

6. Soft Totalities: Conjunctural Analysis and/as Assemblage Analysis

Back to the conjuncture!
(Lawrence Grossberg)

Undoubtedly, the present is messy. It is a moment marked by multiple overlapping crises, indeed, by a paradoxical sense of *chronic crisis*, which indicates that we are living through an ‘interregnum’, characterized, in Gramsci’s well-known words, by the fact that “the old is dying and the new cannot be born” (1971: 276). As Stuart Hall writes, in such a “Transitional Age”, “we must *expect* unevenness, contradictory outcomes, disjunctures, delays, contingencies, uncompleted projects overlapping emergent ones” (1996b: 232). Simple explanations, like those that attempt to capture all of the present moment in one single term, won’t do. How, then, to analyze such messy moments? It would seem that what is needed is a ‘multimodal methodology’ (Coole/Frost 2010: 32) which, on the one hand, is able to do justice to complexity and context specificity, while, on the other, simultaneously does not let go of the attempt to ‘see it whole’ (Toscano 2012), that is, to produce an orienting representation – a ‘cognitive map’ (Jameson 1991: 51–54) – of the social totality. Of course, this concept has come under attack in the recent past, particularly from Bruno Latour and other actor-network theorists, who have more or less completely dismissed it in favor of the empirical study of concrete associations and networks. “Like God, capitalism does not exist” (1993: 173), and, appropriating Thatcher’s infamous words, “There is no such a thing as a society”, Latour boldly proclaimed and urged us to replace all such “mysterious structure[s]” by “fully visible and empirically traceable sites” (2007: 5, 179). As Rita Felski explains: “For Latour, [...] there is no historical box and no society, if we mean by this term a bounded totality governed by a predetermined set of structures and functions. Society does not stand behind and steer human practices, as if it were outside of and ontologically distinct from these practices, akin to a shadowy, all-seeing, puppet master.” (2015: 157) Yet, it has to be said that this understanding of the totality against which actor-network theory (ANT) scholars polemicize has in fact long lost traction both within large sections of Marxism and beyond. Instead,

in the wake of earlier theoretical challenges, above all deconstruction, a number of novel conceptions have taken its place. One of these is the notion of the *conjuncture*.

In the following, I want to suggest that the method of conjunctural analysis as developed within Cultural Studies is an ideal candidate for the type of methodology I have outlined. As the recently resurgent interest in conjunctural analysis¹ (cf., e.g., Gilbert 2019b, 2020) suggests, this is an approach that is well-suited to capturing the social complexity and specificity of a historical moment like ours. In this context, I particularly want to return to the vexed question of the totality and the apparent tension between conjunctural analysis and intellectual formations such as ANT. My main concern will be to argue for a more nuanced relationship between the concepts of totality, conjuncture, and assemblage, a key notion within ANT and elsewhere, by elaborating a theoretical ‘encounter’ or ‘contact zone’ (Haraway 2008) between Cultural Studies on the one hand and currents associated with the ‘nonhuman turn’ (Grusin 2015), such as ANT, new materialism, or speculative realism, on the other. In doing so, this article distils and builds upon a tradition of thought that mainly stretches from the work of Louis Althusser and his followers – in Britain, especially Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst – via the post-Marxism of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe as well as important work within Cultural Studies² by such thinkers as Hall or Lawrence Grossberg, right up to the present. This is a tradition that detractors of ‘the Totality’ and critical social theory in general, such as Latour, systematically ignore. My goal is not so much to revisit important moments of it in detail, but to condense and extract from it a conception of the totality, particularly under the label of ‘conjuncture’, which evinces significant affinities with the notion of the assemblage and is thus in some respects not at all incompatible with those assemblage-based approaches frequently portrayed as being opposed to any thinking of the totality.

