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An evental pandemic: thinking the COVID-19 ‘event’ with Deleuze and Foucault

Jemima Repo ^a and Hannah Richter ^b

^aReader in Feminist and Political Theory, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK; ^bLecturer in Politics and International Relations, University of Hertfordshire, Hatfield, UK

ABSTRACT

As COVID-19 swept the world it also became the subject of a quickly growing body of theoretical scholarship aimed at understanding the social, political and economic implications of the ‘pandemic event’. Taking a step back, this paper draws on Deleuze and Foucault to interrogate whether, and in what way, the COVID-19 pandemic can and should in fact be understood as an event. We first offer a structured overview of existing ‘pandemic theory’ where we highlight that the productivity unfolded by the pandemic event is here either politically or ontologically fixed. Against this background, we show that, in distinct ways, Deleuze’s and Foucault’s concepts of the event caution against reifying a pandemic event. Any political force the pandemic can unfold is always made after the fact, and is contingent on what is (counter-)effectuated from the pandemic, or which discursive dispersions intersect with and unfold from it. We argue for considering the pandemic as evental rather than an event – it is made up of events, and holds the potential to produce events. For critical theory, the significance of the pandemic event is thus in the first place methodological: it gives insight to how (post-)pandemic societies are produced, and where openings for the actualization of alternatives might lie.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19; Gilles Deleuze; Michel Foucault; counter-effectuation; eventualisation

In her attempt to respond to the unfolding of the coronavirus pandemic, Clare O’Farrell opened her remarks with the ‘realization that anything I have to say has already been said – and often far better by someone else’ (2020). Over two years after the first wave of lockdowns hit industrialized Western nations, one can hardly avoid O’Farrell’s sentiment when surveying the vast amount of theoretical literature that has been generated on the COVID-19 pandemic. A significant part of this ‘pandemic theory’ has been written by postfoundational and other critical thinkers. The fact that the pandemic was of particular significance as an event for critical theory is partially rooted in the fact that the case of the pandemic fits several of the analytical lenses it offers so perfectly: biopolitics,

CONTACT Jemima Repo  jemima.repo@newcastle.ac.uk

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new materialism or social reproduction theory. But in part it must also be attributed to the fact that postfoundational thought has always been interested in the event.

Hardly a single postfoundational author 'has been able to refrain from proffering an event-theory of some sort, whether that theory be thematic or latent, explicit or merely operative' (Zangeneh 2012: 363). From Martin Heidegger and Hannah Arendt to Jacques Derrida and Alain Badiou, the event is commonly understood as a rare and singular occurrence, crisis or rupture that ushers in a radically new formation. It cuts through notions of time, history, and truth, and therefore, effectively, political change and transformation. In recent history, the Gulf War, the Occupy movement and the financial crisis have all been analysed through evental theory in the attempt to make sense of the major political shifts in truth and knowledge that they may or may not entail.

It is thus no surprise that, regardless of whether it is explicitly articulated or not, a theory of the event also underpins most if not all of the more philosophical responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, in the attempt to grasp the significance of this historical moment, the ways in which the pandemic as an event is conceptualized are by no means homogenous. Already at the beginning of the pandemic, many theorists framed it as a crisis event that exposed longstanding failings (for instance, of governance, care, neoliberalism, environmental destruction, animal welfare), disrupted various local and global processes (such as education, work, leisure, trade, transportation, migration), and ushered in new social, economic, and political practices and policies (such as mask wearing, remote working, mutual aid, accelerated digitalization, the closure of international borders). The event, we are told, holds many 'lessons' (Rothman 2021) that we must try to grasp.

Given these varied ways of seeing the 'pandemic event', in this article we pause to consider how our understanding of the 'event' produces particular ways of viewing and evaluating the present moment. We maintain that how we theorize the event shapes our critical processes of understanding and meaning-making. What, then, does postfoundational theory have to offer to the task of theorizing the COVID-19 pandemic, this major event of our time? How should the 'event' be approached, what issues should be addressed, what questions should be asked in the first place? These are obvious but not necessarily straightforward questions for political and social theorists hoping, in some way, to analyse, understand or explain the pandemic. To tackle them, we begin by examining existing postfoundational theoretical discourse around the pandemic, then use this as a foil to propose two alternative ways of conceptualizing the event through the work of Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault. Thinking the event with Deleuze and Foucault invites us to pause from assessing the COVID-19 pandemic as an event and instead consider it as *evental* – internally multiple, dynamic and contingent in its external form and effect, it is necessarily constituted by other events, and holds the potential to become or produce other events. Where existing theories of the pandemic event attribute the former with a fixed and ontologically rooted political quality, we suggest that any political force the pandemic can unfold is always made after the fact, and is contingent on what is (counter-)effectuated from the pandemic, or which discursive dispersions both intersect with and unfold from it. The significance of a Deleuzian and Foucauldian reconsideration of the event for critical theory is thus methodological: rather than effecting change or continuity, it gives insight to how

(post-)pandemic societies are produced, and where openings for the actualization of alternatives might lie.

Mapping the event postfoundational pandemic theory

In the following, we will provide a structured overview of the postfoundational pandemic theory that has been generated since March 2020. Using exemplary authors and comments, we will draw out how the existing literature is dominated by three distinct perspectives: the pandemic is either (1) no event at all, (2) a politically reproductive exception or (3) a materially rooted moment of creative potentiality.

