It seems that Horowitz is not simply suggesting that radical State-withering consequences follow from mere “ethical subjectivity.” Rather, at times he appears (perhaps unintentionally) to be exhorting us to a vague transformation of our subjective relations, as if we simply hadn’t realised that escape from domination would require us to treat each other better. Maybe we have forgotten, but this is certainly a round-about way of reminding us.

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_A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity_

Manuel DeLanda

New York: Continuum, 2006; 142 pages.

Manuel DeLanda wrote _A New Philosophy of Society_ in a style which, by his own admission in the introduction to his _Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy_, bridges the gap between Continental and Anglo-American philosophy. His aim is to introduce “a novel approach to social ontology” (1) in order to provide “sociologists and other social scientists” (8) with an insight into “what kind of entities we can legitimately commit ourselves to assert exist.” (1) He calls such entities “the actors of [his] earlier historical narratives” (6), namely, _War in the Age of Intelligent Machines_ (1991), _A Thousand Years of Non-Linear History_ (1997) and _Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy_ (2002). DeLanda had already undertaken a reconstruction of Deleuze’s ontology in _Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy_. In this new book, which is in a sense a continuation of the former project, DeLanda elucidates the concept of assemblage and other related concepts as they were used by Deleuze in _A Thousand Plateaus_ and in other texts. By introducing this reworked segment of Deleuzian ontology, DeLanda wishes to alter rather than preserve the ontological foundations on which sociologists are to base their works.

As a means of deploying Deleuze’s “theory of assemblage” in a more productive manner, DeLanda proposes a “neo-assemblage” theory, sometimes derided as “assemblage-theory 2.0” by “orthodox” Deleuzians. (4) This new framework can accommodate both reductionist
and non-reductionist views of micro and macro levels of social reality. It is presented as a continuum spanning a broad range of social assemblages. This work on the concept of assemblage is important and insightful because it develops a non-essentialist view of assemblages and sees them as instead governed by relations of exteriority. Understood in this way, the assemblage approach is a powerful tool that can be used to analyze social entities on any scale, from individual persons, to cities, nation-states, and the global economy. As DeLanda puts it: “[T]he ontology of assemblages is flat.” (28) The drawback is that, at times, the resulting conceptual framework may appear too schematic and terse.

In the first chapter, “Assemblages against Totalities,” DeLanda presents assemblages that are unlike the organic totalities founded on relations of quasi-Hegelian interiority. As an example of relations of exteriority in assemblages he refers, like Deleuze, to the “symbiosis of plants and pollinating insects.” (11) He then presents assemblages in two dimensions using four variables: on the one hand either 1) material or 2) expressive; on the other either 3) undergoing processes of territorialisation or 4) of deterritorialisat. Most interesting is the other synthetic process he introduces: “the role played in the production and maintenance of identity by specialised expressive entities such as genes and words.” (14) By adding this third dimension, DeLanda manages to define the theory of assemblages more clearly than Deleuze, who insists on the differentiation between assemblages and the strata of “filiations, biological organisms and institutional organizations.” (121)

In the second chapter, “Assemblages against Essences,” DeLanda attempts to persuade social scientists of the merits of his approach by demonstrating that his account of assemblages is non-essentialist and yet compatible with realism. DeLanda explains that “the ontology of assemblages is flat since it contains nothing but differently scaled individual singularities.” (28) There are thus no general categories. Larger social assemblages can also be regarded as individual entities when essences are reconceived according to a transformed notion of the relation of parts and wholes.

In the third chapter, “Persons and Networks,” DeLanda commences his “detailed analysis of social assemblages at progressively larger spatial scales” not with sub-personal components but rather with persons as “the smallest-scale social assemblage.” (46–7) Drawing on the principles established in the first two chapters and using the personal
scale as his point of departure, DeLanda, like Deleuze, follows Hume’s empiricist model in which singular impressions are heterogeneous and irreducible. He then analyses the processes of territorialisation, which occur through habitual repetition, and of deterritorialisation, which are brought about through events that break the routine and destabilise personal identity, for example skill acquisition. Bringing Bourdieu’s accounts of social classes and resource distribution into his analysis of social assemblages, DeLanda moves on to large-scale entities such as government organisations, in his progressive analysis of the ontological status of social entities. DeLanda admittedly uses his own non-Deleuzian theoretical resources in creating relations between the ideas of contemporary thinkers such as Bourdieu and Tilly and those of Deleuze, in order to render the concept of assemblages fruitful for contemporary sociologists. For example, Bourdieu’s analyses of social classes, which are not limited to economic resources, but also include cultural resources such as education, help conceptualise social classes as assemblages by taking into account interpersonal networks and organisations with both material and expressive roles, as well as the larger assemblages that they may form.