This, of course, is not entirely novel terrain. Indeed, in a number of fields, various steps in the direction of such a conversation between older, ‘critical’ paradigms and more recent, nonhuman turn-related ones have already been taken. Regarding Cultural Studies, this has especially been the case within what Jeremy Gilbert has called “a radical Deleuzian furrow at the very edge of the cultural studies field” (2008: 66), work, that is, whose principal points of reference are not the likes of Saussure, Derrida, and Foucault, but, rather, Deleuze and Guattari and, often through them, philosophers such as Simondon, Whitehead, Bergson, Nietzsche, and Spinoza (cf., e.g., Seigworth 2006; Seigworth/Wise 2000; Wiley/Wise 2019). In this context, the thought of Grossberg, who for decades now has been fashioning a decidedly a-modern, ‘Deleuzian Cultural Studies’ (Wiley 2005; cf., programmatically, Grossberg 2014

1 On this growing interest, cf. the introduction. There, I also list a number of further references.

2 On the close relation between post-Marxism and Cultural Studies, cf. Bowman 2007.

and Grossberg/Behrenshausen 2016), certainly deserves special mention as an invaluable source of inspiration. The present essay is inspired by all of this work and by those scholars who have explicitly called for and worked towards a stronger opening up of Cultural Studies to the nonhuman before (cf. esp. Badmington 2006; Slack 2008; Slack/Whitt 1992). In particular, it is in dialogue with those writings within the field, especially by scholars like Grossberg, Gilbert (2014; Gilbert/Williams 2022), or Jennifer Daryl Slack (2008, 2016; Slack/Wise 2015), who have already begun translating the concept of the assemblage into the discursive horizon of Cultural Studies, elaborating a decidedly relational and processual understanding of the world, and bringing assemblage and conjuncture into exchange. Beyond Cultural Studies, one vital source of inspiration for the kind of work of translation and articulation I want to undertake and advocate is geographer Noel Castree's brilliant essay "False Antitheses?" (2002), which effectively constitutes an early attempt to bring what he terms a 'weak' version of ANT and a more 'modest' variant of relational eco-Marxism into encounter and thus to do away with the 'false antithesis' between the two approaches.

Though there will be no room for detailed engagements with all these important antecedents, the following reflections should be understood as informed by, building on, and continuing this work in and on the 'contact zone'. They also represent a modest attempt to add to it, especially by developing a closer conversation regarding the question of the totality with more recent approaches such as new materialism and speculative realism. The vanishing point of these efforts is a posthumanist contouring of the concept of the conjuncture. I maintain that a cross-fertilization or 'diffraction' (Barad 2007) of conjunctural analysis and assemblage theory, of Cultural Studies and the nonhuman turn, holds significant analytical potential with regard to the complex messiness of the present. In particular, it promises to update conjunctural analysis vis-à-vis the analytical demands and challenges of the Capitalocene, not least regarding the climate and biodiversity crises, especially by ridding it of its lingering anthropocentrism and sharpening its awareness for the central role of the more-than-(just) human vectors which are constitutive elements of any conjuncture: technology, infrastructure, the material organization of the environment, ecology, biology, nonhuman life forms, the body, etc. What thus emerges here are the contours of a *posthumanist conjunctural analysis*. I hold this to be vital so that Cultural Studies can continue to do what, according to Grossberg, it has essentially always been about: 'telling better stories' about the world, in order to better intervene in it.