While a large part of the existing pandemic theory tries to understand the pandemic as event and develop suggestions for its social and political significance, the first perspective on COVID-19 is comprised of a small number of scholars who resolutely reject the idea that the pandemic is an event at all. Alain Badiou, thinker of the great eventual rupture, argues that ‘the current situation, characterized by a viral pandemic’ is ‘nothing new under the contemporary sun’ (2020). The pandemic is a far cry from his conception of the event as an extraordinary ‘opening up of possibilities’ (2013: 10): human communities have been swept by deadly epidemics before; the way this particular coronavirus brings death and despair follows the established lines of global and social inequality. Beans Velocci suggests along the same lines that we are not so much living in uncertain times but that rather, in ‘these times, uncertainty is being actively made’ (2020) to conceal the fact that nothing has really changed. Social marginalization and economic exploitation, for instance that of pink collar workers or those staffing Amazon warehouses, might be more immediately visible now but are in fact simply continuing in their pre-pandemic trajectories, exposing those to the lethal threat of the virus who societies had already left to die (Velocci 2020; Montag 2020; see also: Butler and Wade 2020). In *Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency* (2020), Andreas Malm argues that the COVID-19 pandemic is merely a symptom of the real, underlying event of climate change caused by the forces of global capitalism which the pandemic has briefly interrupted but ultimately left unchanged. While the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed that State curtailing of production and consumption is possible, pandemic governance has failed because it did not address the underlying cause of the virus’ emergence and spread, which lies in the capitalist exploitation of wildlife and workers, ‘the reappearing imprint of one meta driver. Capital’ (Malm 2020: 56).

For Giorgio Agamben, something significant *did* happen in the coronavirus pandemic. In his infamous first comment, Agamben suggests that the ‘disproportionate reaction to what according to the CNR [National Research Council] is something not too different from the normal flus’ (2020a) can only be understood through the lens of political exceptionalism. The threat of Islamic terrorism, which had steadily supplied Western governments with opportunities to reproduce their power through the exercise of force throughout the course of the twenty-first century, has run its course. It had to be replaced with a new emergency – and COVID-19 has filled this vacancy. Scholars unpacking the pandemic through an exceptionalist lens do not suggest that it is entirely manufactured but propose that it’s *representation* as a severe threat to human communities is the politically constructed hinge for the current iteration of a political governance that reproduces itself in the exception.¹ The biomedical crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic has strengthened

the biopolitical grasp of sovereign power, whether it is through measures of surveillance and ‘nudging’ on the inside of the population to be saved, or at its margins, where it has made possible for instance a further securitization of migrants (Short 2020; Tazzioli 2020).

A parallel line of argumentation identifies the COVID-19 pandemic as a politically productive moment that sustains a sovereign power that has always been Hobbesian (Toscano 2020; Runciman 2020). Following Alberto Toscano, the perpetual alienation of the subject’s political will in exchange for health and security is the foundation and essence of liberal-democratic politics. The sovereign Leviathan has always made use of ‘[w]ar and epidemics’ as ‘the context for the incorporation of now-powerless subjects into the sovereign’ (Toscano 2020); it requires the plague event in order to demonstrate its necessity for protecting citizens from its effects. As long as the Hobbesian link between ‘health, law and the state’ (Toscano 2020) remains uninterrupted, crisis events like the COVID-19 pandemic can only unfold a reproductive political force. Viewed from an exceptionalist angle, the pandemic event is productive – but its productivity is always-already enfolded with the representations of a governmental apparatus and can thus only unfold in one direction, towards the reproduction of a social and political status quo.

The third perspective that dominates the existing literature on the pandemic adopts the opposite position. Here, the materially real rupture of economic production and social interaction – which involved a powerful new participant, the virus – creates a moment of open potentiality. This momentary externality to existing social relations is no guarantee for actual change, but a real opportunity for the former. The virus impacts on existing social relations and alliances from a material outside, either demanding or itself performing a reconfiguration of these relations (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos 2020; Valdés 2021). The emergence and spread of the virus have ushered in a ‘Virocene’ (Fernando 2020: 637) that has altered all aspects of human life and ‘demands fundamentally rethinking the relationship between humanity and nature at the global level’ (Fernando 2020: 637). Benjamin Bratton views the pandemic as a ‘revenge of the real’ (2021: 23) that requires, and stipulates, the invention of a new ‘model of governance based on planetary-scale technological rationalism’ (2021: 29) to leave behind the latent technophobia and individualistic vitalism he sees present in both Continental philosophy and populist politics. Slavoj Žižek’s two *Pandemic!* volumes conceptualize the pandemic as a creative-transformative event rooted in the profound rupture of economic-material relations which repeated lockdowns and production restrictions brought about. After the pandemic has caused ‘economic havoc conceivably worse than the Great Recession’, Žižek is certain that there cannot be a ‘return to normal, the new “normal” will have to be constructed on the ruins of our old lives’ (2020a: 3).

In line with Žižek, several thinkers express hope that the material-economic rupture of the pandemic event would bring in its wake the death of neoliberalism (Barker 2020; Jones 2020) which ‘cannot survive the virus for five minutes’ (Jones 2020).² After the COVID-19 rupture, following Žižek, the only choices available are an even more unequal capitalism, under which the 1% are exponentially increasing their wealth while workers are rendered not only financially but also physically insecure, or the construction of a political alternative from the collective practices of production and care which have become visible, at least as contours, during the pandemic (Žižek 2020a: 108-115; 2020b: 47-48). The social reproduction crisis of COVID-19 has irrevocably

revealed that the ‘health of people and the health of the economy are not separate’ (Barker 2020: 34), and thereby opened-up a ‘portal’ (Barker 2020: 28) to a truly collective political community. Jean-Luc Nancy similarly suggests that the standstill caused by the ‘commu-novirus’ (Nancy 2020) COVID-19 provides a genuine opportunity to better understand what lies at the heart of communal life – a collectively shared experience of fragile singularity (Nancy 1991: 22–38) or, as Elettra Stimili puts it, being ‘in common at a distance’ (2020). The pandemic event here creates an opening for developing alternatives to both individualism and collectivism towards a genuinely new form of political and economic organization based on a communal spirit of shared limitedness and vulnerability (Nancy 2020; Nancy and Bouthors 2020).