The fourth chapter, “Organizations and Governments,” starts with an investigation of authority structures, following Max Weber’s threefold model of authority, which includes the rational-legal, the traditional, and the charismatic type, as well as mixtures of these. DeLanda looks at techniques for the enforcement of authority, such as punishment, as described by Foucault, as well as at forms of organisation such as camps, which derive, like punishment, from the military sphere. The same processes of territorialisation and deterritorialisation that affect persons also affect these larger assemblages: destabilising events disturb the routine functioning of authority structures. DeLanda describes nation-states as large hierarchical assemblages, which, like any organisation, depend on their resources. He references Pfeffer and Salancik on the magnitude, criticality, control, and substitutability of resources, as well as on strategies for coping with resource dependencies, such as oligopolies and economies of agglomeration. He then deals with some complex forms of hierarchical organisation, such as federalism and examples from the U.S.A. DeLanda admits to both the lack of cross-cultural references and of deeper social or historical analyses in the examples he uses, but he sees this lack as justified since he is attempting to create an efficient and easy-to-use ontological tool for social scientists.
The final chapter, “Cities and Nations,” deals with spatial relations, which become increasingly prominent as the analysis shifts towards larger scales of social assemblages. Increased geographical mobility, fashion, and the disciplinary use of space in factories, offices, prisons, schools, etc. are described as processes that destabilise the identity of assemblages. These processes are then counterbalanced by territorialising processes such as segregation and congregation. Referencing sociologists, historians, and urban geographers, DeLanda looks at different types of cities in the context of historical sequences of events that shaped the connectivity and territorial hierarchy of urban centres. He moves from cities to nation-states, following the same governing principles he previously established.

In A Thousand Years of Non-Linear History, DeLanda included a chapter on linguistic history. In A New Philosophy of Society, he reserves a place at the end of each chapter for language in order to highlight the dangerous relation between the easily misinterpreted linguisticality of experience and social constructivism. He thus inadvertently gives prominence to postmodernist linguistic analysis. His ideas on language would benefit from the same sort of elucidatory reworking to which he subjects Deleuze’s concept of assemblage.

Deleuze used a wasp pollinating an orchid as a rather poetic example of a heterogeneous assemblage. This image is evoked on the book cover designed by Tony Chung, which represents not a wasp but another type of hymenopterans, a swarm of bees interacting over a beehive seen from up close: looking at it feels like zooming in on Google Earth. That is how the reader may eventually start to feel as DeLanda, moving closer to the present, surveys an expanding territory and quotes an increasing number of authors. In the face of the disconcerting thought of ourselves as parts of assemblages, DeLanda, with his non-reductionist matter-of-fact approach, does the reader a tremendous favour by reconstructing Deleuze’s theory of assemblages and by recognising elements of it in the works of the diverse authors assembled in this book. Indeed, their voices “can come together to form a chorus that does not harmonise its different components but interlocks them while respecting their heterogeneity.”

On the whole, DeLanda, whose major works on Deleuze have not yet been translated into French, has created a clearly structured introduction to a new philosophy of society based on assemblage theory that social scientists may find useful as a tool for thinking about “the irreducible
James Mensch’s *Hiddenness and Alterity* opens with the Delphic oracle’s call: “know thyself.” However, throughout the ages of human inquiry, obtaining such self-knowledge has proven troublesome, if not impossible. Mensch’s question in this text is not how one can achieve self-knowledge, but rather “how our lack of knowledge can show itself as such.” (2) How is it that we can find our motives obscure, our memories faded, and what we say unmeant? The main task of this book is to explore the way in which this lack reveals itself and what it reveals about our selfhood. The answer offered throughout is that “the hidden is the other.” (2) For Mensch, the other is the lack that I can see hidden from me “to the degree that the other is in me as other than me—that is, as beyond what I can grasp and know.” (5) While the book’s subtitle suggests that the examples for this investigation will come from the domains of philosophy and literature, the thirteen chapters actually fall into four sections: phenomenology, ethics of the other, literature and religion. As a whole, what this book adds to the discussion of hiddenness and alterity is a reading of a virtuous other to whom we are in debt for the alterity inside us that defines who we are.

The first three chapters seem to gather around issues of temporalisation explicit in phenomenology. According to Mensch, Kant’s account of temporalisation, when closely read, “shows that temporalization is a self-concealing process.” (18) What he means is that in order for two pieces of content to show themselves as different from each other, an element of “not-newness or pastness” needs to be added to one of them. “This modification is reproduction’s generation of time” (22) and this generation, for Kant, “is the trace of the subject.” (29) The paradox con-