

Learning to think in the Anthropocene:

What can Deleuze-Guattari teach us?

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ABSTRACT: This paper suggest that the philosophical perspective that one may derive from the ideas of Deleuze and Guattari opens up a new way to look at the Anthropocene. In order to do this, a ‘plateau’ has been constructed around the date June 13th, 1992. On this day, the American President, George H.W. Bush flew into the first Rio Earth Summit and delivered a speech about America’s environmental action plan. Conjunctive with this moment in history is the city of Dallas, Texas, which is used here as a case study for the plateau of June 13th, 1992. Thinking in the Anthropocene is about understanding the dynamics of fossil fuel capitalism in everyday life, of which Dallas is exemplary, and was encapsulated by Bush in his environmental speech.

Key words:

Thinking; learning; time; economy; growth; the Anthropocene

June 13th, 1992

I think we are, and I think the record shows we are, the leading environmental nation in the world ...

(George H. W. Bush, 1992, online)

Introduction

In this paper:

- 1) Deleuze's philosophical method lends itself to what I have called: 'critical-thinking-practice' (Cole, 2017a), which is a means to get at the assumptions inherent in the current situation. Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) was a French philosopher, who aimed to rewrite Western Philosophy, and in so doing refigure how and why it has gained such a preeminent place in the world. By rethinking crucial aspects of Western Philosophy such as subjectivity, agency, knowledge, and the truth; Deleuze sought to formulate a new philosophy, unburdened by the constraints of the past that come from the Western Canon, e.g., the mind/body divide.
- 2) 'Critical-thinking-practice' enables learning, which, as Deleuze (1994) describes it, can be aligned with nature and the unconscious (p. 165).
- 3) This specific combination of Deleuzian thinking and learning can enable a different approach to the Anthropocene, that is sketched out in this paper, and which will be elaborated with respect to: time; the economy; and growth. Rather than a strictly applied approach, the Deleuzian combination of thinking and learning does not enable an instrumental understanding of things, but encourages 'encounters' with what they are and what they might become.

I have made the case elsewhere that Deleuze and Guattari (1988) perform a type of immanent materialism (Cole, 2013; 2014) in *A Thousand Plateaus*, that mobilizes material ideas on planes of immanence, to construct conceptual ecologies around particular inquiries (Cole & Mirzaei Rafe,

2017); here figured through the Anthropocene, and in time, the economy, and growth. Felix Guattari (1930-1992) was a radical psychiatrist and Deleuze's major collaborator, together they extended Deleuze's philosophical project into the analysis of capitalism and its effects on the psyche. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari (1988) drew on the ideas of Gregory Bateson (1972), who suggested that all that we call 'thought' is the result of exchanges in information; it is an affective activity and physical interaction. Thus, fully mobilized, the image of thought from *A Thousand Plateaus* leads to a mode of becoming, in and through which thinking and learning are fused, directionality in learning is not tied to human-only-designated outcomes or pre-designed goals, but attends to an immanent plateau, here figured through the date, *June the 13th, 1992*, when George H.W. Bush claimed that the United States was the preeminent environmental nation in the world. Bush (1992) intended to take over the Earth Summit through American power, and ride rough shod over the specific ecological crises that the American way of life has created, is creating, and will continue to create as other nations emulate the American way of life. The truth is that in 1992, the boundary line for the Anthropocene had already been crossed. Enough CO₂ had been released into the atmosphere to cause irreversible climate change. Bush was in fact both defending and creating the mythology of globalization, that the human, through the figure of 'the American way of life' could save the world, which in fact it was precisely destroying at that moment, before, and ever since, through fossil fuel capitalism (Malm, 2016). Malm's analysis of fossil fuel capitalism is an important complement to the approach taken here, as it shows the deep connections between capitalist accumulation and climate change over time. The difference in this article and its approach, is that the philosophical, psychic and everyday connections are also figured between history and climate change. The first aspect of this self-reciprocating, anthropocentric death-loop I will attend to is time.

