

“Gilles Deleuze’s ‘I recall’”, interview conducted by Didier Eribon, *Le Nouvel Observateur* , 1619, 16-22 November 1995, 50-51

*[Two years ago, the author of A Thousand Plateaus -- his favorite book -- opened up to our contributor Didier Eribon. He spoke of major intellectual figures -- Sartre, Canguilhem, Lacan, and Marx -- as well as the stakes involved in his joyful work as a philosopher. Here are excerpts from these previously unpublished remarks.]*

**Writing:** I do not write against anyone or anything. For me, writing is an absolutely positive act: it is articulating what one admires, rather than combating what one detests. To write merely to denounce is the lowest form of writing.

On the other hand, it is true that writing implies that something is amiss regarding the subject one wishes to address, that one is not satisfied. So, I’d say: I write against the preconceived idea. One always writes against preconceived ideas.

**Sartre:** Sartre was everything to me. Sartre was something phenomenal. During the Occupation, he represented a way of existing in the spiritual realm. Those who reproach him for having his plays performed during the Occupation clearly haven’t read them. Having “The Flies” performed, we’d have to compare that to Verdi having his work performed before the Austrians. All the Italians understood and shouted "Bravo!" They knew it was an act of resistance. It was exactly the same situation for Sartre.

*Being and Nothingness* was like a bombshell, and in this case, unlike with “The Flies”, not because it was immediately perceived as an act of resistance, but because it was a blinding revelation. An entire book, a massive one, filled with new thought. What a shock! I read it the moment it was published. I remember: I was with Tournier; we had gone out to buy it together. And we devoured it. Sartre obsessed the people of my generation. He wrote novels and plays, so everyone wanted to write novels or plays. Everyone imitated him. Or else they were jealous, irritated... As for me, he fascinated me. I was utterly fascinated by Sartre. And for me, there is a certain innovation to Sartre that will never be lost, an innovation that is eternal.

This is just like with Bergson. One cannot read a great author without discovering within their work an eternal innovation. And if, today, people dismiss Sartre or Bergson as outdated authors, it is because they no longer know how to recognize the innovation they embodied in their own time. And these two things are one and the same: if you cannot recognize an author’s innovation within the context of the era, you also miss the eternal innovation they carry within themselves. You’re no longer able to grasp what they present forever. Then, the reign of imitators arrives, who are the first to cast into the past those whom they’ve copied.

**Canguilhem:** When I took the entrance exam for the École Normale Supérieure, it was Canguilhem who administered my oral philosophy exam. He gave me a good grade, although it wasn't high enough to make up for my shortcomings in the other subjects. I failed to gain admission, but I did secure what was known as an agrégation scholarship. Since the policy of decentralization was already in effect, the scholarship was allocated for a university in the provinces. Jean Hyppolite, who had been my teacher during my preparatory years and who was very fond of me, said: "Come to Strasbourg." He had been appointed there after completing his doctoral thesis on Hegel. I didn't actually move there, however; I would travel to Strasbourg once a term simply to collect my scholarship stipend. And this way, I would attend Canguilhem's lectures. He spoke to us about authors we didn't know, authors we had never even heard of.

Whenever I went to Strasbourg, since I didn't live there, I saw a great deal of him. He had a small circle of people around him, and so I became part of "Canguilhem's gang." He was of enormous importance to me, both his teaching and his books. In fact, Canguilhem was profoundly important to every generation that passed through his hands, starting with my own. One could even go so far as to say that he shaped just about everyone

