



# Activism and the academy: Assembling knowledge for social justice

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## abstract

This paper asks whether assemblage theory provides a useful way of thinking through the challenges of knowledge production for social justice in the context of the relationship between social movement activism and the academy. We begin by describing the problems associated with spatial metaphors that reinforce reified generalities whereby ‘horizontal’ social movements are opposed to hierarchical higher education (HE) institutions. We then give a brief account of DeLanda’s (2006) interpretation of the assemblage, focusing on the concepts of immanence and difference, actual and virtual and de- and re-territorialisation. Having described the problem and sketched out the theoretical context, we move on to consider the analytical value of assemblage theory, focusing on the merits of its materialist anti-essentialism. This leads on to a critical discussion of the ways in which speed and mobility are inscribed with normative value in some political readings of assemblage theory. We argue against the temptation to imbue any particular spatial or temporal mode with normative value. Instead, we suggest that an explicit recognition of time as a universal stake in social justice knowledge production helps us to move beyond discourses that reproduce reified oppositions.

## Introduction

Given the extent to which academic labour has been colonised by the neoliberal logic, the worth of positioning oneself ‘in and against’ the academy quite rightly has been posed as a foundational dilemma to be addressed in this special issue. However, in *ephemera*’s issue on the ‘Excellent Institution’, Hoofd (2010) astutely reminds us just how problematic the very terms of this debate are, as binaries such as academy | activism, institution | movement, ivory tower | rhizome, continue to mutually presuppose and reproduce one another in a circular

fashion. Thus, despite the ‘unprecedented gulf between theorists of the revolution and its practitioners’ routinely lamented by activist-intellectuals’ (Graeber, 2002: 61), we share the frustrations of those dissatisfied with aspects of the debates around knowledge production for social justice (e.g. Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010; Hoofd, 2010), which work to reproduce contingent boundaries and borders and obfuscate important power dynamics as a consequence.

Our contribution to the dialogue is a modest inquiry into the extent to which assemblage theory provides a useful way of challenging such dualisms. Firstly, we name the problem by explaining what is wrong with ‘reified generalities’ in this context (DeLanda, 2006). Secondly, we give a necessarily brief account of assemblage theory, outlining its key concepts. This allows us to appraise the analytical value of assemblage theory for better understanding the material, and therefore also spatio-temporal, complexities at play in social justice knowledge production. However, there has been a tendency on the Left to ascribe spatio-temporal norms when taking up assemblage theory. In this paper we focus on one particularly prominent valorisation: the combination of speed and nomadism in pursuit of social justice knowledge.

Whilst we recognise that time and mobility are key stakes for any materialist analysis of social justice, we contend that accelerationist (a term that we will go on to explain) accounts of social justice knowledge production wrongly equate slowness with Left anachronism. Moreover, a critical materialist reading of the privileging of speed and nomadism reveals a problematic propensity for social justice activism to become caught in the same capitalist rhythms that compromise Higher Education as a site of emancipatory knowledge. In other words, without normative distortions, assemblage theory can productively work to critique the reified generalities that separate activism from the academy. The final section suggests that one way in which activist/academic knowledge can make common cause is through an incorporation of slow politics, which is in no way incommensurate with the notion of assemblage. Valorising neither slowness nor speed, stasis or mobility, this section calls for proper recognition of the complexity of spatio-temporal conditions that *matter* for generating social justice knowledge.

### **What’s the problem with reified generalities?**

Assemblage theorist DeLanda (2006) proposes that a challenge for the Left is to replace analyses based on ‘reified generalities’ with analyses of populations of concrete assemblages. DeLanda uses the term ‘reified generalities’ to refer to

abstract concepts (generalities) brought into being through classificatory systems (reified) that spuriously ascribe essential characteristics to what are actually populations of historical singularities. Examples of such commonly invoked reified generalities might be ‘the market’, ‘the state’ or ‘the academy’. We take this insight as our starting point in this section. The history of debate surrounding the relationship between Left academia and social justice activism provides a window into several issues that remain salient to this special issue on academic labour. For one, there is the issue of the relevance of social movement scholarship to activists. For example, Bevington and Dixon’s (2005) influential study suggested that many North American social justice activists do not find academic social movement theory to be particularly insightful or ‘operationalisable’ in a practical sense. Generally, the criticism of detached social movement scholarship, developed in recent years by numerous activist-intellectuals, has been well received by activist constituencies (e.g. Choudry and Kapoor, 2010; Croteau et al., 2005; Graeber, 2002; Shukaitis et al., 2007).

On the other side of this longstanding debate, and in spite of claims that academic research and theorising into social movements is often ‘extractive’ (worse still ‘parasitic’), several academics have explored the problematic assumption that social justice scholarship must, or should be, spontaneously applicable to the practice of activist constituencies (e.g. Amsler, 2013; Edelman, 2009; Rootes, 1990). Such positions often are rooted in a reasonable scepticism about the instrumentalisation of creative intellectual inquiry, whose utility cannot be known *a priori*.

These debates are certainly nothing new and share an enduring concern with the relationship between the material and the ideational in the context of political reform and revolution. For example, Adorno (critical theorist of the Frankfurt School) writing in 1978, lamented the fact that the Left’s rhetorical adoption of the dialectical unity of theory and practice, seemed to inevitably give way in the end to a suspicion that those unwilling to engage at a moment’s notice in activist practices are worthy of distrust. In fact, he termed much activism ‘pseudo activity’ in the sense that participants derive comfort from just doing *something*, regardless of its efficacy.

