

ASSEMBLAGE THEORY



MANUEL DELANDA

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Series Editor's Preface

It is a pleasure for this series to host the publication of Manuel DeLanda's *Assemblage Theory*, the most recent and perhaps most lucid statement of his philosophy that we have. DeLanda is well known to Anglophone readers of continental philosophy – especially among Deleuzeans – as a respected innovator in this sub-field since the 1990s. He reached his current level of importance along a highly unorthodox career path that began with film-making, passed through an astonishing period of self-education in philosophy, and came to fruition in 1991 with the first of numerous influential books. He has worked as an adjunct professor in prestigious schools of architecture, and for some years as a faculty member at the European Graduate School in Saas-Fee, Switzerland. All the while he has been largely ignored by professors of philosophy but adored by graduate students – a demographic profile that usually indicates a thinker of high calibre, a full generation ahead of peers. DeLanda's popularity shows an additional element of paradox since his ontology is an uncompromising *realism*, still a minority position among continental thinkers despite the onset of a broader speculative realism movement.

DeLanda was born in Mexico City in 1952 and moved in the 1970s to New York, where he lives to this day in a spirit of understated bohemianism. As a student and practitioner of experimental film, he circulated in the New York art scene and acquired some international renown. The Manuel DeLanda we know today first emerged in roughly 1980, when he began to shift his focus to computer art and computer programming. In an effort to understand his equipment properly, DeLanda resolved to teach himself symbolic logic, a decision that soon led him to the classic writers

of analytic philosophy, which may help explain the clarity of his writing style. After a time he worked his way into the rather different intellectual atmosphere of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in whose works DeLanda found both a materialism and a realism, though ‘realist’ is a word rarely applied to Deleuze by his other admirers.

In 1991, not yet forty years old, DeLanda joined the authorial ranks with his debut book, *War in the Age of Intelligent Machines*. It is worth noting that this book was written just *before* the Persian Gulf War and General Schwarzkopf’s daily highlight footage of smart bombs going down chimneys: the first contact for most of the global public with the coming intelligent weaponry. Military thinkers also took note of the book, and adopted this work of a basically Leftist thinker for serious study in their academies. This promising debut was followed in 1997 by *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History*, which explores the way in which various cyclical processes repeat themselves in natural and cultural settings, and is filled with riveting concrete examples such as an account of how rocks are reduced to smooth pebbles in a stream. In 2002, DeLanda published one of the great classics of Deleuze scholarship, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*, which relates Deleuze’s philosophy in some detail to such disciplines as nonlinear dynamics and the mathematics of group theory. This was followed in 2006 by a less famous but even more frequently cited book, *A New Philosophy of Society*, in which DeLanda developed the outlines of a realist social theory as consisting of different scales of assemblages. In 2010 there came the short book *Deleuze: History and Science*, and in 2011 *Philosophy and Simulation*, with its unforgettable discussion of thunderstorms, among other topics. DeLanda’s most recent book before this one was the 2015 *Philosophical Chemistry*, which examines chemistry textbooks taken at fifty-year intervals, and rejects the Kuhnian model of sudden ‘paradigm shifts’ tacitly favoured by most continental thinkers.

DeLanda’s widespread appeal as an author can be traced to several factors. There is his great clarity as a prose stylist, the thorough research he invests in each book, and his impeccable taste in pinning down cutting-edge problems across multiple disciplines. There is also the utter lack of frivolity in his works, though his

serious attitude is always coupled with a freshness that makes his authorial voice anything but oppressive. And whereas most continental thinkers who turn to science quickly indulge in nihilistic aggressions and an almost religious zealotry, DeLanda's version of science makes the world more interesting rather than less real.

