CHAPTER 7

Deleuze and Relational Sociology

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For some Deleuze might seem like an unusual addition to a handbook on relational sociology, for what does a relatively obscure, extremely far-out philosopher much more associated with poststructuralism and postmodernism have to do with recent debates in sociology? One of the goals of this chapter will be to show that Deleuze has a lot to do with sociology in general, and the ongoing research into relational sociology in particular. At the outset there are two things that make understanding Deleuze's thought in the sociological context difficult. The first is that his philosophy is simply dense. He writes in the tradition of rather treacherous, jargon-laden professional philosophy that tends to dissuade outsiders (one commentator remarked that reading Deleuze was like eating dry, unbuttered toast). The second is that Deleuze has been a bit of a victim of his own success. His work has been around in the English-speaking humanities for several decades but was subsumed into the international academic milieu in a rather disjointed way. The books that he co-wrote with Félix Guattari, in particular *Anti-Oedipus* and *One Thousand Plateaus*, enjoyed considerable currency in the field of American literary criticism. This effectively meant that Deleuze's reception into the social sciences was part of an anti-explanatory research paradigm that found fertile ground in politics and international relations. Moreover, many of his solo works, especially key ones written in the 1960s, were not available in English until the 1990s. In short, there are a number of Deleuzes out there, but often the most predominant is the one deployed in anti-explanatory political studies. What I would like to draw on in this chapter is another Deleuze that is somewhat

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F. Dépelteau (ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-66005-9_7

eclipsed by this popular Deleuze but much more relevant to sociology and the themes of this handbook in particular.

Although Deleuze's philosophy is difficult, it also has a beautiful simplicity that I will try to lay out in this chapter. I propose to show how Deleuze's thought suggests an approach to studying society that is in itself relational and can inform and differentiate between various strands of relational sociology. First, I will introduce Deleuze for readers who have little or no knowledge of him and his work. Second, I will elucidate the aspects of his philosophy that are relevant for relational sociology. Here I pay particular attention to Deleuze's notion of the fold, an overlooked but very robust entry point into what a Deleuzian relational sociology would look like. Third, I think it is important to focus some attention on method. It is one thing to talk about Deleuze's philosophy in the abstract and what that means for sociological theory; it is quite another to figure out just how we are supposed to go about doing sociology while adhering to the principles his philosophy expounds. The final section of this chapter will explore some other salient implications of the analysis below, specifically focusing on what Deleuze's thought can do for relational sociology.

As a philosopher Deleuze presents a holistic system. Although he is particularly interested in ontological and metaphysical questions, his thought encompasses the gamut of philosophical realms (ethics, logic, aesthetics, language, etc.) and beyond. In a way he offers a kind of super theory that contains the world and accounts for all the various perspectives and theories therein. It cannot be called reductionist, but Deleuze's thought is totalizing in its way. In this sense it is more like Luhmann than Foucault, and thus it is very hard to succinctly deal with his work in a relatively short chapter. So I will begin with a few general remarks. If one had to roughly categorize Deleuze's thought, it should be seen in the tradition of Spinoza and Whitehead as a philosophy of immanence. This simply asserts that there is a oneness to the world of which all of the parts and variations are aspects. There can be no other transcendent subject or object that stands apart from or outside of this whole. The trick, of course, is to explain the relation between the whole and the parts, or the All and the One, and this is what Deleuze spends the vast majority of his solo works investigating. The most important of these is *Difference and Repetition* (2004a), first published in 1968, which provides a basic statement of his ontological and metaphysical system. A second book, *The Logic of Sense* (2004b), published a year later, rather innovatively and evocatively explores what the system would look like in a number of "series" or more or less self-contained yet interrelated chapters.

Much more widely known are the two early books that he published with the French psychoanalyst Félix Guattari. The first of a two-volume set called *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, *Anti-Oedipus* (1983) caused a stir among literary and activist circles, and the second, *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), inspired a generation of anti-explanatory thinkers, as mentioned above. Whereas the first book attempted to dismantle the implications of a transcendent subject,

