



PROJECT MUSE®

What is an Assemblage?

Thomas Nail

SubStance, Volume 46, Number 1, 2017 (Issue 142), pp. 21-37 (Article)

Published by University of Wisconsin Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/650026>

What is an Assemblage?

Thomas Nail

Introduction

The concept of assemblage plays a crucial role in the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. In a 1980 interview with Catherine Clément, Deleuze describes their invention of the concept of the assemblage as the "general logic" at work in *A Thousand Plateaus*. However, despite its thirty years of influence on political theory, this "general logic of the assemblage" still remains obscured by the fact that Deleuze and Guattari never formalized it as a theory per se, but largely used it ad hoc throughout their work. This fact continues to pose problems for theorists today who wish to deploy something like a theory of assemblages, but also admit, as Manuel DeLanda does, that Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the assemblage "hardly amounts to a fully fledged theory" (DeLanda 3). This position allows DeLanda to relegate "Deleuzian hermeneutics" to the footnotes and focus on developing his own "neo-assemblage" theory, "not strictly speaking Deleuze's own" (DeLanda 4).

However, for those who want to know what Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage theory is, DeLanda's answer is not quite satisfying. Thus in order to render Deleuze and Guattari's general logic of assemblages more accessible for political theorists today as part of the current special issue of *SubStance*, this paper develops a formalization of their theory of assemblages invented in *A Thousand Plateaus* and *What is Philosophy?* The thesis of this paper is that, contra DeLanda, Deleuze and Guattari do in fact have a fully fledged theory of assemblages.

At present and to my knowledge, this is the first full-length journal article to focus exclusively on Deleuze and Guattari's formal theory of assemblages. By concentrating on the structure of the theory apart from any specific kind of assemblage or application of assemblage theory such as linguistic, sociological, biological, or geological, this paper shows, in a relatively brief manner, the core formal operations shared by all kinds of assemblages and to clarify in what precise sense all assemblages are political. Elsewhere I have shown at length how this general logic of assemblages can be used as a method of concrete political analysis,¹ but the focus of this paper is to show the theory behind the analysis. In short, this essay does for the concept of the assemblage what Deleuze and Giorgio Agamben did for Foucault in their essay "What is a Dispositif?": it ex-

tracts from a large body of work the core formal features of its operative methodology or logic.

Agencement

The English word “assemblage” is the common translation of the French word *agencement* used by Deleuze and Guattari. This translation has two problems. First, the English word “assemblage” does not mean the same thing as the French word *agencement*; in fact, the two come from completely different etymological roots. According to *Le Robert Collins* dictionary, the French word *agencement* comes from the verb *agencer*, “to arrange, to lay out, to piece together.” The noun *agencement* thus means “a construction, an arrangement, or a layout.” On the other hand, the English word “assemblage,” according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, comes from the French word *assemblage* (a-sahn-blazh), not the French word *agencer*. The meaning of the English word “assemblage” is “the joining or union of two things” or “a bringing or coming together.” A layout or arrangement is not the same thing as a unity or a simple coming together. Thus the second problem of this translation: the French word *assemblage* already exists and means the same thing as the English word “assemblage.” According to *Le Robert Collins*, the French word *assemblage* means, “to join, to gather, to assemble.” Again, an arrangement or layout is not the same as a joined or unified gathering.

The important philosophical takeaway of this translation issue is that English readers of Deleuze and Guattari ought to dissociate their understanding of the English word “assemblage” from the concept of *agencement* since it will only confuse things. Furthermore, three major consequences follow from this indexical distinction between assemblage and *agencement*. While an assemblage is a gathering of things together into unities, an *agencement* is an arrangement or layout of heterogenous elements.

Three Consequences of this Distinction

There are at least two major philosophical consequences of this indexical distinction that Deleuze and Guattari use to develop their general logic of assemblages: the rejection of unity in favor of multiplicity, and the rejection of essence in favor of events.

The first major philosophical consequence of inventing a “general logic of assemblages” for Deleuze and Guattari is that it provides an alternative logic to that of unities. A unity is defined by the intrinsic relations that various parts have to one another in a whole. A unity is an organic whole whose parts all work together like the organs of the human body. Each organ performs a function in the service of reproducing its relations

with the other parts and ultimately the harmony of the whole organism. A heart separated from a body does not survive as a “heart,” since the function of a heart is to circulate blood through a body. Similarly, the organism does not survive without a heart, since it is the nature of the organism to have a heart. The unity of an organic whole is given in advance of the emergence of the parts and subordinates the parts to an organizing principle or spirit. Unities can develop themselves, but they never change the whole of what they are. Thus, unities do not allow for the possible emancipation of recombination of their parts without destroying themselves in the process. On the other hand, when component parts subsist independently from their internal relations within a unity, they cease to be unities and become mechanisms: defined only by their external relations. As Hegel writes, “This is what constitutes the character of mechanism, namely, that whatever relation obtains between the things combined, this relation is extraneous to them that does not concern their nature at all, and even if it is accompanied by a semblance of unity it remains nothing more than composition, mixture, aggregation, and the like” (71).