While DeLanda's admiration for Deleuze and Guattari is always in evidence, the present book offers more pointed criticism of these figures than we have previously seen him deliver. One point of contention is Marxism. Though Deleuze and Guattari work politically within a basically Marxist outlook, DeLanda is one of the most prominent non-Marxist Leftists in continental circles today. He prefers to Marx the analysis of capitalism found in Fernand Braudel's masterful three-volume *Civilization and Capitalism*, with its attention to different scales of markets and its crucial distinction between markets and monopoly capitalism. Given Braudel's conception of society as a 'set of sets', of intertwined assemblages of all different sizes, it is no longer possible to reify 'Capitalism' in the manner of 'Society', 'the State', or 'the Market'. (A striking similarity, by the way, between DeLanda and Bruno Latour, whose anti-realist tendencies repel DeLanda immeasurably more than they do me.) And whereas Braudel traces the birth of capitalism to maritime cities such as Venice, Genoa, Lisbon, and Amsterdam, Deleuze and Guattari retain the Marxist prejudice that since banking and commerce are 'unproductive', such cities cannot possibly have been the birthplace of capitalism, which Deleuze and Guattari therefore link to the *state* rather than the commercial city. DeLanda objects not only to this assumption, but also to the old Marxist chestnut about 'the tendency of the rate of profit to fall', a 'tendency' that DeLanda bluntly proclaims 'fictitious'.

He adds that Deleuze and Guattari remain too committed to an ontology of 'individuals, groups, and social fields', which cannot account for Braudel's attention to economic organisations and cities. This leads DeLanda to more general conclusions that are sure to spark controversy: 'Much of the academic left today has become prey to the double danger of politically targeting reified generalities (Power, Resistance, Capital, Labour) while at the same time abandoning realism.' Any new left worthy of the name would need to '[recover] its footing on a mind-independent reality and . . . [focus]

its efforts at the right social scale, that is . . . [leave] behind the dream of a Revolution that changes the entire system'. Along with Marx, DeLanda finds an additional target on the left in the person of Noam Chomsky, whose linguistics he sees as too dependent on an ontology of internal relations.

On other fronts, however, DeLanda takes a more positive Deleuzian line in a way that runs counter to present-day Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO). For instance, DeLanda has no use for the concept of essence. He critiques Aristotle's conception of formal cause, which OOO adores. DeLanda further advocates a genetic-historical rather than synchronic approach to individuation, drawing on Gilbert Simondon no less than Deleuze. And whereas OOO advocates realism without materialism, DeLanda insists on a close alliance between the two terms, which he seems to use more or less as synonyms.

Although *Assemblage Theory* is a refined presentation of an already long intellectual trajectory, its clarity of style and wealth of examples also make it a suitable introduction to DeLanda's work more generally. Here we have one of the most formidable thinkers in present-day continental philosophy, moulded by his own hard work and insight, with no support from the traditional institutions of philosophy through which most of us have passed, willingly or not. DeLanda's resulting independence of mind makes him one of the crucial dialogue partners for anyone wishing to see contemporary philosophy with their own eyes. We are fortunate indeed to welcome Manuel DeLanda to the Speculative Realism series at Edinburgh University Press.

Graham Harman
Dubuque, Iowa
August 2015

Introduction

Writing a book about the concept of *assemblage* presents various challenges. The easiest one to meet is terminological. The word in English fails to capture the meaning of the original *agencement*, a term that refers to the action of matching or fitting together a set of components (*agencer*), as well as to the result of such an action: an ensemble of parts that mesh together well. The English word used as translation captures only the second of these meanings, creating the impression that the concept refers to a product not a process. If this were the only challenge it could be easily bypassed. We could simply take the term *agencement* to be the *name* of the concept, the concept itself being given by its definition. But this way out is blocked by the fact that the concept is given half a dozen *different definitions* by its creators, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Each definition connects the concept to a separate aspect of their philosophy, using the terms that are relevant for that aspect, so when taken in isolation the different definitions do not seem to yield a coherent notion. This book is an attempt to bring these different definitions together, introducing and illustrating the terms required to make sense of them. We can begin with the simplest definition, one involving a minimum of additional conceptual machinery:

What is an assemblage? It is a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them, across ages, sexes and reigns – different natures. Thus, the assemblage's only unity is that of a co-functioning: it is a symbiosis, a 'sympathy'. It is never filiations which are important, but alliances, alloys; these are not successions, lines of descent, but contagions, epidemics, the wind.¹