the second took a less sustained approach, and presents a series of deployments or "plateaus" that essentially bring Deleuze's philosophy (and Guattari's political activism) to a number of cases, ranging from horticulture to fascism. Although it is tempting to dismiss it as flippant social commentary and vague psychoanalytics, when read through the lens of his other, solo works, Deleuze's partnership with Guattari—including the much later *What is Philosophy* (1994)—presents a powerful vision of Deleuze's philosophy in action. Bookending this flourishing with Guattari in the 1970s are his books on other philosophers including Hume (1991), Spinoza (1992a), Bergson (1988a), Nietzsche (2005), Foucault (2006b) and Leibniz (2006a). It was perhaps his fresh take on Nietzsche, originally published in 1962, that was most inspiring to his contemporaries and earned the respect and friendship of, among others, Michel Foucault. What is interesting about these works, and is probably the only instance in the history of philosophy, is that far from a virtuosic "treatment" of the work of the title philosopher (Martin Heidegger's four-part exegis on Nietzsche comes to mind as an example of such a work), Deleuze prods, bends and twists each philosopher's thought into his own ontology and corresponding metaphysics. The results, as he once remarked, are a number of monstrous offspring—the outcome of Deleuze's intellectual buggary (see Deleuze 1995, 6). These works are not so much about their title philosophers—though there is a lot to be learned here, to be sure—but rather more like riffs of Deleuze's philosophy as played on the instrument of the philosopher in question. Thus we have the Bergson series, the Nietzsche series, the Leibniz series and so on. It is perhaps this combination of sheer density (*Difference and Repetition*), whimsy (*The Logic of Sense*), activism (*Capitalism and Schizophrenia*) and unorthodoxy (his books on solo authors) that made his impact rather less spectacular than that of the other big Fancy French Philosophers such as Derrida and Foucault. In comparison with these other intellectual rock stars of that time (see Cusset 2003), his work, though sometimes invoked, is rarely explored in great detail.

This has all begun to change in the last decade or two as his work, now translated into English and other languages, seeps into the broader academy. There has been a wealth of books on politics and culture—too numerous to mention individually here—but also on many other diverse disciplines such as law (Braidotti et al. 2009; Lefebvre 2009), ecology (Herzogenrath 2009), technology (Poster and Savat 2009), design (Marenko and Brassett 2015) and music (Moisala et al. 2017). It must be said that sociologists have been hesitant to draw on Deleuze,[1] but there are some exceptions, notably the work of William Bogard and, largely via Gabriel Tarde, Sergio Tonkonoff. This connection through Tarde is more than warranted, as Deleuze lauds Tarde's microsociology throughout his oeuvre. And though it must be said that Deleuze was not interested in sociology per se, he was deeply interested in sociological questions and in the nature of the social whole. One of the goals of this chapter is to show Deleuze's poignant relevance for sociology, not only in terms of theory but also in terms of methodology.

1 The Ontology of Folds

Rather different from today's sociological debates, Deleuze's rebuke of contemporary approaches is, not surprisingly, made through a critique of Western philosophy. As I have already mentioned, Deleuze is a philosopher of immanence who seeks to account for the entire scope of phenomena (thoughts, actions, individuals—theories) as being parts of a whole. This is in clear counter-distinction to Platonic-based philosophy, on which the vast majority of Western thought—and hence sociology—is based in one way or another. Plato, one of Deleuze's early targets, has his ideational realm of images or models (τό εἴδωλον), most clearly described in his allegory of the cave. Unlike many of his predecessors (to which Deleuze is naturally sympathetic) such as Heraclitus, Plato posited this transcendent realm, a position which went on to inform early Christian philosophy and Scholasticism. The notion of the transcendent—something in but somehow apart from the world, such as God and, by extension, human subjectivities—figures prominently in Enlightenment thought and humanism, as well as in psychology and the vast majority of sociological approaches,[2] indeed of the social sciences in general.

Deleuze argues that this affection for the transcendent is underwritten by a fundamental flaw in Western metaphysics most clearly articulated in Aristotle, and this has to do with difference (2004a, 40). Difference seems to be rather a straightforward thing for most: Trees are different from people in so many ways, as are two species of tree (some are conifers, some are broad-leafed and so on). Importantly for Aristotle (and for us today) these things that denote differences (coniferous, broad-leafed), these differentia, have being, and it is herein that the problem lies. We generally fail to notice it, but this way of understanding differences does not apply to individuals. For example, one cannot entertain a differentia—tall, for example—that makes Barack more of a human than Donald. We simply allow individuals their own distinct "thisness".[3] But such a notion of difference is clearly impossible when we begin to talk about differences between very large groups. This is because, for Aristotle, the "largest" category or grouping to which all belong, the one which predicates all others, is Being. With mid-range differences—among plants and animals, for example—the differences are not part of the groups that they differentiate. That is, "sedentary" is not a member of the group "plants"; it differentiates them from animals. But as we work our way up to more generalizations, eventually we end up using the members to divide the groups, in a classic example of the barber in the regiment fallacy. This may seem like pretty tangential stuff—old logical puzzles that have little bearing on sociology—but Deleuze argues that it is precisely this inability to talk about difference that leads to error in our thought. What we have, in effect, is a problem, a fallacy, embedded deep within the fundamental notions of difference in Western thought—Deleuze calls it a "sleight of hand" (2004a, 41)—which plagues the social sciences to this day. Although for Deleuze there were efforts to overcome this defect, focusing on the very large (Hegel) and the very small

(Leibniz), in effect the trajectory of Western thought has merely papered over this defect with ever more baroque caveats, qualifications and models. To give a glimpse of what is to come in this chapter, in Deleuzian terms, relational sociology can be read as an effort to overcome this problem.