Although such debates have as much contemporary relevance as ever, our concern lies more with the ways in which commentators problematically position *themselves* and the complex practices that they engage in. Social justice discourse habitually makes use of reified binary opposites such as such ‘grassroots’ knowledge | ‘ivory tower’; knowledge ‘from below’ | knowledge ‘from above’; ‘theorists’ of the revolution | ‘practitioners’ of the revolution, and so on. It might be argued that such binaries help us to make important analytical distinctions.

Nevertheless, we have some specific concerns. Social movements and HE institutions are obviously not hermetically sealed spaces of knowledge production. To constantly reinforce such distinctions (tacitly or intentionally), not only masks the complex processes through which knowledge and understanding about/for social justice come about, but also blinds one to the persistent bending of capitalist production (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2006). To assume that one escapes the logic of capital simply through replicating established activist pursuits, serves not only to cloud the complex dynamics through which capital operates, but also to bolster the very structures it purports to circumvent. It's not just that these reified binaries are wrong; rather their active use reterritorialises systems that, in some circumstances, move us further away from understanding the actual material and expressive practices through which social justice might come about.

We begin from the recognition that 'grassroots' organising and in particular, 'horizontality', are not anterior material realities but rather, *discursive* devices which serve to bolster the foundational separation of contemporary movements from stereotypical forms of hierarchy (Juris, 2005; Nunes, 2005). By 'horizontality' we mean the propensity towards forms of organising that avoid hierarchical relationships. In the former case, by invoking the *roots*, social movement discourse often obfuscates *routes* – meaning the pathways that particular individuals have travelled – so that they are equipped to participate in specific social practices codified as 'active'. Often, routes to activism pass through the academy (Morris and Staggenborg, 2004; Rootes, 2004; Rootes, 1995). The following diverse examples illustrate this process.

Firstly, the relocalisation-oriented Transition movement has turned its attention to how local community action in response to climate change and fossil fuel depletion can also address social justice issues. It trades on its 'horizontal' and 'open space' approach to knowledge production (Hopkins, 2011). The spatiality of the movement's knowledge production is premised on a combination of 'grassroots' local community learning and simultaneous rapid 'rhizomatic' knowledge sharing through digital space. Consequently, such discourse distances itself from what is perceived to be 'elite knowledge':

Everything you read in this book is a result of real work in the real world, with community engagement at its heart. There's not an ivory tower in sight; no professors in musty oak-panelled studies churning out erudite papers. (Hopkins, 2011: 17)

Yet existing studies of this particular movement highlight that it continues to be overwhelmingly composed of the 'civic core'; that is, middle aged and 'well resourced – financially, educationally and with time' (Aiken, 2010: 96).

Moreover, such claims of ‘real work’ appear to retain a problematic ‘humanist dialectic of action and thought’ (Hoofd, 2010: 19), in which the former is privileged as emancipatory and self-empowering, and devoid of the exclusivity and discrimination of the institution. To perceive knowledge-through-action, however ‘open’ without partiality and prejudice, obfuscates power relations.

Secondly, in the context of the alter-globalisation movement, several ethnographic accounts of World Social Forum (WSF) (e.g. Choudry and Kapoor, 2010; Juris, 2005; Nunes, 2005), US Social Forum (USSF) (e.g. Juris, 2008), and European Social Forum (ESF) (e.g. della Porta, 2005) processes have noted how an analogous cultural orientation towards open space and horizontal modes of knowledge production, have obscured the political economy of participation, resulting in exclusionary practices whereby processes become dominated by Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and those with the necessary resources and capabilities. Therefore, one is required to already possess particular and privileged abilities in order to simply enter the highly-competitive world of social justice activism. Horizontality and openness are not the radical other to the supposed hierarchy of the institution and its increasingly pervasive neoliberal engine; they are precisely their symptom (Hoofd, 2010).

Various poor peoples’ movements are subject to similarly problematic assertions, despite the fact that they often utilise the material and cognitive resources of universities and ‘Western’ NGOs to further their struggle whilst trying to avoid co-option. Kinchy’s (2010) research into farmers’ activism against transgenic maize in New Mexico uses the term ‘epistemic boomerang’ as a metaphor for this kind of process. Alternatively, McFarlane’s (2009: 567) ethnographic research reveals how ‘many urban social movements in Mumbai are mobilised and led by middle-class activists in positions of relative power, with particular formal educational attainments, connections in government or with donors, and distinct resources that they can draw upon’. As one final example, we offer Gill’s (2014) ethnographic study of the Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM) shack dwellers movement in Durban, South Africa. Gill’s (2014: 215) account of the AbM recognises the tension between the movement’s own pedagogical praxis and academics who reinforce vanguardism and ‘assume they know better than, or can speak for the poor’. However, AbM activist-intellectuals have cautiously made connections with middle-class academics, locally and through digital technologies, in order to connect their struggle to a wider network of resources and ‘engage in mutual learning’ (*ibid.*: 216).

What these fairly diverse examples illustrate is that representations of social movements as grassroots/horizontal entities, and universities as archaic and isolated knowledge producing entities are common but untenable, and serve to

obfuscate the ways in which the practice of social justice is materially constrained and mediated by persistent power relations. In what follows, we explore assemblage theory as a way to rethink the relationships between social movements and the academy, in an area which has tended to reassert dualisms, totalities and essential identities.

### A brief explanation of assemblage theory

In this section we draw primarily on the assemblage theory of DeLanda (2006), which is derived from the philosophy of Deleuze (1994) and Deleuze and Guattari (1987). As such, we cannot isolate the concept of the assemblage from the broader ontological commitments in this work without diluting to some extent the potency of the ideas (Phillips, 2006). The purpose of this section is simply to outline, in broad terms, important aspects of assemblage theory. As such, we do not focus too heavily on the connections with activism and academia, a fuller discussion of which will follow.

