

Reinventing The Wheel

Towards a Deleuzian Social Ontology

“Philosophy is the theory of multiplicities. Every multiplicity implies actual elements and virtual elements. There is no purely actual object. Every actuality surrounds itself with a fog of virtual images.”

- Gilles Deleuze¹

Gilles Deleuze is the archetypal *philosopher's philosopher*.

For Deleuze, philosophy is the “*forming, inventing, and fabricating [of] concepts.*”² In turn, Deleuze was profoundly creative. A self-described “*pure metaphysician*”³, his vocation was the construction of an alternate metaphysics. One in which “*the concept of multiplicity replaces that of substance, event replaces essence, and virtuality replaces possibility*”⁴. His prolific work ethic and degree of original thought leave Deleuze as “*one of the most influential and prolific French philosophers of the second half of the twentieth century*”⁵.

Yet, we cannot help but note ‘*multiplicity*’ has *not* replaced ‘*substance*’. Nor has ‘*event*’ replaced ‘*essence*’, or ‘*virtuality*’ replaced ‘*possibility*’. The title quotation – taken from Deleuze’s “*The Actual and the Virtual*” – is not ubiquitously understandable. It reads as esoteric and a little abstract. We might expect an interested student of Deleuze to understand it, but certainly not a layman. If Deleuze’s mission was to provide an alternate metaphysics through which we can all conceptualise the world we live in – then he’s seemingly failed.

In light of this, the question remains as to *why* this degree of reinventing the wheel of metaphysics is ever necessary. It’s been implied Deleuze thinks the concept of *substance* is unfit for purpose. Yet, even before elucidating why this might be the case, ‘*substance*’ is a term with such little baggage it is unclear how this would turn on anything but philosophical minutiae. A quick glance of the introductory quotation and this looks to be the case. Consequently, debating

¹ Deleuze, G., (2002), “*The Actual and the Virtual*”.

² Deleuze, G., and Guattari, F., (2002). “*What is Philosophy*”.

³ Arnaud, V., (1999). “*Essai sur Gilles Deleuze*”.

⁴ Smith, D., and Protevi, J., (2020). “*Gilles Deleuze*”.

⁵ Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “*Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995)*”.

the intricacies of Deleuze is best left to philosophers and philosophy geeks alike. Deleuze remains a *philosopher's philosopher*.

Yet, this is the precise picture I wish to challenge. Reconceptualizing metaphysics to this degree seems unnecessary, but I charge that Deleuze shines a light on how commonly accepted paradigms are little more than agreed frameworks that can often mask deeply important features of the world.

In particular, I utilise Deleuze's concepts of (1) *multiplicity*, (2) *virtuality*, and (3) the *rhizome* to show why a Deleuzian lens helps us better think through some of the most pressing puzzles in sociology. In turn, we can appreciate the value of drastically reframing how we think about the world around us. The world is undoubtedly complex, and the acceptance of dominant paradigms can help mask this complexity. Gilles Deleuze helps us realise why, on occasion, it benefits us to entirely reinvent the wheel.

I. Multiplicity as the Foundational Unit

The foundation of Deleuzian thought is the concept of *multiplicity*, and to explicate this concept I introduce our first puzzle: *what exactly is a 'society'?*

Deleuze takes his concept of multiplicity from Henri Bergson. For Bergson, one way of approaching this question is by looking at a society *spatially*. In other words, we could essentially 'freeze time' and take a look at the large number of phenomena taking place to find a definition of 'society'. This is essentially how we arrive at widely accepted definitions. The Merriam-Webster dictionary, for example, defines a society as "*a community, nation, or broad grouping of people having common traditions, institutions, and collective activities and interests*".⁶

However, Bergson would point out what this definition *misses*. In particular, many of the things central to a society are in *movement*. Much of what constitutes a society are continuous processes that cannot be captured if we simply take a fixed-in-time snapshot. We can look to processes of cultural revolution; the constant changing of commonplace ideas; that the individuals within a society are constantly emigrating, immigration, being born and dying – these are all elements that make up a society we cannot fix still.

Furthermore, we might be tempted to break down the original puzzle further by asking: *what exactly is a society composed of?* If a society is an entity composed of the aggregate of individuals, then each individual represents the *substance* that composes it. Of course, little needs to be said

⁶ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/society>.

that a society is more than the sum of its parts. However, Bergson would question the sensibility of considering humans as the singular *part* of a society in the first place. There is no society without the geography it is built on; no society without its natural resources; no society without culture; no society without customs, and so on.