In this definition, two aspects of the concept are emphasised: that the parts that are fitted together are not uniform either in nature or in origin, and that the assemblage actively links these parts together by establishing relations between them. The contrast between filiations and alliances gives us a clue regarding the type of relationships needed to hold the parts together. Some relations, such as that between parents and their offspring, or those between brothers or sisters, define the very identity of the terms that they relate. One can only be a father if one is related genealogically to a son or a daughter, and vice versa, so that the identity of the role of father, or of that of son or daughter, cannot exist outside their mutual relation. Traditionally, these relations are designated as relations of *interiority*. On the other hand, when two groups of people related by descent enter into a political alliance, this relation does not define their identity but connects them in *exteriority*. It is a relation established between the two groups, like the air that exists between them transmitting influences that connect them but do not constitute them.² The terms ‘interiority’ and ‘exteriority’ are somewhat misleading because they suggest a spatial relation, a relation internal or external to something. A better choice would be intrinsic and extrinsic, but the intent is clear: if a relation constitutes the very identity of what it relates it cannot respect the heterogeneity of the components, but rather it tends to fuse them together into a homogeneous whole.

The majority of relations in the world are extrinsic. Intrinsic relations tend to be confined to niches, such as social roles defined by conventions. For there to be a convention, there must be alternative ways in which the identity of a social role is defined, and the choice among the alternatives must be arbitrary. Family relations, for example, vary across cultures, as do the rights and obligations attached to the role of parents, offspring, and relatives. So the fixing of one of these alternatives by an arbitrary social code constitutes its very identity. A similar situation arises in biology with respect to the roles that organisms of the same species play relative to one another. When the behaviour of an organism is not learned but is rigidly coded by its genes, and when there exist alternative behavioural patterns that could have performed the same function, its identity can be considered to be determined by relations

of interiority. Hence Deleuze's attraction to the ecological relation of symbiosis, as in the relation between insects and the plants they pollinate, because it involves heterogeneous species interacting in exteriority, and their relation is not necessary but only contingently obligatory, a relation that does not define the very identity of the symbionts. In both the social and biological cases, intrinsic relations are such because they are *coded*, and because the code arbitrarily selects one alternative over the rest. This suggests that the opposition between the two types of social ensembles mentioned in the previous quotation, those linked by filiation and alliance, respectively, may be captured by a single concept equipped with a *variable parameter*, the setting of which determines whether the ensemble is coded or decoded.

Chapter 1 explores this possibility. In their exposition of assemblage theory Deleuze and Guattari tend to use a series of oppositions: tree/rhizome, striated/smooth, molar/molecular, and stratum/assemblage. But they constantly remind us that the opposites can be transformed into one another. In particular, the kinds of ensembles designated as 'assemblages' can be obtained from strata by a decoding operation.³ But if one member of these dichotomies can be transformed into the other then the oppositions can be replaced with a single parametrised term capable of existing in two different states. This yields a different version of the concept of assemblage, *a concept with knobs* that can be set to different values to yield either strata or assemblages (in the original sense). The coding parameter is one of the knobs we must build into the concept, the other being territorialisation, a parameter measuring the degree to which the components of the assemblage have been subjected to a process of homogenisation, and the extent to which its defining boundaries have been delineated and made impermeable. A further modification to the original concept is that the parts matched together to form an ensemble are themselves treated as assemblages, equipped with their own parameters, so that at all times we are dealing with assemblages of assemblages. Using this modified version of the concept, Chapter 1 goes on to detail a materialist social ontology in which communities and organisations, cities and countries, are shown to be amenable to a treatment in terms of assemblages.

Chapter 2 uses this social ontology as a context to discuss the assemblage approach to language. As is well known, Deleuze and Guattari were highly critical of orthodox linguistics, and adopted ideas from sociolinguistics to study language in its communal and institutional context. A tightly knit community, for example, is an ensemble of bodies (not only the biological bodies of the neighbours, but also the architectural bodies of their houses, churches, pubs, and so on) in which the fitting together is performed by linguistic acts that create social obligations among the neighbours. A promise between community members must be kept, else the reputation of the member breaking it will suffer, and he or she may be punished with ostracism. Similarly, a military or corporate organisation is an ensemble of bodies (including the bodies of their weapons and machines) in which commands create the bonds that fit them together: after being commanded to do something a subordinate is held responsible for the fulfilment of the command, and punished for disobeying it. Social ensembles held together by enforceable obligations are referred to by the authors as ‘collective assemblages of enunciation’.⁴ However, their discussion of this important concept is hampered by a social ontology that includes only three levels: individuals, groups, and the social field. A more finely grained ontology, with many levels of social ensembles between the person and society as a whole, will help us to clarify and extend their ideas about language.

