I’m going to start my presentation with a short digression.

In an interview with Deleuze from 1990, Antonio Negri is repeatedly, almost desperately, trying to extract from Deleuze how his theoretical conceptions translate into political praxis. And time and again Deleuze evades these questions, or at least he tries to bring Negri’s questions about insurrection, resistance and a communist utopia, back to ‘inconspicuous events’, to membranes in the brain, and ‘vacuoles of non-communication’.¹

Deleuze uses the word *vacuole* more often in his texts, for instance in a conversation from 1985 which is reprinted in *Negotiations*, where it is translated as ‘little gaps’—in the sentence ‘little gaps of solitude and silence in the insane quantities of [stupid and irrelevant] words and images’.² In French, *vacuole* can actually mean ‘interstice’, but just as in English it is primarily used to denote a specific part of a cell. Or actually, a non-part of the cell, that is a membrane-bound cavity within the cell, in the so called cytoplasm (which is, to put it simply, all matter surrounding the nucleus).

Deleuze recurrently uses biological metaphors, so it would not surprise me if he actually refers to this entity. Let us see how we can make this metaphor work. The little ‘empty’ space of silence folded in an environment ‘plagued’ by ‘pointless statements’, and ‘corrupted’ by money. A little island of non-communication in a turbulent social environment. As Deleuze says, ‘what a relief to have nothing to say, the right to say nothing, because only then is there a chance of framing the rare, and ever rarer, thing that might be worth saying.’³

It is in these small vacuoles of solitude and silence, in these interstices of non-communication that ‘we can elude control’, says Deleuze. And it is these ‘events that elude control’, that can ‘elude established forms of knowledge and dominant forms of power, even if they in their turn engender new forms of power or become assimilated into new forms of knowledge’. It is, says Deleuze these events, ‘however inconspicuous’ that we should precipitate. It is these ‘new space-times, however small their surface or...
volume’ that we should engender. That is Deleuze’s answer to a question by Negri about politics: the question was ‘what politics can carry into history the splendor of events and subjectivity.’

It is here, I would suggest, that Deleuze’s politics could be seen as a true micropolitics.

I will return to this, but allow me first to focus shortly on some more biological functions of vacuoles. There are quite a few different functions. First, they play an important role as a sort of fluid skeleton for plants. To simplify: they contain cell sap which causes a so called Turgor pressure to the cell wall and the surrounding cells which enables plants to stand up straight. Second, they can also store food nutrients which cells might need to survive. So if we stick to the metaphor, vacuoles are a sort of backbone of society, something we could say a society feeds on. Third, they enable the cell to change shape via a process called vacuole rupture, which can go really fast, but rarely ever happens in nature.

So generally, we could say that the metaphor works well to describe alternative spaces in societies where creativity thrives and rebellious events can take place outside the purview of the society of control. Places where resistance can be precipitated, however inconspicuous or small, and which can, eventually, although this rarely happens, change society.

A last important function of the vacuole is that of transporter or rather exporter of unwanted structural debris from the cell. Or it can isolate materials that might be harmful to the cell and export it or dissolve it or contain it indefinitely. If we bring this function of the vacuole to our metaphor then, what little space-time remained for politics, is discarded of completely, pushed out or digested or contained. It is here, some people would say, rephrasing Deleuze that politics ‘becomes-molecule to the point of becoming-imperceptible’. (Hold that thought, I will return to it shortly.) So Deleuze’s thought would not only leave little space for politics, but none at all. That is what some people suggest now anyway.

This is a relatively new stance in cultural studies. I gave a paper on a graduate conference in the Netherlands in 2000 in which I cast some doubt on the practical application of Deleuze’s thought, after which, a very lively discussion followed. These days, however, this is a fashionable idea. A whole list
of contemporary philosophers, including but not limited to, Alain Badiou, Peter Hallward, Jacques Rancière and Slavoj Žižek are critical of or should I say disillusioned, by exactly the political implications of Deleuze’s thought.

Let us focus now, shortly, on one of these critics, Jacques Rancière. He concludes in an essay on Deleuze’s reading of Melville’s story ‘Bartleby’ that Deleuze ultimately erects an impasse for politics. In Melville’s story the character of Bartleby is hired as a scriviner by a solicitor. At the third day after he started working in the office his employer asks him to do a certain task. Bartleby answers with the formula “I would prefer not to”. The solicitor is baffled: He responds: ‘You will not?’ but Bartleby quietly says ‘I prefer not’ and goes on with his copying work.\(^6\)

The formula, ‘I would prefer not to’, says Deleuze, is neither a refusal, nor an acceptance, but produces a state of suspension (\textit{Wolfe}). Indeed the solicitor does not know how to respond, and being busy he just leaves it at that. But a few days later, it happens again, and then again and in the end Bartleby also stops his regular copying work, but he does not leave the office. He remains working behind the screen that separates his desk from the desk of the solicitor. When the solicitor finally asks him to leave, he of course answers ‘I would prefer not to’. In the end, the solicitor, completely unable to deal with the situation, moves office himself and Bartleby stays behind in the vacated office.

For Rancière, to put it simply, politics is the rare event that occurs when those who are not heard or acknowledged demand to be heard and seen etc. For this you need a reconfiguration of what he calls the distribution of the sensible. Rancière gives as an example the fact that historically the distribution of the sensible did not acknowledge a link between the \textit{Declaration of the Rights of Man} and the working conditions in factories. Worker’s strikes forced society to perceive a relationship between these two entities (\textit{Wolfe}).