1) Time and the Anthropocene

The third plateau of *A Thousand Plateaus* is dated: 10,000 B.C. This date marks the beginning of the Holocene, and a change in the environmental conditions that enabled the rise of human civilization. I have suggested that the human drives that have been apparent since the beginning of the Holocene have created the Anthropocene, and are constituted by four dimensions that go back to the hominids that preceded *Homo sapiens*, and represent two and half million years of

evolution: 1) Tool-enhancement; 2) the Carbon-trail; 3) the Phallocene; and, 4) Atomic-time (Cole, 2017b). Tool-enhancement and the Carbon-trail were already part of the human constitution at the beginning of the Holocene, the Phallocene and Atomic-time were to follow, as sedentary societies were invented, human civilizations developed that dominated domestic populations through division, other human populations through war, and nature through centralised resource exploitation. The first lesson that we derive from the Deleuzian analysis of the Anthropocene and these 4 dimensions, is that there are multiple times running through the present situation, the plateau of June 13th, 1992, when George H.W. Bush claimed that the American way of life was unassailable, and as encapsulated by the city of Dallas. The concept of a multiplicity is central to this paper, and which Deleuze (1994) derived from the mathematician Riemann (p. 182), who distinguished between discrete and continuous multiplicities, but to which Deleuze ascribed a purely philosophical status by replacing the metaphysical concept of substance from Aristotle (ibid.) with process conceptual architecture, and as multiple syntheses of time. The multiplicity of time from Deleuze (1994) restructures spacetime, and makes agency possible given the repetitious and seemingly unassailable mechanics of fossil fuel capitalism as presented by the everyday reality of the Anthropocene.

The first synthesis of time from Deleuze (1994) is *habit*. Habits are often passive, unconscious, yet according to this schema for learning and thought from Deleuze can be attended to and recalibrated. Of course, it is hard to change one's habits, as they are often embroiled within structures that we cannot alter. For example, in Dallas one is obliged to habitually take one's car to drive to the shopping precinct, to go to work or college, or to do anything outside of one's house, as public transport is limited, electric cars are unaffordable, making one's daily habits part of climate change, as they add to the release of CO₂ into the atmosphere. The second synthesis of time from Deleuze is *memory*. Deleuze (1994) principally derived his notion of the synthesis of time through memory from Bergson and Proust; it is an expanded but specific, literary-philosophical concept of memory, and represents a harnessing of memory away from a personalised, interior, subjective memory that only focuses on one's life story (which is of course still important). Dallas is a non-place (Augé, 2008), a globalized erasure of memory of what went before on the American plains, and yet productive of exactly the American way of life which George H.W. Bush claims will fix the environmental crisis.

The third synthesis of time from Deleuze is *the new*. This is the most complex synthesis of time, and is different from merely coming up with new ideas. One way to think of the three syntheses is as present, past and future, even though these dimensions of and in the three syntheses do intermingle, perhaps most obviously in the production of the new. In terms of Dallas as exemplary of the American way of life in the Anthropocene, one could imagine a greener city, with electric cars, solar and wind power, good, clean public transport, and a way of life not dependent on fossil fuel capitalism. However, it is clear that this set of new thoughts about Dallas will not be realised without enormous political-social will to challenge the status quo, and an entirely new economic model to guide the Dallas lifestyle away from CO₂ release. This is why the economy has to be attended to in this critical-thinking-practice approach to the Anthropocene.

2) The economy and the Anthropocene

Deleuze and Guattari (1984; 1988) do not give an economic model for sustainability or, indeed, survival in the Anthropocene. Rather, one can use their philosophy to reanalyse today's economic model, and, in the context of this article, apply it to Bush's statements in 1992 and Dallas. Firstly, economics, figured as a human activity based on exchange of a monetary form may be questioned as being multiple and not only human. Deleuze and Guattari's (1988) work is concerned with introducing new elements, non-human, natural and unconscious, into any one stream of thought such as economics, and as such they effect a kind of connective yet fragmenting synthesis, that Guattari (1996) himself called 'ecosophy'. "... [A]n ecosophy is a philosophical worldview or a system inspired by our living conditions in the ecosphere," (Levesque, 2016, p. 512). Ecosophy is a complementary approach to the one taken here, in that the critical-thinking-practice and immanent material inquiry forms conceptual ecologies around the objects of investigation. However, ecosophy can have the unfortunate side-effect of downplaying the human role in environmental matters, and as such could misunderstand the effects, for example, of capitalism. In *Anti Oedipus*, Deleuze & Guattari (1984) give a relatively straightforward account of the rise of capitalism, developed from the notion of synthesis that is central to the analysis of time, and which includes elements of ecosophy. In the first case, **connective syntheses** work to join bodies and communities to create filiation, as one may be seen in pre-modern communities. In this state of connective syntheses, one is closer to nature and community, because of the unbroken

connectedness in thought, and the relative freedom of the under-developed ego and super-ego (Deleuze & Guattari, 1984, p.20) to not become lodged in simple, repetitive, possessive, or sedentary thought. In the second stage, characterized by **disjunctive syntheses**, top down power structures such as the early state, patriarchy, feudalism, and the worship of a King or a transcendental God are introduced. Power is no longer distributed immanently in the nomadic act of becoming, but dispensed through royal favour or top down mechanisms, via codes, edicts and decrees that organize a predominantly slave population. In the third stage, capitalism introduces **conjunctive syntheses**, which is about producing surplus value through and by joining decoded flows, for example, by uniting commodities and finished products with their markets through sales. It is through this very act of conjunction that capitalism is able to absorb previous societies, values, ways of life, and, for example, George H.W. Bush was able to claim:

