Concepts and the `New' Empiricism

Nicholas Gane

European Journal of Social Theory 2009 12: 83

DOI: 10.1177/1368431008099645

European Journal of Social Theory 12(1): 83–97

Concepts and the 'New' Empiricism

Nicholas Gane

UNIVERSITY OF YORK, UK

Abstract

This article examines the role of concepts in the so-called 'new' empiricism that is currently emerging from the writings of Gilles Deleuze. It asks what concepts are, and how they might be put to work to present the 'pure difference' of the empirical world. In addressing these questions, a number of parallels and contrasts are drawn between the writings of Deleuze and Max Weber. It is shown that many of Deleuze's key arguments about concepts – in particular, that they are pedagogical, multiple, networked and problem-oriented in basis – are anticipated by Weber's sociological methodology of concept formation. This leads, finally, to a consideration of whether the creation of concepts as a practice belongs primarily within the domain of philosophy (as argued by Deleuze), or if it is a key part of social scientific work more generally.

Key words

■ concepts ■ Deleuze ■ empiricism ■ ideal-types ■ neo-Kantianism ■ Weber

> Concepts are centres of vibrations, each in itself and every one in relation to all others. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 23)

There is currently talk of a new empiricism: one inspired by the writings of Gilles Deleuze. This is perhaps surprising given that Deleuze's interest in empiricism dates back to the early 1950s, and can be traced back to his study of Hume – *Empiricism and Subjectivity* – which was first published in 1953. While there is nothing 'new' about Deleuze's empiricism, what is new is the impact that his writings on this subject are beginning to have upon the social sciences. For a new generation of social scientists, and sociologists in particular, Deleuze's empiricism offers a way out of hackneyed and time-worn sociological debates about the connection between theoretical and empirical research, and the techniques or 'methods' needed for the study of so-called 'reality'. Against most existing sociological conceptions of empiricism, Deleuze's work offers a radical alternative. Deleuze argues, via Alfred North Whitehead, that empiricism is to be defined according to two basic principles: first, that 'the abstract does not explain, but must itself be explained', and second, that 'the aim is not to rediscover the eternal or the universal, but to find the conditions under which something new is

www.sagepublications.com DOI: 10.1177/1368431008099645

produced' (Deleuze and Parnet, 1977: vii). The second of these principles – that empirical philosophy is a philosophy of creation and becoming – has received more attention than the first: the suggestion that 'states of things' should be analysed in ways that 'non pre-existent concepts can be extracted from them' (Deleuze and Parnet, 1977: vii), a position that questions the common assumption that the effectiveness of concepts lies in their ability to shift thought from the abstract to the concrete. The key point here, and one that has often been missed in the secondary literature on Deleuze (see, for example, Alliez, 2004), is that this brand of empiricism is framed by a theory of the *concept*. In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze says, 'This is the secret of empiricism. Empiricism is by no means a reaction against concepts, nor a simple appeal to lived experience. On the contrary, it undertakes the most insane creation of concepts ever seen or heard' (1995a: xx). This is not an isolated statement in Deleuze's work. Elsewhere, he terms *A Thousand Plateaus* 'a book of concepts' (Deleuze, 1995b: 25) and opens his final book (with Félix Guattari), *What Is Philosophy?*, with the basic although deceptively difficult question 'What is a Concept?' (1994: 15–34). Given the centrality of the concept within Deleuze's philosophy, this article questions what exactly concepts are and considers how they might be put to work within sociology. In order to do this, a number of key parallels will be drawn between Deleuze's work and that of Max Weber (*the* concept theorist of the social sciences). This, in turn, will lead to a questioning of Deleuze's claim that 'philosophy is the discipline that involves *creating* concepts' (1994: 5) and that it is the philosopher who is 'expert in concepts and in the lack of them' (1994: 3).

Concepts and Empiricism

The basic principles of Deleuze's empiricism are laid out in his early text *Empiricism and Subjectivity*. This short essay on 'Hume's theory of human nature' is a challenging read, but in a preface to the English language edition written in 1989, Deleuze lays bare his key points of interest in what he calls 'the genius of Hume' (1991: x). The first of these, for Deleuze, is that Hume not only established the concept of belief, but questioned the conditions under which belief and, by extension, knowledge (between which there is no clear line of demarcation for Hume) takes form and is legitimated. Second, Hume does this by analysing knowledge in terms of the '*association* of ideas', thereby treating knowledge as 'a practice of cultural and *conventional* formations (conventional instead of contractual), rather than as a theory of the human mind' (1991: xi). This, in turn, opens the way for a third reason for reading Hume: 'He created the first great logic of *relations*' (1991: xi). This emphasis on the relationity of ideas is pivotal for Deleuze, and no doubt informs his later writings on the rhizome (see Deleuze and Guattari, 1988). But in his reading of Hume, it takes on a particular significance: 'all relations (not only "matters of fact" but also relations among ideas) are external to their terms. As a result, he constituted a multifarious world of experience based upon the principle of the exteriority of relations' (1991: xi). The notion