Conjunctural analysis has long been an integral element of Cultural Studies and is considered by some to be its defining methodology. As Hall stated in an interview: “The commitment to understanding a conjuncture is what from the beginning we thought cultural studies was about.” (qtd. in Grossberg 2006: 4) While John Clarke has dubbed conjunctural analysis “Stuart Hall’s difficult gift to cultural studies” (2019: 146), thus emphasizing Hall’s central role in the development and popularization of the approach within as well as beyond the field, the concept actually has a long and diverse history in Marxist theory (cf. Koivisto/Lahtinen 2012), though its two most influential thinkers, at least with respect to Cultural Studies, are arguably Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser (who are also Hall’s principal sources). For both, ‘thinking conjuncturally’ means thinking about the “question of the relations of force, at the various levels” (Gramsci 1971: 184). Hence, put simply, conjuncture refers to the “complex formation of an historical moment” (Koivisto/Lahtinen 2012: 276), a “complex structured whole” (Althusser 2005: 205), or, as Nicos Poulantzas, another prominent theorist in this context (cf. Gallas 2017), has it, the “*nodal point where the contradictions of the various levels of a formation are condensed in the complex relations governed by over-determination and by their dislocation and uneven development*” (1978: 41). To speak of a conjuncture, understood as “a specific moment in the life of a social formation” (Hall et al. 2013: xv), always involves a particular temporal and spatial focus as well as a specific theoretical outlook, which conceives this formation in terms of a condensation of a number of different tendencies, forces, circumstances, and antagonisms. This, after all, is also what the Latin etymology (*coniungere*) suggests: a conjoining, a binding, a joining together. These multiple lines of force that come together and ‘make up’ a conjuncture are located in and across different fields or dimensions of the social formation, including the political, the economic, the cultural, or the ecological. Hence, a conjuncture, as Hall points out, “is not a slice of time, but can only be defined by the accumulation/condensation of contradictions, the fusion or merger – to use Lenin’s terms – of ‘different currents and circumstances’”. It is a ‘moment’, not a ‘period’ – ‘over-determined in its principle.’ (1980a: 165) Importantly, conjunctural analysis considers any such ‘moment’ as an inevitably precarious ‘equilibrium of forces’, the result of a fragile ‘settlement’, which always harbors more or less strong centrifugal forces which can only be suppressed temporarily. Sooner or later, as Hall and his colleagues, quoting Althusser, write, “the antagonisms and contradictions, which are always at work in society, begin to “fuse” into a *ruptural unity*” (2013: xv). It is precisely the ensuing *crises* of social formations that are of particular interest to conjunctural analysts. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that conjunctural analysis (also) constitutes a genuine *theory of crisis*. In accordance with the distinctive analytic outlook of Cultural Studies as I have characterized it – the ‘five Cs’ of Cultural Studies – this approach to crises emphasizes *contextuality*, *contingency*, *complexity*, and *the concrete*, and is driven by a political *commitment*, that is, by a strategic and interventionist orientation. What is of par-

ticular importance is that crises are understood in a decidedly non-reductive and non-deterministic way, as always overdetermined and open to a number of possible forms of 'resolution', and that, in keeping with what can be described as Cultural Studies' (post-Laclaean) political ontology (cf. Marchart 2010: 211–18), there is a persistent focus on the *primacy of the political*, that is, on the ineradicability of (ontological) 'antagonism' and hence of (ontic) 'dislocation', and thus of contradictions, conflicts, and struggle (cf. Cord 2018). This is precisely where the performative dimension of conjunctural analysis comes into play: It is a "theoretical-analytical-political practice" (Grossberg 2010: 42) – its mapping of the social territory is ultimately meant to serve the purpose of identifying potential sites of political intervention and "entering into the struggle over whether and how to construct an organic crisis", that is, in Gramsci's terminology, a sort of larger 'meta-crisis' of the social formation as a whole, a battle "over a new reality" (Grossberg 2019: 54, 53). Within Cultural Studies, no one has done more to theorize the conjuncture and conjunctural analysis than Grossberg. He writes:

A conjuncture must always be seen as the result of a complex and fragile set of articulations, which requires various labours attempting – and always partly failing – to maintain its ever-changing shape and density. It is, in the last instance, a complex articulation of multiple overlapping, shared, interacting and sometimes even contradictory contexts – perhaps even multiple conjunctures – connected by the specificities of the movements and interactions of a variety of forces that extend in and across varied spatial and temporal configurations and ranges. (2019: 58)

In its attempt to do justice to the complexity of a conjuncture, the analysis takes into view multiple dimensions and planes of the social formation. This includes such interrelated aspects as temporality, especially the relations between the conjuncture and the 'current situation' as well as the 'epoch'; the entanglements between, using a Heideggerian terminology, the ontic (or empirical) and the ontological, or, speaking in a Gramscian terminology, between the 'war of positions', the 'problem space', and the 'organic crisis'; and the interconnections between the different domains of politics, the economy, culture, the media, etc. (Grossberg 2019). As this necessarily incomplete list makes clear, conjunctural analysis, even as it principally works at what may be called a 'meso' concretion level, must nevertheless be ready to shift between different levels of abstraction. Hence Cultural Studies' characteristic interweaving of the descriptive and empirical with the conceptual and theoretical. Importantly, the point of all this movement is precisely to bring to light the close interpenetration of these different levels. For Cultural Studies, as Hall once put it, the central question is always: "what does this have to do with everything else?"