The majority of the existing postfoundational pandemic theory identifies the COVID-19 pandemic as entailing or unfolding a clearly defined – either reproductive or creatively open-ended – political quality. The pandemic’s political quality is here underpinned by its status as *event*. Both the reproductive and the rupturing interpretation of the pandemic assume that it is indeed an event, that it is something exceptional and reveals or unfolds something unique that political thought must capture, analyse and interpret. Can we assume this much outright? Is there not the possibility that the year 2020 will not be remembered for COVID-19, just as 1918 is not remembered for the Spanish flu? In the following sections, we revisit Deleuze’s and Foucault’s notions of the event. Their alternative perspectives serve as a provocation towards all three existing perspectives on the pandemic event. With them, we will interrogate and subvert the rigid distinctions between event and non-event, reproductive and creative event. The point is not that we should not presume to analyse the pandemic, but rather that we should not presume that the pandemic is the central point or driving force that defines the course of social life henceforth.

Untimely interpretations and leaps of imagination: COVID-19 as a Deleuzian event

We will first turn to Deleuze as a theorist of the evental pandemic, not the pandemic event. While traces of Deleuze’s theory of the event can be found in most of his works, the event is most systematically explored in *The Logic of Sense*. The book develops a postfoundational ontology of events which overcomes any notion of foundational primacy in favour of thinking worldmaking as taking place on the inside of sense relations (Bowden 2011). Sense relations are always materially and epistemologically conditioned, yet they are immanently creative because sense is inherently excessive, or, to put it differently, evental. The evental quality of sense is tied to its perpetual, transgressive self-displacement. As ‘the fourth dimension of the proposition’ (Deleuze 1990: 19), expressed sense is never identical to either of its composite elements, idea, material object and linguistic meaning, and, as soon as it is expressed, opens up new opportunities for such transgressive sense-expression. In Deleuze’s words, sense ‘is an incorporeal, complex, and irreducible entity, at the surface of things, a pure event which inheres or subsists in the proposition’ (1990: 19). For the context of this paper, two aspects of Deleuze’s ‘sense-event’ (Deleuze 1990:31) are of particular interest: firstly, Deleuze’s relationally immanent event is always both conditioned and creative; secondly, to produce manifest change, the event must be counter-effectuated.

The concept of the event that Deleuze develops in *The Logic of Sense* draws heavily on Stoic philosophy. A first important concept is here the Stoic idea of the *incorporeal* – events are ‘incorporeal events-effects’ (Deleuze 1990: 94). For the Stoics, ontogenesis is never the product of external causes. What functions creatively are instead the ‘quasi-causes’ of mixed bodies: incorporeals. Bodies are the only things that exist and have the capacity to act. It is however important to note the Stoics’ broad understanding of bodies, which encompasses objects and living organisms just as it includes the metaphysical bodies of ideas and souls (Voss 2013: 15). The actions of, and links between, physical and metaphysical bodies create the incorporeal effects which make, shape and change the particular state of the world we live in (Butler 2005: 132; Widder 2008: 102). For the Stoic, it is neither the corporeal of the knife nor that of the criminal idea but the incorporeal of being cut emerging from their interaction that causes the wound. The creativity of the event understood as an incorporeal effect dismembers our conventional understanding of causality to impose an entirely ‘new distribution... on beings and concepts’ (Deleuze 1990: 6). Events are only ‘quasi-causes’ (Deleuze 1990: 6) insofar as they are always themselves conditioned and result from the synthesis of both material and epistemic bodies. However, at the same time, they unfold a productive force which is qualitatively different from that of its bodily composites (Patton 1997).

What is actualized through the productive force of Deleuze’s sense-event depends on how the former is located in relations of time. Deleuze takes yet again inspiration from the Stoics to argue that the event takes place in the interaction between two different times: *Chronos* and *Aion*. The chaotic present of Chronos ‘measures the action of bodies as causes’ (Deleuze 1990: 61). To create sense in time, and thus history, the instantaneous Chronos must interact with a second time: the ‘unlimited past and future’ (Deleuze 1990: 61) of the Aion. The Aion is the time of the evental incorporeality insofar as it does not in itself exist as an actual timeline, but rather contains a multiplicity of past-future timelines which Chronos can render actual (Lundborg 2009; Deleuze 1990: 60-63). Because of the uncertain, incalculable nature of its productive effects, Deleuze, in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, refers to the evental Aion as ‘a child who plays, plays at draughts’ (2006: 24). In a different place in his work, Deleuze uses a strikingly similar set of expressions, the ‘divine game’ of a ‘child-player’ (1994: 116), to refer to different kind of event: Nietzsche’s eternal return.