of exteriority has been influential in a number of different strands of French philosophy (see, for example, Lévinas, 1969; Althusser and Balibar, 1977), but for Deleuze it describes a relationality that is underpinned by what he calls *association*, or rather a combination of 'contiguity, resemblance, and causality' (1991: 100). Deleuze goes beyond this, however, for he argues that association, while making relations possible, is not enough on its own to explain what relations are or the liveliness of their components and contours. There are many complications here, one of which is that there is a degree of independence between objects and/or ideas and the relations that are forged between them. Deleuze observes, for example, that 'ideas do not account for the nature of the operations that we perform on them, and especially of the relations that we establish among them' (1991: 101). The temptation this offers is to treat ideas and relations as transcendental forms, but Deleuze declares that this is exactly the wrong path to take. Instead, he returns to the question of empiricism, and argues that the task of thought is to address the 'given' as something that is to be placed in question, and to ask the ways through which subjects constitute themselves, or perhaps are constituted, through encounters with the empirical or pre-conceptual world.

But what exactly is the 'given'? This question leads to the heart of Hume's, and in turn Deleuze's, notion of empiricism. In a key passage, Deleuze explains:

> It is, says Hume, the flux of the sensible, a collection of impressions and images, or a set of perceptions. It is the totality of that which appears, being which equals appearance; it is also movement and change without identity or law. We use the terms '*imagination*' and 'mind' not to designate a faculty or a principle of organization, but rather a particular set or a particular collection. Empiricism begins from the experience of a collection, or from an animated succession of distinct perceptions. It begins with them, insofar as they are distinct and independent. In fact, its principle, that is, the constitutive principle giving status to experience, is not that 'every idea derives from an impression' whose sense is only regulative; but rather that 'everything separable is distinguishable and everything distinguishable is different. (1991: 87)

The basic argument of this passage is that empiricism is not about a simple movement from an experience of sensory data to its representation in the form of an idea. Rather, such data is characterized by difference and singularity and is thus not subsumable under any general law or procedure. This means that representing what is given to our senses in the form of a coherent idea or theory is not only undesirable but ultimately impossible. For Deleuze, empiricism is thus to be less about the representation of a sensible world through means of rational thought than the challenges this world *presents* to thought. For Boundas, this means that 'empiricism is not a philosophy of the senses but a philosophy of the imagination' (1991: 7). This position might be compared to Jean-François Lyotard's writings on aesthetic judgement, which takes the sublime, contrary to the beautiful, as a moment of excess that arises from the inability of reason to be reconciled with the imagination (see Gane, 2002: 109). But Deleuze takes things in a different direction, for, unlike Lyotard, he treats neither reason nor imagination in Kantian terms as faculties, and refuses to be seduced by a Nietzschean

language of excess. Instead, he asserts the notion of difference that can be developed from the writings of Hume (and which was later to become one of his own key concepts), along with the importance of the *concept* as a device for presenting the seemingly unpresentable in thought (see Hallward, 2006: 39).

This emphasis on the role of the concept is central to Deleuze's empiricism but is strangely absent from his study of Hume. In later writings, however, Deleuze makes the importance of the concept explicit: 'I never broke with a sort of empiricism that proceeds to a direct exposition of concepts' (Deleuze, cited in Rajchman, 2000: 21). And: 'The concept exists just as much in empiricism as in rationalism, but it has a completely different use and a completely different nature' (Deleuze and Parnet, 1977: viii). But what, for Deleuze, are these concepts of a 'different' use and nature, and how might they be put to work? These are the central questions addressed by Deleuze and Guattari in their final collaborative work, *What Is Philosophy?* In this text, it is argued that conceptual work can take three main forms. The first involves that creation of concepts that are designed to have a classificatory purpose. These are the concepts commonly found in encyclopaedic works that are constructed to organize accounts of empirical materials and to give them fixed and stable meanings. The second is concept creation in service of the capitalist marketplace. This involves the creation of concepts to be bought and sold, and to be prized for their capacity for 'commercial professional training' (1994: 12). Deleuze and Guattari are not alone in identifying such activity. This commodification of thought is also addressed by Lyotard in his later work, most notably in *Postmodern Fables* (1998), which argues that even the most critical concepts of philosophy and theory are today marketed as niche ideas that have an economic worth. More recently, Nigel Thrift extends this position in his analysis of an emergent 'knowing capitalism' that organizes itself by incorporating many of the concepts and ideas of critical social science. He calls attention, in particular, to the feedback loop between critiques of capitalism and the ability of capitalism to deal with its own contradictions (see Thrift, 2005: 6). Deleuze and Guattari largely anticipate this development and term it 'an absolute disaster for thought' (1994: 12).