Thus any attempt to reduce, reify or even qualify is for Deleuze an attempt to introduce the transcendent in order to shoehorn this notion of difference into thought. Just to put this briefly into context, the structure–agency problem and the ontological inconsistencies it often implies is a consequence of this. In other words, sociology is driven to establish some explanandum, some foundation or causal significance that would explain the social phenomena, because of its bond to the transcendent principle that hinges on difference. Naturally there are exceptions. I have already mentioned Tarde, whom Deleuze sees as doing sociology "right". But as will become clearer below, we would have to include Actor Network Theory and possibly Luhmann among the exceptions as well.[4]

Of course, the big question is if, in order to do sociology properly, we are not allowed to deploy these basic notions of difference, how can we talk about anything? Precisely how are all the phenomena in the world distinct from one another and yet at the same time immanent to a larger One-All? Deleuze's solution to this problem is based on his ontological principle of univocity, that is, being said "in a single and same sense, of all its individuating differences or intrinsic modalities" (2004a, 45). Without going into the philosophical (and ultimately theological) implications of this position,[5] we can succinctly describe this position as insisting that there be no difference or hierarchy of being, wherein some things are "more" or "differently" than others. Thus God *is* just as humans *are*, anger *is* just as apples *are* and so on. This does not imply that these elements are undifferentiated or the same, but rather that they have the same ontological standing. Now, whereas some philosophers (and sociologists) have sought distinct differences—inherited from Descartes's clear and distinct (1993, 70)—among elements or objects, Deleuze insists on difference that does not separate entities into fixed groups or units with characteristics and inherent qualities (essences). For Deleuze, what we generally call difference arises from processes, processes driven by differences differentiating.

What makes his thought interesting and particularly productive for sociology is the metaphysical tableau he devises to drive this differentiation. Rather than the (social) world consisting of a bunch of stuff or things to which are variously attributed causes, patterns, structures and individual wills, Deleuze posits a world with two poles or aspects, the virtual and the actual. These are not separate realms or dimensions; everything in the world, what is real, is at once both virtual and actual. It is as if everything is a double, with one half in the virtual and the other in the actual (2004a, 260–1). The virtual half is qualitative and intensive, while the actual half is quantitative and extensive. In the virtual, elements in relation—or what Deleuze calls a series—form systems (intensive spatia) that interact through differentials or intensive quantities. This interaction, unlike numerical or metricized relations, is a purely

immanent difference, what Deleuze calls differentiation. In effect what Deleuze is calling for here is difference that does not rest in some other concept or difference from something else. For Deleuze, "difference must be articulation and connection in itself, it must relate different to different without any mediation whatsoever by the identical, the similar, the analogous or the opposed" (2004a, 143).

Although Deleuze does describe virtual intensities as those which cannot divide without changing their nature (the feeling of love, for example, can be seen in this sense to be intensive), he does insist on the quantitative nature of intensities. This is particularly relevant to relational sociology because it allows for a system and corresponding analytic of pure relation. If we take any two points in a series, $A–A^1$, for example, the first term, A, is defined in reference to another series, $a–a^1$, in which a refers to $\alpha–\alpha^1$, and so on. This enveloping takes place in both directions, where $A–A^1$ is a subseries of (is enveloped by) another term. In sum this makes for an infinitely enveloped/enveloping spatium of intensive differences. The "enveloped distances" account for the quantitative nature of intensive relations, which as such are always different from themselves and so leave a remainder (2004a, 298). These remainders resonate with other series leading to new intensive quantities. At this point the space of the system becomes populated by what Deleuze calls "larval subjects" and "passive selves" (2004a, 144). These are the proto selves which are actualized or differenciated into the extensive quantities or states of affairs.[6] Thus in the virtual we have a metaphysics (or description of a total system) which is principally based on pure relation. At this point there are no furnishings, objects or subjects; indeed, the latter are the result of the connection of intensive differences. They are the actualizations (or differenciations) of the virtual.

It is important to emphasize that the actual does not resemble the virtual in any way. The process of actualization describes the movement from qualitative or true difference (differentiation) to the quantitative difference of species and parts (differenciation). But again, it is not as if these actualizations, these states of affairs, can be solely actual; the virtual half is always present. Or, in other words, everything is always still caught up in virtual movements. Thus the shifts in states of affairs, that is, the relationships among quantifiable entities, do not transmutate directly from one actual to another, but rather morph according to what Deleuze sometimes calls their counteractualization, wherein an entity's virtuality is further differentiated and subsequently actualized. This accounts for the often chaotic and non-linear nature of the world, both material and social, and in effect defuses a potential determinism that might lurk in Deleuze's system. As for actual individuals—that is, discrete, extended, differenciated individuals—they are the products of the concentration, accumulation and "coincidence of a number of converging preindividual singularities" (Deleuze 2006a, 72). So although in Deleuze's metaphysics there are such things as individuals, they are not pre-given or transcendent entities (part of the world but somehow apart from it) but rather the result of quasi-causes (see

2004b) or intensive processes of the virtual. As for the precise nature of these subject-systems or converging singularities, here Deleuze shows the rigor and consistency of his immanent system, from which there can be no above, outside or exterior. In a subtle move, Deleuze posits the fold, or the folding of the outside to make an inside.