The potentiality of the Aion must thus be understood as that of the eternal return, in which the creative potentiality of Deleuze’s pure difference returns to the otherwise ‘too well centred natural or physical circle’ (Deleuze 1994: 115) of time. The eternal return creates the conditions for both the reproduction of the same and the actualization of change through its ‘reproduction of diversity at the heart of synthesis’ (Deleuze 2006: 52). Worldmaking in sense unfolds, for Deleuze, from the contingent connection of Chronos’ present to one of the multiple past-futures of the Aion. While ‘the living present, happens and brings about the event’, ‘the event nonetheless retains an eternal truth upon the line of the Aion, which divides it eternally into a proximate past and an imminent future’ (Deleuze 1990: 63). In other words, the mixture of material and epistemic bodies in the present of Chronos initiate the evental moment, they make an event happen. But which world will be produced as a consequence, and where it lies between the completely unchanged continuity of the world we currently live in and its radical

change, depends on how Chronos links to the Aion, ‘the Event for all events’ (Deleuze 1990: 64).

To understand how the open potentiality of the sense-event that Chronos draws from the Aion can be actualized towards manifest transformation, it is necessary to introduce a third kind of time: *Kairos*, the right time, the time of the transformative event. In Nietzsche, Kairos marks a critical moment in the present where ‘the access [to] an untimely creative force’ (Leston 2013: 42) allows it to change the direction in which the future unfolds (Nietzsche 2002: 167-169). Nietzsche’s Kairos is thoroughly contextual, and unfolds from the particular relations it is to disrupt. The productive moment of the right time is only ‘right’ for a particular philosophical, political or social order (Nietzsche 1999: 18-34; 93-110; 2002: 168). Deleuze himself uses the concept of timing in jazz music to illustrate the creative capacity of Kairos as the ‘favourable occasion, the opportunity, the spot ... the moment when the trumpet can take things over there’ (1981: 8).

As Deleuze states in *Nietzsche & Philosophy*, the right time does not create transformative events, it rather ‘interprets’ (2006: 55) the event. The right time is not the condition for or intrinsic quality of the event but something drawn from it in a secondary act of interpretation, which renders the event creative. For the three syntheses of time that Deleuze unpacks in *Difference and Repetition*, the right time is the operator of the third synthesis of the future: it draws something new from the past to allow a different present to unfold (Deleuze 1994: 89-93).

This evental interpretation can be better understood with the help of Deleuze’s concept of counter-effectuation.³ In Deleuze, counter-effectuation is linked closely to the Nietzschean task of willing the event or becoming ‘worthy of the event’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 160) that marks the aim of critical philosophy and activism. This counter-effectuation is sometimes understood as the subject’s ethical challenge to recognize ‘themselves as the fortuitous case, as just like everyone else (perhaps as all the names in history)’ (Ansell Pearson 1997: 81; see also: Widder 2008) beyond the liberal modern figments of autonomous agency and fixed human identity. Understood in this sense, the practice of counter-effectuation alters the trajectory of subjective synthesis in time to allow a different future self to emerge. Different from this line of interpretation, we suggest that counter-effectuation does not need to be read as an inwards-oriented ethical challenge for the subject, but can be related directly to the task of thinking and enacting the event (Patton 1997). As Deleuze writes with Guattari in *What is Philosophy?*, the event is ‘counter-effectuated whenever it is abstracted from states of affairs so as to isolate its concept’ (1994: 159). The practice of counter-effectuation is then specified in the following way:

Philosophy is always meanwhile. Mallarme, who counter-effectuated the event, called it Mime because it side-steps the state of affairs and ‘confines itself to perpetual allusion without breaking the ice.’ Such a mime neither reproduces the state of affairs nor imitates the lived; it does not give an image but constructs the concept. ... Not willing what happens, with that false will that complains, defends itself and loses itself in gesticulations, but taking the complaint and rage to the point that they are turned against what happens so as to set up the event, to isolate it, to extract it in the living concept (Deleuze and Guattari 1994:159-160).

So how should we view the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of Deleuze’s philosophy? At a first glance, Deleuze seems close to thinkers like Žižek or Nancy who call for

making use of the pandemic disruption to make sense of the world differently, to rethink and reform the political community. Despite this superficial alignment, we suggest that Deleuze's philosophy in fact cautions against readily identifying the COVID-19 pandemic as a (transformative) event. Deleuze is often viewed as a philosopher of the event, and certainly not without reason (Zourabichvili 2012; Beck and Gleyzon 2016). But one would be mistaken to equate Deleuze's event with the in itself decisive historical moment which the concept conventionally marks – and which the pandemic, for those scholars who view it as an event, idealtypically exemplifies. For Deleuze, events are not extraordinary at all – all incorporeal effects that unfold motions and activity as a result of the interaction between bodies are events. Cutting a loaf of bread is an event, just like cutting through skin is. 'Lacking a determinable "being"', as Tom Lundborg writes in his political application of Deleuze's event, 'events cannot be identified in terms of what is, nor can they be linked to a fixed centre of convergence' (Lundborg 2009).

Where the existing pandemic theory distinguishes sharply between whether or not the pandemic is an event, and what kind of event it is, if it is one indeed, Deleuze's philosophy of the event cuts across these distinctions. The pandemic is an event, or rather composed of a multiplicity of events – but only to the extent that every other incorporeal effect is too. It is evental rather than an event of unique and decisive quality. The pandemic can function transformative – but no more or less than any other event-effect can, including cutting a loaf of bread (whether and under what conditions this transformative potential is ever actualized is of course a separate matter). Viewed through the lens of Deleuze's sense-event, the material reality of the viral threat of COVID-19, and of the changes it brought in its wake, do not automatically render it (more) creative or transformative, and neither do they safeguard it against becoming a tool for the reproduction of a pre-pandemic status quo. For Deleuze, the event must be counter-effectuated to unfold a transformative potential. The transformative event is thus made after the fact, in the way the event is received an acted upon in context.