#### *Immanence and difference*

DeLanda's work on assemblage is about theorising what he calls 'morphogenesis' (understood as the birth of form, irrespective of whether the entity in question is geological, biological, linguistic, political and so on). Morphogenesis 'gets rid of all transcendent factors using exclusively form-generating resources which are immanent to the material world' (DeLanda, 2002: 10). This foregrounding of immanence over transcendence is grounded in the Deleuzian concept of difference as a process (Deleuze, 1994). For DeLanda, Deleuze 'conceives difference not negatively, as lack of resemblance, but positively or productively, as that which drives a dynamical process' (2002: 4). In other words, difference is the process through which things *differentiate and become what they are* through relations with each other, rather than an abstract set of categorisations by which things are classified (by 'us') as *different from*. '[I]nstead of something distinguished from something else', Deleuze 'imagine[s] something which distinguishes itself' (1994: 28).

In order to foreground immanence, DeLanda (2006) sets up an analytical opposition between 'relations of interiority' and 'relations of exteriority' as ways of thinking about wholes, structures, or bodies (call them what you will). Within the terms of this opposition, two further fundamental distinctions are respectively derived: these are logical obligation and contingent obligation. Relations of interiority are logically obliged in the sense that the relationships between 'parts' are 'logically necessary' to make the organism function as a structured totality. Both Hegelian dialectics and structuralism are positioned as

archetypal modes of thinking in which relations of interiority are foundational, and where ‘the entities themselves are the absolutes, and all relations between them are merely accidental’ (Shaviro, 2007).

In opposition, DeLanda (2006) suggests *relations of exteriority*, which require a shift from focussing on the *properties* of components in the system, towards an additional concern for *capacities*, that is, potential linkages and connections with elements outside of the ‘body’ in question. The way that both properties and capacities are conceived here is crucial, because it provides assemblage theory with the means to avoid deterministic positions. An entity can retain properties that are not defined entirely from its current set of relations, and these properties can be understood to derive from previous relational states. As such, properties are understood to be contingently obligatory ‘all the way down’, rather than essential. An entity is therefore not entirely determined by an outside, and nor is it governed solely by intrinsic properties. In other words, the ‘things’ of the world do not have essence, only a continual production through co-constitutive relations, or ‘becoming’, and nor are they thought to derive exclusively from any present configuration of relations. Capacities are the means through which relations can happen, and are contingent. In other words, an entity’s potential to relate in a certain way must be matched by another entity’s potential to receive the particularities of that relationship. New relations require corresponding capacities, and this allows assemblage theory to acknowledge both the potentials and limits of change, and to identify the specifics of such eventualities. In such ways, acknowledging both the properties and capacities of entities, bodies, or structures provides the conceptual means to interrogate the complexity of given situations, rather than rely on the abstract ideals and norms offered by the kinds of generalities discussed previously.

Our contention is that the generalities ‘activism’ and ‘academia’ appear to structure and maintain divisions between singular assemblages, and that the assemblage requires us to actively engage with the broad and complex processes that impinge upon and shape them. Assemblage theory encourages us to be specific: to consider what might be engrained properties, hardened through important historical relations, as well as what might be capacities for new associations and structural change. In this sense, we cannot begin with the ‘academy’ and ‘social movement activism’ as predetermined, distinct, and bounded categories, but rather we have to work through the processes of differentiation through which they have been *produced* as such, as well as the important avenues through which relational change might occur. In this way, proponents suggest that assemblage theory is not abstract theorising, but rather the attempt to take specific and tangible factors into account. Rather than relying on generalised terms to denote difference, the focus shifts to exploring *how*

*difference has come about*, and in such a way, perhaps work more productively towards influencing the kind of differences we want to see come about in the future. This is an important point to stress here, because that which we call ‘the academy’ and that which we might term ‘social movement activism’ *are* different in important ways. However, we must recognise that that difference is not because of an abstract measure of an ideal state in either case, but because of processes of differentiation. In other words, institutions have *become* hardened and standardised around particular formalities and hierarchies, and these processes of differentiation are identical to those that have produced the customs and patterns associated with social movements. The very point of defining difference in this way is to get closer to what is possible and what is not possible in terms of change. If we maintain reified generalities, we are less inclined to recognise where and how the institution and the movement might actively and productively transform, especially in terms of their relations with each other.

#### *Actual and virtual*

An important nuance to highlight, and the substantive difference between the relations of exteriority and interiority of the assemblage, is that the analogy of the ‘network’ is not quite enough. The assemblage is not merely a set of determinable relations between identifiable things, but a theory that attempts to account for the actual *and the virtual* (Phillips, 2006). In other words, the assemblage is a set of relations that includes the *potential* encapsulated in the idea of capacity. We suggest that this is of central importance in critically assessing assemblage theory here, because potential, or more accurately the limitations and possibilities for *the virtual becoming actual*, is the site at which social justice praxis could productively operate. DeLanda articulates the notion of capacity in terms of ‘degrees of freedom’ (2006), attesting to the idea that the ability to relate remains a site of productive potential, but also signalling that one has to acknowledge the substantive limitations structured-in through previous relations that have shaped and affected the entities themselves.