For Deleuze the stuff of the world, things, are the result or the actualization of the communications between intensities—this infinite architecture of enveloped and enveloping. In a rather ignored but extremely significant book entitled *The Fold*, Deleuze explores this matter-relationship as the baroque/Leibnizian notion of the fold. According to Deleuze–Leibniz the world is an infinite series of virtual foldings, like caverns within caverns (2006a, 6), which are unfolded in actual extensities. This highlights the processual nature of the world—both physical and social—for Deleuze. Things are not just units in action or undergoing processes (erosion, photosynthesis, social conflict), but are the result of this infinite folding wherein the smallest unit is not the point, but the fold itself. What Deleuze incites us to focus on, then, is not the apparent characteristics of the world, but the manner in which series are folded (virtually) and unfolded (actually), or in other words the relations between series and their effects. In this sense Deleuze's schema does away with any kind of units with interiority/transcendence and is purely relational.

The fold is a way of arriving at an inside using only a pure, undifferentiated outside, "as if the ship were a folding of the sea." Within such a system of folds there is no such thing as the primitive interior because

> the double is never a projection of the interior: on the contrary, it is an interiorization of the outside … It resembles exactly the invagination of a tissue in embryology, or the act of doubling in sewing: twist, fold, stop, and so on. (2006b, 81)

In sum, Deleuze insists on a distinction between the virtual and the actual that effectively splits the continuum of the real into two modes or aspects (2004a, 260ff.) where folding takes place among virtual, differential relations. Actual, discrete entities (such as political subjects, me, you) are the actual projections, the actual halves of these virtual foldings. It is important to be clear on the physical nature of reality itself. Observers of the real, including sociologists, see the world furnished and peopled with all manner of things and individuals, as well as intangible phenomena such as social groups, organizations and the like. Deleuze, following Spinoza and in many ways analogous to Foucault, sees the world as a mixture of substance and incorporeal flux. The former are physical things with properties (hardness); the latter are not physical or natural but logical attributes (2004b, 7). Substance is the flow of matter that receives its attributes from the incorporeal flux. Determining the latter, of course, are the resonating virtual intensities. Thus Deleuze never has to account for or explain an entity or individual—they are all emergent properties of a single substance. The world of incorporeal bodies is folded within itself, only to be unfolded as the entities and fixtures that make up the world, including social phenomena.

As for an account of the individual human subjects on which most of Modern or humanistic sociology is founded, Deleuze borrows Leibniz's notion of the monad as that which actualizes the virtual (2006a, 90). Significantly, and rather ironically given the discussion below, in the critical literature dealing with individual actors the monad is commonly used to refer to a subject that is self-contained or complete within the world, or in other words bounded, autonomous and generally sovereign and separate.[7] But although Leibniz does present the monad as the self-contained entity that has no parts (1898, 217–8), Leibniz and Deleuze clearly point out that it is not at all separate from the world—in fact, crucially, the very opposite is the case. What Deleuze's Leibniz makes clear through the double usage of the fold and the monad is that this moment of perception called the monad is in fact the only guarantor of a consistent philosophy of immanence that precludes the very "bounded" subject that is the focus of so much radical critique. In the monad, Deleuze sees the ultimate expression of the principle of immanence that provides a coherent account of the relationship between the All of the world on the one hand, and the discrete, extensive individual or One (what we generally call the actor-agent, or subject) on the other. The monad's relation to the infinite is found in the way that it is always between the fold—again: a cave within a cave or a fold of the sea. The process that ends in an actualized extensity begins when certain ideal Events are condensed into a monad. These Events are the monad's clear zone of expression, which in turn are actualized into a body which is said to "belong" to the monad as its final cause (see Deleuze 2006a, 98). According to this schema consciousness is rather easily explained as those monads with memory. Deleuze here is drawing on Leibniz's distinction between three kinds of monads: perceptive (plants), sensory (animals) and thinking (humans—and angels). For Leibniz, the term monad should apply to "simple substances which have perception only, and that the name of Souls should be given only to those in which perception is more distinct, and is accompanied by memory" (1898, 230). It is the actualization of this soul that we normally refer to as the subject. Thus,

> We go from the world to the subject, at the cost of a torsion that causes the monad to exist in the actual [*actuellement*] only in subjects, but that also makes subjects all relate to this world, like to the virtuality that they actualize … The world must be placed in the subject in order that the subject can be for the world. This is the torsion that constitutes the fold of the world and of the soul. And it is what gives to expression its fundamental character: the soul is the expression of the world (actuality), but because the world is the expressed of the soul (virtuality). (Deleuze 2006a, 28)[8]