But at the same time, the politically and epistemically enfolded nature of the COVID-19 event does not bind it to a politically reproductive fate, as Deleuze's sense-events are always both conditioned and creative. As Paul Patton observes, 'event attributions do not simply describe or report pre-existing events' (1997) for Deleuze, but rather are an intrinsic part of what creates the event in its specific actuality. For this reason, 'politics frequently takes the form of struggle over the appropriate description of events' (Patton 1997). Even if we adopt the exceptionalist perspective to argue that the widespread acceptance of lockdown measures and tax-funded state support schemes indicates a renewed faith in sovereign authority and its necessity, understood with Deleuze, the evental pandemic exception can still unfold unexpected political consequences. One such consequence might be that the pandemic seems to have weakened the populist political forces that dominated pre-pandemic politics with their calls for minimal governmental intervention, as the election defeats of Donald Trump in the US and Keiko Fujimori in Peru as well as substantial voter losses for right-wing populist parties in France and Germany indicate (Caulcutt 2021; Nasr 2021).

In order to actually function transformatively, the event needs to be counter-effectuated in Deleuze. In *Nietzsche & Philosophy*, he argues that that any interpretation of the event in the context of universal history marks the triumph of reactive over creative forces and is therefore an act of nihilism (Deleuze 2006: 139-140; 152). Deleuze, like

Nietzsche, ‘has no faith in great resounding events’ (2006: 152). An event instead ‘needs silence and time to discover finally the forces which give it an essence’ (Deleuze 2006: 152). Following Deleuze, the philosopher who aims at counter-effectuation must resist any hasty interpretation of the event. Both in the mind of the thinker and in the society impacted by the event, it is only over time that the event, through interpretation, can be given a significance ‘that it did not contain in itself’ (Deleuze 2006: 152). The rupturing externality which the creative-transformative perspective presumes for the event is here a product of interpretation, ‘the magnificent gift of exteriority’ (Deleuze 2006: 152.) given to the event after it has taken place. Read in this light, existing perspectives on the pandemic event, both those that readily classify it as politically reproductive and those that view it as a genuine opportunity for change, have not allowed for enough silence and passed time to interpret the pandemic. Rather, their perspectives seem thoroughly entangled with established historical tropes and timelines.

Classifying the pandemic as a sovereign exception that functions equivalent to the English Civil War or 9/11 glosses over rather than draws out any particular significance of COVID-19. Žižek’s (2020a) post-pandemic political programme and Malm’s pandemic ‘war communism’ (2020: 105), which he suggests to utilize against the ecological crisis of climate change, are obvious reiterations of past left-wing narratives. The creative pandemic event, like its exceptionalist counterpart, is built from the frameworks and gestures of universal history – totalization, unprecedentedness, turning points, state actors and the alliances they form. What differs between the respective evental framings is merely the particular way they use the established events and narratives of modern history to give meaning to the pandemic event – a link to the Spanish Flu, the Second World War or the neoliberal turn at the end of the twentieth century. For Deleuze, any effectuation of the event that draws on the timelines and tropes of history as it is written now is doomed to fail in its transformative aspirations because it leaves unchallenged, or worse even reproduces, the epistemic frameworks and power structures which the universal history of modernity upholds.

A Deleuzian counter-effectuation which interprets the event to draw from it a new past that opens a new future instead requires detachment – and a certain leap of imagination. In *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze describes the counter-effectuation that draws the occasion for change from the event as ‘the replacement of physic ingression by speculative investment’ (1990: 238) through the ‘leap from one surface [of sense] to another’ (Deleuze 1990: 238). Deleuze here borrows from another important thinker of the event, Alfred North Whitehead. In the opening pages of *Process and Reality*, Whitehead repeatedly speaks of the need for an ‘imaginative leap’ (1978: 4) or ‘leap of the imagination’ (1978: 13) which would allow philosophy to understand phenomena beyond the limits of existing trajectories of meaning. Like Deleuze, Whitehead uses a negative turn of phrase to describe this imaginative leap in the connective moment of the event – not as counter-effectuation, but as negation. A leap of imagination requires the thinker to negate rather than accept the connective opportunities most obvious, most readily available in the sphere of abstractions. It is not the simple actualization of a pre-given evental potentiality that is just waiting to unfold its rupturing force but it implies an imaginative-conceptual move against the grain to effectuate something genuinely different from the event. Deleuze’s counter-effectuation seems to echo Wendy Brown’s scepticism towards a theorizing the political event and her call for ‘decentering

the event, working around it, treating it as contingency' (1997) as the task for a critical political theory.

Speculating about what such a counter-effectuation of the COVID-19 pandemic could look like, we suggest that it requires resisting the idea that the 'right time' of the pandemic event has anything to do with the 'major' happenings of pandemic governance, viral ethics and vaccine distribution. One must look for it in unexpected places – such as the killing of George Floyd, and the protests against structural racism that erupted in its wake. In his essay 'Present Tense 2020: An Iconology of the Epoch', W.J.T. Mitchell asks on the topic of Floyd's murder: 'Why did it make such an impression? Why did it go viral? I hope it does not seem cold-blooded to ask this question. His murder was cruel and indifferent, but we also know that it was not exceptional. [...] This is not the first video of a police murder: [...] What made the images of Floyd's murder exceptional?' (Mitchell 2020). Mitchell's answer focuses on the affective quality of the video footage, the 8 min and 48 s during which Floyd repeated 'I can't breathe' at least 28 times to the police officer kneeling on his neck.