“A growing economy creates the resources necessary for environmental protection, and *environmental protection makes growth sustainable* over the long term ...” (Bush, 1992, online) *emphasis added*.

In a place such as Dallas, this claim could seem to be feasible. Dallas is a boom-town, with a growing economy and population, expanding endlessly across the Texan plain. Large populations of immigrants have come to Dallas, and they are usually able to establish a better standard of living for themselves and their families than before. Hence, one could state that having an open market has benefitted Dallas, perhaps also enabling scientific research into climate change solutions. However, science has to be connected to other areas of study to rethink nature and the unconscious as part of a *Deleuze-Guattari* (1984; 1988) approach to the ‘wicked’ problem of man-made climate change and the questioning of the conjunctive synthesis of capitalism. As a result, the very logic of our thinking has to turn away from the primary concern of and in conjunctive economics, as has been expressed, for example, by Bunge (1998):

The economic approach to everything social homogenizes and flattens social science by reducing all social relations to exchanges, and all goods and bads to commodities, without regard to their specific functions. The approach does not and cannot work for families or clubs, schools or hospitals, scientific laboratories or artist’s ateliers, churches or charities,

political parties or government departments, police stations or court rooms.
(p. 89)

Of course, there are different types of economics, and these differentials in capital, finance, cash, credit and debt set up and maintain a complex set of axioms and values, perhaps only understood by central bankers, and that only become apparent when the system collapses before recalibrating, as happened with the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) in 2008 (Cole, 2012). Consequently, the future of capitalism (and its possible demise) is not as important as the ways in which it continues to adapt, recalibrate and reveal the immanent levels of its functioning, such as the mantra and necessity of *growth*.

3) Growth in the Anthropocene

This paper creates couplets of [habit-connective] [memory-disjunctive] and [the new-conjunctive]. In turn, these syntheses produce a mode of growth (see Table one), which has become a central consideration of economic forecasting, whether positive or negative. Growth in the economic sense refers to how profits will be made (or lost), for example, in locations such as Dallas, where an increasing population, favourable economic conditions (e.g., low tax), and generally good (fossil fuel) infrastructure and governance, point to the probability of economic growth. The point of the analysis of growth from Deleuze and Guattari (1984; 1988), is that it not only economic, but that it is multiple and synthetic, and that it does not fall prey to the tendency to revert back to ‘natural’ growth as deep ecology or a pure ecosophy tends to do (Guattari, 1996), or to an entirely controlled economy, such as in a socialist state would suggest, which takes out non-human elements of growth. One could argue that the inter-related picture of growth from Deleuze-Guattari (1984; 1988) as presented in this paper, more closely follows the way in which synthesis connects time, the economy and growth, and avoids the romanticism of pure nature, or imposed notions embedded in the ideology of human-only understanding with respect to how growth works (Table one).

Time	Economy	Growth
Habit-present	Connective	Lateral-immanent-hidden
Memory-past	Disjunctive	Transcendental-affirmative-dislocated
The new-the future	Conjunctive	The actual-empirical-combined

Table one. The map of syntheses and the consequences for growth from Deleuze-Guattari (1984; 1988)

In Dallas, economic growth is palpable. The highways are full of cars, there is a general buzz in terms of the movement of people, the construction of new businesses, housing, roads, amenities and enormous evangelical churches. This is exactly the type of economics and growth that George H.W. Bush was talking about, and underpins the mechanics of fossil fuel capitalism. However, there is also growth that is hidden, immanent and lateral (Table one); it is the darker, negative side to the spread of nodal cities such as Dallas, which are adding to the reality of man-made climate change without respite. This analysis of growth from Deleuze-Guattari undercuts statements from George H.W. Bush in 1992:

“Twenty years ago some spoke of the limits to growth, and today we realize that growth is the engine of change and *a friend of the environment*. Today an unprecedented era of peace, *freedom and stability* makes concerted action on the environment possible as never before...” (Bush, 1992, online) *emphasis added*.