But although the world is expressed in the monad, it is not expressed in its entirety. According to the discussion of enveloping/enveloped in *Difference and Repetition* (2004a, 314–7), it is only the enveloped series that are expressed clearly, in this case in terms of a segment or a point of view which corresponds

to the individual that is differenciated into an actual state of affairs. The monad for Deleuze–Leibniz is bound up in the world and expresses it from a particular point of view, that is, a specific segment of it. If, as we noted above, the world consists of an infinite number of folds, each soul must be located in the space between two folds, at once being folded into (or enveloped by) the world, and at the same time folding the world within it (or enveloping it). In this way the continuum between the One and the multiple—and Deleuze's truly immanent metaphysics—is preserved. As Deleuze puts it, "The world is an infinite series of curvatures or inflections, and the entire world is enclosed in the soul from one point of view" (2006a, 26). Through this process the soul or subject is what becomes actual, not the entire world at once. In terms of a subject, this fold within the fold, when taken to the limit, is incommensurable with other Modern variations of subjectivity. As Badiou notes, "Deleuze is searching for a figure of interiority (or of the subject) that is neither reflection (of the cogito), nor the relation-to, the focus (of intentionality), nor the pure empty point (of eclipse). Neither Descartes, nor Husserl, nor Lacan" (1994, 61). In other words, it is because the world is infinite that I am connected to the world; I envelop the entire world, and the world envelops me in the virtual sense.

Thus we can see that an examination of the subject sheds considerable light on Deleuze's philosophy as it pertains to sociology in general. Individual subjects or those human beings that we so often take to be autonomous and active are, according to Deleuze, the result or actualization of virtual, differential relations. These monads contain the entire world but express only a certain, particular point of view.[9] Human subjects obviously have materiality or extension, but they are not the originators of action. They are the result (unfoldings) of virtual foldings. As such, we can now see that the distinction between systems and individuals breaks down. All unfoldings or actualizations, be they cultures, political systems, animal species or singular human beings, are the result of the virtual intensities of foldings. Thus just like there can be no workable, fixed model of a sociological notion such as the family, singular human beings are also systems, with their roamings, slides, moments of sedentariness and lines of flight, which is why Deleuze sometimes refers to people as "dividuals" (1992b, 5). Singular, extensive human beings function like any other system plus memory. This effectively sidesteps the whole structure–agency paradox/debate and in the context of the current discussion exposes no small amount of cultural and ideological leanings when it comes to retaining the autonomous, bounded subject as a central feature of sociological thought, as will be further discussed below.

A valid and pressing question given the above sketch, but one that rarely comes up in the Deleuze literature, is: How do we go about doing sociology according to Deleuze's thought? In this virtual–actual schema, how can we understand physical and mental objects as well as temporal distinctions—the "discrete things" as mentioned above—and how can we explain their becomings? How can we explain group behavior, for example? In short, how could

one actually study social phenomena? One of Deleuze's (and Guattari's, in this case) best tools for understanding material and ideational artefacts is the notion of assemblage (*agencement*, not *assemblage*). Put succinctly, an assemblage consists of the morphogenic processes which account for an existing state of affairs.[10] Here Deleuze draws on Foucault. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (2002) Foucault proffers two forms of historical emergence: content and expression—two terms borrowed from Louis Hjelmslev (see 1969). These things (the visible) and words (the sayable) are in reciprocal presupposition and, according to Deleuze, perhaps receive their clearest treatment by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1977). What distinguishes an assemblage from Foucault's work on dispositifs, however, is the addition of the virtual–actual axis, which functions to join the visible and the sayable and accounts for movement and change within the system. Thus forms of content engender forms of expression, which in turn become new forms of content in increasingly fixed or stratified states of affairs (actualized institutions and identities), and at the same time are open to evolution, change and influences (that is, virtual relations) from what Foucault calls "neighbouring practices" (2002, 211), but Deleuze would insist are virtual series in communication or folds. Thus the assemblage straddles Deleuze's two-poled metaphysics, relating the relative movement between the virtual and the actual through mutually implicating forms of content and forms of expression. Not only does this avoid any dualism, but it also lends a propelling dynamic to understandings of emergence and change that are not based on any transcendent principle such as individual will or *sui generis* social structures or relations. To put it another way, all things are actualized (from virtual to actual) and counteractualized (from actual to virtual) according to varying forms of content and forms of expression. One real service the virtual–actual renders here is to overcome the limits of linear, path-dependent change and even more importantly, to resist determinism—as if through examining the elements of an assemblage we could determine their future constellations. Although to be sure there often appears to be continuity (although in contemporary networked society this seems to be less and less the case), the notion of the virtual allows for the new to enter the system, which can explain true, spontaneous change.