Chapter 3 concentrates on a specific social organisation, the army. One of the earliest illustrations of an assemblage was the warrior–horse–bow ensemble of the nomads.⁵ This assemblage can become a component part of a larger one, a nomad army, while its own components can also be treated as assemblages: the bow as an ensemble of a flexible arc, a string, and a projectile.⁶ And similarly for a Second World War army as an assemblage of platoons, themselves composed of soldiers, their rifles, and their radios. Armies are therefore a perfect example of a nested set of assemblages. In the history of armies we can detect transformations that add to their flexibility or that, on the contrary, make them more rigid and obedient. These transformations can be modelled by setting the parameters of the assemblage to the right settings, a task that is greatly simplified if an assemblage’s components have parameters

of their own. This way, we can locate the right level in the nested set at which the coding or territorialisation occurred, and do justice to the complexity of the historical record.

Chapter 4 discusses scientific fields, viewed as assemblages of a domain of laboratory phenomena, a community of practitioners, and the techniques and instrumentation that fit one to the other. Unlike other approaches, in which the cognitive items governing scientific practices (concepts, statements, problems, explanations, classifications) are viewed as related to one another in interiority, forming a monolithic paradigm from which there is no escape short of a religious conversion, in this chapter we explore the idea that cognitive tools are not fused into a totality but rather coexist and interact in exteriority. The distinction between strata and assemblages in this case corresponds to what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as *major and minor sciences*. An example of a major science is an axiomatised version of classical physics, in which immutable truths about nature's laws are used as self-evident axioms, while deductive logic is used to derive in a uniform way an unlimited number of further truths (theorems). An illustration of a minor science would be chemistry, a field that resists axiomatisation and in which the phenomena in the domain continuously confront partitioners with variation, even as they strive to find constants, posing new problems for them to solve.⁷ In this case too, we can replace the dichotomy major/minor by a single concept, while deriving the very real distinctions discussed by the authors from the settings of the parameters. And as in the case of armies, scientific fields can also be treated as assemblages of assemblages, allowing us to locate at the right level of the nested set the changes brought about by the conditions created by the settings of the parameters

Chapter 5 tackles the most difficult notion in this approach: the diagram of an assemblage. An ensemble in which components have been correctly matched together possesses properties that its components do not have. It also has its own tendencies and capacities. The latter are real but not necessarily actual if they are not currently manifested or exercised. The term for something that is real but not actual is *virtual*. An assemblage's diagram captures this virtuality, the *structure of the possibility space* associated with an assemblage's dispositions. But in addition to defining a virtual

space already caught up into actual ensembles, trapped into their materiality and expressivity to a degree specified by the parameters, the diagram connects an assemblage with other diagrams, and with a cosmic space in which diagrams exist free from the constraints of actuality. While the ontological status of dispositions that are not currently being manifested is controversial, the existence of the cosmic plane is clearly much more so. Nevertheless, this chapter strives to show that both are compatible with a materialist metaphysics.

Chapter 6 deals with another metaphysical question: all assemblages should be considered unique historical entities, singular in their individuality, not as particular members of a general category. But if this is so, then we should be able to specify the *individuation process* that gave birth to them. In the previous chapter we had already begun to use examples of assemblages belonging to the natural world, proof that the approach is not confined to social assemblages, an emphasis that continues into this chapter. The individuation processes behind physical atoms and biological species are used as illustrations. Chapter 7, finally, returns to the question of the virtual diagram of an assemblage, but this time to connect this notion to epistemological rather than ontological questions. It is the most technical chapter, because a rigorous discussion of diagrams must proceed using concepts from mathematics, but it introduces all the necessary notions in clear technical and historical detail.