This leads them to argue instead for a third type of conceptual work, what they call a *pedagogy of the concept*. This is where concepts are created neither as universals for the purpose of classification, nor as conduits for the production of economic value, but as experimental tools that are born out of tensions between the empirical world, for Deleuze, the realm of 'pure difference', and philosophical thought. This raises the difficult question of where concepts come from. It would appear that the conceptual and pre-conceptual worlds are intimately related (see Thanem and Linstead, 2006), even if, because of the infinite complexity of empirical life, they can never be aligned. James Williams detects that for Deleuze there are 'intimations of significance prior to well-defined concepts and to knowledge, not the opposite. What is more, these intimations are irreducible and critical elements of the concept' (2003: 32). Concepts are never forged in abstraction as they always come from somewhere, but at the same time they are never ready made. Villani thus observes that 'It is not a question of finding concepts

in the public domain, even if the latter sometimes takes on philosophical airs. Concepts are never "at hand" and never fall from the sky' (2006: 228). Rather, concepts are mobile and transient abstractions that are forged out of our encounters with the sensory world of experience. Nikolas Rose sees this as giving rise to a form of empiricism centred on 'a constant dynamic engagement between thought and its object' (Rose, in Gane, 2004: 176). But Deleuze and Guattari go further than this as they argue that concepts are about *creation*: the creation of precarious and unstable bridges between the empirical world and its presentation in thought. Concepts are not fixed but are what they call *becomings*: devices that draw on the complexities of the empirical world in order to open our theoretical imagination to things as they might be, rather than to represent or capture these complexities in knowledge. Concepts deal with possibilities. For Deleuze and Guattari, they involve the creation of an *event* (1994: 33), and as there is no guarantee of the effectiveness of such creation, or of where it will lead, they compare it to the throwing of a dice (see 1994: 35). Such events are intensities that condense around the problems empirical data pose to the apparent certainties of thought. Deleuze and Guattari, however, are careful to draw a distinction between intensity and energy: the concept 'has no energy, only intensities; it is anenergetic (energy is not intensity but rather the way in which the latter is deployed and nullified in an extensive state of affairs)' (1994: 21). This statement, in turn, is accompanied by further paradox: 'The concept is an incorporeal, even though it is incarnated or effectuated in bodies' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 21).

Deleuze and Weber

The question of what concepts are, and more pressingly how they might inform a 'new' empiricism, can be considered in finer detail by drawing a number of key parallels and contrasts between Deleuze and Guattari's *What Is Philosophy?* and the methodological writings of Max Weber. For some, this might seem an unorthodox, even heretical approach, but there is a clear rationale for reading between these two figures: Deleuze insists that the creation of concepts underpins all philosophical practice, while Weber puts concept formation at the heart of sociological theory. This said, however, there are important differences between the philosophical positions underpinning Deleuze and Weber's work. There is no suggestion in Weber's writings, for example, that thought in general, and concepts in particular, are susceptible to commodification processes that emanate from, and extend the reach of, the capitalist marketplace. There is also no Freudian insistence that concepts are anenergetic forms that emerge out of and condense around (libidinal) intensities. Instead, Weber's theory of concept formation is primarily neo-Kantian in orientation, and lays down the principles of a social science designed to be value-free and objective in basis, and which gives us the means for establishing 'adequacy' at the levels of causality and meaning. This might appear to place Deleuze and Weber on philosophical ground that is mutually irreconcilable, but this in no way precludes a reading between these

two thinkers. One approach, hinted at by Gillian Rose (1984), might be to consider the latent neo-Kantianism of 'post-structuralist' thought and to connect this to Weber's cultural sociology. This is not something, however, that can be done in any detail in this article. Instead, a number of key parallels and contrasts will be drawn between Deleuze and Weber's theory of concepts and concept formation. To do this, Deleuze's wilder statements, for example, that concepts are '*traversed by a point of absolute survey at infinite speed*' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 21), will be bypassed in favour of more basic analysis of what concepts are and how they might inform a 'new' empiricism. The key points of intersection between Deleuze and Weber on these questions are as follows.