This concern for leaving open the potential for productive change is met, we suggest, in the actual and virtual structure of the assemblage. Where reified generalities tend to maintain categorisations in which transcendent models serve as the measure and limit of what one is considering – here the educational institution and the social movement – then the scope for action is significantly constrained. If one already assumes a particular definition of the ‘university’, against which any actual conditions are to be measured, the possibilities for one’s creative action seem to be confined by the boundaries of the transcendent form. The advantage of the actual and virtual ontology described here is that, to

paraphrase the Deleuzian take on Spinoza, ‘we don’t know what a university or a movement can do’. What is virtual, and what can be rendered actual through cohering capacities, remains unknown, and therefore an affirmative space for pursuing social justice praxis.

The pragmatics of the assemblage as actual-and-virtual comes to the fore here: assemblages must be created not discovered. In other words, we must recognise that this ‘virtual’ we have been speaking of is, in part, conditioned through the ways that assemblage is brought into being. A crucial part of this bringing-into-being is ‘who’ might be doing that, and this importantly enfolds the subject of research with the object of enquiry. Any identified assemblage is not an objective state, but a contingent set of relations brought into being through particular circumstances. Critically, this foregrounds responsibility for the ways that debates are framed. Assemblage theory therefore encourages us to bring into being the kind of activism and social justice one wants to make actual, rather than, through the very same process, to produce unhelpful differences, incommensurable distinctions, and insurmountable disparities. Indeed, we might then say that the claim of transcendent differences between the academy and social movement activism might be interpreted as the very ‘fatalism’ so often assumed of the ‘post-modern’ and ‘post-structuralist’ orientations attributed to assemblage theory.

Turning to the specific theme of this paper, we can say that assemblage theory encourages one to perceive entities such as the educational institution and the social movement as *made actual* through persistent relational activity. However, what is made actual and what is not, and thus what these entities or systems manifest as at any given moment, is determined by the virtual. As we have seen, the appeal of DeLanda’s (2006) rendition of assemblage theory here is in the way we can account for the specific limitations and possibilities in this movement from the virtual to the actual. The academy and the social movement have properties that make them distinct, and these properties also define what domains of the virtual are open to becoming actual.

### *Territorialisation*

Importantly, we also need to introduce the notion of territorialisation and deterritorialisation, through which assemblage theory provides a useful analysis of the processes of assemblage formation that we have been describing above. DeLanda (2006) situates these processes on a continuum: at one end we have the assemblage forming through homogenisation; material and expressive processes which standardise and regulate, and which require an analysis immanent to the qualitative and scalar particularities of any given assemblage. At

the other end of the axis we have processes that operationalize heterogeneity; destabilising commonality and establishing difference. It is important to emphasise a literal (as opposed to metaphorical) interpretation of territorialisation here: the colonisation or devolution of social movements and the academy, for example, must be considered in spatial and material terms.

For example, HE institutions as orderings of human bodies within brick and mortar campuses are deterritorialised through digital technologies on the one hand, and are reterritorialised on the other, as distance learning programmes and massive open online courses (MOOCs) offer new avenues for institutional market expansion. This is a complex dynamic, as the perceived materiality of the campus frequently *expresses* historical and cultural clout ('traditional authority') that legitimates the enterprise that the distance learner engages with (Bayne et al., 2014). At the same time, the campus continues to act as a concentrated spatial ordering of bodies necessary to reproduce 'bureaucratic authority'. In other words, it is doubtful that the institutional assemblage could function if its core staff were dispersed over long distances in different cities and countries. Within the institution, the physical co-location of small teams in marginal programmes (as is often the case in the social sciences and humanities) is often pivotal, as rationales for overcoming so-called 'silo' mentalities and increasing 'cross-pollination' are used to justify 'divide and rule' management tactics.

This has the potential to be compounded by moves towards shifting modular content to online modes of delivery. On the other hand, marginalised teams might have small 'degrees of freedom' to use 'internationalisation' and 'e-learning' agendas as opportunities to widen their constituency and develop trans-local and trans-national solidarity with students and academics who share particular commitments in relation to social justice. It is within these ambivalent spaces that opportunities for collaboration with social movement constituencies may exist.

In summary then, there are three important terms we need to clarify by way of defining assemblage theory, and specifically why it might be important to our considerations of activism and the academy. Firstly, we need to think about difference differently; not as a way of comparing things according to abstract categories, but rather as the process through which things change through immanent relations. This would encourage us not to think about activism and academia as self-identical ideas differing from one another, or as dialectical opposites, which may or may not be synthesised. Secondly, the set of relations in an assemblage must be considered to span both actual and virtual connections, thus allowing for a coherent analysis of the potentials and limitations for change. This is particularly important for recognising the ways in which activism and the

academy can identify common causes, and acknowledge the specific kind of relations that might lead to productive transformations. Thirdly, processes of de- and re-territorialisation allow us to take account of the complex contexts through which things form through sameness, or change through difference. In the context of assembling social justice knowledge, this means paying particular attention to the material and expressive processes that seek to de-territorialise particular assemblages whilst re-territorialising others. Having outlined key concepts from assemblage theory, the following sections will further assess its value in the context of social justice, activism and academia.

