, the man of emergence himself, became increasingly popular throughout the Anglophone world after the turn of the 21st century, his presence manifesting in fields such as organization theory (e.g., Linstead and Thanem, 2007; Thanem, 2006, Sørensen, 2005) and, more recently, consumer research as well (e.g., Hietanen et al., 2014; Kozinets et al., 2016; Hietanen and Andéhn, 2017).

God is dead, man is dead: how then can there be a century of anything?

And yet there is. One of persistent habit and custom. Besides fanaticism and superstition, there is another element that directly defines the idolaters, the essence-makers or, worse, the essence-discoverers, and that is dogmatism. As Hegel (out of all thinkers!) wrote, ‘dogmatism as a way of thinking [...] is nothing else but the opinion that the true consists in a proposition which is a fixed result’ (as quoted in Deleuze, 1994: 211). Hegel was right, but his claim was also incomplete. Dogmatism is not related to fixed essences only, but also to everything that tends to be expressed through absolutes. Therefore, dogmatism can readily infuse a Deleuzian non-fixed, non-truth / multiple truths within its circuitry.

The main weapon against idolatry, essentialism, and dogmatism is criticism, but only the kind that can envisage a pure outside that refuses to rebound back to its origin. As Deleuze noted, Kant is the first philosopher who understood critique as

having to be total. Total because ‘nothing must escape it’ (Deleuze, 1983: 89). Nothing. For theorizing to keep emerging and the thought-machine of academia to keep humming, the critical vector is the fuel for problematizing. This is where the young radical in academia finds pure potential, only to then be repeatedly reeled back in for lack of faith in the iconic register.

A few years ago, Daniel Zamora published a piece in the leftist magazine *Jacobin* titled *Can we criticize Foucault?* (Zamora, 2014). What seemed a rather innocent question, created a storm of gargantuan proportions (Elden, 2014). When it comes to Deleuze and most notably his collaborations with Guattari, with the very notable exceptions of, for instance, Badiou’s (1997, so close to the 21st century) book *Deleuze: The clamor of being* (see Žižek, 2012), he seems to have largely escaped criticism. And where there is no criticism, there is idolatry. As his presence increases within organization theory, consumer research and even marketing, he’s become something akin to an untouchable figure – the mystic too impenetrable to touch. Is this surprising? Maybe yes, maybe no. Paraphrasing Zamora (2014), Deleuze always took pains to inquire into theoretical corpuses of widely differing horizons and to constantly question his own ideas. Unfortunately, the intellectual process-oriented Left has often remained trapped in a ‘school’ attitude, i.e. the ‘little Deleuzians’ (Blake, 2016), often keenly refusing to consider or debate ideas that start to question his premises.

Within this particular journal [*ephemera*], his name (alone, or together with Guattari) appears an impressive number of times (e.g., Helle, 2008; Pedersen, 2011; Sørensen, 2003; Yue and Peters, 2015), akin to *à la mode*, a hype. It is essential (pun intended). And being so, means it’s uncriticizable: dogmatism is there, although in a decidedly more elusive way. Truth consisting of fixed, certain results is replaced by its equally unquestionable negation. *There is no truth* except in the fragments of a deception and a disaster; *there is no truth* except a betrayed truth; *there is no truth*, but orders of truth (Deleuze, 2008: 73). *There is no truth*, there are only evaluations (Deleuze, 2015: 18). The truth of non-truth, and nothing beyond.

In this sense being a Deleuzian has never been easier. His name is uttered with almost sacred reverence at organization theory conferences and now also increasingly in gatherings of consumer research and marketing scholars. Those who follow his views are sometimes self-proclaiming themselves ‘heretics’. Strange, were they not supposed to be radicals? You cannot be both: you’re either close to the roots (radicals), or away from them (heretics). Business people – what a sobering thought! – have found in Deleuze a new friend, an ally that can and should be trusted. In an increasing number of academic circles, Deleuze, the monstrous and the blasphemer, has become the ‘official philosopher’, the oracle