Conjunctural analysis thus starts off, in Grossberg's words, "by accepting that there is complexity everywhere and at every level" (2018: 31). To 'think conjuncturally' means to 'think multiply' (Clarke 2019: 134). Yet, as Hall's statement makes clear, this commitment to complexity does not mean a renunciation of the attempt to 'see it whole'. On the contrary, this type of investigation explicitly focuses on the social formation "as some sort of totality, however fragile and temporary" (Grossberg 2019: 42). In fact, it could be said that the shift from received notions of totality to that of the conjuncture corresponds to the shift, made by Hall and many others since the 1960s and 70s, from an older sort of Marxism to what Hall (1996c) famously referred to as a 'Marxism without guarantees', a flexible, open, non-dogmatic mode of theorizing, shorn of all the received 'certainties'. In the wake of, among other things, the growing interest in Gramsci's writings, the first English translation of Marx's *Grundrisse* (published in 1973), the work of authors such as Sartre or Althusser, of structuralism and poststructuralism, contingency became a central feature of this new Marxism (or 'post-Marxism'). The time of eternal principles of history, universal laws of development, true consciousness, essential identities, total structures, and so forth was over. Yet, significantly, in the case of Hall and others, this did not result in a move to the opposite end of the theoretical spectrum, to a radical deconstructivism which contented itself with tracing always and everywhere the inevitable slip-page and 'dissemination' of all meaning brought about by the unstoppable play of differences, and with celebrating the infinite semiosis of language. Instead, Cultural Studies has typically opted for a middle course between these extremes, in a manner that I would say is emblematic of its characteristic self-positioning in what may perhaps be called its '*third space*', a space of the in-between, one of whose defining features is its willingness to accept and work with *tension*. The goal, in other words, has always been to find a way, as Hall once put it, "through the Scyllia of a reductionism which must deny almost everything in order to explain something, and the Charybdis of a pluralism which is so mesmerized by 'everything' that it cannot explain anything" (1980b: 343). This position finds a paradigmatic expression in Hall's dictum of 'no necessary correspondence', with which he offered precisely such an alternative, 'third' mode of thinking beyond that of 'necessary correspondence' (i.e., [Marxist] teleology and determinism) and that of 'necessary non-correspondence' (i.e., radical poststructuralist relativism) (cf., e.g., Hall 1985). For Hall, the fact that meanings, identities, or relations were arbitrary did not make them any less real. In other words: While they certainly are not inevitable and eternal, they nevertheless have a bearing in the real world. As Grossberg puts it: "They did not have to be that way, but, given that they are that way, they are real and they have real effects." (2010: 22) This is what has been called the 'anti-anti-essentialism' (Gilroy 1993: 102), or, perhaps better, 'post-essentialism' or 'post-foundationalism' (Marchart 2010) of Cultural Studies, proceeding from the assumption of 'contingent foundations' (Butler 1992) and hence committed to thinking both, identity *and* difference, positional-

ity *and* movement, institution *and* destitution. Although nothing, neither meaning, nor identities, nor the social, is ever instituted naturally and once and for all, for at least a certain amount of time, differences *are* necessarily stitched in place and organized in a particular way – they are, as Cultural Studies says, *articulated* (cf., e.g., Clarke 2015; Slack 1996, 2016). It is precisely this key concept of articulation that allows Cultural Studies to hold on to the notion of the totality even as it takes on board the constructivist critiques directed against Marxism. To speak of a conjuncture is always to speak of an *articulated totality*, and that in a double sense: For one thing, this totality is never really ‘total’, its unity only ever being a ‘*unity-in-difference*’ or a ‘*unity-in-complexity*’, one of merely provisional condensations, in principle always open to change. As such, as was already indicated, it is also a more concrete totality than those of earlier moments of Marxist theorizing, since conjunctural analysis, as a mode of “radical historicity” (Jefferson 2021: 41) aiming at what Foucault called “writing the history of the present” (1995: 31), is never (mainly) about ‘Capitalism’ per se, but always about the actual composition of forces and relations in a particular time and place. At the same time, however, it should be made clear that this commitment to a deliberately ‘low’, ‘weak’ mode of theorizing – as against the ‘strong’, sweeping claims of ‘high theory’³ – should not be confused with a general rejection of more abstract concepts and forms of theory and analysis (and certainly not with the populist charge that the latter have no relevance outside of the allegedly self-sufficient and self-enclosed world of an academic ‘ivory tower’!). Instead, as conjunctural analysis moves back and forth between different levels of abstraction, these frequently provide vital heuristics and perspectivations that not only help to unlock particular elements of a given conjuncture, but also to open the investigation onto “a multiplicity of overlapping contexts, [...] of what we might call embedded contexts” (Grossberg 2010: 28).⁴