What in effect sociology investigates are the incorporeal changes in substance. Thus, although there may certainly be what sociologists would call structural effects, these cannot be structurally deterministic. Likewise, although assemblage theory allows for individual volition, the cause does not originate within an autonomous subjectivity. In other words, assemblage theory can seek the "causes"—or what Deleuze refers to as quasi-causes (2004b)—but they are not normal, natural or necessary. The full palette of sociological explanation is available, but it is as variable as the phenomena are mobile. Because of this there is no one-size-fits-all assemblage theory; just how an assemblage is formed must be determined on a case-by-case basis. To take a brief example, previous research of mine examines how ordinary (*lao bai xing*)

Chinese arrive at housing arrangements among various degrees of forced evictions to make way for urban planning and expansion. It is very tempting to rely on—and many sociologists do—Western-developed theories of civil society and resistance to analyze these shifts. And whereas a relational sociology might tend to look at the relations (friendships, reciprocities, institutional arrangements) between the actors (inhabitants, authorities, police, community leaders), assemblage theory sees the (in)dividuals, the flow and flux of building materials, the perceptions and the social values and relations as forming part of a system. Again, this admits no causal significance in any social structure, agency or relation, but rather all are the effects of virtual relations that are expressed in the built environment and the use of and speech about them (their incorporeal bodies).

2 Deleuze's Relational Sociology

The main focus for the rest of the chapter will be to see to what extent Deleuze could be said to be a relational thinker and so support a relational sociology, and what his philosophy does to provide a deeper understanding of relational sociology and the debates surrounding it. As to the former focus, the above evidence supports the position that Deleuze is a relational thinker par excellence. Because of his emphasis on differing differences (differentiation) and enveloping/enveloped or folding, the primary focus in investigating the world is pure relation. The elegant notion that the more "fixed" states of affairs that we observe and live are the results of intensive communications allows for both chaos and emergence as well as stratification and capture, but again what we call units or individuals are always the results, not the causes. This implies a sociology of pure, mobile relation, a calculus of thought without foundation or ground. It is a world of flux wherein mobile relations relate to mobile relations ad infinitum.

It seems to me that a central value of Deleuze for relational sociology is the focus on ontology that his work clearly lends. What is described above is probably quite radical for most sociologists trained in the sociology traditions of the twentieth century. As for relational sociology, to a considerable degree it has been an attempt to walk a fine line between methodological individualism and holism (Donati 2006), without succumbing to the bugbear of intentionality (Donati 2010). But this last was precisely what Deleuze was in no small way reacting against in twentieth-century philosophy: the intentionality of phenomenology (see Badiou 1997, 21; Schrift 2000, 151). Although we have only briefly touched on the role of the subject in a relational sociology, at minimum we can say that Deleuze's relational sociology solves, or at least clearly defines, the problem of the individual. As is clear from above, individuals are the effects of intensive relations in the virtual. We could call this strong relational sociology: a sociology of folds, an origami-sociology.

We can see what an ontology of folds and infinite envelopedness means practically for relational sociology by considering an illustrative example provided by Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987, 352–3). It illustrates the implications of the virtual–actual split for actually doing sociology. Crucial here is the notion of illustrative. Nowhere do Deleuze and Guattari claim that this shows the difference between the virtual and the actual. However, the following outlines the contours of what a sociology of pure relation might look like. The example concerns two board games, chess and Go.[11] The former is defined by structural rules governing distinct and finite pieces (one only has so many pawns, knights and so on) that have inherent characteristics or capabilities. Indeed, they have these characteristics abstractly, even when they are not in play. The strategy of chess is linear—to capture the king. Moreover the nature of the pieces makes the relatively small board a bounded, finite surface. In Go, in contrast, the stones are functionally the same—they have no inherent characteristics. The character that they take during play is derived solely from their relations to other stones. When they are not at play, sitting in their little jars, they really have no characteristics at all. The strategy is fluid and highly intuitive: one must develop relations among one's stones in such a way as to block and surround the opponent—to create space. And while a Go board is also technically finite, the relational nature of the stones makes the entire playing surface much more relative and thus infinite in a sense. Now Go stones are not exactly folds, as Deleuze would have the smallest point be, but understanding how Go works and how it is different from chess is a close approximation of what a sociology of difference, the infinitesimal and the relational might look like. Although a relational sociology would seek to understand phenomena through the relations among the pieces and not in the chess pieces themselves, Go provides a clue as to how it would be possible to think a social world of pure relations. A more Go-inspired relational sociology would disavow any reliance on pre-given entities, focusing rather on the relational, often chaotic, aspects that in fact constitute fluid, purely relational characteristics.