In contrast to organic unities, for Deleuze and Guattari, assemblages are more like machines, defined solely by their external relations of composition, mixture, and aggregation. In other words, an assemblage is a multiplicity, neither a part nor a whole. If the elements of an assemblage are defined only by their external relations, then it is possible that they can be added, subtracted, and recombined with one another *ad infinitum* without ever creating or destroying an organic unity. This is what Deleuze and Guattari paradoxically call a “fragmentary whole” (*What is Philosophy?* 16). The elements of the assemblage are “not pieces of a jigsaw puzzle,” they say, but like a “dry-stone wall, and everything holds together only along diverging lines” (*What is Philosophy?* 23). Each new mixture produces a new kind of assemblage, always free to recombine again and change its nature. Thus, as Deleuze says, “in a multiplicity, what counts are not the terms or the elements, but what is ‘between’ them, the in-between, a set of relations that are inseparable from each other” (Deleuze and Parnet viii). The assemblage constructs or lays out a set of relations between self-subsisting fragments—what Deleuze calls “singularities.”

The second major philosophical consequence of the theory of assemblages is that it provides an alternative to the logic of essences. The essence of a thing is what uniquely and necessarily defines it—in other words, what it is about a thing that makes it what it is such that it is not something else, which endures despite all its unessential aspects. The problem with this sort of question is that the answer requires us to already assume the finished product of what we are inquiring into. Assuming the thing to be the complete product, we simply identify the enduring

features of its history and retroactively posit them as those unchanging and eternal features that by necessity must have pre-existed the thing.

In contrast to this, Deleuze and Guattari do not ask, "What is . . .?" but rather, how? where? when? from what viewpoint? and so on. These are not questions of essence, but questions of events. An assemblage does not have an essence because it has no eternally necessary defining features, only contingent and singular features. In other words, if we want to know what something is, we cannot presume that what we see is the final product nor that this product is somehow independent of the network of social and historical processes to which it is connected. For example, we cannot extract the being of a book from the vast historical conditions of the invention of an alphabetic language, distribution of paper, the printing press, literacy, and all the social contingencies that made possible the specific book of our inquiry, with all of its singular features (color, lighting, time of day, and so on) and all the conditions under which someone is inquiring into the book. A vast network of processes continues to shape the book and thus there is no final product. We do not know what the book might possibly become or what relations it may enter into, so we do not yet know its universal or essential features. We know only its collection of contingent features at a certain point in its incomplete process. As Deleuze says, "If one insists, the word 'essence' might be preserved, but only on condition of saying that the essence is precisely accident, the event" (*Difference and Repetition* 191).

I. The Basic Structure of Assemblages

An assemblage is not just a mixture of heterogenous elements; this definition is far too simplistic. The definition of the French word *agencement* does not simply entail heterogenous composition, but entails a constructive process that lays out a specific kind of arrangement. All assemblages may be singular and heterogenous but they also share three features that define their arrangement: their conditions, their elements, and their agents, or what Deleuze and Guattari call their "abstract machine," their "concrete assemblage," and their "personae."

The Abstract Machine

The first feature shared by all assemblages is that they all have conditions. The condition of an assemblage is the network of specific external relations that holds the elements together. Deleuze and Guattari's name for this set of conditioning relations is the "abstract machine." The condition of an assemblage is abstract because it is not a thing or object that exists in the world, but rather something that lays out a set of relations wherein concrete elements and agencies appear. The abstract machine is abstract

in the sense that it is not a thing, but it is absolutely real in the sense that the relations that arrange concrete elements are real. It is a machine in the sense that it is defined only by extrinsic relations and not intrinsic relations of organic unity.

Different assemblages are defined by different sets of relations; thus there are also different types of abstract machines that arrange their elements in one way or another. In every case, the abstract machine functions as a kind of local condition of possibility—a set of relations in which elements appear to be meaningfully related. It is in this sense that Deleuze and Guattari state that the abstract machine is that “which at every instant causes the given to be given, in this or that state, at this or that moment. But . . . itself is not given” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 324/265)²—not, however, as in “a dream, something that is not realized or that is only realized by betraying itself,” but rather as a “Real-Abstract . . . that is neither undifferentiated nor transcendent” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 179/142). The abstract machine is the relations between the elements.