Concepts and 'Empirical Reality'

The difficult questions of what concepts are, how they might be forged, and the uses to which they can be put lie at the heart of Weber's methodological writings. The standard reading of Weber is that in neo-Kantian fashion he draws a distinction between is and ought, fact and value. This is normally associated with his call for objectivity or value-freedom in social scientific work. But a further point of his argument is commonly overlooked: that 'empirical reality' is so complex that it cannot be known in its entirety. This is a point also addressed by Simmel (1997) in his writings on the tragedy of modern culture, in which he argues that culture is now too laden with artefacts and values to be known in its totality. Weber's response to this difficulty is both neo-Kantian and Nietzschean in orientation. In arguing that the complexity of the empirical world is largely unknowable, he takes a neo-Kantian step, for he suggests that we can never get a firm grip on the noumenal realm, or the realm of things-in-themselves. The difficulty of this position is expressed in the following passage:

> As soon as we attempt to reflect about the way in which life confronts us in immediate concrete situations, it presents an infinite multiplicity of successively and coexistingly emerging and disappearing events, both 'within' and 'outside' of ourselves. The absolute infinitude of this multiplicity is seen to remain undiminished even when our attention is focussed on a single 'object'. (Weber, 1949: 72)

The empirical world, even in most immediate, lived sense, is simply too complex to capture fully in thought. And even if we were to try to do so, Weber is sceptical of the likely results. Drawing on the work of James Mill, he declares that 'if one proceeds from pure experience, one arrives at polytheism' (Weber, 1970: 147). His response to this challenge is initially Nietzschean in orientation, for it treats modern culture as an agonistic realm made up of numerous competing value-orders and value-spheres. Confronted by the chaos of this empirical world, he argues the best we can hope for is to address problems that are of significance to us because they relate to our subjective value interests (what is commonly called value-relevance or *Wertbeziehung*, see below). But, against Nietzsche, Weber argues that the only way that social scientists can do this with any meaningful results is through the use of *concepts*. For through the use of (ideal-typical) concepts Weber

argues, somewhat idealistically, that a logical and empathetic understanding of social life and culture might be gained, and subjective judgements and personal biases be isolated from social scientific work.

This aim does not guide the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari: 'Nowhere do we claim for our concepts the title of a science' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 22). But nonetheless there are surprising points of contact between Weber's and Deleuze's writings on concepts. In his recent book *Out of this World*, Peter Hallward addresses Deleuze's theory of the concept in some detail. He states the following: 'Every conceptual creating injects a certain stability into the otherwise undifferentiated flux of pure chaos in which thoughts disappear as soon as they appear' (2006: 141). And: 'A concept renders *a* slice of chaos available for thought. A conceptual creation achieves this by imposing a certain consistency upon its various elements' (2006: 141). These statements could quite easily belong in a secondary text on Weber. Weber states, for example, that an ideal-typical concept is formed through:

> one-side *accentuation* of one or *several* perspectives, and through the synthesis of a variety of diffuse, discrete, *individual* phenomena, present sometimes more, sometimes less, sometimes not at all; subsumed by such one-sided, emphatic viewpoints so that they form a uniform construction *in thought*. In its conceptual purity this construction can never be found in reality (Weber, 2004: 388).

Concepts are, for Weber, theoretical fictions that are forged through the abstraction and accentuation of the fragments that make up the 'polytheism' or 'pure difference' of the empirical world. This position is largely in keeping with Deleuze's so-called 'new' empiricism, in which concepts are not simply abstractions or tools that are to be used to explain concrete phenomena, but are themselves drawn out of a confrontation with the pre-conceptual realm of the empirical – a process which poses problems to thought and forces it account for itself. To repeat: 'the abstract does not explain, but must itself be explained' (Deleuze and Parnet, 1977: vii). Further to this, Deleuze and Guattari follow Weber in presenting the concept as a fractured totality that is necessarily removed from empirical reality: 'The concept is a whole because it totalizes its components, but is a fragmentary whole. Only on this condition can it escape the mental chaos constantly threatening it, stalking it, trying to reabsorb it' (1994: 16). Concepts, then, are defined by an artificial unity that can never do justice to the complexity of the sensory world, and are made up of 'diffuse, discrete, individual' components to which they are not in turn reducible. Concepts can at best be seen as bridges that are always being assembled and re-assembled: on one hand, they are forged out of and in response to the immediacy of lived experience, while on the other they open the impossible challenge of presenting this world in thought.

Concepts and Problems

One of the key statements of the opening section of Deleuze and Guattari's *What Is Philosophy?* is that 'All concepts are connected to problems without which they

would have no meaning' (1994: 16). This emphasis on meaning has a distinctly Weberian ring, as for Weber it is only when 'reality' becomes meaningful that it becomes constituted as culture. In his essay, 'The "Objectivity" of Knowledge in Social Science and Social Policy', for example, Weber declares that 'Empirical reality is for us "cultural" in the sense, and to the extent that, it is related to evaluative ideas; it comprises those elements of reality rendered *meaningful* by this relationship, no more' (2004: 383). Moreover, Weber observes that 'scientific domains are constituted not by the "objective" relation between "things", but by the relationship of *problems* in *thought*' (2004: 371). This places him on similar ground to Deleuze, as knowledge is produced through what Weber calls the 'setting' of different problems that will vary according to the value-interests of the social scientist and the components or segments of empirical reality encountered. This means that Weber's empiricism is not anti-conceptual and drawn simply from the sensory data of the lived world, it is rather driven by problems that emerge from such encounters. This lies at the heart of Weber's theory of value-relevance (*Wertbeziehung*), for social scientific knowledge, which can only ever be one-sided and partial given the infinite complexity of empirical reality, is driven by values that lead us to address certain cultural or scientific phenomena and to pose questions about these in thought. Weber proceeds from here to formulate (ideal-typical) concepts as a means for addressing such questions in an objective and detached manner (although whether this is in fact possible is another matter).