Dépelteau stakes out one of the fundamental questions in relational sociology as the ontological one:[12]

> What are social phenomena made of? Do we analyze how relations determine the individuals (RS as another version of social determinism), how social structures interact with agency (RS as another version of co-determinism), or how interdependent actors make various and fluid social processes (RS as a 'deep', transactional sociology)? (2015, 47)

What is handy in Deleuze is that his immanent philosophy resists or sidesteps all three of these options. He is none of the above. And as such Deleuze's philosophy encompasses, can account for and thus allows for all three: a simple monism. This is not being wishy-washy; this is saying that patterns, apparatuses of capture or social structures do have ontic reality, in no way different from

the (in)dividuals that can, by collision, by speeds and slowness, be a part of an assemblage that dramatically changes a structure. And as for the question of what we should study if nothing is ontologically prior to anything else, it is clear that we must focus on the only thing there is apart from substance: the processes, the flows, the lines of flight, the territory that is created, the subjectivations that are actualized. This means relations themselves. Deleuze calls this starting in the middle (see 1995, 86). He argues that not doing this is another philosophy of categories that falls into the same fallacy of difference that has haunted Western philosophy—and so also sociology—since its beginning. This puts his philosophy far closer to Emirbayer's shot over the bow of relational sociology, which argues for what some call a transactional kind of relational sociology, wherein the units "derive their meaning, significance, and identity from the (changing) functional roles they play within that transaction." This for Emirbayer is relational. There is no existence independent of relation. From the perspective of Deleuze's philosophy, we can call it transactional if we like, but actually it does not go far enough to attain Deleuze's pure immanence, since there is still this undefined "they" of "their meaning" (Emirbayer 1997, 286–7). For Deleuze there is no meaning (although there is sense); the "they" itself is derived from pure relations.

If Emirbayer is the transactional extreme of relational sociology—dismissed as postmodernism by Donati (2015)—then Deleuze is even more extreme. But this does not render him beyond usefulness. On the contrary, his rigorous ontology suggests an equally rigorous method. Indeed, Donati is deeply concerned about the pitfalls of Emirbayer being "clearly caught up in full relativism" (2010, 3). Here, Deleuze comes stalwartly to Emirbayer's aid, arguing that we have nothing to fear (or be ashamed of!) with full relativism. We only need a rigorous ontology analogous to a new calculus of thought capable of differentials in order to master it. The problem that holds us back for Deleuze is exactly the opposite: a sociology with the philosophical foundation rooted in a ground or a foundation that can ultimately only be a philosophy of categories, incapable of thinking the virtual. Donati's "*sui generis* reality", which he calls "the order of relations" (2010, xvi), is opposed to Deleuze's univocity. Likewise it seems clear that Archer's critical realism, although positing an independent realm of relation (although this suffers from the same ontological difficulty as Donati above), is not ready to jettison the transcendental subject (2010). Evidently the philosophy of sociology is not a contest for who can develop the most ontologically immanent account of relational sociology. Deleuze, however, can clarify many of the claims made by various proponents and critics of relational sociology. In Deleuze's radical monism, there is no ontological difference between actualized elements and their virtual series (intensities, pre-singularities). His is truly a flat ontology.

To be sure, even a "weak" relational sociology wherein relations are given logical, analytic and methodological (but not ontological) priority would be, following Deleuze, preferable to a sociology that grants causal significance to either *sui generis* social structures on the one hand, or autonomous individuals

on the other—or worse, both. These clearly only deal with actual states of affairs, and we see this reflected in scientific experimental controls, from physics to psychology to international relations, that strive to block or resist the indeterminate and chaotic nature of the virtual. This fixation on actuals—steady states, (eternal) laws, essential characteristics, holism and individualism—Deleuze sometimes calls the transcendental illusion: our inability to think the virtual. But nevertheless any relational sociology such as Donati's and Archer's that maintains the *sui generis* nature of relations and, perhaps more problematically, simultaneously the full, Modern, autonomous subject, must also be a philosophy of categories, one wedded to the transcendental illusion. Although seldom stated, there are many reasons why such a relational sociology, for Deleuze, must hold on to the transcendental subject. In *Difference and Repetition* he calls them good sense and common sense (2004a, 42, 169, 284), but for the purposes of this chapter they constitute a kind of knowing, a kind of sociology that cannot break from its Modern, Enlightenment (and ultimately Platonic) roots.[13] In many ways this has become an ideological bent for individualism. The point is that there is nothing to fear from Deleuze's subjectless subjectivities. It is not such a bitter pill to swallow. It denies none of the feeling, sanctity or uniqueness of human-ness. It only denies the transcendent nature of human subjectivity: that individuals are in the world but somehow apart from it. Moreover, the centrality of the individual and the impossibility of doing social science without it is a relatively recent and culturally specific phenomenon. Even the heroes of the putative roots of Western civilization, of Homer, were not understood as being bounded and autonomous (Hirst and Woolley 1982, 133). By adopting a purely relational subject we merely need to rethink some of our institutions.[14] It may be difficult, it may even seem utopian, but it is certainly not beyond the horizon of sociological thought based on a rigorous immanent ontology.

