

A Deleuzian Future for Organization Theory?

by Guest Editor: Torkild Thanem
Stockholm University, Sweden

The past couple of decades have witnessed an expanding interest in the work of the French twentieth century philosopher Gilles Deleuze, inside and outside philosophy. Interpretations and applications of Deleuzian philosophy have been pursued by scholars across the humanities and the social sciences, including cultural studies, film studies, literary theory, women's studies, social theory, and more recently, certain areas of organization theory and management studies. Though Deleuze is often considered an obscure thinker, more elusive than contemporaries such as Foucault and Derrida, his contribution to Western thought has been extraordinary. From a sophisticated thinking of becoming and the virtual (Deleuze 1991, 1994), and through intense involvement with controversial thinkers such as Nietzsche (Deleuze, 1983), Bergson (Deleuze, 1991) and Spinoza (Deleuze, 1988, 1992), Deleuze has been a significant interlocutor in the critical rewriting and "buggery" of the history of metaphysics in ways that challenge the philosophical canon (see Deleuze, 1995), open up the world and expand Western philosophy's understanding of the world

beyond being and the real. Reflecting both a biophilosophical and a methodological concern, Deleuze has sought to rethink the task of philosophy as the creative invention of concepts (Deleuze, 1994; Deleuze & Guattari, 1994) and problematize the relationship between thought and life, theory and practice (e.g. Foucault & Deleuze, 1977; Deleuze, 1995). As this has made Deleuze a controversial figure inside philosophy, it may seem that his work has been more palatable outside philosophy. In his sole-authored works as well as in his joint work with the psychologist Félix Guattari, Deleuze speaks directly to non-philosophers through powerful notions such as the body without organs, nomadology and becoming-other, radically proposing a life to be lived differently from the established habits, norms and traditions of Western modern society (e.g. Deleuze, 1988, 1995; Deleuze & Guattari, 1984, 1988). And on a more concrete level akin to the agenda of organization theory, Deleuze has offered thought-provoking commentaries on the nature and workings of capitalism, bureaucracy and the State, juxtaposing these phenomena with schizophrenia.

Interestingly, Deleuze seems to have spurred more interest in organization theory than in many other social science disciplines (see e.g. Cooper, 1998; Chia, 1999; Bougen & Young 2000; Linstead, 2000; Carter & Jackson, 2002; Fuglsang & Sørensen, forthcoming), possibly because organization theory's strong interdisciplinary roots have made it relatively open to intellectual communication and exchange across disciplinary boundaries. Of course, intellectual openness and excess is by no means representative of the entire field, and what may be seen as a lack of scholarly discipline and a failure of disciplinary containment remains a rusty nail in the eye of the mainstream establishment that still aspires to turn organization theory into a distinct, united discipline by tightly regulating and severely restricting cross-disciplinary communication (see e.g. Donaldson, 1985, 1996; McKelvey, 2003). Thus, the recent arrival of Deleuze at the margins of organization theory is no less important, as it effectively interrupts the striving for unity, homogeneity and discipline by working to sustain organization theory as an open field[1]. Deleuze's commitment to the openness of philosophy, the openness of the concept and the openness of life itself may help organization theorists open up the understanding of organizations, organizational life and the concept of organization.

It is therefore with great joy that I introduce this special issue on Deleuze and organization theory, which, like Deleuze's own writings, is an effect of some exciting and surprising encounters between a variety of events and ideas. Viewing the Danish Employment Service as an expression of what Deleuze (1992) termed societies of control, **Bent Meier Sørensen** both extends and challenges previous work

in Human Resource Management on the constitution of subjectivity. And using the ideas of the refrain, faciality, the rhizome and becoming-other, he examines the struggle faced by people without a job to constitute the subjectivity of the unemployed enforced by the Danish Employment Service. Through the notion of machinic assemblages, the interrogation of subjectivity is continued by **Chris Land**. Challenging both the humanism of constructionist research on technology in organizational life and scrutinizing the technological determinism that this stream of research seeks to counter, Land develops a symmetrical understanding of human-machine interaction that draws attention to how non-human forces constitute human subjectivity. **Scott Lawley** breaks with the focus on subjectivity pursued in the two previous papers, continuing instead their concern with heterogeneity by offering a critical analysis of the notion of the rhizome and previous applications of this notion in organization theory. Identifying three main uses of the rhizome in organization theory (the rhizome as organizational structure and technology, the rhizome as organizational activity, and the rhizome as ontology) Lawley stresses the importance of simultaneously keeping the rhizome ontologically open and putting it to political, social and ethical use. **Martin Wood** shares Lawley's commitment to openness and use. In a critical investigation of the spatio-temporal organization of the global knowledge economy, Wood invokes the idea of nomadism to develop strategies of resistance against this Empire. Common for all these papers is a rigorous and critical engagement with Deleuze that puts his ideas in powerful connection with organizational concepts and phenomena. It is perhaps no coincidence that these papers – like previous studies of Deleuze in

organization theory and other social science areas – draw heavily on his work with Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Engaging with social, political, economic and organizational issues such as the nature and workings of capitalism, bureaucracy and the State, this is where Deleuze most directly approaches the realm of social science. Perhaps it is more surprising, then, that Deleuze commentaries in organizational and social science research pay relatively little attention to these parts in *A Thousand Plateaus*, delving instead into ideas with less obvious – but no less powerful – connections to the organizational, the social, the political and the economical. Although it is risky to speculate why this is so, it might be the case that scholars are more attracted to ideas that offer something completely different from what they usually encounter in their own fields. And notions such as becoming-other, machinic assemblages, the rhizome and nomadism do exactly that: highlighting the spontaneous forces of the outside and the heterogeneous couplings between very different bodies (be they human, animal, vegetable, mineral, chemical or mechanical), they help organizational and social researchers challenge established understandings of organization, society, polity and economy and rethink the ways we think, live, work and organize.