Since this conditioning set of relations is neither a transcendent entity nor an existing thing, it cannot simply be represented. Rather, since the relations are immanent to the elements (qua relations) the abstract machine is instead designated by a proper name *through* which concrete objects and agencies speak and attribute their similarities and differences from each other. In this sense the abstract machine does not “signify” or “represent” anything beyond the arrangement of concrete elements. The abstract machine is designated by a proper name because as a proper noun it refers to a unique set of relations (e.g., May 1968, Lenin, Einstein) as opposed to common nouns, which refer to essentialist categories of things (e.g., revolutions, statesmen, scientists). The abstract machine is thus an asignifying proper name like the names of military operations or the names of hurricanes, as Deleuze and Guattari say (*A Thousand Plateaus* 40/28, 322-323/264). Since they only occur once, they do not have an eternal essence.

The abstract machine does not cause or program the concrete elements in advance, nor does it give them a normative direction. Rather, the abstract machine supports a “conjunction, combination, and continuum” of all the concrete elements it conditions. Take, for example, a constellation of stars. The constellation of Ursa Major does not inhere naturally or essentially in the sky. It does not cause the stars to exist. It is simply the proper name for the set of conditioning relations that arrange a set of stars. Without stars in the sky there are no relations between stars, but without relations between stars there is only radical heterogeneity. In this example, the abstract machine is the relational lines that connect the stars and the concrete assemblage is the stars that are connected. However, since new

stars are born and old stars die and all of them move around in relation to our point of view, there is no eternal essence of the constellation. The constellation is a singular event: a set of relations that change as the elements change in a kind of reciprocal feedback loop.

The Concrete Assemblage

The second common feature shared by all assemblages is that they all have concrete elements. Just as all assemblages have a set of conditioning relations (an abstract machine), they also have specific elements that are arranged in these relations—what Deleuze and Guattari call the “concrete assemblage.” The concrete elements of an assemblage are the existing embodiment of the assemblage. They are not abstract; they are the part of the assemblage that appears within the relations of distribution. The concrete assemblages are “like the configurations of a machine” that give it its degrees of consistency.” They compose an “abstract machine of which these assemblages are the working parts” (*What is Philosophy?* 39/36). Thus the relationship between the abstract relations and the concrete elements is not pre-constructed but has to be constructed piece by piece. One does not transcend the other, but both are mutually transformative. Deleuze and Guattari state that the concrete elements “are like multiple waves, rising and falling, but the [abstract machine] is the single wave that rolls them up and unrolls them.” The concrete elements are like the archipelago or skeletal frame, whereas the conditioning relations are the breath that suffuses the separate parts (*What is Philosophy?* 38/36).

Since the abstract machine is not an eternal essence or a program given in advance of the concrete elements, when the concrete elements change so does the set of relations that they are in. There is thus a reciprocal determination between the abstract and the concrete: when one changes, so does the other. As Deleuze and Guattari say, there is a “coadaptation,” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 91/71) or reciprocal presupposition of the two (*What is Philosophy?* 74/77). This is why the consequences of events cannot be known in advance. There is no essence of the event; there are only concrete elements that are defined by their external relations, i.e., what they are concretely capable of at any given point. If we want to understand how an assemblage works, we do not ask what its essence is, but rather what it can do. This is an empirical question. We do not know in advance what a concrete body can do. The answer “can only be resolved step by step” (*What is Philosophy?* 39). For example, who are the allies and enemies of the assemblage? What are the consequences and implications of this assemblage now? What can the assemblage accomplish and where are its limits in some particular instance? Since the concrete elements are always changing along with their conditioning relations, the assemblage is always

becoming capable of different things. This requires a constantly renewed analysis of assemblages.

The Persona

The third feature shared by all assemblages is that they all have agents, what Deleuze and Guattari call “personae.” Personae are not autonomous rational subjects, nor are they simply decentered or fragmented subjects incapable of action. Rather, the personae of an assemblage are the mobile operators that connect the concrete elements together according to their abstract relations. In other words, personae do not transcend the assemblage but are immanent to it. They are not the origin of the assemblage and do not control or program the assemblage in advance. Rather, personae are the immanent agents or mobile positions, roles, or figures of the assemblage. Like a “runner, or intercessor,” (*What is Philosophy?* 62/64) Deleuze and Guattari say, the “persona is needed to relate concepts on the plane, just as the plane itself needs to be laid out” (*What is Philosophy?* 73/75–6). However, as they point out, “these two operations do not merge in the persona, which itself appears as a distinct operator” (73/76).