The lens of Deleuze's sense-event instead prompts us to turn to the interpretive context in which the video footage was watched and shared. In May 2020, at the height of the pandemic's first wave, many citizens of Western industrialized nations found themselves confined to their homes under lockdown restrictions. Counter-effectuating the pandemic event might mean locating its conceptual core and significance in the peculiar combination of spatial confinement and stillness, and heightened digital attention it created when computer and phone screens became the main vehicles for labour, leisure and news about the unfolding pandemic. Maybe this combination rendered the pandemic the 'right time' for the killing of Floyd to spark a wave of protests, generating a far-reaching, politicized public attention on issues of structural racism. Illustrated clearly by the toppling of the statue of slave trader Edward Colston into the Bristol harbour, the Black Lives Matter protests very explicitly sought to reopen universal history to reveal its colonial underpinnings and complexities, and draw a different kind of future from it. While it is unclear whether and how the BLM protests achieved manifest change on a socio-structural and institutional level (Bratton 2021: 291-295), they nevertheless seem closer to Deleuze's idea of revolutionizing the landscape of thought by counter-effectuating the event than any pandemic theory.

Eventualising the pandemic: COVID-19 and Foucault's event

Foucault's work, especially his concept of biopolitics, has served as a major reference point for analysing the vast politics of COVID-19, from the discipline of bodily movements and personal hygiene to changing of practices of care, work, and mobility (e.g. de Kloet et al. 2020, Lorenzini 2021, Rose 2020). What, however, does his notion of the event have to offer the study of the pandemic? The concept of the event is present throughout Foucault's work, with, we argue, particular methodological use and significance. Foucault is not interested in events as points or 'instants in time' (Foucault 1972: 231) but rather as 'event[s] in the order of knowledge' (OOT: 376). This reflects his broader approach to historical analysis that traces the conditions of knowledge that produce certain issues or objects as 'problems' instead of reconstructing or assessing historical chains of events, or their causes or effects.

In the *History of Madness*, Foucault refers to several historical transformations of thought as events, most notably the Great Confinement. He describes it as ‘an institutional creation peculiar to the seventeenth century’ that was not merely an economic policy and social invention. ‘In the history of unreason,’ Foucault writes, ‘it signals a decisive event: the moment when madness is seen against the social horizon of poverty, the inability to work and the impossibility of integrating into a social group. It was a moment when it started to be classified as one of the problems of the city’ (Foucault 2006: 77). The eventfulness of confinement therefore lies not in its historical location or even the fact that it marks the physical removal of the mad from public space. It is the new problematisation of madness, which becomes connected to parallel moral and social obligations to work, and therefore became approached entirely differently as a social problem, both discursively and practically. The newly emerged experience of madness, Foucault argues, cannot be grasped without understanding its connection to the condemnation of idleness that came to treat poverty, unemployment, vagrancy, and insanity as moral failures. Therefore, because Foucault concerns himself with events as ‘historical problems rather than periods’ (Flynn 2005: 61) the status, scale, or meaning of the event is not pre-determined by its timespan or perceived historical significance, but rather the elicitation of ontological and epistemological questions around a given discourse that precipitates a knowledge struggle over truth.

In his lecture *The Discourse on Language*, Foucault rearticulates the event from another angle by discussing the notion of the ‘discursive event’. Rather than making a point about the discursivity of the event (that events are constituted through the linguistic expression of power/knowledge), Foucault uses the concept of the event to articulate his specific understanding of discourse. Discourse, for Foucault is not about ‘sign or structure’, nor about ‘dealing with meanings possibly lying behind this or that discourse’, but his point is that discourse is evental, understanding ‘discourse as regular series and distinct events’ (Foucault 1972: 231). Archaeology therefore is not about unveiling sinister forces behind discourse, but rather the critical documentation and analysis of changes unleashed by the emergence of new discourses (i.e. events). However, these do ‘not represent a “revolution” in thought or consciousness’ nor any continuity, but rather, as Hayden White puts it, they are simply ‘the forms of expression which consciousness takes in its effort to comprehend its essential mystery’ (White 1973: 27). Events are therefore spatially and temporally specific responses to a particular problem.

These responses should be understood as enacting a dispersion of the constitutive elements of knowledge. Such ruptures do not swipe the slate clean and establish singularly new paradigms (as would occur in Badiou’s concept of the event), but rather entail a ‘general redistribution of the episteme’ (Foucault 2002: 376, emphasis added). This idea of the event as redistributive offers a contrasting angle to the pandemic that is neither reproductive nor revolutionary. There is a claim to novelty, but this is novelty without externality, propelled through a rearrangement rather than a displacement and replacement of existing elements. It is this rearrangement that for Foucault allows the paradoxical expression of the emergence of something new that is nonetheless oddly familiar. We can witness this at work in the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, we can point to the emergence of a new epidemiological vocabulary around which daily life becomes orientated, around terms such as social distancing, R-numbers, flattening the curve, self-isolation, PPE, and community spread. These terms, and their accompanying

practices, are not new. They have a history that goes back decades, sometimes centuries, yet have at this particular moment broken past their more usual discursive fields. Through a redistribution of power/knowledge, they have taken a hold of daily patterns and routines beyond the spaces of public health expertise. For many, the pandemic instantiated a shift in our grasp of everyday life and in social practices, effectively a biopolitical reconstitution of everyday life where virtually each aspect of it, such as personal hygiene, social contact, nutrition, mobility and employment, became reconstructed through the lens of COVID-19. The point is here not whether the pandemic is an event or not, but how the idea of the event might help illuminate the ways in which pandemic rationalities have melded with and restructured our ontological understanding of ourselves and societies, and by extension the material practices that shape them. Where Deleuze pushes us to recover the small evental moments from the pandemic, Foucault shows that the pandemic is intelligible only by referring back to larger, longer-standing social formations that far exceed the pandemic (cf. Chambers 2014: 43).