Deleuze, by contrast, takes a different route as is he has no discernable interest in objectivity. Rather, he emphasizes the role problems have in creating the conditions under which new ideas and knowledge can emerge. This might seem to place Deleuze on similar ground to Thomas Kuhn (1962), who speaks of the force of revolutionary science, or Jean-François Lyotard (1984) and his theory of paralogy, but Deleuze places far greater emphasis on the role of the concept in addressing problems in thought. He also conceives of problems and the possibility of their solution in a quite different way from either Kuhn or Lyotard. His inspiration is instead Henri Bergson, for whom the first act of methodology is 'the stating and creating of problems' (Deleuze, 1988: 14). For Deleuze, the formulation and definition of the key problems of thought are central to intellectual and political freedom. There are two main reasons for this. First, the formulation of problems, along with the conceptual tools needed to pose and address them, opens a space for creation that would not have been possible otherwise. He explains:

> Stating the problem is not simply uncovering, it is inventing. Discovery, or uncovering, has to do with what already exists, actually or virtually; it was therefore certain to happen sooner or later. Invention gives being to what did not exist; it might never have happened. (Deleuze, 1988: 15)

Second, Deleuze insists that the freedom to identify problems in thought is pivotal, for the way in which they are presented subsequently directs the ways in which they can be addressed and possibly resolved. He states: 'The problem always has the solution it deserves, in terms of the way in which it is stated . . . and of the

means and terms at our disposal for stating it' (Deleuze, 1988: 16). This novel approach might seem to place Deleuze at a distance from Weber, but there are potential points of intersection here. For example, the introductory section of Weber's 'The "Objectivity" of Knowledge in Social Science and Social Policy', sets out the editorial line of the then new journal *Archiv für Sozialwissensschaft und Sozialpolitik*, and defines in detail the key problems and limits of the social and cultural science (see 1949: 63–8). In so doing, it opens a space of possibility within which social or cultural scientists might work, and gives an accompanying indication of the types of conceptual devices, in this case ideal-types, that might be forged. In this sense, there is perhaps a normative thread to Weber's and Deleuze's writings, for both place problems and concepts at the very heart of their respective fields (sociology and philosophy), and in so doing define what these fields are and can possibly be.

Pedagogy of the Concept

Deleuze and Guattari's argument for a pedagogy of the concept is closely tied to their proposition that concepts gain meaning from their application to various problems in thought. Problems force us to think in new ways, and often this is only possible through the (re-)formulation of concepts that expand the theoretical imagination. Concepts are learning devices because they force us to confront in creative ways the difficulty and sometimes the impossibility of presenting empirical data with any clarity or feeling in thought. Weber's latent neo-Kantianism, as discussed above, brings him close to this position because the noumenal realm – the realm of things in themselves – is never something that thought can capture with any certainty. For this reason, Weber stands against the construction of universal concepts as direct representations of the world, not least because this world is never knowable in any full sense. Instead, he constructs conceptual fictions or *ideal-types* that might be of heuristic value, and in this way, concepts take on a pedagogical role: 'the construction of abstract ideal-types is not an aim, but a *means*' (1949: 387–9). This type of pedagogy is different from that advocated by Deleuze, who, as stated above, prioritizes invention over discovery, along with related questions of imputation and meaning. But there is an intriguing point of connection here: Weber's idea of the concept as a 'heuristic device' (1949: 102) emphasizes the interplay between discovery *and* invention. For it is only through invention, in this case the invention of ideal-types or concepts, that discovery can take place. At the same time, this act of invention is likely to be fired by some kind of pre-conceptual encounter or evaluative interest. This means that discovery, for Weber, is fundamentally a creative process, and is not simply a matter of presenting something that is already in existence or which is given. It is not simply an act of uncovering what is there, but rather inventing the terms through which problems posed to us by the empirical world can be presented in thought. This, for Weber, is precisely the value of what he calls a concept: 'it is not a *description* of reality but aims to give unambiguous means of expression to such a description' (1949: 90).