### The analytical value of assemblage theory

In order to further understand the analytical import of assemblage theory and its key propositions outlined above, we must begin with the specific manner in which it combines *materialist* analysis with ontological commitments to anti-essentialism and realism. We do not need assemblage theory to deconstruct the linguistic categories ‘activist’, ‘academy’ and their various conceptual analogues, as articulated in the above section on reified generalities. Poststructuralist arguments in this vein are well established. Whilst such endeavours ostensibly remain within the remit of ‘semiotic politics’, assemblage theory encourages us to move towards what assemblage theorist Levi Bryant (2014) calls ‘thermodynamic politics’. This approach, Bryant argues, is a ‘form of political engagement’, which targets an assemblage’s material ‘sources of energy and capacity for work’ – essentially through mapping its degrees of freedom – in order to further social justice struggles. In other words, while assemblage theory and poststructuralism share an anti-essentialist stance, the difference lies in the emphasis on *materiality* in the former, and specifically how accounting for this dimension sharpens the analytical critique. A general position that assemblage theorists share is that the ‘linguistic turn’ taken by Left intellectuals has had deleterious effects on the production of effective social justice knowledge and, in any case, is ‘confused about what it is doing’ (Bryant, 2014: 73).

In what sense is this claimed to be the case? The first half of this critique addresses what assemblage theorist DeLanda (2006) calls ‘macro reductionism’. This position states that organising around big reified generalities is ineffectual since such generalities do not explain but require explanation. For example, Bryant (2014: 186-97) notes contemporary assemblage theorists’ dissatisfaction with what he calls ‘occult’ explanations of events and processes where it seems that black boxed ‘social forces’ are offered as pseudo-causes without the need to show the manifold *material* mediations – ‘powerlines, televisions, coal burning

power plants, governments, people' (*ibid.*: 190) – that properly constitute the social realm.

Secondly, at the other end of the spectrum we find the dismissal of both 'micro reductionism' and anthropocentrism. As Bryant puts it:

[s]emiotic politics is confused in that it is premised on producing change through ethical persuasion, and thereby assumes that institutional machines [...] are open to the same sorts of communicative flows as *humans* [...] Persuading a corporation through ethical appeals is about as effective as trying to explain calculus to a cat. (2014: 73)

In other words, effective social justice knowledge should attempt to generate a form of sensitivity towards the kinds of expressive and material functions that work to de- or re-territorialise any given assemblage. 'Semiotic politics' are therefore merely part of the expressive function of assemblages undergoing ongoing processes of de- and re-territorialisation. DeLanda (2006: 62), in his discussion of the 'territorialising' effects of language argues that 'activists trying to change a given category are not negotiating over meanings, as if changing the semantic content of a word automatically meant a real change in the opportunities and risks faced by a given social group, but over access to resources (income, education, health services) and relief from constraints'.

One might conclude that this amounts to a statement of the obvious masquerading as insight. Yet we are tempted to suggest that something like 'thermodynamic politics' and an acknowledgement of materiality, is useful insofar as it calls our attention to the relationship between spatial, temporal and energetic requirements of social justice knowledge production. In doing so, it arguably exposes the idealist scholasticism of some variants of 'semiotic' ideology critique. People, imbricated as they are in particular material conditions, firstly have to reckon with the obstacles of time poverty, lack of access to common public space, and cognitive and affective exhaustion before tussling with their 'interpolation' into whichever ideological edifice 'distorts' their reality (Bryant, 2014: 174). In other words, *actual* material conditions and limitations are enfolded in, and restrict any *virtual* capacities for change that might be brought about through critical awareness. As a consequence, materialist theories of social justice must consider time and space as a key stakes since space-time unproductive of exchange value might always be used to question the configuration of dominant social assemblages.

This, if we follow the arguments of assemblage theorists, it opens up a sensibility that addresses different concerns to those generated by 'semiotic politics'. For example, Emejulu and Bassel's (2015) empirical research provides insight into

the material – and therefore spatio-temporal and energetic – impacts of austerity on minority women in relation to ‘creative political work’ against it. We can see this relationship between time, space and exhaustion in the following quote from ‘a Scottish Pakistani woman volunteering at a minority women-led community organisation in Glasgow’:

We’ve got a lot of stuff we have to do. Like the kids’ breakfast and stuff, it’s mainly us women that are doing it. Bringing and dropping them off at schools, even at the mosque, that’s mainly women that’s doing that. So it [cuts to services] does [have an impact], it quite tires a woman out. When it comes to the weekend when you want to spend time with the kids more, you’re more reluctant, [you want] to be staying in bed. (*ibid.*: 89)

As blogger James put it so well in the context of precarious information work

[i]f a worker spends 8 hours of her day at work, operating in two temporalities via her body and her immersion in a disembodied digital temporality [...] [c]hronic overstimulation and under nutrition mean her brain is burned out, exhausted, and she must get to bed rather than crack open a copy of *Capital* or *Hatred of Democracy*. (2013)

Therefore, some more ‘lines of flight’ in relation to understanding the ‘virtual capacity’ for social justice knowledge assemblages might, for example, involve inquiry into: the cognitive fatigue generated by prolonged periods of mundane data entry work and digital overstimulation; the ways in which new forms of time discipline are imposed, particularly where digital technologies blur the distinctions between production/consumption, work/leisure; and sleep itself as a site of struggle, under ‘24/7’ global capitalism (Crary, 2013). Many more such questions could, and should, be asked that all materially relate space, time and energy to issues of social justice knowledge production. Arguably, assemblage theory provides one such analytical ‘lens’ for doing so. A detailed exposition of how this might look in particular circumstances lies outside the scope of this discussion. Our modest aim here is to make clear a general sense of the approach in this context to generate further discussion.