For another thing, the notion of an articulated totality further points to the fact that, for conjunctural analysis, the totality is explicitly also a question of representation. That is to say that, while the conjuncture undoubtedly has a material existence and is in that sense real, it is at the same time something that has to be constructed and narrated and is thus to some extent unavoidably bound to the specific positionality of the analyst. As Haraway (2008) or Barad (2007) might say, conjunctures are

3 On this topic, cf. ch. 3 and the excursus.

4 That is to say, although these more abstract modes of thinking, to use a distinction made by Andreas Reckwitz (2023, esp. 23–26), may well originally rather be designed or conceived as theoretical ‘systems’, conjunctural analysis nevertheless treats them as theoretical ‘tools’ (cf. Reckwitz 2023: 203n18). I believe that Reckwitz’s recent meta-theoretical reflections resonate quite strongly with the Cultural Studies approach to theoretical work (though there are also important differences).

‘material-semiotic’. Conjunctural analysis thus self-consciously constitutes a practice of ‘worlding’. In distinction to older Marxisms, knowledge is here not underpinned by the “god trick”, that is, imagined as the result of a “view from above, from nowhere”, but self-reflexively understood as the product of a “view from a body” (Haraway 1988: 589), of a certain socio-cultural positioning – a ‘situated knowledge’. Because of this, such an analysis can never claim to be total and definitive, but will inevitably remain partial and incomplete – something that, of course, applies to *all* analyses. Conjunctural analysis, in other words, self-consciously acknowledges “its general impossibility (as a project of mapping the totality)” (Highmore 2020: 13). If this makes it seem somewhat self-defeating, I believe that this is so only if viewed from an entrenched ‘modern’ perspective, which, however, is precisely one – post-modernism being another – that this approach decidedly goes beyond. If conjunctural analysis expresses a ‘will-to-totality’, then it is a conditional, qualified one, one that is put ‘under erasure’, that takes the form of a ‘will-to-articulation’. As Grossberg points out: “a conjunctural analysis is not a goal but a practice, a process, a critical analytic” (2019: 42). As was already indicated, its orientation is essentially pragmatic: It is a tool, a heuristic, whose ultimate goal is to infuse political struggle (cf. Carley 2021). As such, it aims at *a*, not *the*, truth. As Moritz Ege and Alexander Gallas emphasize, “there is not a single, definite analysis of any given conjuncture – and different analyses highlight different aspects and may be plausible and useful despite their obvious divergences” (2019: 94). Thus, while it is decidedly driven by a desire ‘to see it whole’ and to devise some form of ‘cognitive mapping’, for conjunctural analysis, the totality always remains a vanishing point or horizon which can never be caught up completely and neutrally (cf. Reckwitz 2023: 22).

In my view, such an approach to the question of the totality largely deflates the criticism brought forward by Latour and others. For as we have seen, a conjuncture, as an articulated totality, is precisely *not* a ‘panorama’ in Latour’s sense, one that “see[s] *everything*”, provides “a picture which has no gap in it”, and hence “gives the impression of complete control over what is being surveyed”. It is precisely *not* marked by an “excess of coherence” (Latour 2007: 187, 188) but acknowledges and explores the multiple logics, contradictions, and dislocations of the present, and it does go some way toward ‘paying the transaction costs’ (Latour 2007: 180) for moving from one frame to another and self-reflexively acknowledges its own theoretical activity. In conjunctural analysis, the totality is never a simple expressive, organic but always a complex one, “a totality without a center” (Edwards 2010: 286), “a de-totalized totality” (Coole/Frost 2010: 29).