In short, the *wrong* way of looking at a society is what Bergson terms a '*quantitative multiplicity*'⁷. To use his own example,⁸ this is like understanding a flock of sheep as merely the sum of individual sheep. The flock is *homogenous*; can be divided into individual sheep, and these sheep stand in spatial relation to each other.

However, the parts of a society are distinct – they are the individuals, the culture, the geography and so on, such that a society as a whole is one *heterogenous* unit. Crucially, the spatial relations between these parts are unimportant. Although it is useful for establishing his account, Bergson would take issue with this very sort of strict separation into parts to begin with. If we separate individuals from the land they build societies on, neither of these can ever be sufficient for a society. They fail to be '*parts*' in any meaningful sense. Additionally, precisely because we care about phenomena and processes occurring over time; we do not understand a society by freezing time. Rather, we look at it *intertemporally*. This is not the juxtaposition of moments in time one after the other, but a holistic picture in which we consider all those points in time at the same time, or a singular *duration*.

Therefore, the *right* way of looking at a society is to see it as a '*qualitative multiplicity*', or a '*multiplicity*' for brevity. A multiplicity is an entity that is (1) irreducible to a singular set of substances, (2) it exists over a singular *duration* rather than in any specific point in time, and (3) is typified by involving the continuous flow of all of its moving parts. Appreciating entities as a *multiplicity* prevents us from falling into the trap of attempting to understand the nature of an entity via its individual parts then falling into confusion as to why individual interactions seem insufficient to result in a greater whole.

II. Society as Rhizomatic

With the concept of a multiplicity established, we must add two key terms to our Deleuzian lexicon: the *rhizome* and *virtuality*. To introduce the former, we can first recognise an important challenge to applying the notion of multiplicity to a society.

⁷ Bergson, H., (1910). "*Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*".

⁸ Ibid.

This challenge begins with Bergson and Deleuze's apparent recognition of heterogeneous entities that constitute society, but noting that they still see a society as irreducible. Yet, there does not seem to be a problem with simply taking a society as composed of heterogeneous entities including people, geography, history, tradition, and so on. The notion of multiplicity, therefore, is a sensible one when applied to irreducible phenomena. For example, breaking an emotion down as *sadness* to its individual biological and cognitive parts does not seem to capture the whole. Yet, this does not seem obvious of a society.

To respond to this objection, I charge we can answer this challenge by introducing another puzzle: *how do societies change?*

One way of approaching this question is to look for a causally mechanistic process in which certain parts of society change, and this gives rise to wider societal change. The traditional Marxist notion, for example, sees culture, art and tradition as part of a society's *superstructure*, and the superstructure is in itself largely shaped by deeper economic forces.⁹ As the relationship between *means of production* (e.g., land, technology, and natural resources) and *relations of production* (labour, capital, and property) – together known as the *base* – change, this gives rise to changes in how individuals relate to the world and each other. Therefore, this is how societal change occurs.

Of course, the standard objection is to ask how does the *base* change? Even Marx recognises the process is necessarily dialectical; the base and the superstructure shape one other. However, where Marx wants to point to the base being dominant, Deleuze and Bergson would question the very idea of causal separation to begin with.

Tools in themselves are only *tools* when used by individual labourers, otherwise they are merely pieces of material. Land, in order to give rise to *society* must itself be used by individuals and have property built on it. Culture is non-existent without the individuals who embody it. As stated, Bergson and Deleuze do not see these as 'parts', but an intermingled multiplicity.

Rather than a set of two-way interactions for which we can usually highlight a starting point, what we rather have is a complex web of interactions with no clear beginning or end. Or, what Deleuze and Félix Guattari term a *rhizome*¹⁰. In order to understand how a society *changes*, we cannot begin by isolating any specific component and creating mechanistic causal chains. Rather, we must isolate *flows* and *processes* that, in tandem, contribute towards societal change. Our picture is not cause-effect, but one of mutual interaction.

⁹ For example, see Marx, K., (1859). "*A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*".

¹⁰ Deleuze, D. and Guattari, F. (1977; 1987). "*Capitalism and Schizophrenia*".

Modelling society as a *rhizome* helps us appreciate the degree of interconnectedness between the constituent parts of a society, such that the solution to the stated challenge is that we cannot merely break society into heterogenous parts. To do so would be to fail to appreciate how every all these parts mutually constitute each other.