Herein lies the difficulty of immanence in the assemblage: one cannot have a persona without an assemblage of which it is part, but one cannot have an assemblage without agents that bring it about. Since the conditions, elements, and agents are all immanent to one another, Deleuze and Guattari argue that all occur together in mutual presupposition: “The persona and the [abstract machine] presuppose each other. Sometimes the persona seems to precede the plane, sometimes to come after it – that is, it appears twice; it intervenes twice” (*What is Philosophy?* 73/75). On the one hand the persona draws the relational diagram of the abstract machine and on the other hand it establishes a correspondence between the concrete elements. The persona marks out the conditions under which each machine finds itself filled with concrete elements.

For Deleuze and Guattari, personae are not first person, self-knowing subjects; rather, they are third-person (he, she, they) collective subjects of an indefinite event (one, everyone, anyone). “I won’t say I anymore,” Deleuze and Guattari write in *Anti-Oedipus*, “I’ll never utter the word again; it’s just too damn stupid. Every time I hear it, I’ll use the third person instead” (30/23). Irony aside, for Deleuze and Guattari the third-person subject is the collective subject of an assemblage to which it is immanent. Agents of assemblages deploy their speech acts “in the third person,” “where it is always the conceptual persona who says, ‘I [je]’” (*What is Philosophy?* 63/64). The first and second person “I” and “you” are not nonexistent, but rather secondary to the third person “we” that is collectively immanent to the assemblage. No one is subject to themselves

alone; they are part of a larger third-person assemblage that arranges the conditioning relations and concrete elements in which the world of the agent is meaningful.

II. The Typology of Assemblages

All assemblages share in common these three features that define their arrangement. Each one presupposes and is immanent to the other. However, there is not just one kind of assemblage. For Deleuze and Guattari, there are four major kinds of assemblages: territorial, state, capitalist, and nomadic. Since everything is an assemblage for Deleuze and Guattari, a type of assemblage does not refer to the fact that there are biological, literary, musical, and linguistic types of assemblages. Although the content of assemblages is highly heterogenous, there are four major *types* or *ways of arrangement* in which the conditions, elements, and agencies of different assemblages are laid out. The analysis of these different types of assemblages is what Deleuze and Guattari call the politics of assemblages. Thus all assemblages are political insofar as they can be classified according to Deleuze and Guattari's political typology of assemblages. The politics of assemblages is a broader category of analysis than "political assemblages," which deals strictly with classical political phenomena: rights, revolutions, governments, and so on. In their expanded definition of politics, everything is political. "Politics," they say, "proceeds being. Practice does not come after the emplacement of the terms and their relations, but actively participates in the drawing of the lines; it confronts the same dangers and the same variations as the emplacement does" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 203). In this sense, everything is political because every assemblage must be practically laid out. It is not just the so-called "application" of the assemblage that is practical or political, but the very construction of the assemblage—the way it is arranged or laid out.

Territorial Assemblages

The first type of assemblage is the territorial assemblage. Territorial assemblages are arranged in such a way that the concrete elements are coded according to a natural or proper usage. In the case of territorial assemblages, the mutational character of the conditions, elements, and personae are arbitrarily delimited according a set of specific limits. For example, Deleuze and Guattari point out that "the house is segmented according to its rooms' assigned purposes, streets, according to the order of the city; the factory, according to the nature of the work and operations performed in it" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 208). Territorial assemblages divide the world into coded segments. Each concrete element has a designated place and every persona's life has a plan related to its place in the world:

"As soon as we finish one proceeding we begin another, forever proceduring or procedured, in the family, in school, in the army, on the job. School tells us, 'You're not at home anymore'; the army tells us, 'You're not in school anymore'" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 209). The expansion of these limits is then defined by the progressive expansion of the concrete elements.

Territorial codes define the "natural" norms of life. They express the pregiven, essential, and proper limits and usage of persons and objects in a given assemblage by explaining how the world is related to the past, to an inscription of memory—"this is how things are done, how they have always been done." According to *Anti-Oedipus*, these "qualitatively different chains of mobile and limited code" are formed by three basic actions: (1) "a selection cut" allowing something to pass through and circulate, (2) "a detachment cut" that blocks part of that circulation, and (3) a "redistribution of the remainder" to begin a new chain of code (294/247).

