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Deleuze and the deterritorialization of strategy[☆]

Iain Munro^{a,*}, Torkild Thanem^b

^a Newcastle University, United Kingdom

^b Stockholm University, Sweden

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ABSTRACT

Mainstream ideas of strategy are aimed at gaining and maintaining power. In contrast, the work of Deleuze and Guattari is directed against the concentration of corporate and state power and capitalist forms of exploitation. Their writings provide us with valuable concepts for understanding the workings of strategy and exploring creative ways through which strategy can be re-evaluated and subverted. This paper develops three of Deleuze and Guattari's main concepts for understanding the strategic movements within contemporary capitalism: i) nomadic strategy, ii) deterritorialization, and iii) the occupation of smooth space. It then uses these concepts to explain the rise of new strategies in the domains of the news media, the music industry and the Occupy movement, which attempt to subvert corporate forms of exploitation. This radically challenges existing processual notions of strategy that have an underlying conservative bias, as well as other popular conceptions of strategy like Porter's management of "barriers to entry".

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1. Introduction

Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995) was neither a social theorist nor a strategist, but a philosopher. As such, he was deeply concerned with the role of philosophy as a matter of concept creation, genuinely committed to process ontology, and unusually creative in re-reading the history of philosophy. In fact, it is his joint work with the radical psychiatrist Felix Guattari (1930–1992) that speaks most directly to issues of strategy, organization and business, though this is not always acknowledged in the secondary literature. It is here in particular, with Guattari, which Deleuze developed his understanding of the social and the political, of the inherent madness of capitalism, of the bureaucratic strategies that are mobilized to stabilize capitalism and the nomadic tactics that destabilize it. Not that either of them had much time for social theory or strategy as such. Social theory was perhaps too bound up within the dominant social order. And strategy? It is unlikely that they would have known it as an academic field. This is a pity, because the curiosity and inventiveness of the outsider sometimes exceed that of the disciplined insider, and we have struggled to find examples within social theory and strategy proper that go as far as Deleuze and Guattari in rethinking the nature and workings of strategy within and beyond the capitalist political economy.

In the preface to Deleuze and Guattari's first book together, Michel Foucault summarizes one of their key principles as 'Do not become enamored of power' (Foucault in [Deleuze & Guattari, 1984: xvi](#)). Foucault observed that the strategic adversary of

[☆] The University of Edinburgh is a charitable body, registered in Scotland, with registration number SC005336.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: iain.munro@newcastle.ac.uk (I. Munro).

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their work was fascism, and that within us which causes us to love power. From this point of view, mainstream ideas of military and business strategy are far from their position, because such ideas are aimed precisely at gaining and maintaining power. Deleuze and Guattari's writings are specifically directed against capitalism and capitalist forms of exploitation. As such, business strategists may learn little from this work. Nevertheless, their writings provide us with valuable concepts for understanding the workings of strategy and exploring creative ways through which strategy can be re-evaluated and resisted. In Deleuze and Guattari's first collaborative project, *Anti-Oedipus* (1984), they develop a method of schizoanalysis to examine the contradictory tendencies of capitalism, arguing that modern capitalism is haunted by schizophrenic flows of desire which, pushed to the limit, will overcome capitalism's attempt to exploit and contain them:

Capitalism [. . .] liberates the flows of desire, but under the social conditions that define its limit and the possibility of its own dissolution, so that it is constantly opposing with all its exasperated strength the movement that drives it toward this limit.

In their third book together, *A Thousand Plateaus* (1988), they propose that the tactics of nomadism may be employed to attack capitalist and State power. Both schizoanalysis and nomadism operate along a vector of 'deterritorialization', where desire and matter spread beyond the boundaries of property, where identities and bodies are pushed towards absolute de-stratification, and where radically new forms of social life may be created on a 'new earth'. These deterritorializing processes can challenge existing social codes and boundaries as in the example of the Occupy Movement's occupation of important capitalist spaces such as Wall Street, and in the creation of non-monetized forms of production, consumption and communication, such as practices of house squatting, home-growing and the development of the creative commons (Lessig, 2002; Thanem, 2012). Indeed, Deleuze and Guattari (1988, 1994); Deleuze and Guattari, 1988 explained that the creation of a 'new earth' entails processes of revolutionary becoming and deterritorialization, and later interpreters of their work have argued that the 'common' is a deterritorialized earth, which is the foundation of both social and ecological production (Hardt and Negri, 2009). This works in opposition to a vector of 'reterritorialization', which seeks to harness, capture and capitalize on the productive forces of desire. Deleuze and Guattari's work can thus be understood as a strategic response to contemporary capitalism, as it outlines an array of concepts, tools and practices to critique strategy, combat capitalism and develop alternative forms of life.

That said, we are not suggesting that working with Deleuze and Guattari is a straightforward process of simple rendition and application. There is an abundance of neologisms and aphorisms in their writings and it is easy to get lost in their labyrinthine style and overlapping concepts, simply parroting their jargon of 'rhizomes', 'nomadic war machines' and 'bodies without organs'. One should therefore take care not to be seduced by these difficult concepts as if it were a secret processual code of which the initiate may become a priestly guardian. In contrast to previous applications of Deleuze's work in the strategy literature, we will develop three of Deleuze and Guattari's main concepts for understanding the strategic movements within contemporary capitalism: i) nomadic strategy, ii) deterritorialization, and iii) the occupation of smooth space. We then develop three case studies that show the strategic significance of nomadism, deterritorialization and smooth spaces in the media industry, the music industry, and the Occupy movement. This radically challenges the processual yet apolitical notions of strategy that have gained popularity over the past couple of decades as well as Porter's long dominant misconception that strategic advantage can only be achieved by maintaining barriers to entry, and his neglect of the peculiar properties of the informational commons. Before engaging in more depth with Deleuze and Guattari's heterodox notion of strategy and how the tendencies they describe play out in contemporary forms of organization, production and distribution, we will interrogate the literature that has utilized Deleuze and Guattari's work to rethink strategy.

2. A depoliticized misreading of DeleuzoGuattarian strategy

The most influential contributions to this literature in management and organization studies tend to serve up a rather bland version of Deleuzian and DeleuzoGuattarian thought. Chia's (1999) widely referenced argument for a processual and 'rhizomic [sic] model' of organizational change and transformation is a typical example. The core of Chia's argument is that a Deleuzian process ontology of 'rhizomic' becoming alters the premises for strategic management and organizational change. According to Chia (1999: 222), the rhizome "depict[s] the essentially heterogeneous and indeterminate character of reality. One of its central operating principles is that unlike the root-tree which plots a point and fixes an order, spreading outwards predictably according to a binary logic [. . .], the rhizome connects any point to any other in an essentially heterogeneous collective assemblage of occurrences [. . .]."

This does well in bringing out the main points of Deleuze's processual ontology, and in criticizing mainstream perspectives on strategic management for putting too much emphasis on the frames, hierarchies and structures that managers utilize in order to fix reality and manage change. As Chia (1999: 211) argues, mainstream perspectives prevent us from "understanding the inherently creative nature of change processes occurring in organizational renewal and transformation". However, Chia glosses over the radical political agenda that underpins Deleuze and Guattari's processual conception of capitalism, and he ignores their critique of the 'capitalist axiomatic' which continually invents new strategies for extracting surplus value from the deterritorialized flows of labour, energy and commodities. This leads him to make a dubious leap from processual ontology to normative political economy. Specifically, Chia claims that the 'rhizomic [sic] model' of organizing implies a "hands-off" attitude towards change" (1999: 225), which "eschews the control-oriented strategies preferred in conventional approaches to managing change" (1999: 211).

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