**Lacan:** He first took notice of me when he devoted a session of his seminar to my book on Sacher-Masoch [*Présentation de Sacher Masoch*, Minuit, 1967]. I was told -- though I never learned much more about this -- that he had spent nearly an hour discussing my book. Then, he came to give a lecture in Lyon, where I was teaching at the time. He put on an absolutely incredible performance for us... That was where he coined his famous maxim: "Psychoanalysis can do anything, except make an idiot intelligent." After the lecture, he came over to our place for dinner. And since he was a very late sleeper, he stayed for a very long time. I remember: it was past midnight, and he absolutely insisted on having a specific kind of whiskey. That evening was truly a nightmare. My only major encounter with him took place after the publication of *Anti-Oedipus* [in 1972]. I am certain he had taken it badly. He must have held a grudge against Félix and me. But anyway, a few months later, he summoned me; there's no other word for it. He wished to see me. And so, I went. He made me wait in his anteroom. The place was packed with people; one couldn't tell if they were patients, admirers, journalists... He kept me waiting for a long time, a bit too long, truth be told, and then, finally, he received me. He proceeded to run down a list of all his disciples, declaring that every single one of them was worthless (the only one he didn't speak ill of was Jacques-Alain Miller). I was inwardly chuckling because I was reminded of Binswanger recounting an identical scene: Freud speaking ill to him about Jones, about Abraham... And Binswanger was shrewd enough to realize that Freud must have been saying the very same things about him whenever he wasn't around. So, Lacan was speaking, and everyone had a turn, except Miller. And then he said to me: "It's someone like you that I need."

***A Thousand Plateaus:*** This book [Minuit, 1980] is the best of what Félix and I did together. And it's the best of everything I've done. Yes, I can say that it's surely the best work I've produced. It

wasn't a success, but it was a very beautiful book, I believe. Why wasn't it a success? Perhaps the book was too big. And above all, the times were no longer right for it.

**May '68:** This period was immensely rich for theory. If I look back at my own life experience, there was initially an extremely impoverished period – I'm referring to the war, of course. After the war, there was a tremendous cultural and intellectual explosion. And then came the desert, the 1950s. Next came an emergence from that desert, followed by another very intense era in the 1960s (marked by the *Nouvelle Vague* in cinema, and, to summarize, by Foucault and Lacan in the realm of theory). At that time, the intellectual landscape was teeming with activity. And now, currently, we find ourselves back in the desert. Yet this is not irreversible. We must distinguish between two cases: for those who already have a substantial body of work behind them, few difficulties exist; they can simply continue writing and traverse the desert. But for young people, the situation is catastrophic: it's difficult to make one's entry -- to be born, so to speak -- during a period of such aridity. For a young person who has something new to say, the situation is truly difficult.

What was of paramount importance during that era we were discussing -- the 1960s, May '68, and the few years that followed (an era that has, in truth, come to a definitive end today) -- was what I'd label a "new functionalism", a functionalism that was inseparable from a conception of philosophy as the creative activity of concept-formation. The objective was to forge concepts that would function within a specific social field. In Foucault's case, this is self-evident, for he's the one who pushed this creative process the furthest, introducing notions such as the "disciplinary society," which, in my view, constitutes an absolutely essential concept. These were concepts designed to operate within a field of immanence. And from the standpoint of philosophical tradition, this approach stood in opposition to two specific things: the recourse to transcendence, and a reflexive conception of philosophy -- that is, a philosophy whose primary function is merely to reflect upon something else.

In impoverished periods, like the present, what always occurs is a restoration of transcendence and a return to philosophy conceived as a 'reflection on.' It's also a return to university philosophy. So, here's what must be rediscovered now: philosophy as creation, not 'reflecting on,' but creating concepts; not seeking to discover kinds of transcendence, but making concepts function within fields of immanence.

**Marx:** I never joined the Communist Party (nor did I ever undergo psychoanalysis—I escaped all that). And I was never a Marxist before the 1960s. What kept me from being a Communist was seeing what they made their intellectuals endure.

And besides, I must also say that I was not a Marxist because, deep down, I did not know Marx at that time.

I read Marx at the same time as Nietzsche. I thought he was brilliant. And for me, these concepts remain valid. There's a critique contained within them, a radical critique. *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus* are thoroughly permeated by Marx, by Marxism. Today, I can say that I feel completely Marxist. The article I published on the "society of control," for example [reprinted in *Negotiations*, Minuit, 1990], is completely Marxist, and yet I'm writing about things that Marx knew nothing about.

I don't understand what people mean when they claim that Marx was wrong, and even less so when they say that Marx is dead. There are urgent tasks facing us today: we must analyze what the global market is, and what transformations it's undergoing. And to do this, we have to turn to Marx.

**Book:** My next book will be titled *Marx's Grandeur*. It will be my final book.

**Painting:** These days, I no longer have the desire to write. After my book on Marx, I think I'm going to quit writing. At which point I'll spend the rest of my time painting.