The first synthesis of territorial coding—the synthesis of connection—attempts to ward off the chaos of a meaningless world by making a selection cut from fundamentally uncoded flows, allowing some of them to pass through while others are blocked. This primary repression of noncodable flows accomplishes two things: it wards off an absolutely chaotic world by deselecting some of its flows, and it puts into circulation and connection the others to be coded. By marking a separation of some of these noncoded flows, the connective synthesis is able to qualitatively organize them into an identity, or "coded stock." The "entry pole" of selection here initiates a filial line following a genealogical or hereditary descent of hierarchically coded stock: codes of kinship, codes of worship, codes of communication, codes of exchange, codes of location (places of worship, places for eating, places for rubbish, and so on). Everything has its proper code: the proper time, the proper place, and the proper people to do it.

The second synthesis of territorial coding—the disjunctive synthesis or "detachment cut"—also accomplishes two tasks: it blocks some of these connections from attaching themselves to the assemblage, through code prohibitions, taboos, limits and so on, so that a finite stock of code may circulate within a qualitatively distinct territory, and it detaches a remainder or "residual energy" in order to begin a new chain of code further along. These are the borders to towns; prohibitions on kinship; and boundaries to racial, ethnic, and gender identities. These are the limits produced by the disjunctive synthesis.

The third synthesis of territorial coding—the conjunctive synthesis or the "redistribution of the remainder"—wards off the fusion of all codes into a single qualitative stock by producing a residuum. But it also begins a new line of code by redistributing this surplus through an alliance with new lines of code. There are many different mechanisms for warding off

the fusion of codes and redistributing surplus code through alliances with other lines of code: practices of potlatch (giving away wealth in order to gain prestige), practices of struggle (itinerant raids and theft eliminating accumulation), practices of dowry (giving away wealth and establishing alliances with other kinship lines), gifts and counter gifts, and so on.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, these coded territories “form a fabric [*tissu*] of relatively supple segmentarity” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 255/208). The abstract relations change, but only one concrete element at a time, as it is selected, detached, and redistributed into a new relation. Territorial assemblages thus function like a game of leapfrog. They set up some limits and by doing so create a new limit to cross, and so on itinerantly. Every time a territory is delimited, an outside or surplus is produced through this process of delimitation or “detachment.” This surplus or credit is then redistributed to another line through an alliance, where it will again produce a surplus and so on in a perpetual disequilibrium, making its very dysfunction an essential element of its ability to function. In the territorial assemblage, the concrete elements become privileged and primary. Change happens progressively, one concrete point at a time.

State Assemblages

The second type of assemblage is the state assemblage. State assemblages are arranged in such a way that the conditioning relations attempt to unify or totalize all the concrete elements and agencies in the assemblage. Instead of the surplus code generated by territorial assemblages that would normally form an alliance with other concrete elements, a surplus of code may instead begin to form an unchecked accumulation—agricultural, social, scientific, artistic, and so on—requiring the maintenance of a specialized body. This special body of accumulation then reacts back on the concrete elements and brings them into resonance around a centralized point of transcendence. According to Deleuze and Guattari, state assemblages

make points resonate together . . . very diverse points of order, geographic, ethnic, linguistic, moral, economic, technological particularities. . . . It operates by stratification; in other words, it forms a vertical, hierarchized aggregate that spans the horizontal lines in a dimension of depth. In retaining given elements, it necessarily cuts off their relations with other elements, which become exterior, it inhibits, slows down, or controls those relations; if the State has a circuit of its own, it is an internal circuit dependent primarily upon resonance, it is a zone of recurrence that isolates itself from the remainder of the network, even if in order to do so it must exert even stricter controls over its relations with that remainder. (*A Thousand Plateaus* 539–40/433)

In state assemblages, the abstract machine attempts to cut itself off from and rise hierarchically above the concrete relations and personae of the assemblage. What Deleuze and Guattari call “state overcoding” is thus characterized by centralized accumulation, forced resonance of diverse points of order, “laying out [*en étendant*] a divisible homogeneous space striated in all directions” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 272 / 223), and by its vertical and redundant center (on top), scanning all the radii.