that speaks the non-truth. Hallelujah. As is commonplace with academic surges of lines of thought, the situation has escalated rapidly. In many gatherings, being skeptical of all this fanfaronade might earn you, almost immediately, the abhorred status of a positivist. Accordingly, gathered in the corridors after yet another presentation, Deleuze and friends adorning the power point's slides, arousing the adulation of the worshipers, the researchers are exchanging tales of the latest mistreatments suffered at the hands of their archenemies: the positivists, those who 'do not understand how things *really* are'. They wear these wounds as badges of honor: the more you have, the more official you are. And there is plenty of enjoyment to be had in one's repression (also Baudrillard, 2007; Lyotard, 2004), giving away one's identity and body in a mad dash to be extinguished as a commodity (also Cederström and Grassman, 2008; Plester, 2015). Here is where Deleuze has now emerged into something like a becoming-mummy, dipped in formaldehyde and worshiped by his disciples. If we are to follow Deleuze's own definition of the fetish, i.e. a frozen, arrested image (Deleuze, 1991a: 31) – a term very often used interchangeably with 'idol' (Deleuze, 1986, 2004; Deleuze and Guattari, 2000) – there he is without the movement his image-thought would seem to necessitate. His non-truths have become unquestionable truths, replacing the 10 commandments with the *n-1* commandments. Through their disappearance they now reverberate everywhere, vanishing into ubiquity. No young scholar is allowed to embrace and use any of his concepts until after some mummified founding father has graciously approves. You're ready! You're already there! Death by means of de-animation.

The irony here is that you don't need to be a positivist to oppose Deleuze. You *only need to be a Deleuzian*. Was he right or correct in his approaches? Of course he was, and this is *exactly* the reason we have to destroy him.

Being young in academia: Writing against Deleuze, with Deleuze

Is it really the task of the humanities to add deconstruction to destruction? More iconoclasm to iconoclasm? (Latour, 2004: 225)

Academic viability has always, in its internal consensus-seeking tendencies, constituted of anxious circuits to young scholars who have entered into recalcitrant experimentations in their own craft. Focus on the ideas you can sell, theorizations sellable as humble tokens. Specialize. And this is how tenure track departments have become mausoleums, false idols' temples of all but impossible demands for most. Us, becoming-giraffes with Lamarckian aspirations. Those are spaces forcing everything *backwards* (towards the islands that were 'there' before, waiting) and *inwards* (memory, introspection, identity). Spaces stinking of formaldehyde, fear, and superstition. No, wait, [insert favorite FT50 journal here] is now 'ready'

for Deleuzian scholarship! Open the floodgates then and breach the palisade. This is an academic culture moribund, where the image of thought is regimented and disciplined. Let's meet in a bar and spend the evening graphically discussing publishable 'hot topics', 'preferred' reviewers and sellable 'insights'. This is thought that refuses to think itself, and here and now, naïve as ever, we call for more thinking thinking thinking itself. A Deleuzian should thus be wary of a most pressing formula:

thinking – (emergence [of thought] + violence [to thought]) = 0

In other words, thought that ceases to endlessly impose violence on itself = logocentrism. Thinking that refuses to think – hence de-idolatrize – thought itself; no *shocks to thought* (Deleuze, 1989), an affective nothing. *Being-within* constitutes an existence on the continent, on the idolatrous 'where'. But some of these young scholars dream of islands, displaying a longing for oceanography, i.e. for 'smooth spaces' without depth (Deleuze, 1995). In their cravings for difference, they are assembled into sailors that navigate with *maps* that close in upon themselves, not *tracings* that open up new becomings. Often to bear stigma for such perilous disobedience, they pledge allegiance to ignorance, instead to the certainty of the point of arrival. There never was a day of the radicals, simply perennial twilight. Reaching habitable islands is a history of martyrology.

It would however, be a mistake to think that internal consensus-seeking infects or defines only the *status quo*. Not at all. As we noted earlier, given Deleuze's celebrated mummification, by the time these young scholars start dreaming, the islands, the 'smooth spaces' are *already* striated spaces, continents in their own right. In other words, once Deleuze became a Deleuzian-ism, the -ism morphs itself into an isthmus: everything becomes linked, patterns emerge, models of explanation, truth. Abstractions, certainties, the hard dogma of the no-truth truth. In a fetishistic act of mirrored logic, they are invited to kiss the hammer that smashes the idols of the positivists, to raise hosannas to the blasphemer, the god that gave them the *n-1* commandments, and as such, landing on their island equates to raising the flag on yet another Iwo Jima. Desire realized, desire conquered, desire dead, a nightmare, of course (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987).