Ironically, the philosophers **Manuel DeLanda** and **John Protevi** come closer in this special issue to addressing the traditional agenda of organization theory than do much Deleuzian organization theory. Not only do they offer a critical analysis of Deleuze and Guattari's (1984, 1988) reading of Marx and a thought-provoking discussion of the labour process and the capitalist political economy under contemporary Taylorism and Fordism. Via Herbert Simon's (1945, 1969) concept of

bounded rationality and Oliver Williamson's (1995) work on markets, hierarchies and transaction cost economics, DeLanda in particular scrutinizes and expands upon Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of economic organization to rethink socio-economic behaviour and the development of organizational networks under capitalism. Though Simon's and Williamson's research are some times frowned or neglected by radical organization theory – including that informed by Deleuzian ideas – this may stimulate new and interesting ways for the radical margins of organization theory to engage critically with its mainstream establishment – for the peripheries to engage the “hard core”. For example, a close encounter between Deleuzian thought and radical organization theory on the one hand and population ecology, neo-institutionalism and conventional network studies on the other may produce new research on the rhizomatic, nomadic and machinic aspects of organizational populations and interorganizational fields, institutions and networks. Thus, it may stimulate exciting encounters across the Atlantic and even undermine the paradigmatic divide between North America and Europe (see e.g. Burrell, 1996). Of course, there is no guarantee that such research will spring out of either North America or Europe, but instead involve scholars in Australia, Asia, Africa and Latin America. And while there is always a risk for radical thought to be co-opted by the mainstream, this equally opens up opportunities for performing intellectual “buggery”.

DeLanda and Protevi also offer a metatheoretical discussion that ought to be of great interest to a range of organization theorists. Although the thirst for Deleuzian thought in organization theory has been made possible by the earlier introduction of

postmodern and poststructuralist writings into the field, DeLanda and Protevi make a firm distinction between the constructionism and relativism expressed in this literature and Deleuze's profound realism. But they also make sure to avoid any confusion between Deleuzian realism and the critical realism of Roy Bhaskar (e.g. 1978, 1979), Margaret Archer (e.g. 1995) and colleagues, which, reducing ontology to the reality described by natural science, has become increasingly popular in current organizational and social research (see e.g. Reed, 1997; Thompson et al., 2000). But reality is far too important to be left to natural scientists and ontology is far too important to be left to critical realists. Although Deleuze was inspired by certain developments in the natural sciences (such as Riemannian spaces) and even though he may be seen to quietly inspire a small number of exceptional natural scientists (such as Francesco Varela), Deleuze's realist ontology is, unlike the quasi-ontology of critical realism, irreducible to the findings of natural science. Indeed, his ontology of becoming, multiplicity and the virtual produces a biophilosophy that delves into the dirty, murky waters of reality typically ignored by natural science. Thus, unlike an organization theory based on critical realism, which in leaving the study of reality to the natural sciences ends up being neither critical nor realist, an organization theory based on Deleuzian realism would get its hands, feet and head dirty, critically investigating what the forces, bodies and events that make up, change and disrupt the social and organizational world really are.

Insofar as organization theory is becoming Deleuzian, one is tempted to ask what a Deleuzian future will have in stall for us as organization theorists. Since asking to predict the future is most un-Deleuzian, this can only produce a vague – or at best a

general – response. But hopefully, this special issue will provoke further attempts along Deleuzian lines to experiment with and critically rethink organizational phenomena, concepts, theories and methods that help scholars produce new and different insights into the way people think, live, work and organize. While it is likely that this will emanate from scholars in radical organization theory and critical management studies, it would be exciting to see initiatives that even involve and subvert topics associated with the mainstream establishment. Further, I anticipate a future of Deleuzian organization theory that involves closer encounters with feminist and postcolonial thought than has been the case so far, and the recent attempts outside organization theory to work in the interstices between Deleuze and feminism (e.g. Braidotti, 1994; Grosz, 1994, 1999, 2001; Lorraine, 1999; Olkowski, 1999; Buchanan & Colebrook, 2000) suggest that there is no reason why similar encounters cannot take place in organization theory. Finally, in order to maximize future encounters and experiments in Deleuzian and organizational thought, it is important that they are connected to a discussion of Deleuze's realism. Facilitating an ontological turn much needed in organization theory (and even longed for by certain writers [e.g. Brigham, 2000; Burrell, 2003]) this may enable organization theorists to start thinking about what the world is, which is indispensable if one is to understand how it is organized.

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NOTE

[1] See Cooper's (1976) detailed discussion of the open field which, appearing a couple of decades prior to the arrival of Deleuze in organization theory, takes much inspiration from Deleuze's precursor Bergson.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Torkild Thanem is Research Fellow in the School of Business, Stockholm University and he earned his PhD from Warwick Business School, University of Warwick in 2001. In recent publications Torkild has approached issues of embodiment, emotion, nonorganization and monstrosities in organizational life from a Deleuzian angle, and he is currently undertaking a research project funded by the Swedish Research Council on the organization and nonorganization of embodiment in public health and urban space. Email: tt@fek.su.se

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