Networks of Concepts

Deleuze and Guattari situate concepts on what they call a plane of immanence (see 1994: 35–60): a non-hierarchical network made up of individual but related strata that never in themselves assume a position of dominance. The importance of this is that concepts emerge and take shape through relations forged with other concepts. Deleuze and Guattari explain:

> [A] concept . . . has a *becoming* that involves its relationship with concepts on the same plane. Here concepts link up with each other, support one another, coordinate their contours, articulate their respective problems and belong to the same philosophy, even if they have separate histories. (1994: 20)

Concepts, no matter how individual and unique they might appear, never emerge in a state of isolation, for 'every concept relates back to other concepts' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 19). Concepts are thus not simply 'singular, indivisible and discrete' as Hallward suggests (2006: 141), but are relational entities by definition, even if these relations are not always clear (leading Deleuze and Guattari to question their 'exoconsistency'). An example of this is Deleuze and Guattari's own *A Thousand Plateaus* (1988), which presents a dazzling array of concepts within and across of different planes of thought that play off and 'vibrate' against each other. There is no normative order to these concepts. Rather, they are assemblages that can be drawn together and applied in different and often unforeseen ways according to the particular empirical problems in hand (for an example of how these concepts might be put to work, see Buchanan and Lambert, 2005).

This might seem a world away from the work of Weber, but perhaps his *Economy and Society* can be read in a similar way? What is striking about this work is that there are no meta-concepts as such, and surprisingly (given the title of this work) even a concept of 'society' is absent from the 'conceptual exposition' that opens this work. Instead, there are multiple concepts that work along different although related planes: concepts of social action, social relationships (which are much neglected), rationality, power, domination and legitimacy to name but a few. This is perhaps why Weber scholars have struggled to identify the master-concept of Weber's work (see Gane, 2002: 5–7), for Weber does not work with meta-conceptual forms so much as conceptual assemblages (this is hinted at in DeLanda, 2006). These assemblages are drawn from components of empirical reality but in turn are abstracted and pushed into 'one-sided accentuations' to form useful conceptual tools for thought. This practice lies at the heart of his notion of the ideal-type, which, he says, 'is an attempt to analyze historically unique configurations or their individual components by means of genetic concepts' (Weber, 1949: 93). As stated above, these ideal-types are almost always internally differentiated into multiple forms, and are often at their most useful when worked with and against other concepts. Indeed, Weber's sociology is at its liveliest where it centres on the friction within (for example, rationality or domination) and between (most notably, class and status) its ideal-typical constructs.

Concepts as Multiplicities

There is a tendency in Deleuzian scholarship to read concepts as individual creations of the philosopher that are marked out by clear and identifiable differences to each other. This is the emphasis of Peter Hallward, who states, for example, that 'The invention of singular concepts makes it possible for thought to proceed and develop' (2006:141). As stated above, a problem with this reading is that concepts are never forged in isolation from each other, and for this reason the idea of difference always implies at the same time relationality. Even if Hallward is right in saying that concepts play a key role in the creation and development of thought, this is rarely because of their singularity. More often, it is because of their multiplicity, because of their hybrid identities and internal differences and divisions. At the very outset of *What Is Philosophy?* Deleuze and Guattari talk of the concept not as one but as many: 'Every concept is at least double or triple' (1994: 15). They illustrate this point by observing that philosophers such as Descartes, Hegel and Feuerbach do not begin with the same set of concepts (even if these concepts might look similar in name: freedom, reason, mind, to name but a few), and do not even share the same concept of beginning. This point, however, may be illustrated in a more concrete way. There are instances where a theorist might employ a layering or internal differentiation of a concept to address a particular set of problems in hand. This is exactly the case in the work of Weber. When Deleuze and Guattari talk of the doubling or tripling of concepts, this is the very strategy Weber employs throughout *Economy and Society*. There is no singular conception of capitalism, for example, but three types: traditional commercial, political and rational (for a clear mapping of these concepts, see Swedberg, 1998: 47). There is thus never capitalism for Weber, but *capitalisms*. The same is the case for Weber's concept of domination. Again, there are three types: traditional, charismatic and legal/rational (see Weber, 1978: 215). And things are even more complex with the concept of social action, where there are four types: traditional, affectual, value-rational, instrumentally rational (see Weber, 1978: 24–5). The development of multiple concepts is central to Weber's sociology, and is a task that is every bit as creative as the invention of concepts that are marked out by their apparent singularity (such as assemblage, fold, difference or repetition). An advantage of concepts that assume multiple forms is that they are likely to be useful for addressing a wider range of problems, both through the extension of their own internal multiplicities or through strategic and flexible alliances forged with other concepts. This is perhaps one reason why Weber's concepts continue to be such a force in contemporary sociology, and why they continue to be doubled and re-doubled today.