At this point, it is worth re-emphasising that the utility of assemblage theory in this context is analytical rather than normative. The question of whether or not any normative implications can be extrapolated from assemblage theory, as we have summarised it, takes us into an altogether more difficult and contentious terrain. Although this is a complex question, what we limit ourselves to discussing here are the ways in which some popular political readings of assemblage theory after Deleuze and Guattari, ascribe normative value to becoming over permanence, to mobility over stasis, speed over slowness and so on. For example, Foucault’s reading of Deleuze and Guattari’s assemblage theory raised nomadism to the level of an ethical imperative: ‘Believe that what is

productive is not sedentary but nomadic' (Foucault cited in Buchanan, 2011: 11). What is interesting is the way in which these preferences are given normative context in a precisely *materialist* context. This normative privileging of speed and nomadism plays a key role in reproducing the reified generalities that we have identified as problematic.

### **Speed and mobility as normative categories in assemblage theory: A critical intervention**

This section critically explores the relationship between assemblage theory and the notion that the generation of social justice knowledge might emerge from a techno-infused rapidity. It is generally known that Deleuze regarded the proper role of philosophy as the generation of new ideas. To the extent that this is also a prime task for the social justice oriented Left, it is instructive to ground the claims in this section by clarifying Deleuze (and Guattari's) view of the relationship between creativity, speed and nomadism.

It has been suggested that some of the interpretive challenges of reading Deleuze are down to the fact that he wrote using a kind of impatient shorthand. For example, DeLanda (2006) usefully points out that Deleuze's work becomes clearer if we take his use of 'affect' to simply mean 'capacity to affect and be affected'. Particularly in *A thousand plateaus*, there is often a particular relationship between speed and mobility, where the 'concept' is understood to be a 'vector', meaning 'the point of application of a force moving through space at a given velocity in a given direction' (Massumi cited in Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: xii). There is a sense in which the *qualitatively new* is sought after through an attempt to escape the 'abstract idea' by creating the conditions for processes of rapid bricolage. Deleuze and Guattari together use *A thousand plateaus* itself as a thought experiment in the sense that its concepts are immanent to this logic. To offer just one example:

Make rhizomes, not roots, never plant! Don't sow, grow offshoots! [...] Run lines, never plot a point! Speed turns the point into a line! Be quick, even when standing still! Line of chance, line of hips, line of flight. Don't bring out the General in you! Don't have just ideas, just have an idea (Godard). Have short-term ideas. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 2-3)

Nevertheless, in their last writing together Deleuze and Guattari (2015) reflected on the tensions between this orientation towards speed, nomadism and the consequences of corporeal limits; specifically, anxiety and depression. Thus, it is not so much the work of Deleuze and Guattari *per se*, so much as the ways in

which a particular ‘vector’ of their own thought has been developed by succeeding Left intellectuals who have made an ‘-ism’ out of acceleration.

Accelerationists (e.g. Mackay and Avanesian, 2014; Williams and Srnicek, 2013) believe that the generation of emancipatory knowledge is suppressed by the pernicious ‘folk’ tendencies of the Left. Instead, accelerationists start from the premise that the Left must move closer towards the temporality of technocapitalism and harness its ‘deterritorialising’ forces for egalitarian ends. That is, the technologies and productive forces unleashed by capitalism should be accelerated beyond the ‘value system, governance structures and mass pathologies’ of ‘late capitalism’ in a process of globalisation ‘from below’ (Williams and Srnicek, 2013). As Cunningham (2015) highlights in his critical engagement with accelerationist thought, a line can be drawn here from Deleuze and Guattari’s assemblage thinking, through ‘cyberpunk’ culture and to the present ‘theoretical enterprises that aim to conceptualise the future outside of traditional critiques and regressive, decelerative or restorative solutions’ (Mackay and Avanesian, 2014: 10).

Accelerationists argue that traditional socio-political assemblages are ineffectual in the face of phenomena such as high-frequency trading algorithms that exceed the temporality, and therefore agency, of human thought as well as political and democratic processes (e.g. Rosa, 2015; Williams and Srnicek, 2013). An implication for accelerationists is that social justice knowledge must emerge from, and take account of, ‘thermodynamic politics’ (Bryant, 2014), which as we have outlined above is fundamentally about understanding the ways in which human ‘social’ agency is enmeshed with, and inseparable from, wider ecologies of matter in order to produce better maps for intervention. Yet beyond this analytical bent, who is the subject of the ‘accelerationist’ future? Where are the silences and what does this mean for an ‘assemblage theory’ reading of the relationship between activist and academic knowledge production?

Arguably, this is just part of a broader narrative tendency within Left intelligentsia that moves too quickly to naively posit the immanent self-organisation of digitally mediated social justice-oriented assemblages. In moving too quickly towards such grand narratives, the classed, gendered and raced social relations, which capitalism depends upon, are obfuscated. The implicit subject seems to be one at ease in an environment of rapid constant technological change, able to exist, adapt, ‘become’ within capital’s ‘deterritorialising’ tendencies.

We see no justification for imbuing speed and mobility with normative tendencies just as we see no logical connection between speed, mobility and

creativity in the context of social justice knowledge production. If the 'virtual' potential for such utopian assemblages is misrecognised as 'actual' then how do the protagonists of such discourse avoid the dangers of moving towards a techno-vanguardism which merely hardens perceived differences between the 'grassroots' knowledge of the have-nots and the 'elite' knowledge of the haves?