Yet, for Foucault, changes in the use of language and way of life are not enough to constitute an event, or even to signal the existence of one. In fact, for Foucault, while he may clarify what events involve (such as the redistribution of knowledge) the event has no particular criteria whatsoever that allow us to identify whether something is or is not an 'event'. The event is only weakly ontological because it is primarily a methodological concept. In Foucault's early work, the event is key for articulating his distinctive approach to history focused on 'discontinuity and rupture, rather than as a progressive narrative based on the logic of cause and effect' (Huffer 2010: xi). In other words, his aim is not to uncover the causes of historical events, but to investigate the contingent play of power/knowledge that establish certain facts or knowledge as true. In his later work, as Foucault develops the concept of eventualisation (*événementialisation*, sometimes also translated as eventalisation), the description of a given phenomenon as an event is a methodological move in itself. Tied to his genealogical method, which aims to examine the conditions through which knowledge is established as true, eventualisation is what genealogy 'does': it interrogates 'what are the connections that can be identified between mechanisms of coercion and elements of knowledge... such that a given element of knowledge takes on the effects of power in a given system' (Foucault 2007a: 59). Its effect is to instigate 'a break of self-evidence', challenging the ideas and beliefs that we take for granted as truth. By insisting that we think of discourses not as language but events, Foucault contests the presumed self-explanatory nature of such things. The basic tenets that shape liberal society, such as freedom, rights, and the autonomous self, do not simply exist, but emerge at specific times and places. Both discourse and material processes, therefore, are events insofar as we seek to eventualise them.

The effect of eventualisation on the object of study is the multiplication of points of intelligibility and engagement. To study an event is not to study a particular point in time and its causes, but rather to multiply the timespans of events. The aim of genealogy, the broader framework in which eventualisation is carried out, is 'to restore the conditions for the appearance of a singularity born out of multiple determining elements of which it is not the product, but rather the effect' (Foucault 2007a: 64). Eventualisation accomplishes this restoration by 'continually enlarging the field of events, constantly discovering new layers [and] incessantly isolating new ensembles' (Foucault 1972: 230). For Foucault, history is composed not of single but multiple, intertwined time spans. Each of

these time spans carries with it particular kinds of events, therefore multiplying also the number of events that must be taken into account (Foucault 1998: 430). When we eventualise the pandemic, then, it is not a matter of treating the pandemic as an event of privileged importance, but as the name we give to the multiplicities that intersect, both giving rise to and emanating from the 'pandemic'. In the process, the pandemic itself is de-centred as we multiply the points of engagement with the pandemic, creating connections to other events rather than cutting them off. This is the necessary effect of eventualising the pandemic in its multiplicity, composed of the capitalist destruction of habitats and wildlife, global movement of people and commodities, practices of public health, big pharma, populist movements, and so on, all of which are events with their own time spans, but are also borne along this pandemic series, continually re-constituting it in various mutations across space and time.

Eventualisation resonates with Deleuze's notion of counter-effectuation, as a methodological approach with which to give events 'back the mobility they had and that they always should have' (Foucault 2007b: 138). Eventualisation dissects the series in which events are organized, producing 'a multiplicity of possible positions and functions' (Foucault 1972: 231). Like eventualisation, counter-effectuation 'returns to the vital structure of events, in order to re-actualise them in another manner' (Cowell 1997). C. Cowell argues that for Deleuze and Foucault, this is tied to the question of the problematic and problematisation, respectively. Deleuze argues that problems function to pare things down to something that has a narrowly defined, specific solution. Events, by contrast, do not have solutions except to the extent that they are effectuated. Foucault would call this process problematisation – 'making the event into a problem again' (Cowell 1997).

But, in addition to engaging with problematisation as a methodology (see Koopman 2013: 87-153), problematisation is also what genealogy is examining – how things *become* problems. The pandemic, we would argue, is productive in the Foucauldian sense: it has reproblematised a number of issues, disrupting conventional practices and ways of reasoning and posing anew questions about how we ought to think, act, conduct ourselves and organize social, political and economic life. The discursive responses to such questions, or, the potential events that they might give rise to, are still in formation, and they may well eventually conform to or perpetuate variations of existing neoliberal governmentality and populism. But, it is possible to note how the 'pandemic' has been productive of certain problematisations, relating for example to climate change and the environment, global mobility, inequality, and perhaps most strikingly for political theory, the limits of the state.

Specifically, popular discourse, through governments, workplaces and media and social media collectively have posed the question: what is the responsibility of the individual, the collective, and the state vis-à-vis one another? For example, following two decades of austerity enforced with the neoliberal logic of 'there is no alternative' (Stubbs and Žitko 2018), in spring 2020 biopolitical imperatives at least momentarily undermined the dominance of neoliberal governmentality. Wages were widely state subsidised as workers in developed countries were furloughed, private healthcare was nationalized in some places (such as Spain), homeless people were housed and fed from the public purse. Vulnerable people such as the elderly were not just seen as unproductive population, but as people whose lives were need of care and protection (while at the

same time endangering others in vital sectors of the new pandemic service economy). Self-discipline was encouraged or demanded for the collective biopolitical good. While many societies and states responded to the question of the limits of the state by rehashing aspects of biopolitical welfarism, others voices issued populist responses that questioned the dangers or existence of COVID-19, the newly interventionist state, or neoliberal responses that called for individualized risk management (including the early 2020 ‘herd immunity’ argument) and the continued marketised management of public resources (such as the lack of a federal health supplies strategy in the US that made states compete for resources, causing prices to skyrocket). The contents of these problematisations have been highly unstable, changing across and within time and space since early 2020, and we have yet to see what notable redistributions they collectively will give rise to, if any.