Conclusion

The above connections between Deleuze and Weber have been considered in order to question what concepts are, and how they might be central to a 'new' empiricism. A key question which arises from this exercise, and which demands

further work, is whether the creation of concepts is the exclusive task of the philosopher as Deleuze tends to suggest. At the end of the first chapter of *What Is Philosophy?*, for example, Deleuze and Guattari declare that 'The concept belongs to philosophy and only philosophy' (1994: 34). It is common to find this position reproduced without reflection in commentaries on Deleuze. Eugene Holland, for example, states that: 'creating concepts is the principal task of philosophy, and part of what this entails is extracting elements or dynamics from the works of other philosophers and combining them in new and productive ways' (2005: 53). This position, which elevates the status of the philosopher, is common elsewhere (a version of this argument can be found, for example, in Berlin, 1999: 9), and can perhaps be traced back to Plato (Weber himself traces the historical value of science back to Plato and his discovery of the concept, see 1970: 141). But is this right: do concepts, and the task of concept creation, belong solely to philosophy? What about other disciplines that have engaged in deep conceptual work since their inception, in particular, the discipline of sociology? There are at least three possible ways of answering this question. First, one might adhere to Deleuze and Guattari's position, and to see other disciplines as posing a threat to the privileged position of philosophy. For Deleuze and Guattari, this is an age-old struggle: 'philosophy has encountered many new rivals. To start with, the human sciences, and especially sociology, wanted to replace it' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 10). Second, and in opposition to this, it is possible to argue that concept formation is not solely the domain of philosophy and has been a key part of sociological work since the discipline's inception, particularly within the Weberian tradition (see Burger, 1976; Oakes, 1988; Drysdale, 1996). In this view, sociology is a discipline that has always been at war over concepts, particularly the so-called 'key' concepts of class, gender and race. Finally, there is another possible position: that while conceptual work is performed as a matter of routine with sociology, the conceptual imagination of this discipline is supplied largely by philosophy. There is perhaps some truth in this, as the vocabulary of contemporary sociology is today brimming with concepts drawn from the writings of philosophers such Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault and Jean Baudrillard, to name but a few. There has also been a striking lack of inventive new concepts forged from within sociology in recent years. In the face of this, Ulrich Beck (2000) complains that the discipline is today swamped by 'zombie concepts': concepts that live on in name but which died long ago in terms of their usefulness. Elsewhere, Bruno Latour (see Gane, 2004: 77–90) hints that one reason for this is that sociology has too often broken its ties with philosophy in its quest to be 'scientific', and that this has limited its empirical scope and imagination – a position which again suggests that it is pivotal that sociology draw upon philosophy (but rarely vice versa).

There are elements of truth to the latter two positions stated above. On one hand, sociology has been, and continues to be, a discipline that is devoted to conceptual work. On the other hand, the conceptual imagination of the discipline is not as vibrant as it could be, or as vibrant as it was at its outset. However, contrary to Deleuze or Latour, this does not mean that contemporary sociologists

are incapable of concept formation or that they must look to philosophy for instruction. Ulrich Beck, in response to his own complaint about zombie concepts, has attempted to introduce new concepts into the discipline (most notably 'risk'), even if some of these (in particular, reflexivity and cosmopolitanism) admittedly have philosophical roots. The problem is that such attempts at concept-formation are today few and far between, and even concepts that continue to be pivotal, such as class, are all too often presupposed or re-hashed rather than given a new lease of life. It is here that Deleuze's writings on concept formation might prove to be an inspiration even if we choose not to adopt the particular concepts to which they give rise. Peter Hallward, in commenting on the spirit of Deleuze's philosophy, remarks that 'The more stable, static or blandly universal a concept, the more skeletal, unremarkable or uncreative it becomes' (2006: 140). This dictum should perhaps lie at the heart of contemporary sociological work. There are a number of possible ways forward here. One is to invent new sociological concepts that are in keeping with the empirical challenges and problems of our times. Another lies in the possibility of reinventing or reworking older concepts so that they are lifted from their historical settings and are pushed in directions that pose us problems today. Reda Bensmaïa argues that Deleuze is an expert at such practice:

> By detaching concepts from their original theoretical contexts, he is able to re-evaluate them, to re-evaluate their tenor and make them play new roles – in a word, he is able to transform them into 'conceptual personae'. In this way, philosophical concepts are never, for Deleuze, static entities fixed once and for all, but are, rather, matter to be further worked through and reconnected, ever called into crisis and reinvented. (2005: 145)

It is indeed interesting that Deleuze so often turned back in order to go forward, and found so much of conceptual interest in the writings of Hume, Spinoza, Bergson and others. Perhaps there is a message here for sociology: classical theory – which is not limited simply to Marx, Weber, Durkheim – is not dead. It is dead only if it is limited to exegesis of the texts of classical thinkers, a practice which we already have in abundance. Instead, creative readings are needed that value concepts according to their potential to offer something new. This might broaden the current sociological imagination, and reinvigorate the challenge of confronting the empirical in thought. But for this to happen, sociology must first return to some basic although now neglected questions: what are concepts, under what conditions do they emerge, and to what purposes can they be put? It is the argument of this article that such questions lie at the heart of a 'new' sociological empiricism.