Deleuze and Guattari describe three kinds of state arrangements proper to the process of statification: binary, circular, and linear. Whereas binary territorial segmentations are defined by multiple binaries that are always determined by a third (an alliance between the two), binary state segmentations are self-sufficient and assure the prevalence of one segment over the other (hierarchy). Whereas circular territorial segments do not imply the same center but a multiplicity of centers (round but not quite circular), circular state segments form a resonance of concentric circles around an axis of rotation, converging on a single point of accumulation. Whereas linear territorial segmentation functions by “segments-in-progress,” alignments but no straight line, and supple morphological formations, linear state segments function by homogenized segments geometrically organized around a dominant segment through which they pass: a space or *spatio* rather than a place or territory. According to Deleuze and Guattari, there are all manner of state assemblages—statist science (statistics), statist art, statist linguistics (Chomsky), and so on.

Capitalist Assemblages

The third type of assemblage is the capitalist assemblage. Capitalist assemblages are arranged in such a way that the conditions, elements, and agencies of the assemblage are divested of their qualitative relations and codes in order to circulate more widely as abstract quantities. In the capitalist assemblage, it is no longer the concrete elements that drive the process of progressive itinerant change (as in the territorial assemblage), nor the abstract machine that centralizes the control over the concrete elements (as in the statist assemblage), but the agent or persona that becomes disengaged from the assemblage and tries to force unqualified concrete elements into strictly quantitative relations.

Deleuze and Guattari define the capitalist assemblage by its processes of “axiomatization.” An axiom, they say, is precisely this independent or disengaged point that forces unqualified elements into homologous quantitative relations (*What is Philosophy?* 130 / 137–8). Thus whereas codes determine the qualities of elements (types of places, types of goods, types

of activity) and establish indirect relations (of alliance) between these incommensurable, qualified, mobile, limited codes, and statist overcodes capture and recode these elements through extra-economic forces, capitalist axioms establish a strictly economic general equivalence between purely unqualified (decoded) elements.

However, Deleuze and Guattari point out that the axiomatic is not the invention of capitalism since it is identical to capitalism itself. Capitalism is the offspring or result, which merely ensures the regulation of the axiomatic; "it watches over or directs progress toward a saturation of the axiomatic and the corresponding widening of the limits" (*Anti-Oedipus* 300/252–3). Capitalist axiomatics create denumerable finite representations of assemblages divested of their qualities. Each independent from the others, they are added, subtracted, and multiplied to form more or less saturated markets for the generation of wealth.

While territorial assemblages arrange qualified pieces of labor corresponding to a particular quantum of abstract labor (activity required to create a given artifact), and state assemblages introduce the general equivalent of currency formally uniting "partial objects" (goods and services) whose overcoded value is determined by noncapitalist (imperial or juridical) decisions, neither decode nor dequalify exchange to the degree that capitalism does. Capitalism goes further. On one hand, it decodes qualitative relationships through the privatization of all aspects of social life, free trade, advertising, freeing of labor and capital, and imperialism; on the other, it axiomatizes them as "productions for the market." This capitalist assemblage thus retains a certain version of immanent relation among the three aspects of the assemblage, but instead of treating them as singularities or qualitative differences, treats them all as globally exchangeable quantities.

Nomadic Assemblages

The fourth type of assemblage is the nomadic assemblage. Nomadic assemblages are arranged in such a way that the conditions, elements, and agencies of the assemblage are able to change and enter into new combinations without arbitrary limit or so-called "natural" or "hierarchical" uses and meanings. Deleuze and Guattari call this type of assemblage "nomadic" because it was invented by historically nomadic peoples whose movement was not directed toward a final end (a static territory or state) but functioned as a kind of "trajectory." For the nomad, Deleuze and Guattari observe, "every point is a relay and exists only as a relay. A path is always between two points, but the in-between has taken on all the consistency and enjoys both an autonomy and a direction of its own.

The life of the nomad is the intermezzo. Even the elements of his dwelling are conceived in terms of the trajectory that is forever mobilizing them" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 380).

In contrast to the capitalist assemblage that makes possible unlimited immanent transformation on the condition of global quantification, the nomadic assemblage makes possible a truly unlimited qualitative transformation and expansion of the assemblage. Without the abstraction and dominance of any part of the assemblage, a truly reciprocal change occurs. Thus the nomadic assemblage does not simply affirm the chaos of heterogeneity or qualitative difference, it constructs a participatory arrangement in which all the elements of the assemblage enter into an open feedback loop in which the condition, elements, and agents all participate equally in the process of transformation.