Avoiding this isn't only a matter of a privileged Left making common cause with those less privileged. The simplification of the tendency towards a multitude of singularities acting in unison also fails to adequately reckon with the ideological work that would have to occur for those 'virtual' privileged change agents to recognise their potential in such terms as agents operating both 'in and against' flexible capitalism. The idea of the nomadic subject is easily conflated with what Boltanski and Chiapello (2006) call the 'new spirit of capitalism': networked, flexible, constantly 'becoming', but resilient where it counts in the face of external pressure (Zizek, 2004). Boltanski and Chiapello's (2006) basic proposition is that initially an anti-capitalist 'artistic critique' of alienation and cultural authenticity promulgated by new social movements emerging in the late 1960s was easily co-opted by an emergent 'new managerial order':

This 'ideal typical' figure is a nomadic 'network-extender', mobile, tolerant of difference and ambivalence [...] Those lacking the requisite flexibility, who cannot become the nodal point of various networks, thus generating the necessary activity, or otherwise engage, communicate, market, innovate, add value, and so on and so forth, have little hope of success. (Du Gay and Morgan, 2013: 24)

In this context, the mobile and time-rich are likely to succeed in activist as much as in academic milieus. Of course, their time and mobility in each context is underwritten by the reproduction of material infrastructures by an equally precarious, but necessarily immobile lower-skilled workforce. Ironically, in this version of events, the elevation of normative aspects of assemblage theory (the 'nomad', the 'rhizome') to the level of 'reified generality' emerged not from materialist critique but an abandonment of it (Du Gay and Morgan, 2013; Zizek, 2004).

At this point in the argument, we might re-emphasise our view that there is no necessary connection between assemblage thinking and good or bad spatio-temporalities. For example, the mobility of capital across borders and physical mobility of bodies across borders have very different ethical implications. Rather than hitch our wagon to particular spatial or temporal modes, assemblage thinking might be productive in restricting itself to an analysis of the material dynamics of knowledge production. Thus, we find it important to stress that this is not a call to reify slowness as the ultimate condition required for an emancipatory form of academic scholarship. That would be to retain the

problematic oppositional stance that this paper is attempting to overcome. Our point is to call for recognition of the value of slowness to scholarship, as part of a necessarily complex dynamic that involves both accelerated and decelerated momentum. However, in the closing section, we would like to provide a corrective to the normative excesses of speed and mobility in some interpretations of assemblage theory by drawing attention to the universality of time as a key stake in social justice knowledge production.

### **Time for social justice knowledge production**

It is surely an uncontentious fact that one of the common effects of poverty is to be trapped in the tyranny of the moment, which has deleterious consequences for long-term critical and creative thinking. On the other hand, received wisdom would have it that academics have space and time to think and reflect. Whilst we by no means are trying to justify detached scholarship through making dubious equivalences between academics and the oppressed, we would like to argue that time is a key stake for the production of emancipatory knowledge in any context.

Social movement occupations are partially so threatening to the status quo because they disrupt particular rhythms of capitalist assemblages on a localised scale. It is worth speculating whether ‘network society’ evangelists have gotten it precisely the wrong way round: does the growth of the digital commons signal a tentative ‘actualisation’ of ‘virtual’ post-capitalist social arrangements? Or does the speed at which their ‘offline’ manifestations are dissolved by state-corporate power (such as seen in various Occupy encampments) not tell us something about the fact that digital spaces can proliferate as much as they like as long as there are no limiting factors to their production that infringe on the generation of profit?

Even network society utopian Castells (2012: 169) has recently conceded that contemporary social justice movements such as Occupy and the 15-M movement are at least partially about egalitarian access to what he himself has called ‘parentheses’ in frenetic rhythms of capital accumulation as experienced in every life. This has a dual aspect: on the one hand, they literally (if only on a micro scale) disrupt the material (and therefore spatial, temporal and energetic) flows that ensure these rhythms; on the other hand, they have been commonly described as ‘prefigurative’ movements. This phrase is significant because what it draws attention to is precisely the relationship between the generation of emancipatory knowledge and the material need for assemblages that, through deterritorialising urban space-times, are marked by stasis and deceleration rather than speed and hypermobility. To put it in assemblage language, the *material*

functions of occupations are simultaneously *expressive* in the sense that merely occupying particular urban spaces starkly reveals patterns of ownership, the sociomaterial organisation of power, and its lack of tolerance for the disruption of urban rhythms normally dominated by the need to be, above all, *productive of exchange value*. Since control over the production and use of urban space is an issue directly affecting all urbanites, challenges directed at the organisers of space generate all manner of unlikely alliances and relationships. Under such circumstances, participants and bystanders cannot help but learn in and from such activity in unpredictable ways. In other words, such processes are educative in simply revealing the sheer lack of public space, time and resources available for engagement in collective non-commodified cultural and intellectual activity.

To highlight another example touched on above, the Transition Towns movement explicitly connects knowledge production and collective learning with energy descent (moving away from fossil fuel reliance), relocalisation and *slowing down* the pace of daily life. And to return to just one more example discussed previously, the lack of time and space for collective intellectual inquiry is a perpetual challenge for poor peoples' movements such as the AbM (Gill, 2014: 215).

One urgent task for social justice activists and educators is to find ways to articulate these connections between diverse movements and between activism and the academy. It is not our purpose here to further rehearse observations and arguments around academic intensification (which we assume are well known, particularly to the readership of this special issue). Rather it is to highlight the task of making common cause and to think about the role that assemblage thinking might play.

The neoliberalisation of HE and an uncritical embrace of digital technology are two intertwined strands of the 'accelerating' academy. One way of explaining the pernicious effects on academic knowledge production is to use Erikson's (2001) distinction between 'fast time' and 'slow time' in the context of his work on the 'tyranny of the moment' in the 'information age'. The tyranny of the moment refers to a state of frenetic standstill, a perpetual present, and its ideal typical mode of knowledge production becomes one of rapid 'vertical stacking', which threatens the collective endeavour for coherence. This is compounded with the increasing casualisation of academic staff. The pernicious implications for social justice knowledge production and creative inquiry are obvious, as depth and duration of collective engagement diminishes, and in so doing, prevents the territorialisation of such assemblages in institutional contexts.