References

Alliez, E. (2004) *The Signature of the World: What Is Deleuze and Guattari's Philosophy?* London: Continuum.

Althusser, L. and Balibar, E. (1977) *Reading Capital*. London: New Left Review.

Beck, U. (2000) 'The Cosmopolitan Perspective', *British Journal of Sociology* 51(1): 79–105.
Bensmaïa, R. (2005) 'On the "Spiritual Automaton": Space and Time in Modern Cinema According to Gilles Deleuze', in I. Buchanan, and G. Lambert (eds) *Deleuze and Space*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
Berlin, I. (1999) *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Burger, T. (1976) *Max Weber's Theory of Concept Formation: History, Laws and Ideal Types*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Boundas, C. (1991) 'Translator's Introduction: Deleuze, Empiricism, and the Struggle for Subjectivity', in G. Deleuze *Empiricism and Subjectivity: An Essay on Hume's Theory of Human Nature*. New York: Columbia University Press.
Buchanan, I. and Lambert, G., eds (2005) *Deleuze and Space*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
DeLanda, M. (2006) *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*. London: Continuum.
Deleuze, G. (1988) *Bergsonism*. New York: Zone.
—— (1991) *Empiricism and Subjectivity: An Essay on Hume's Theory of Human Nature*. New York: Columbia University Press.
—— (1995a) *Difference and Repetition*. New York: Columbia University Press.
—— (1995b) *Negotiations*. New York: Columbia University Press.
Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1988) *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: Athlone.
—— (1994) *What Is Philosophy?* New York: Columbia University Press.
Deleuze, G. and Parnet, C. (1977) *Dialogues II*. New York: Columbia University Press.
Drysdale, J. (1996) 'How are Social-Scientific Concepts Formed? A Reconstruction of Max Weber's Theory of Concept Formation', *Sociological Theory* 14(1): 71–88.
Gane, N. (2002) *Max Weber and Postmodern Theory: Rationalization Versus Re-enchantment*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
—— (2004) *The Future of Social Theory*. London: Continuum.
Hallward, P. (2006) *Out of This World: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Creation*. London: Verso.
Holland, E. (2005) 'Desire', in C. Stivale (ed.) *Gilles Deleuze: Key Concepts*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
Kuhn, T. (1962) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Lévinas, E. (1969) *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
Lyotard, J-F. (1984) *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
—— (1998) *Postmodern Fables*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Oakes, G. (1988) *Weber and Rickert: Concept Formation in the Cultural Sciences*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Rajchman, J. (2000) *The Deleuze Connections*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Rose, G. (1984) *Dialectic of Nihilism: Post-Structuralism and Law*. Oxford: Blackwell.
Simmel, G. (1997) 'On the Concept and Tragedy of Culture', in D. Frisby and M. Featherstone (eds) *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*. London: Sage.
Swedberg, R. (1998) *Max Weber and the Idea of Economic Sociology*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Thanem, T. and Linstead, S. (2006) 'The Trembling Organisation: Order, Change and the Philosophy of the Virtual', in M. Fuglsang and B. Meier Sorensen (eds) *Deleuze and the Social*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press.
Thrift, N. (2005) *Knowing Capitalism*. London: Sage.
Villani, A. (2006) 'Why Am I Deleuzian?', in C. Boundas (ed.) *Deleuze and Philosophy*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
Weber, M. (1949) '"Objectivity" in Social Science and Social Policy', in E. Shils and H. Finch (eds) *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*. New York: Free Press.
—— (1970) 'Science as a Vocation', in C.W. Mills and H. Gerth (eds) *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. London: Routledge.
—— (1978) *Economy and Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
—— (2004) 'The "Objectivity" of Knowledge in Social Science and Social Policy', in S. Whimster (ed.) *The Essential Weber*. London: Routledge.
Williams, J. (2003) *Gilles Deleuze's 'Difference and Repetition': A Critical Introduction and Guide*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

■ **Nicholas Gane** is a Reader in Sociology at the University of York, UK. He is the author of *Max Weber and Postmodern Theory* (Palgrave, 2002), *The Future of Social Theory* (Continuum, 2004), and (with David Beer) *New Media: The Key Concepts* (Berg, 2008). *Address*: Department of Sociology, University of York, Heslington, York, YO10 5DD, UK. [email: nbg2@york.ac.uk] ■