In all kinds of fields—science, art, politics, and so on—nomadic assemblages are the ones that create something new or revolutionary for their time. The nomadic assemblage is revolutionary in the sense that instead of applying solutions to pregiven problems, such as how to make sure everyone is represented fairly in a presupposed state, or simply affirming that "other problems are possible," particular problems are themselves transformed directly by those who effectuate them and who are affected by them. "When people demand to formulate their problems themselves and to determine at least the particular conditions under which they can receive a more general solution," there is a nomadic assemblage: a direct participation without representation or mediation (*A Thousand Plateaus* 588/471). This kind of participation and self-management thus offers a political alternative absolutely incompatible with territorial hierarchies based on essentialist meanings, state hierarchies based on centralized command, and capitalist hierarchies based on globally exchanged generic quantities.

These four types of assemblage are never pure; all assemblages are composed of a mixture of these four types to different degrees. In order to understand how an assemblage works (the politics of the assemblage), we need to be able to map out its different tendencies and political types.

III. The Typology of Change in Assemblages

Not only are there four different types of assemblages, but in order to understand how an assemblage works we also have to locate four different types of coexistent processes of change. "In every social system," Deleuze observes, "you will always find lines of escape, as well as sticking points to cut off these escapes, or else (which is not the same thing)

embryonic apparatuses to recuperate them, to reroute and stop them, in a new system waiting to strike" (*Desert Islands* 269–270). Every assemblage is always simultaneously crisscrossed with multiple types of processes. According to Deleuze and Guattari, we need to understand the mixture of different processes of change that make it up. In every assemblage there are at least four different kinds of political types of change at work, to some degree. The concept they use to describe these four mixed types of change is "deterritorialization." Deterritorialization is the way in which assemblages continually transform and/or reproduce themselves. If we want to know how an assemblage works, we must ask, "What types of change are at work?"

The four kinds of deterritorialization or change that define assemblages are: (1) "relative negative" processes that change an assemblage in order to maintain and reproduce an established assemblage; (2) "relative positive" processes that do not reproduce an established assemblage, but do not yet contribute to or create a new assemblage—they are ambiguous; (3) "absolute negative" processes that do not support any assemblage, but undermine them all; and (4) "absolute positive" processes that do not reproduce an established assemblage, but instead create a new one. Let us look more closely at each of these types of change that define all assemblages.

Relative Negative Deterritorialization

Relative negative deterritorialization is the process that changes an assemblage in order to maintain and reproduce an established assemblage. This is the process by which pre-established assemblages adapt and respond to changes in their relations by incorporating those changes. For example, popular social movements against the policies of governments can often be satisfied through the adaptation of state politics: legal reform, increased political representation, and party support. These processes allow the pre-established state assemblage to remain in place precisely through adaptation to popular demands. As Deleuze and Guattari say, "D[eterritorialization] may be overlaid by a compensatory reterritorialization obstructing the line of flight: D[eterritorialization] is then said to be *negative*" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 634/508). Popular movements against war, poverty, the exclusion of minorities, and so on are "lines of flight" or expressions of political realities different from the established ones. Relative negative deterritorialization aims to obstruct these lines of flight by offering them an increased incorporation of their desires into the state

assemblage. In doing so, these desires become normalized as part of the state itself.

Assemblages are thus never total or homogenous. All assemblages are always undergoing some kind of adaptation or change. The question is, “What kind of process of transformation are they undergoing?” Relative negative deterritorializations are the processes that simply reproduce an established territorial, statist, or capitalist assemblage.

Relative Positive Deterritorialization

Relative positive deterritorialization is the process of change that does not reproduce a pre-established assemblage, but does not yet contribute to or create a new assemblage either (*A Thousand Plateaus* 634/508). These sorts of processes are, in short, ambiguous changes that are not clearly incorporated or incorporable into an established assemblage. Everyone recognizes that a new element or agency has escaped the established assemblage, but it is not yet clear whether it will cause a radical transformation of the whole assemblage or whether it will be incorporated into an already established assemblage through a relative negative deterritorialization. According to Deleuze and Guattari, this type of change is so “extremely ambiguous” because it is a borderline phenomena that is split in two: on one side it is an “anomalous” [*anomal*] phenomena that cannot be represented or incorporated with the current state of affairs, and on the other side it is like an “exceptional individual” that expresses the possibility of an entirely new world yet to come (*A Thousand Plateaus* 302/247). It is both the possibility of a new world and the possibility of co-optation (356-357/291).