Crucially, I believe that this makes conjunctural analysis eminently compatible with recent theoretical work associated with the nonhuman turn. As I have suggested in chapter 2, I see the concept of the *assemblage* – a central notion shared by a multitude of posthumanist theories – as a helpful hinge for such an endeavor. Its articulation to the discursive horizon of Cultural Studies sets off processes of

a stronger posthumanization of the field, which have the potential to significantly expand its analytical capacities in ways that better equip it for the messy world(s) of the Capitalocene. To give just a few (interrelated) examples, this concerns things such as matter, processes of materialization and ‘mattering’, the domain of ontology, the multiplicity of nonhuman actants, non- or more-than-representational forms of power, matters of affect, issues of science and technology, ecological concerns, questions of scale (temporal and spatial), or the rethinking of relationality. As I see it, this is not a question of a radical paradigm shift, but of an ‘interruption’, to use Hall’s (1996a: 268) suggestive metaphor, of the established protocols of Cultural Studies, beyond both euphoric hypes and reflexive defensive movements.

Such an encounter with the nonhuman turn facilitated by the notion of the assemblage is aided by the fact that conjunctural analysis in itself already shares a number of commonalities with it. The concept of the assemblage, originally derived from the work of Deleuze and Guattari, is today used in a variety of different ways. Broadly speaking, the term denotes “any set of social elements, and the relations between them, that is more than the sum of its parts” (Gilbert/Williams 2022: 253). I believe the conjuncture, too, can be described in terms of the three features I have highlighted with regards to the assemblage: It, too, is marked by *heterogeneity*, by the articulation of a plurality of different processes and elements; the result of these articulations is something new and distinct, an outcome of just these particular combinations, an *emergent* whole; and finally, any such specific constellation is always *contingent*, the result of distinct conditions of existence. Moreover, *assemblage/agencement* as well as *conjuncture/articulation* both can be taken to refer simultaneously to the result of processes of conjoining/assembling as well as to these processes themselves. In that sense, what Thomas Nail has observed with regard to assemblage theory equally applies to conjunctural analysis: It does not ask “What is ...?” but rather, how? where? when? from what viewpoint? and so on” (2017: 24). Perhaps most significantly, both approaches can be said to similarly proceed from the assumption of the centrality of *relations* and *processes* and, what is more, of their primacy over against specific entities and events. As Hall explains, in conjunctural analysis, “the analysis is a relational matter – i.e., a question to be solved *relationally*” (1986: 14). The focus is on what Gramsci termed ‘*relations of force*’, the mapping of *relations* of power. And as set out above, these relations are always understood as essentially volatile, with every configuration being a contingent and only ever temporary one. The interest of the analysis, in Gramsci’s words, lies in what is conceived as “a continuous process of formation and superseding of unstable equilibria” (1971: 182).

This onto-epistemological assumption has most explicitly been foregrounded by Grossberg. As he programmatically writes: “Cultural studies treats everything as relationally constituted, and every context as defined by the continual making, un-making and remaking of relations.” (2019: 46) More than that, as I read him, Grossberg draws out the radical implications that the notion that “reality is relational” has

always contained: Explicitly thinking – just as I am here – about “a post-cultural (or at least, a post-culturalist) cultural studies”, he postulates that “any ‘term’ is defined only as the effect of the relations that constitute it” and, what is more, that “the relations precede and are more real than the terms” (2006: 4, 24), a statement that resonates quite strongly with new materialist work such as that of Barad, who famously proclaimed that “[r]elations do not follow relata, but the other way around” (2007: 136f). Because of this, Grossberg explains, “an event is not anything by itself”; “[i]t is what it is [...] only within a set of relations.” (2006: 24) Hence, “[a]ll events and formations are heterogeneous contexts, all the way up to the social formation itself as an articulated unity.” (Grossberg 2006: 24) On any level, what we are dealing with is thus “the construction of one set of relations out of another” (Grossberg 1992: 54) – this, precisely, is what ‘articulation’ (now) means. I would argue that this conception of contexts/conjunctures in terms of a “throwntogetherness”, a hybrid and contingent “constellation of processes rather than a thing” (Massey 2005: 141), decidedly moves conjunctural analysis into the vicinity of assemblage theory. While they should certainly not simply be conflated – clearly, the concept of the conjuncture typically performs a different kind of theoretical work than that of the assemblage – it seems to me that the former can be (re-)conceived as a particular type of the latter. *The conjuncture as assemblage*, an assemblage of assemblages (cf. DeLanda 2016: 3).