III. Virtuality and the Ontology of History

The notion of *virtuality* requires very brief elucidation, for I charge much of our standard way of thinking already instantiates it. In particular, we can explicate the value of virtuality by introducing a third puzzle: *what exactly does it mean for 'history', 'tradition', and 'culture' to be a constituent part of society?*

It seems, for example, that history, tradition, and culture only ever manifest themselves through their impact on individual human behaviour. Therefore, it is sufficient to consider *individuals* as the constituent parts of society. However, we can object to this charge via analogy to how we understand *companies*. Insofar as a company is “*an association of persons for carrying on a commercial or industrial enterprise*”¹¹, we might equally embrace scepticism about the existence of companies. *Apple Inc.* is a collection of brands, individuals, systems, structures, and physical storefronts as opposed to anything meaningfully *real*.

Instead of embracing this scepticism, rather, we instead take Apple as a *social construct*.¹² Companies are not tangible things existing in the real world, but exist *intersubjectively*. Apple is not *tangible*, but it is *real* – and there are plenty of accounts of how this may be the case. Samuel Pufendorf, for example, sees social entities as the product of implicit agreements we make with each other about the nature of things.¹³

This intangibility yet realness is how Deleuze and Guattari conceptualise history, tradition, and culture as *real*. Though centrally, whilst one might see history a *quantitative* multiplicity – the succession of events one after another – Deleuze, Bergson and Guattari would all agree history is a *qualitative* multiplicity. Historical events; the continued effects of history; our memory of history; the statues and shrines we hold to history, and the very teaching of history are all constitutive of the singular, intertemporal, multiplicity that is history.

¹¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/company>.

¹² On the nature of social construction, for example, see Mallon, R., (2019). “Naturalistic Approaches to Social Construction”. But in short, I understand a social construct as an intangible representation of some feature of the world.

¹³ Pufendorf, S., (1673). “*On the Duty of Man and Citizen According to Natural Law*”.

Therefore, whilst history is real and intangible, it is not necessarily intersubjective. Many of its constituent components – such as the effects of historical events – are ‘out there’ in the world. History and Apple Inc. are two very different sorts of entities, but they have an important commonality. Both are intangible yet real in the present. In other words, they both exist in the *virtual*, intermingled with the *actual* to form *reality*.

Virtuality is the singular notion tying together a plurality of entities. The *meanings* of propositions; popular knowledge, and even *possibility* is all a matter of the virtual. This is what is meant by ‘*virtuality*’ replacing ‘*possibility*’. What it means for something to be *possible* is its constituent parts are there in the real world – even if not tangible. If it is possible for an individual to become a doctor, it is because there are present, *real* opportunities I could presently engage in to become a doctor. It is in this sense, therefore, we can talk about history, culture, and tradition as constitutive of the social world.

IV. Applying a Deleuzian Social Ontology

With our new Deleuzian lexicon established, it remains for me to demonstrate why this reinvented social ontology can be highly useful. To do this, I present a fourth and final puzzle. However, this puzzle requires some set-up.

Firstly, we might observe that modern racial identity politics seems rooted in a paradox. It is well-established in sociological literature one does not have a race, but rather one is “*racialized*”¹⁴. The very concept of ‘*blackness*’ emerges out of historical division in the interests of serving colonial ends. Consequently, the obvious path to liberation might be the embrace of *post-racialism*: the abandonment of racial essentialism and racial categorisation altogether.

Yet, the history of racial liberation seems to take the opposite stance. The institutions of “*black culture*” and “*African-American culture*” embrace racial delineations that are entirely antithetical to stated aims of black integration.¹⁵ It remains an important matter, therefore, how we can justify the presence of racial division. To do so, we must be clear on the *nature* of such division. Thus, we establish the fourth puzzle: *what is ‘African-American’ culture?*

To advocates of post-racialism, there seems to be no accurate conceptualisation of African-American culture that justifies minority partiality. As Stuart Hall writes, precisely because there

¹⁴ For example, see Omi, M., and Winant, H. (1986). “*Racial formation in the United States : from the 1960s to the 1980*”.

¹⁵ I take this as given by the obvious examples. For example, from presence of history black colleges and universities (HBCUs); Black History Month, all-black safe spaces, and so on. Certainly, these are the sort of institutions pointed to by advocates of postracialism. E.g., see Goldberg, D.T., (2008). “*The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism*”.

seems to be no sufficient homogeneity to 'black culture', "*it is to the diversity, not the homogeneity, of black experience that we must now give our undivided creative attention*". Objecting to post-racialism, therefore, necessitates showing this to be a false conception of African-American culture.

Many *prima facie* ways to define African-American culture fail.¹⁶ More nuanced attempts to capture this phenomenon attempt to *historicize* black culture. A convincing explanation might be to see African-American culture as the tapestry of black history that has emerged since the enslavement of Africans. However, such an account fails to do justice to that which is integral to black culture yet at least somewhat *contingent*. African-American sneaker culture¹⁷ is one plausible example. The idea that African-American culture continues to be little more than structural by-products of historic slavery seems to remove the *agency* of present African-Americans in constituting their own culture.