However, it is important to emphasise that the ‘tyranny of the moment’ is not strictly something new to the advent of ‘network time’: as touched on above, people living in poverty know all about the tyranny of the moment as dealing with perpetual crises, and working long hours for unfair wages, rob one of time and energy for engagement in emancipatory politics. Here (around the universal recognition of time as a key stake) is the opportunity for mutual learning and mutual engagement, which might help to dissolve unhelpful reified generalities. But this involves precisely the kind of assemblage thinking, which connects the lived concerns and material circumstances of the *entire* institutional assemblage (catering staff, technicians, students, cleaning staff, academics, administrative staff, security their various unions and so on) with the various kinds of social movements to which we have alluded. *One* way of approaching this is through finding common cause with, and catalysing processes of learning between, various ‘slow movements’. In 2010, a ‘Slow Science’ academy was founded in Germany, whose manifesto states for example:

We do need time to think. We do need time to digest. We do need time to misunderstand each other, especially when fostering lost dialogue between humanities and natural sciences. We cannot continuously tell you what our science means; what it will be good for; because we simply don’t know yet. (Slow Science Academy, 2010)

In the same way that the Slow Food movement has argued for slowness as important to food ‘excellence’, Brian Treanor’s (2006) manifesto for the ‘Slow University’ and Hartman and Darab’s (2012) arguments for ‘slow scholarship’ might be marshalled in the context of the euphemistic ‘excellence’ regime of contemporary HE. However, as we have argued, it is important that we do not fetishise ‘fastness’ or ‘slowness’ in lieu of an analysis of social relations under particular economic arrangements. In Martell’s (2014) critical engagement with the concept of slow scholarship, he asks two crucial questions: ‘what is slow actually about?’ and ‘who can go slow?’. In attempting to answer the first question, Martell argues that ‘slow’ lumps together several arguments about the corporatisation of HE, the role of digital technology in capitalism and ‘employer power over labour’. The second question is, in our view, absolutely key. It is key because it urges caution over voluntarist arguments that are as salient for academic labour as they are for social justice movements. It recognises that ‘go slow’ is often code for ‘I have money to take time’ (Martell, 2014). Moreover, as education trade unions have increasingly recognised, actions short of strike such as the ‘go slow’, whilst available for some in secure employment, are increasingly unavailable for academics in precarious employment and on ‘zero hours’ contracts.

Treanor's 2008 postscript to his manifesto contains some interesting reflection on his limited success in claiming 'slow time' to create a 'robust intellectual community'. Although it recognises institutional constraints, it is written as though it is simply a matter of personal choice to slow down. Lacking is much sense of the urgent need to connect with other social movements (actually not by analogy) and trade unions since this is a fundamentally political act. It is true that the 'excellent institution' doesn't recognise risk, indeterminacy and failure as necessary components of the creative engine of academic inquiry. However, recognising this means that academics should be prepared to, for example, stand alongside and vocally support 'prefigurative' movements like Occupy, whose protestors were pilloried in the popular media for their lack of programmatic demands. Moreover, these protestors would have to work to find ways to act on the recognition that the time and resources *to* occupy are privileged capacities not accessible to those parts of the '99%' they symbolically claim to speak for.

### Concluding remarks

We began this essay by explaining why we speak poorly when we couch debates about academic labour in terms of 'activism' and the 'academy'. Such reified generalities were shown to continually resurface in contemporary debates, too often representing social movements as horizontal planes of a-hierarchical relations, and institutions as archaic, inaccessible and sedentary. We suggested assemblage theory as a way of rethinking the dualist relationships habitually assumed between social movements and the academy. We defined assemblage theory through the concepts of *immanence and difference*, *actual and virtual*, and *territorialisation*, drawing principally on the work of DeLanda (2006). We elaborated on the analytical value of this theory, and emphasised the importance of the *materialist* perspectives, alongside a more-established anti-essentialist theoretical position. The key point here is that assemblages must be understood as more-than-the-social. Therefore, we must understand the linguistic categories 'activism' and 'academy' to *require explanation*, rather than serving to explain the complex human and non-human relations that combine to produce the conditions they supposedly represent. Furthermore, we must also recognise that such complex assemblages cannot simply respond as if they were rational social entities.

While we maintain that assemblage theory provides the theoretical means to penetrate the often complex spatio-temporal and energetic aspects of social life, in the final sections of the paper we highlighted the problematic tendency to adopt normative positions amongst some proponents of the theory. Specifically, we highlighted the predominance of movement in material space over fixity, for

‘rhizomatic’ material arrangements over ‘arborescent’ ones, and for speed over slowness. We suggest assemblage theory to have significant potential for pushing forward our understandings of the relationships between educational institutions and social movements. However we caution against such normative inclinations, through which oppositional orientations are maintained rather than questioned. Speed elitism and nomadism too often promise a utopic escape from the material conditions through which social justice knowledge might be pursued. Chiefly, we highlight the tendency to valorise digital networks for their spatio-temporal capacities to amplify collective learning and action in ways that are liberated from hierarchical modes of institutional knowledge production (e.g. Castells, 2012).

Ultimately, we call for social justice activists and educators to find ways to articulate the material – that is spatio-temporal and energetic – connections *between* diverse movements and *between* activism and the academy, and it is in this pursuit that assemblage theory can be productively put to use.

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