

manuel delanda, *assemblage theory* (edinburgh university press, 2016)

andrew ball

While Manuel DeLanda's philosophy is associated with the most cutting-edge innovations in continental thought, his *Assemblage Theory* should be considered a work of secondary scholarship that builds upon the concept of assemblage first sketched by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. DeLanda characterizes his own theory as "an extension of their work" which is deferential to "its value and resiliency" and remains committed to "preserve and extend Deleuze and Guattari's insights" (65, 131). Though DeLanda significantly expands on their ideas, conceiving of properties and capacities of assemblages not envisioned by Deleuze and Guattari to develop a comprehensive "ontology of assemblages," the work is ultimately one of creative exegesis that remains grounded in the latter's philosophy (127).

DeLanda begins by elaborating the defining traits of assemblages and the ontological framework they compose. All assemblages, he explains, are singularities, they are historical and individually unique, and are therefore not "particular members of a general category" (6). Because each is unique, a primary function of assemblage theory is to map the individuation process that has given rise to an assemblage. Unlike the relationalist ontology described in Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, where each entity is defined by its interactions with other entities—by its capacity to affect and be affected by other entities—DeLanda's assemblages consist of parts that remain autonomous and independent of their network

of relations. Each part is capable of detaching to form new relations and therefore assemblages are characterized by “relations of exteriority.” In contrast to the “relations of interiority” that characterize Latour’s assemblages, where relations “define the very identity of the terms they relate,” relations of exteriority are non-constitutive of component parts (2). As opposed to the ontological contingency of assemblage components described by Latour, in DeLanda’s assemblage theory, relations do not define the terms of the relation. However, while the parts of an assemblage remain independent and are not defined by the whole, the nature of the whole assemblage is a function of the interrelations of its parts. Assemblages are characterized by the “emergent properties” that are “produced by the interactions between components” (12). As such, the nature of assemblages are not determined by “essences [that] belong to a...transcendent plane,” but are contingent on immanent material interactions (12). That is, while the parts maintain an autonomous identity independent of their relations, the nature of the whole assemblage is contingent on the emergent properties that arise through the relation of its parts.

One way that DeLanda seeks to correct or improve upon Deleuze and Guattari’s assemblage theory is to argue that assemblages and their components possess mind-independent agency. He sets out to invest the components of assemblages with an autonomous will that Deleuze and Guattari formerly denied them and argues that we must regard assemblages as “legitimate agents” (9). In the first three chapters of the book, DeLanda attempts to prove this by developing “a more detailed social ontology” than we find in Deleuze and Guattari, one that takes “into account a greater variety of forms of social agency” (65). In the sixth chapter, he attempts to show that “assemblages must be considered to be fully *independent of our minds*” by examining the individuation processes of atoms, elements, genes, and biological species (138). While this is a major feature of his assemblage theory, DeLanda fails to develop a rigorous or systematic account of non-human agency to the extent that other new materialists have, such as Jane Bennett and Levi Bryant, and to sufficiently differentiate his concept of mind-independence from that of other thinkers.

More broadly, DeLanda’s assemblage theory is a flat, materialist ontology of immanence. It is flat because “the ontological status of all assemblages is the same,” and immanent because all assemblages “populate the same ontological plane,” one that is not derived from an anterior, transcendent level of existence (19). DeLanda argues that its non-hierarchical ontology distinguishes assemblage theory

from other realist philosophies which make “strong ontological distinctions between levels of existence, such as genus, species, and organism” (13). Perhaps DeLanda’s most well-known contribution to Deleuze and Guattari’s theory is his contention that reality consists of assemblages all the way down. All that *is*, he writes, is an assemblage, or rather, “assemblages of assemblages” (3). Each component of an assemblage is also an assemblage and “the environment of an assemblage is itself an assemblage” (7). All of existence is composed of a “nested set” of assemblages that operate at varying levels of scale, terminating in “the grand cosmic assemblage, the plane of immanence” (7). In short, assemblages are historical, unique, relationally contingent, mind-independent agents that are part of a flat, non-hierarchical plane of existence that is immanent rather than transcendent and material rather than ideal.