The era of peace, freedom and stability that George Bush was referring to was the fall of Russian Communism. Therefore, under the rule of unfettered global capitalism, and in particular, fossil fuel capitalism; the idea here is that the USA will steer the world to increased and better environmental protection with a flourishing economy that maximizes growth paying for such protection. Given this thesis, places such as Dallas should be shining lights of environmental protection, and examples for the rest of the world to follow. However, the *opposite is true*. The point is to realise that economic growth is not the answer to environmental matters, and to consequently orchestrate a new image of thought that questions the logic of fossil fuel capitalism, and one that suggests new

paths that leads us down different routes away from the domination of the fossil fuel economy. As Deleuze and Guattari (1994) have expressed it:

To think is to experiment, but experimentation is always that which is in the process of coming about—the new, the remarkable and the interesting. ... The new, the interesting, are the actual. The actual is not what we are but, rather, what we become, what we are in the process of becoming—that is to say, the Other, our becoming-other.

(pp. 111–112, translation modified by Ronald Bogue)

To think in the Anthropocene is according to Deleuze-Guattari therefore about enacting the path to a non-carbon future as experimentation (the new). We do not know exactly how or when this path will come about, as it is part of ‘the new’ clashing with now as the future, and of course, fossil fuel capitalism will appropriate and exploit the new as its own. Deleuze (1994) was insistent that his approach lends itself to metaphysics, and as a secular thinking practice, this metaphysics draws on and adds to the analysis of the syntheses of the Anthropocene as the virtual, intensive and actual (Table two):

Time	Economy	Growth	Thinking practice
Habit-present	Connective	Lateral-immanent-hidden	Virtual
Memory-past	Disjunctive	Transcendental-affirmative-dislocated	Intensive
The new-the future	Conjunctive	The actual-empirical-combined	The actual

Table two. The map of syntheses, growth, and thinking practice in the Anthropocene.

Thought still happens according to Deleuze - it is just not contained or controlled in a human-only mode of ‘consciousness raising’ or simple emancipation, as could happen in dialectical or simply critical approaches to the Anthropocene. In other words, Deleuze’s (1994) differential ontology works through stripping thought away, until we are left closer to what is real, for example, as

exemplified by the plateau of June 13th, 1992, and the multiple through-lines of everyday life in the city of Dallas under fossil fuel capitalism.

Conclusion(s)

In reality, the through-lines of this paper are inter-linked and connected, which often makes them hard to think clearly or separately, and why there are no easy solutions to the integrative problematics of climate change and thinking in the Anthropocene. What is certain is that the nihilism of manmade climate change is connected to the instinctual human drives which permeate economics and growth, and have become irremovably embroiled in the everyday life (Cole, 2013; 2017b), the ontology of a city such as Dallas, Texas, and which underpinned the rhetoric of George H.W Bush. This mode of nihilism engendered the type of statements about Man as made by the philosopher-poet E.M. Cioran (1992):

“...those who know what it means to be Man long to be anything but. If I could, I would choose every day another form, plant or animal, I would be all the flowers one by one. ... Let me live the life of every species, wildly and un-self-consciously, let me try out the entire spectrum of nature, let me change gracefully, discreetly, as if it were the most natural procedure. How I would search the nests and caves, wander the deserted mountains and the sea, the hills and the plains! Only a cosmic adventure of this kind, a series of metamorphoses would reawaken in me the desire to become Man again. If the difference between Man and animal lies in the fact that the animal can only be an animal whereas man can also be not-man - that is, something other than himself - then I am not-man.” (pp. 68-9).

The through-line of despair and disowning the achievements and being of Man is held out by Deleuze-Guattari (1984; 1988) as one of many ways in which the future will unfold as fully implicated and involved with the dynamics of the past and present. In a parallel manner to the speculative metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead, the point of applying the philosophy of Deleuze-Guattari to the reality of the Anthropocene as a thinking practice and immanent materialism is to maintain the possibility of thought in this context. As such, the analysis of

thought in this paper is a strategy for the continued will to power in the light of enormous (negative) anthropocentric odds:

From this perspective, even the most extreme of ‘moral’ phenomena, the ‘ascetic priest’, remains a manifestation of an immanently conceived ‘will’, albeit as a ‘will to nothingness’ (Nietzsche, 2006, III: 28, p.128/ 1967-77, 5, p.412). As Nietzsche insists, “man still prefers to will nothingness than not will” (ibid).

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