

BOOK REVIEW

**Manuel DeLanda, 2016, *Assemblage Theory*, Edinburgh,
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1. INTRODUCTION

Manuel DeLanda, or as some would note a uniquely arrange singularity within the socio-philosophical realms, represents an authentic voice which has constantly permeated a palette of scientific domains, an approach also found in his (apparent) unity called *Assemblage Theory*, published in 2016 to be dissected by both public and practitioners alike. In this manuscript the author turned phrases into a totality of their own, almost to the point where they possess agency, making the readers become mingled into his logic' seamless web while also pivoting them towards the enactment of their own thoughts. Hence, a drop-by-drop cyclical revelatory co-creationist process engulfs the theory, one in which readers-chapters reach mutual understanding and balance each other's constellations, all while unlocking perspectives on societal stringent issues. Moreover, DeLanda coagulates everything from everywhere, seeking to be something more than it is, while also remaining less than it became. Through vivid anecdotes, amalgaming physics, politics, history, anthropology, etc., the book generates a micro-cosmos, through which a synthesized theory is given,

guiding us with research that scratched some of social sciences' fundamental and left a mark on how Complexity Studies evolved.

2. DECYPHERING THE ASSEMBLAGE

Whilst building upon assemblages' primordial concepts, firstly introduced by Deleuze and Guattari, even DeLanda depicts the manuscript as „an extension of their work“, with slight alternances in the *per se* approach of the matter (p. 65). Thus, to form an „ontology of assemblages“, which „preserves and extends“ their insights, DeLanda expands assemblages' capacities, capabilities and governing principles, generating a creative exegesis and *sui generis* endeavour (pp. 127-131) As such, the conceptualization commences through a composite overview of what assemblages represents, contouring an ontological prism, as he goes to prove how they represent unique singularities, with intrinsic specificities, standing out as they are not „particular members of any general category“ (p. 6).

Otherwise, since each element has its own particularities, one of the system's functions is mapping the exact individuation process that allows an assemblage's emergence. Thus, the manuscript notices that parts retain a palette of autonomous capabilities, independent from the relational network in which they reside, unlike Latour's actor network perspectives (relationist ontology), where each item is defined solely through his interactions. Therefore, assemblages are rooted in intertwined „relations of exteriority“, derivate of each item's capacity to form linkages, contrasting Latour's interiority, described as systematic processes that „define the very identity of the terms they relate“ (pp. 2-3).

Moreover, dichotomic to Latour's ontological contingency, DeLanda remarks that relational operations do not dictate the network's terms. Nonetheless, while items remain independent and undefinable by systemic attributes, an assemblage is a function of its constituents' interrelations. Also, they are founded on „emergent properties“ „produced by the interactions between components“, which aggregately construct said collective attributes (p. 12).

Furthermore, assemblage's contexts are not determined by „essences that belong to a transcendent plane“, but immanent material interactions amongst its constituent parts (p. 13).

By proving that assemblages, subsequently their components, present mind-independent agency, spilling-over and creating intrinsic capacities, DeLanda aims to improve former conceptualizations. In this context, the manuscript provides assemblages' components with authentic autonomy, treating them as „legitimate agents“ (p. 9). Aspects entailed across the first 3 chapters, were DeLanda develops „a more detailed social ontology“, in respect to „a greater variety of forms of social agency“ (p. 65). Additionally, he underlines that „assemblages must be considered fully independent of our minds“ through a multidisciplinary cross-examination of individuation (p. 138). While the spectrum of examples is well crafted, DeLanda fails to rigorously account, like Bennet or Bryant (materialists), for non-human or post-human agency.

As such, his theory becomes a flat materialist ontology of immanence, since all assemblages „populate the same ontological plane“ and have identical status, underived from anterior transcendence (p. 19). Also, compared to other realist philosophies, proposing „strong ontological distinctions between levels of existence“, DeLanda's work is rooted in non-hierarchical ontology (p. 13). As his own writing is formed through „assemblages of assemblages“, he portrays reality as an aggregate of the latter (p. 3). Furthermore, since „the environment of an assemblage is itself and assemblage“, all processes (be it political or mathematical) consist of a „nested set“ of assemblages, operating across varying levels, only wrapped through „the grand cosmic assemblage, the plane of immanence“ (pp. 7-9).