What gets lost in this new version of the concept of assemblage? Not much. The rich descriptions made by Deleuze and Guattari of rhizomes versus trees, or of molecular flows versus molar aggregates, or of smooth spaces versus striated ones, are all recoverable as descriptions of *qualitatively different phases* of one and the same entity, making these renditions every bit as useful as a detailed portrayal of the differences between a substance in the liquid and crystalline states. Hence, the change in this respect boils down to a matter of emphasis: using strata and assemblages as distinct categories allows one to stress their very important differences, even if it complicates the discussion of their mutual transformations.⁸ The other change, conceiving of the components of an assemblage as themselves assemblages, is also harmless, as is

the idea that the environment of an assemblage is itself an assemblage. The authors introduce further categories of being to define the different kind of components, like the category ‘bodies’ for the working parts of ‘machinic assemblages’, and use words like ‘conditions’ to define the larger context in which an assemblage operates.⁹ But their tendency to view the world (natural and social) in terms of two (or three) levels makes the expression ‘the larger context’ particularly dangerous, since it ends up engulfing what in reality is a multi-level ontology. Hence, replacing bodies (and other component types) and contextual conditions by smaller and larger assemblages, respectively, allows us to sidestep this difficulty. It also yields a view of reality in which assemblages are everywhere, multiplying in every direction, some more viscous and changing at slower speeds, some more fluid and impermanent, coming into being almost as fast as they disappear. And at the limit, at the critical threshold when the diagrams of assemblages reach escape velocity, we find the grand cosmic assemblage, the plane of immanence, consistency, or exteriority.

Notes

1. Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues II*, p. 69.
2. The theme of filiation versus alliance is discussed in detail in Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, pp. 147, 155.
3. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 503. ‘Assemblages are already different from strata. They are produced in the strata, but operate in zones where milieus become decoded.’
4. *Ibid.*, p. 88. The authors refer to the assemblage of bodies as a ‘machinic assemblage’, the term ‘machinic’ meaning the synthesis of heterogeneities as such (*ibid.*, p. 330). In this book the distinction between machinic and collective assemblages is treated as the distinction between material and expressive components. The authors sometimes express themselves that way: ‘We think the material or machinic aspect of an assemblage relates not to the production of goods but rather to a precise state of interminglings of bodies in society . . .’ (*ibid.*, p. 90).
5. The earliest mention of the man–horse–bow ensemble occurs in a text that was published as an appendix to some editions of *Anti-Oedipus*. The text has been republished as part of a collection of essays by

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Guattari. See 'Balance-Sheet Program for Desiring Machines', in Guattari, *Chaosophy*, p. 91.

6. The authors do not approach armies using a nested set of assemblages. The soldier and his weapons are considered an assemblage, but the weapons are referred to as 'technical objects', while a whole army (e.g. a sedentary army broken into phalanxes) is thought of as providing the conditions for the emergence of the assemblage: 'The Greek foot soldier together with his arms constitute a machine under the conditions of the phalanx' (*ibid.*, p. 91).
7. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, pp. 361–2. The authors do not use chemistry as their example of a minor science but metallurgy. Chemistry was born from the material culture of blacksmiths, pharmacists, and alchemists, but it is supposed to have become major with the work of Lavoisier (*ibid.*, p. 370). This is in fact a misconception that this chapter attempts to correct.
8. The transformations between strata and assemblages are characterised like this: 'A single assemblage can borrow from different strata, and with a certain amount of apparent disorder; conversely, a stratum or element of a stratum can join others in functioning in a different assemblage. Finally, the machinic assemblage is . . . also in touch with the plane of consistency and necessarily effectuates the abstract machine' (*ibid.*, p. 73). In this quotation we can see that the components of one kind of ensemble can become a part of the other kind of ensemble. Assemblages are also described as operating within strata, forming the machinery that performs the articulations of material and expressive components (*ibid.*, p. 67). On the other hand, what seems like a radical difference is also mentioned: only assemblages can effectuate an abstract machine, that is, only assemblages have a diagram. This seems entirely unjustified, as it denies stratified ensembles the possibility of having dispositions in a non-actual state. This statement is valid only to the extent that the setting of the parameters that yields the 'assemblage state' also determine that this state is much 'closer' to the state of the plane of consistency in a sense to be defined in Chapter 5.
9. See remarks in notes 4 and 6 above.