DeLanda’s foremost revision of Deleuze and Guattari’s theory is “to *parametrise* the concept of assemblage” (56). In place of Deleuze and Guattari’s binaristic distinctions—between strata and assemblage, molecular and molar, micro and macro—DeLanda proposes that we conceptualize assemblages as having variable parameters that are analogous to “control knobs” (19). This would allow what formerly appeared to be dichotomous categories to be unified as different phases in a continuum. He writes, “Unlike mutually exclusive binary categories, phases can be transformed into one another, and even coexist as mixtures, like a gel that is a mixture of the solid and liquid phases of different materials” (19). By replacing distinct ontological categories with historically variable parameters, all entities can be recognized as existing in a unified, immanent field of assemblages. DeLanda proposes that all assemblages are characterized by two variable parameters: the first quantifies its degree of territorialization and deterritorialization, the second quantifies its degree of coding and decoding. The two parameters are analogous; territorialization is to coding as deterritorialization is to decoding. As in the work of Deleuze and Guattari, territorialization refers to the components within an assemblage that give it “its defining boundaries and maintains those boundaries through time” (27). When the “control knob” of territorialization is set at a high value, the assemblage exhibits a high degree of stasis, fixity, homogeneity, normalization, and self-replication. Conversely, when deterritorialization values are high, the assemblage exhibits mobility, flux, heterogeneity, destabilization, novelty, and a loss of unity. The values of each parameter are tied to two classes of traits found in every assemblage: expressive or symbolic components, and material or physical components. In a social assemblage, for example, territorialization is expressed symbolically and materially through rituals, routines, regula-

tions, traditions, conventions, laws, standard procedures, rights, and obligations that are aimed at reproducing the assemblage, whereas deterritorialization is expressed through innovations that destabilize the continuity of the assemblage. Like social entities, linguistic entities are assemblages which “operate at several levels of scale at once,” from the level of the phoneme to the linguistic codes that enforce social obligations. When the variable parameter of territorialization or coding is high, linguistic assemblages function as enforcement mechanisms used to maintain homogeneity and conformity to a standardized norm. When deterritorialization values are high, linguistic assemblages function to break down formerly rigid social codes.

DeLanda devotes each chapter of *Assemblage Theory* to a different kind of assemblage, each operating at varying levels of scale and modality, in an effort to exemplify his concepts. Chapter one is concerned with social assemblages, chapter two with linguistic assemblages, chapter three with martial assemblages, chapter four considers scientific practices as assemblages, chapter five examines diagrammatic assemblages of the actual and virtual, chapter six gives an account of atomic, genetic, and chemical assemblages, and chapter seven looks at the solutions to scientific and mathematical problems as assemblages.

While parametrizing Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the assemblage is DeLanda’s primary extension of their ideas, his most thoroughgoing critique of their philosophy concerns what he calls “reified generalities.” He begins at the level of social theory and then extrapolates the consequences of these premises to develop his own realist ontology. DeLanda wishes to correct “the limitations of Deleuze’s social ontology,” which “is made up of only three levels: the individual, the group, and the social field” (40, 39). By offering “a more finely grained ontology, with many levels of social ensembles between the person and society,” he can design a more valid materialist philosophy (4). What we have traditionally designated as “society [is] an assemblage of assemblages” (37). As such, we cannot “coherently speak of ‘society as a whole’” (38). Rather, social assemblages exist at different levels of scale, such as families, communities, bureaucracies, corporations, cities, territories, and nation-states. Similarly, we cannot speak of a unified “economic system that encompasses all of society” (15). What have formerly been regarded as “monolithic entities” such as Capitalism or the Market must be recognized as an assemblage of individual entities, each of which are “valid historical actors” such as local marketplaces, as well as regional, national, and continental markets (16, 15). DeLanda maintains that “Deleuze and Guattari get their eco-

nomic history wrong” by failing to recognize that macro-entities like the Market or the Capitalist System do not exist as “individual emergent wholes” but consist of a nested set of assemblages “operating at different scales,” each with their own historically contingent parameters (46, 16). DeLanda argues that Deleuze and Guattari are not alone in this error. Rather, he contends that “the academic left today has become prey” to a “double danger” (48). First, by “politically targeting” reified generalities such as the Market, Capitalism, the State, Power, and Labor. Second, by abandoning a realism that recognizes reality to be mind-independent. Assemblage theory, DeLanda argues, offers a more valid materialist, realist ontology which rejects any appeal to such reified generalities and leaves “behind the dream of a Revolution that changes the entire system,” as no monolithic social or economic system exists (48). By recognizing the “heterogeneity...and variety of... the real agents of economic history,” assemblage theory can correct the left and effect the kind of change it has failed to accomplish (16). DeLanda develops this social theory in the first chapters of the book. In the remainder of the text, he extends his critique of Deleuze and Guattari’s social ontology to argue that other nested sets of assemblages such as language, science, nature, and culture have been falsely regarded as unified wholes and must also be reconceptualized in light of assemblage theory.