What is certain is that in recent decades there has been a desire for a firm and rigorous justification of a strong relational sociology, and Deleuze can provide that. We can see this in Tonkonoff's New Social Physic. Here we see a Tarde deployment that expresses quite nicely the kinds of sociology Deleuze implies. We have a science that "instead of starting by analyzing the actual structure of social objects... should start by reconstructing the diverse ways in which these structures are produced (that is what Tarde calls polygenesis)". This is a sociology of process, of emergence—not one that accepts that there is some thing called society (2013, 271). It is sociology as cartography, and perfectly Deleuzian:

> to characterize any social system we have to identify the specific manner in which its elements have been articulated or disposed.… In addition, we must describe its internal morphology, the direction of its flows, its degrees of intensity (rises and drops), the positive or negative nature of its charges, as well as the inputs and outputs (regular or irregular) that nourish its economy, and its relations with other ensembles. This has to be done every time, for each social ensemble studied, for they are culturally, historically, and locally embedded. (2013, 276)

We see similar overlap with Actor Network Theory. Although based on Deleuze only lightly or indirectly (through studies of Whitehead perhaps), it maps on quite nicely, and poses no obvious or at least certainly no unsurmountable contradiction. The goal, as stated by its most notable proponent, Latour, is to purge "agency, structure, psyche, time and space along with every other philosophical and anthropological category, no matter how deeply rooted in common sense they may appear to be" (2005, 24). And when seeking the impulse, the newness, the causal significance, Latour turns to pure action or very Deleuze-esque events: "For the social sciences to regain their initial energy, it's crucial not to conflate all the agencies overtaking the action into some kind of agency—'society', 'culture', 'structure', 'fields', 'individuals', or whatever name they are given—that would itself be social. Action should remain a surprise, a mediation, an event" (2005, 45). And so on, with actors being a moving target of an array of forces (46), as well as seeing matter as an ontologically equal part of an emergent social world (76).

Looking at the work of Emirbayer, Tonkonoff and Latour—and there are many others—we can detect a broader will in sociology to move beyond philosophies of categories and transcendents, but it seems the tools are only now being developed. Deleuze's thought as outlined above can help shape and hone these tools. He offers a rigorous philosophical justification for relational sociology deeply embedded in a powerful, consistent and sustained critique of the Western philosophical tradition that forms the foundation of sociology, even if it is only rarely acknowledged. In my own research I have tried to show how with some development and extrapolation Deleuze's philosophy alone suggests a canny theoretical and methodological system in its own right. In any case, one useful aspect of Deleuze's philosophy for relational sociology is that it can help us assess and map the various relational sociologies, from the transcendent to the transactional to the completely relational fold.

Notes

1. Possibly with good reason. As hinted above, a great deal of Deleuzian commentary has been vague at best.
2. I say vast majority because there are considerable parallels and overlaps with non-transcendent sociology which I will address below.
3. From one perspective this acceptance is the root of the perennial and massively problematic agent–structure problem.
4. As yet there is no sustained research program on Deleuze and Luhmann. My suspicion is that Deleuze would reject Luhmann on a number of grounds (and vice versa), not least for the latter's notion of emergence.
5. The best source on the significance of univocity in Deleuze is Widder (2001); or see my own *Deleuze and World Politics* (2012, 52ff.).
6. Readers may well wonder what precisely causes or enacts these resonances, and with good reason. The bulk of *Difference and Repetition* can be seen as a rather long-winded answer to this query. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to explore this question, but we will simply say that the mechanics rest on what is

sometimes called the dark precursor in much of the Deleuze-complexity literature, but what Deleuze more commonly (and usefully, it seems to me) refers to as the Event, which should be read much more in the spirit of Nietzsche's eternal return or Bergson's *élan vital* as opposed to simply "things happening".

7. We find this everywhere, from Marx (1978, 42) to Wendt (2010, 297).
8. Translation altered—compare with Deleuze (1988b, 26–7). Here Conley translates *actuellement* as "currently", which pays no heed to the crucial role of the actual in other works, especially *Difference and Repetition*. My view is that Conley's translation hampers the utility of *The Fold*.
9. Widder (2012) makes productive use of the notion of perspectives in this sense.
10. Rather than allowing names to designate "things" such as bicycles, computers and workers' associations, Deleuze and Guattari call them abstract machines, that is, that which designates the assemblage (1987, 70). For specific "individuals", Deleuze and Guattari use conceptual personae to designate that particular assemblage, such as the Lenin abstract machine (1987, 100). See also *What is Philosophy?* (1994, 61ff.). Thus like all "dividuals", great historical figures do not at all intervene in history, but are rather the names given to the assmblage: the Trump abstract machine!
11. Known in the West by the short form of its Japanese name, *igo*. In Chinese, 围棋 (wéi qí); Korean, *paduk*.
12. Deleuze would probably rephrase this question somewhat. For him ontology is properly the philosophy of Being, not of beings. As for what social phenomena are made of, this is an ontic or, slightly more technically, metaphysical question.
13. Deleuze also calls this representational thought, and it also would have been possible to write this chapter through this lens.
14. For example, this rigorously supports an alternate view of justice and guilt: Hirst and Wooley claim that we need not get rid of the foundations of Western law and society (contract, obligation, responsibly, fault, guilt) just by denying the sovereign subject. "These categories do not depend on individuals being in some inherent, ontological sense responsible or guilty, but they do require that conduct is attributable to individuals, not as its origin but as its locus" (1982, 131).

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