The hammer: the tool that smashes the idols becomes an idol in itself. Who has the courage to crush it? The blasphemer becomes a no-truth teller. Who has the courage to curse him? Once dreamt, the island should be easily forgotten. Not only because of the pressure the *status quo* and the heretics puts on those radicals 'desiring' to fly, but because the island should not be remembered long enough to become covered over by signification – as Adorno wrote (Adorno, 1981: 249). The idolaters remember too much. An island, a gesture covered by signification

becomes a totality, a limit, a horizontal wall. Indeed, only the ‘great Amnesiac’ (Deleuze, 2004: 11) can inhabit an island. However, because ‘sometimes you forget to forget’, as the Polish painter Stefan Czerkinsky noted in his dialogue with Deleuze (Deleuze, 2004: 283), that’s where the trouble starts.

More deconstruction to destruction, more iconoclasm to iconoclasm ought to be added. Stop remembering, stop recognizing. No, that thing wasn’t there *before*. For the true radicals, there are no islands, there are no ‘theres’. The radicals do not bow, they do not worship, and they do not not-worship.

Move!

Thus we, the ‘radical youth’, search for *crystals* (see Deleuze, 1989: 274), but not for crystals themselves, but for them as movements: upon their rotation, endless spectrums of color are created. There are no crystals, don’t bow. The crystalline regime refuses to explain because it simply flashes with affect and then disappears before it can explain (*ibid.*). In its continuous ignorance, its furious momentary affectivity, it keeps forgetting its point.

Dream (never discover) new places, institutions, for there never were any. There is nothing that precedes the *now*. If there is, then don’t listen to its siren’s call. Destroy it. Do not believe in words, we have learned to trust them too much. They are convincing, because they come bearing gifts, i.e. nouns, essences: promises of subjectivity, identity, and memory. A noun attached to an object is terrifying, for it creates an image of thought that controls the exterior; a mastery of the universe. But the world does not need delusional heretics. We cannot tolerate them anymore. Burn them, then burn your ‘self’ with them. Do not wish to be remembered: why becoming another false idol, a ‘where’? Simply make a fold where there was none (and there’s never one), be the seed of an origami (see Deleuze, 1993) that will vanish long before its creation. Emergence has no tomorrow, but let it too wither before the new.

Deleuze-the-idol, when visiting our dreams, a spectral speaking mummified-Deleuze, is still alive and kicking, and through him religion and fanaticism. Malraux was right: the 21st century seems indeed to be religious, something especially evident within the corridors of academia. Foucault, as always, queer and confused. He was right – the man is dead – while also being wrong: there cannot, and should not be a Deleuzian century. Ever. As Lyotard noted in an obituary

dedicated to Deleuze: ‘Why did I speak of him in the past? He laughed. He is laughing. It’s your sadness, idiot, he’d say’¹.

Let us (pseudo-)conclude this essay by paraphrasing Nietzsche’s famous dictum: Deleuze is dead. Deleuze should remain dead. Forget him! (Galloway, 2015). Stop being a heretic: be a radical. This would mean: destroy the hammer that smashes the stagnation, blaspheme the blasphemer, rise against the ‘century of something’. The twenty-first century will not be at all, and not even that.

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¹ A fax sent to *Le Monde* by Jean-François Lyotard upon Deleuze’s death (*Misère de la philosophie*. Paris: Galilée, 2000: 194).

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the authors

Joel Hietanen is visiting assistant professor at Aalto University School of Business and an associate professor (docent) at Stockholm Business School. His interests include videographic methodologies, philosophies of immanence and emergence and consumer culture theory.

Email: joel.hietanen@aalto.fi

Andrei Botez is post doc at Aalto University School of Business. His research is focused on uncovering the theological underpinnings of transhumanism.

Email: andrei.botez@aalto.fi