Absolute Negative Deterritorialization

Absolute negative deterritorialization is the process of change that does not support any political assemblage but undermines them all (*A Thousand Plateaus* 636/510). These are lines of flight that escape pre-established assemblages but instead of being ambiguously split between the old and the new, they are unambiguously against the old assemblage *and* any new assemblage that threatens its absolute rejection of all assemblages. However, by rejecting all forms of organized assemblage, they become fragmented targets easily recaptured by the relative negative deterritorializations of territorial, statist, and capitalist assemblages. Deleuze and Guattari state, “Staying stratified—organized, signified, subjected—is not the worst that can happen; the worst that can happen is if you throw the

strata into demented or suicidal collapse, which brings them back down on us heavier than ever" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 199/161).

Absolute Positive Deterritorialization

Absolute positive deterritorialization is the process of change that does not reproduce a pre-established assemblage, but instead creates a new one. Not only do these sorts of change escape the capture of pre-established assemblages, but they also connect to other such elements that have escaped capture. Their connection is not one that reproduces an alliance, totalization, or commodification, but forms an entirely new form of assemblage. The goal of this type of change is to "prefigure" a new world; that is, to create a new world in the shell of the old (*A Thousand Plateaus* 177/142). This absolute positive deterritorialization does not emerge ex nihilo, but rather simply amplifies the processes of deterritorialization that are already part of every assemblage and connects them together to form a new assemblage.

Deleuze and Guattari describe this type of change as the absolute limit confronted by all other assemblages (*Anti-Oedipus* 208/176). This process of deterritorialization is neither transcendent nor oppositional, nor merely potential, but a creative process that creates something new from the subjects and objects that are continually escaping from all assemblages. Absolute positive deterritorialization is thus the kind of change that is capable of creating and sustaining a revolutionary movement. It is constructive insofar as it builds an alternative, irreducible to the pre-constructed or pre-established assemblages of the past.

We can now see that the general use of the concept "deterritorialization" is unhelpful for analyzing assemblages without a clear clarification of its four-part typology. For Deleuze and Guattari, there are four clearly distinct types of deterritorialization that we need to make use of in order to understand how an assemblage works. Without such clarification, we risk falling into the valorization of "pure change as such," i.e., absolute negative deterritorialization, spontaneism, "the worst that can happen."

Conclusion

Contra DeLanda, Deleuze and Guattari, do in fact have a "fully fledged" assemblage theory. This theory is fully fledged not in the sense that it explains all the consequences of the theory, but simply in the sense that it gives us the core concepts and typologies by which the theory can be successfully deployed. What Deleuze and Guattari call their "general logic of assemblages" is based on three major theoretical formations. First, all assemblages are composed of a *basic structure* including a con-

dition (abstract machine), elements (concrete assemblage), and agents (personae). Although the content differs depending on the kind of assemblage (biological, amorous, aesthetic, and so on), the structural role or function of these three aspects are shared by all assemblages. Second, all assemblages are arranged according to *four basic political types*: territorial, statist, capitalist, and nomadic. Each type describes a different way in which the conditions, elements, and agents of the assemblage are ordered. Each assemblage is always a mixture of these four types to varying degrees. Finally, all assemblages are constantly changing according to *four different kinds of change* or “deterritorialization”: relative negative, relative positive, absolute negative, and absolute positive.

According to this general logic, all assemblages are political. If we want to know what an assemblage is, we need to know how it works. We have to do an analysis of the assemblage: what is its structure? what is its political typology? and what are the processes of change that shape it? Once we understand how the assemblage functions, we will be in a better position to perform diagnosis: to direct or shape the assemblage toward increasingly revolutionary aims. However, the focus of this essay has not been to provide any such particular analysis or diagnosis of assemblages since there are numerous published essays that already do this, including several in this special issue of *SubStance*. Rather, the focus of this essay is to clarify the basic theoretical apparatus built by Deleuze and Guattari so that future analysis can be more rigorous and consistent in its methodology.

University of Denver

Notes

1. See Thomas Nail, *Returning to Revolution: Deleuze, Guattari and Zapatismo* (Edinburgh University Press, 2012), and “Deleuze, Occupy, and the Actuality of Revolution” in *Theory & Event*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2013.
2. Where given, French page numbers precede English page numbers. Where only one page number is given, it is the English page number.

Works Cited

- DeLanda, Manuel. *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*. Continuum, 2006.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Desert Islands and Other Texts, 1953-1974*. Semiotext(e), 2004.
- . *Difference and Repetition*. Translated by Paul Patton, Continuum, 2001.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi, Continuum, 2008.
- . *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Robert Hurly, University of Minnesota Press, 1983.
- . *What Is Philosophy?* Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell, Columbia University Press, 1994.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Claire Parnet. *Dialogues*. Columbia University Press, 1987.
- Hegel, Georg W. F. *The Science of Logic*. Humanity Books, 1999.