Rancière offers the following summary of the story of Bartleby: ‘The formula ['I would prefer not to'] erodes the attorney’s reasonable organization of work and life. It shatters not just the hierarchies of a world but also what supports them: the connections between cause and effects we expect from that world, between the behaviours and motives we attribute to them and the means we have to modify
them.’ (Wolfe). But it is not enough, Rancière says, to have the potential to interrupt the functioning of the distribution of the senses; you also need the potential to found a new and distinct kind of sense (Wolfe). Whereas for Deleuze, Bartleby’s formula is the seed from which Melville’s story develops and from which a new organization of society can emerge, for Rancière, in the end, Bartleby only renders himself imperceptible. (Wolfe) And although I simplify here enormously, it is fair to say that it is for this reason, because of this becoming-imperceptible, rather than becoming-perceptible, that Rancière concludes that Deleuze erects an impasse for politics. Thus the interruption of communication, the creation of a vacuole of non-communication, according to Rancière, eventually results in a becoming-imperceptible and leaves no room for politics in Deleuze’s thought.

However, Katherine Wolfe questions Rancière’s conclusions. She says that Rancière conception of the kind of aesthetics that politics must disrupt can be traced back to Kant and is primarily drawn from the Critique of Pure Reason. This book, she says, is primarily concerned with the world as we know it, whereas the later Critique of Judgement explores sense beyond the limits of our understanding. When Deleuze places imperceptibility at the heart of his new kind of community, he bases this, Wolfe claims, on Kant’s Critique of Judgement. So from the perspective of the Kantian object-form, which is the condition of perception in the critique of Pure Reason, Deleuze’s new kind of community, a relational concept of community, based not on sensations but on the relations between sensations, are indeed imperceptible. If, however, she continues, we draw, like Deleuze does, on Critique of Judgement, a political voice can be discerned in Deleuze’s philosophy.

This is an extremely simplified presentation of her argument but I would need a least 10 more minutes to do right to the complex net that Wolfe weaves around Deleuze and Rancière, but it suffices, for the goal of my presentation today, to say that Wolfe, and she is certainly not alone in this, points towards an almost imperceptible closeness (at least to Rancière) between Deleuze and Rancière.

And this brings me to the main topic of my dissertation.

There is a whole generation of philosophers—and when I say generation I do not mean literally mean a generation, because some of them are of almost the same age as Deleuze would have been—but a
new generation, nevertheless, which has only come to the spotlight after the death of their precursors (or we should say, now their precursors have finally gaining more standing within larger academic circles, not just in cultural studies, literature and art departments etc., but also in philosophy departments). Whatever the reason, there is a new paradigm being formed by philosophers such as, as I already mentioned, Badiou, Rancière, and Žižek, but also Etienne Balibar and, I would include Toni Negri. Despite their internal differences, which are substantial, they share something in common, which is, I would say, a disillusionment with the political possibilities offered by those we now sometimes gather under the name poststructuralists, specifically Deleuze, Foucault and Derrida. This new generation would contend that the thought of these poststructuralists is structurally unable to realize any actual or substantial changes in the capitalist axiomatic.

What characterizes this new generation is their engagement in politics proper. And with politics proper I mean a return to the terrain of existing/empirical political institutions. They engage with actual political movements or agents directly opposing or criticizing the capitalist axiomatic. It is for this reason that I have given this presentation the polemical title ‘macropolitics’—as opposed, of course, to the ‘micropolitics’ proposed by Deleuze and Foucault which rather focuses on the (infinitely subtle) ways in which macropolitical power-structures have been internalised by individuals and have encroached upon all of our contemporary practices (to the point where they have almost become imperceptible).

Macropolitics is not a very precise name, on the contrary, it is hardly ‘theorized’ in itself; rather its contours come to the surface only in relation to micropolitics. But what is accurate about it, I believe, is what Deleuze says about the relation between the terms, that is, he says that these two terms (micropolitics and macropolitics) are inseparable, that they overlap and are entangled. They coexist and cross over into each other. This is exactly my point, to which I have alluded earlier. Despite their denunciation of these poststructuralist theories, these new thinkers are, at least that is what I will argue, very close to that of their precursors. This is true, I will try to substantiate, both on a more abstract, metaphysical level and on a more empirical level. I would reconceptualize the project of these new thinkers rather as a continuation, or even better a radicalisation of poststructuralism than as a break from it.
The central questions of this project will focus on the possibilities for resistance within the current political, social, economic and aesthetic ‘regime’ which is sometimes referred to as neo-liberalism. Although the differences between the two paradigms I have sketched above may be small and to some extent programmatic and rhetorical, it is important to investigate the ontological/theoretical and sociological/political differentiations in order to see if they formulate or enable different conceptual or practical spaces for resistance. If so, the question could turn towards an investigation on which (if any) of these spaces offers (the most) viable chances for empirical changes in the axiomatic of ‘neo-liberalism’?

This project, thus, ultimately engages with questions regarding the relationship between theory and practice. It is for this reason that I will try to ‘zigzag’ (that is Deleuze’s term) between theoretical, philosophical questions and more practical political concerns. I have only in the last few weeks framed the terms of this project in the way I set out in this presentation, and I have not yet a more detailed plan of precisely which concepts or exactly which philosophers I am going to focus on. So while I started today with one word which, I believe, surfaces in Deleuze’s texts 4 or 5 times, I end here in a could of generalizations, which still needs a lot more reflection and focus and work.

3 Ibid, p. 129.
4 ‘Control and Becoming’, in Negotiations (see Deleuze above), pp. 196-176 (pp. 175-6).