Hence, DeLanda understands systems as rationally contingent, historical, individually unique, formed through mind-independent and autonomous agents, which create the capacity to operate within a flat, non-hierarchical plane of existence, rather immanent and material than transcendent or ideal, aspects revising Deleuze and Guattari's works to „parametrise the concept of assemblage“ (p. 56). Thus, the manuscript overthrows binary distinctions, like strata/assemblage, molecular/molar, micro/macro, proposing variable parameters across the system („control knobs“) (p. 19). This allows even

diametral categories to become knitted, as „phases can be transformed into one another, and even coexist as a mixture” across the assemblage’s continuum, by tapping into its territorialization/deterritorialization or coding/decoding degrees (p. 20).

Therefore, the first refers to aspects that give assemblages their „defining boundaries and maintains those throughout time” (p. 27). Meaning that a high-value control knob (e.g. governing body) is present assemblages exhibit stasis, fixity, normalization, self-replication or homogeneity (e.g. conformation to norms), and vice-versa. Additionally, each parameter is tied to two traits – expressive/symbolic and material/physical components, as for instance across social assemblages territorialization is symbolically and materially constructed through institutions, rituals, norms, traditions, procedures etc., until their systemic perpetually reproductive functions are met with destabilising innovations (expressive and physical deterritorialization – like counter-movements, revolts, dissension etc.) which break the continuity line. Aspect which gives new meaning to societal constructs.

Nevertheless, DeLanda organizes the work in chapters with varying modality and scalability levels, from social assemblages (1), linguistic (2), martial (3), scientific (4), diagrammatic assemblages of virtual and actual spheres (5), atomic, genetic and chemical (6), with the last chapter (7) underlining mathematical ones. Thus, DeLanda addresses „reified generalities” proposed by its predecessors, especially those „made up of only three levels: the individual, the group and the social field” (pp. 39-40) by creating a „more finely grained ontology, with many levels of social ensembles” that form a more valid materialist philosophy (p. 4). This allows other practitioners to play with juxtaposed notions, making the theory more programmatic, as for instance it forces new understanding even for society which is „an assemblage of assemblages” (p. 37), meaning that we cannot treat it undeferential nor „coherently speak of society as a whole” (p. 38). Therefore, social assemblages exist across a plenitude of scales, DeLanda seeking to deconstruct these „monolithic entities” and bring forth „valid historical actors”, underlining that we cannot understand „economic systems that encompass all of society” but rather constructed interactions, by way of example (pp. 15-16).

In this regard, macro-entities do not represent „individual emergent whole” but nested sets „operating at different scales”, each interlinked and with its historically contingent parameters (p. 46). Also, DeLanda notes a hiatus across the academic realm, which „became prey to a double danger by „politically targeting” reified generalities and abandoned mind-independent conceptualizations, pointing that there is no „revolution which changes the entire system” since we don’t have a singularity to be altered (p. 48).

On the other hand, Bryant’s „machinic ontology” draws from DeLanda’s rifts, like how he built upon Deleuze and Guattari’s perspectives, improving his immanent ontology, cartographic imperatives, rejection of reified generalities (understood by the former as transcendent agencies), clearing the way for newer analysis. However, as good as a stepping stone can be, the clearly refined 1st half is met by a spectrum of deficiencies spreading across the rest, as DeLanda moves from perfectly tuned narrative-building into yielding the floor to Braudel, Klein, Poincare, Uler, etc. patching together extracts from multiple disciplines. Thus, while illustrating assemblages’ applicative prospects, connecting splendidly the Battle of Hastings with English dialects development (1st part), the exemplifications and multi-field anchoring become progressively unharboured from any cursive line of thought, marking a rather opaque presentation. Also, on a tougher tone, without diminishing the book’s novelty and innovatory role for the field, it can be described as a *de facto* digressive and derivative process of eclecticism or mere syncretism, in which even DeLanda’s voice is drowned across the abyss of others, one which he inserted without providing enough meaningful insight.

Lastly, an abrupt ending (no conclusive remarks provided) makes the manuscript to seem like an erratic thought tapestry or mixed constellation of concepts, sometimes with no clear connection rather than being on the following page. An aspect which forces readers to selectively form their own assemblage of understanding and cherry-pick elements from the uneven volume, both from the 1st part remarkable contemporary continental philosophy and innovatory remarks and the 2nd one which bridges realms, albeit not always with fruition. Hence, the book improves and is improved.