In view of these affinities, it comes as no surprise that, as I have noted earlier, the notion of the assemblage has in recent years more frequently been picked up within Cultural Studies. One very helpful case in point is Jennifer Daryl Slack’s and J. Macgregor Wise’s *Culture and Technology: A Primer*, which, aside from being an extremely concise and accessible introduction to the study of technological culture, can be read as an early exploration of some possibilities for the use of this concept in the field. The authors similarly understand an assemblage as “a particular constellation of articulations”, one that, as they put it, “selects, draws together, stakes out and envelops a territory that exhibits some tenacity and effectivity” (2015: 157), and mobilize the concept to counteract what they, too, see as a tendential overemphasis on the human and on human agency within Cultural Studies (2015: 159). Importantly, Slack and Wise also stress that assemblages, effectively, are “maps of power relations” (2015: 166).

This emphasis, on the one hand, on the ‘tenacity and effectivity’ of articulated assemblages and, on the other, on the centrality of the question of power, is absolutely crucial. As I have shown, conjunctural analysis and approaches for which the concept of the assemblage is key share the assumption of a relational and processual understanding of the world. In their analyses, both similarly foreground heterogeneity, emergence, and contingency, and underline that unities of whatever kind are always fractured, hybrid, and provisional. Yet, it seems to me that it is precisely in the double emphasis of conjunctural analysis just highlighted that this approach productively goes beyond many assemblage methodologies. As we have seen, ANT, for instance, especially in its earlier incarnations, typically confines itself to a rigor-

ous empiricism in the form of a ‘tracing’ of the wide array of actants and relations that make up a specific network. While these connections are described in great detail, what was for long generally ignored are more overtly *political* concerns such as the question of how, with what effects, and in whose interest networks are produced and sustained, or the closely related issue of the ways in which the stabilization of a network, and thus the enactment of a particular ontology, simultaneously produces a “shadowland of alterities”, that is, of Othered, marginalized, “not quite realised realities” (Law/Lien 2012: 373, 363). Relatedly, in its persistent rejection of concepts like structure, culture, or society, that is, of any notion pointing beyond the immediately given of a specific constellation, ANT has been unable/unwilling to identify any overarching formative patterns regarding the multiplicity of existing networks it describes. Similarly, to take another theoretical formation for which the assemblage concept is central, various varieties of the new materialism also tend, contrary to their intention, to de-politicize the analysis. Their often neo-Deleuzian/-Spinozian outlook typically means an accentuation of nomadic becoming and radical contingency and not infrequently entails an unfortunate “lapse into a political romanticization of relation” (Hörl 2017: 7), where relationality is cast in purely affirmative terms, so that material entanglements come to be seen exclusively with a view to an unfolding of potentiality, and where it thus runs the risk of being (re-)essentialized.⁵ Because of this, Thomas Lemke has argued that “new materialist ontology needs to be more strongly connected to an analytics of power that draws on the tradition of critical theory and is informed by a political agenda for change” (2021: 9). While Lemke puts new materialism (and ANT) in dialogue with the Foucauldian analytics of government, it is my contention that Cultural Studies offers another productive nexus. Diffracting/-ed by the new materialisms, Cultural Studies will always insist on the necessity of a detailed analysis of the *specific nature and contextual articulation of relationality in each particular case*, an outlook that will not only not lose sight of its harmful dimensions, but also not neglect the ways in which the flows of becoming are temporarily arrested and, in fact, durable and hegemonic constellations are established, and will scrutinize the power relations that are thus (re-)produced, including the attendant exclusions and asymmetries, but also, importantly, the conflicts and struggles involved in this.