Inasmuch as these puzzles might seem to affirm Hall's suspicion, the sort of complexity captured here would be entirely unsurprising to Gilles Deleuze. The picture he would paint is clear. All cultures are in themselves a *multiplicity* that makes use of both the *virtual* components of history, culture, tradition and the *actual* components of the individuals that compose it. No more can we understand 'society' by looking to the occupation of individuals alone can we understand a concept such as 'African-American culture' by looking to the passions of individuals alone. *African-American culture* is a *rhizome* of history, habits, practices, customs, and values.

We can take a Deleuzian lens further, and directly challenge the post-racial case. If *culture* is necessarily constituted by numerous elements that lie within the *virtual*, then the post-racial ambition for the eradication of the concept of race itself necessitates the eradication of those elements. Yet, we might question what it even means to eradicate the continued presence of *history* in constituting African-American culture.

We might be tempted to think this is merely mitigating the *effects* of colonial slavery by ameliorating socioeconomic disadvantage and persistent racism. But the Deleuzian would point out that eliminating the present *spatial* effects that we could point to is insufficient. Recall that we

¹⁶ Take, for example, the thesis that African-American culture is merely that which African-Americans *do*. This both (1) fails to appreciate the sheer heterogeneity of African-American experiences whilst (2) simultaneously negating the many shared descriptive similarities that are not a part of a normative conception African-American culture.

¹⁷ See, for example, Matthews, D., (2021). "*I wear, therefore I am: investigating sneakerhead culture, social identity, and brand preference among men*" or Chertoff, E., (2012). "*The Racial Divide on ... Sneakers*". Whilst I note this is a contestable point, I observe that discussions pertaining to sneaker culture are one example of discussions on African-American culture in which the discourse isn't centred around the after-effects of colonial imposition. This is not to assert that sneaker culture within African-American culture is an entirely exogenous development. But even inasmuch as there is *some* contingency, this weakens the case that African-American culture is defined by the structural legacy of oppression.

are not interested in merely a freeze-frame snapshot of the present harms, but the entire set of continuous processes within the *duration* of oppression.

This is the sort of thought behind many of the common objections to post-racialism. For example, the roles played by (1) the fact of historical racial oppression simply persisting in the collective consciousness of African-Americans; (2) the presence of persistent racial stigma driven by *historic* narratives, and (3) what Patricia Hill Collins¹⁸, Kathryn T. Gines¹⁹ and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva²⁰ amongst a plurality of others identify as a plurality of path-dependent effects of oppression that have led to the emergence of structural “*new racism*”. For example, we could ameliorate socioeconomic disadvantage, but if the jobs that African-Americans desire are in themselves less valuable due to historic racism, then we will simply revert back to inequality.

However, the Deleuzian framework helps capture these arguments in one neat package. Historic oppression remains a part of the very *virtual* that, in part, *constitutes* African-American culture. The relationship is rhizomatic, thus our attempts to unpack specific chains of causal mechanisms will of course prove fruitless. What an institution such as African-American culture *is*, is an irreducible multiplicity for which its eradication is simply unrealistic.

IV. Conclusion

When Deleuze writes that philosophy is the “*forming, inventing, and fabricating [of] concepts*”, this is because what philosophy is *not* is the unpacking of fundamental universal truths. Due to the limitations of our language, biases, and capacities of reasoning; our understanding of *anything* will always be filtered through very specific lenses.

Deleuze’s alternate metaphysics, in turn, is not about disproving standard paradigms with the ‘right’ ones. Rather, it is about recognising that sometimes our standard paradigms are not fit-for-purpose. If our default metaphysical lexicon is just a lens through which we view the world, then Gilles Deleuze is a prolific lensmaker, providing us with a number of alternate tools to better our collective understanding.

Given how difficult to read his written work is, Deleuze will likely remain a *philosopher’s philosopher*. But he reminds us that sometimes the best way to understand the world is to entirely reinvent the wheel.

[2999 Words]

¹⁸ Collins, P. H., (2005). “*Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender and the New Racism*”.

¹⁹ Gines, K. T., (2014). “*A Critique of Postracialism: Conserving Race and Complicating Blackness Beyond the Black-White Binary*”.

²⁰ Bonilla-Silva, E., (2015). “The Structure of Racism in Color-Blind, ‘Post-Racial’ America”.

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