Eventualising the pandemic, therefore, does not aim to reveal continuities or unmask its hidden workings, but rather, to multiply the possible points of engagement by examining the production of problematisations, results in the decentering of COVID-19. COVID-19 is not an event itself, but when eventualised, can be counter-actualized as a part of a number of series. It does not strive to provide a judgement on the nature of the event, whether it is reproductive or revolutionary, but rather to engage with it as contingent redistribution of knowledges.

Conclusion

In the beginning of this article, we asked how we ought to think about the ‘event’ of the pandemic, but a more appropriate question, when it comes to Deleuze and Foucault, would be how to think the multiplicity that lies beneath and beyond any pandemic event we can identify. This does not mean ignoring the impacts of COVID-19, but remaining open to what can be considered as relevant questions, topics, problems and impacts of the pandemic on social, political and economic life. Such an approach keeps critical approaches attuned to complex and interconnected ways in which ‘events’ continually unfold across time–space, without succumbing too easily into judgements of their repressive or revolutionary character.

In this paper we have argued that, despite their differences, Deleuze’s and Foucault’s complementary concepts of the event allow us to carve out an alternative critical approach to COVID-19. Deleuze and Foucault neither seek to delineate between events and non-events, nor to define or assess the contents of either. For both thinkers, the event is significant insofar as it can be broken down and re-actualized. Paraphrasing Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari (1994: 112) state that ‘the actual is not what we are but, rather, what we become, what we are in the process of becoming’. For Foucault, the event is not an object of inquiry, but a theoretical-methodological tool, an optic device, that redirects our attention from the present to the actual, recovering its complexity and contingency. For Deleuze, in turn, the actual is the open-ended terrain from which transformation unfolds.

Both Deleuze and Foucault offer theories of the event that are neither in the business of naming events nor reifying them, but rather call for a degree of detachment from them. When they speak of the event, it is only to break it open and de-centre it. This is why we describe Deleuzian and Foucauldian approaches to the pandemic as evental: the moment

we use their thought to address the event, the focus has already begun to shift away from it. COVID-19 is not self-evidently a reproductive exception: it is a contextually specific assemblage of a myriad of other longer-standing events – formations, practices, discourses, relations – to which it cannot be reduced. The revolutionary perspective is similarly reductive, forgoing the problematisation of actuality for political strategizing. As we have argued, the pandemic has also had many unexpected consequences, such as the downfall of Donald Trump and weakening of other right-wing populist movements. At the same time, the so-called ‘post-truth’ era both precedes and exceeds the pandemic, while playing an important role in its unfolding (e.g. conspiracy theories about COVID-19 and vaccines). From the perspective, the pandemic is not necessarily extraordinary, but rather evental, a unique yet integral part of our actuality. As such, we cannot assume that pandemic is the driving force that will define the dominant modes of post-pandemic human existence. Yet, the pandemic is evental insofar as an event can always still be drawn from it, or it can form a constitutive element of a future event.

Notes

1. Agamben’s suggestion that what the world experienced in the early months of 2020 was in fact ‘the invention of an epidemic’ (2020a) was critiqued widely, and forcefully (Bird 2020; Bratton 2021 – see also: de Boever in this issue). His ‘Clarifications’ formulated in response reframe his arguments away from diagnosing the ‘invented’ quality of the pandemic, which had placed him in uncomfortable proximity to the mask and vaccine scepticism of the populist right, and towards its ‘ethical and political consequences’ (Agamben 2020b). The exception not only renews but re-opens the toolbox of governmental measures available for sovereign power. Agamben’s concern is that the means of governmental control and surveillance implemented under the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic will become permanent fixtures of governmental control, just like the passport, which was originally introduced as a travel requirement at the height of the Spanish flu outbreak in 1920 (Kavalski and Ross Smith 2020).
2. For a more nuanced and skeptical analysis of whether the political responses to the pandemic in industrialised democracies really signal the end of neoliberalism or are rather to be understood as corrective action for its extension, see Tooze (2021).
3. Because of a certain ambiguity in the translation of the original French, counter-effectuation is sometimes also referred to, somewhat ambiguously, as counter-actualisation (e.g. see Lundborg 2009). For the context of this paper we will use the term effectuation/counter-effectuation in line with recent scholarship (Widder 2021) to make it clear that this is a process different from the actualization from the virtual which Deleuze unpacks in *Difference & Repetition*.

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Biographical note

Dr Jemima Repo is Reader in Feminist and Political Theory at Newcastle University. She has published widely in feminist political theory and biopolitics, including her book *The Biopolitics of Gender* (OUP, 2015). She is currently researching the commodification of feminist activism, and social reproduction and occupation in Palestine. Her work recently won the 2021 APSA Okin-Young Award in Feminist Political Theory.

Dr Hannah Richter is Lecturer in Politics and International Relations at the University of Hertfordshire, where she teaches Political Theory. Her research seeks to develop innovative pathways for contemporary continental theory, particularly in the area of biopolitics and through links to systems theory and ecology. Her work has been published in *International Political Sociology*, the *European Journal of Social Theory* and the *European Journal of Political Theory*. She has edited the collection *Biopolitics: Race, Gender, Economy* (2018, Rowman and Littlefield International) and is currently working on the monograph *Deleuze and Luhmann: sense, immanence, politics*.

ORCID

Jemima Repo  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7598-6589>

Hannah Richter  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5680-6888>

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