The most significant contributions to scholarship that DeLanda makes in *Assemblage Theory* are found in the first three chapters of the book. Here, he ably brings greater clarity and coherence to the theory first sketched by Deleuze and Guattari while also building upon it in ways that have proven to be immensely influential to other thinkers who have been identified—sometimes unhappily—with New Materialism. Just as DeLanda has expanded and fleshed out Deleuze and Guattari’s nascent assemblage theory, resolving inconsistencies and filling gaps to create a comprehensive system from an evocative and elliptical set of concepts, other new materialists, most notably Levi Bryant, have effectively developed the novel ideas DeLanda imparts in *Assemblage Theory* and elsewhere. Many of the fundamental principles of Bryant’s “machinic ontology” are drawn from the still inchoate concepts in DeLanda’s *Assemblage Theory*. Chief among them are DeLanda’s immanent ontology, the Deleuzian cartographic imperative he prescribes (but fails to describe), his rejection of reified generalities—what Bryant calls transcendent agencies—and the abandonment of such false dichotomies as nature / culture and individual / society. Undoubtedly the greatest strength of the book lies in DeLanda’s development of a new materialist social theory, one that Bryant also effectively elaborates in his own brand of assemblage theory.

However, the exceptional virtues of the first half of *Assemblage Theory* are equally matched by the immense deficiencies of the last four chapters of the book. The disciplined rigor and clarity of the early chapters gives way, in the second half of the book, to a seemingly endless procession of excursions and explications of scientific and mathematic ideas which are then clumsily grafted onto Deleuzian concepts in the hopes of creating a patchwork ontology. In the process, any semblance of a coherent and well-wrought argument is lost. DeLanda yields the floor to a large cast of other thinkers like the economist Fernand Braudel and to mathematicians such as Felix Klein, Friedrich Gauss, Henri Poincaré, Leonard Euler, Neils Abel, Evariste Galois, Stanislav Ulam, and John Von Neumann, flitting from one discipline and concept to the next, including thermodynamics, genetics, geometry, astrophysics, chemistry, the history of the periodic table, the history of algebraic equations, velocity vector field dynamics, projective geometry, and discrete mathematics, to name but a sampling. This is not to say that these figures and ideas are incapable of valuably illuminating aspects of assemblage theory, but that DeLanda's treatment of this material for such purposes is murky, tedious, and ineffective. When, in earlier chapters, he engages in eclectic exemplifications, such as the effect of the Battle of Hastings on the development of English dialects, it still remains clear how these are working to legitimate a premise of assemblage theory. But by the time we get to the later chapters, these asides become progressively unmoored from any discernible argument and the careful rigor of the first half of the book is altogether absent.

While DeLanda is widely regarded as a novel thinker, and the extent and scope of his talents are certainly undeniable, this volume must essentially be regarded, if one is reading charitably, as a commentary on Deleuze. And, in DeLanda's defense, he frames it as such. To be sure, DeLanda offers an adept reading and expansion of Deleuze and Guattari's work. If one is being less charitable, however, the book can be described as a digressive, derivative work of eclecticism. There is scarcely an idea to be found in the text that is not derived from another thinker. Deleuze defined philosophy as the creation of concepts and there simply are not many new concepts presented here. It is an inelegant work of syncretism where DeLanda's voice is lost in the cacophonous din of other voices. Of course, philosophy is arguably an accretive practice that continually builds up and refines the work that precedes it, but the measure of novel ideas in this text is far outweighed by those of others, and the latter are not applied in a manner that lends greater insight to the former.

A final, perplexing omission in the text, as it is glaring and easily remedied, is the complete absence of any kind of concluding remarks. The book simply comes to an abrupt end. After one hundred pages of a seemingly endless hodgepodge of concept explications that appear to have no clear connection to premises, some form of summation was sorely needed. If there was ever an occasion to offer remarks that could tie up the diverse threads of an argument, this was it. Without that, this erratic tapestry of ideas appears unfinished.

Ultimately, *Assemblage Theory* is a remarkably uneven text. The first half of the volume is as indispensable for anyone interested in contemporary continental philosophy as the second half is inconsequential. Despite the book's deficiencies, DeLanda is unquestionably one of the most important thinkers in the field and this work, particularly the early chapters, is essential reading for anyone wishing to obtain a thorough account of the new direction in continental thought.

ANDREW BALL is a Lecturer in the Humanities department at the Wentworth Institute of Technology in Boston. His interdisciplinary scholarship is engaged in the fields of American literature, continental philosophy, and the arts with an emphasis on matters of religion, economics, and social justice. He is currently completing a book entitled, *The Economy of Redemption in American Culture: Literature, Theology, Politics*.