In other words: While an encounter of conjunctural analysis and assemblage theory imbues the former, among other things, with a greater sense for the centrality of processes of mattering in a given constellation, for more-than-human agencies, entanglements, scales, and durations (cf. Cota 2019; Gilbert 2019a; Highmore 2020), it simultaneously entails a stronger politicization of the latter. Bringing assemblage/*agencement* and articulation into conversation (cf. Featherstone 2011), what is given more weight is the verb rather than the noun side of these terms –

5 On these issues, cf. the postscript and ch. 5.

not the fact of connections already forged, but the processes of making and maintaining them (cf. Slack/Wise 2015: 154). Going beyond both, the limitation of ANT to pure descriptiveness as well as the tendential overemphasis of new materialism on indeterminacy and plasticity, Cultural Studies highlights *the work of articulation*. It, too, emphasizes the contingency and basic openness of all configurations, yet its particular interest lies in what Hall termed the 'lines of tendential force' or 'magnetic lines of tendency' (in Grossberg 1986: 53, 54; cf. Slack/Wise 2015: 155), that is, in the ways in which things nevertheless are *made to hold* – as well as in the possibilities for a dis-/rearticulation and thus for change. As Slack and Wise put it:

To characterize [an] assemblage, we would have to do more than list its elements. We would be charged to 'map' the territory with attention to the power of particular articulations to produce this constellation, to assemble specific bodies, actions, passions, and representations in particular ways, to give a world shape, so to speak, in a concrete and imaginative way, with concrete effects. (2015: 157)

In this way, with the dictum of 'no necessary correspondence', Cultural Studies effectively moves beyond a number of unhelpful onto-epistemological binarisms: identity vs. difference, unity vs. plurality, fixity (essentialism) vs. mutability (constructivism) – but also, importantly: wholeness (and totalizing research) vs. fragmentation (and empiricism), (modern) grand narrative vs. (postmodern) language games. As we have seen, the opposition between a centered, organic, expressive whole or no coherence at all is a false one. Instead, the concept of the conjuncture, diffracted through that of the assemblage, allows us to theorize contingent, un-centered or partially centered, 'fractionally coherent' (Law 2002) totalities (in the plural), now effectively conceived as 'assemblages of assemblages', as 'meta-assemblages'. These are mapped by conjunctural analysis in its characteristic manner of "a widening analysis and description" (Williams 2018: 6), though the posthumanization of this methodology now somewhat moves it away from what could earlier still be conceived as a successive analysis of clearly separated domains and levels of ascending order towards a mode for which – as the chapters of part II have shown – a spiral, cyclone, or a Kraken are more adequate images. This is an approach that, appropriate to its subject matter, is itself multiple and mobile, its tentacles simultaneously reaching into a variety of different directions. It effectively interweaves the Hallian, conjuncture-analytical question 'What does this have to do with everything else?', which, as we have seen, nevertheless does not result in a totalizing project "in which everything is connected to everything else" (Grossberg 2006: 5), with the Harawayian, assemblage-analytical maxim "Nothing is connected to everything; everything is connected to something" (Haraway 2016: 31). The maps drawn and stories told by means of this method are thus neither grand nor small, but 'big enough' (Haraway 2016: 50) – big enough to matter (as a heuristic within a given context, not universally), big

enough to make a difference. In such stories, James Clifford (himself in a theoretical dialogue with Hall) explains, “forces intersect but do not form a whole”; they are, he writes, “able to account for a lot, but not everything – and without guarantees of political virtue” (2013: 8, 201).

“Don’t focus on capitalism”, Latour famously admonished us, “follow the connections, ‘follow the actors themselves’” (2005: 179). Yet, we now find ourselves in a position where we are able to do *both*, to make the latter an element of the former. As Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle have argued, despite Latour’s polemics, “the theoretical desire for totality is not incompatible with a painstaking attention to traces, objects and devices” (2015: 48). My argument is that conjunctural analysis, rethought through/as assemblage analysis, constitutes precisely one such methodology able to fashion the kind of panorama envisioned by the two writers, one that “present[s] both the totality and its constituent devices, as well as the attendant gaps and dislocations” (2015: 55). Referring to the Latourian imagery, we could say that it proceeds like an ant with wings, an ant aspiring to see like an eagle. For a ‘political project’ like Cultural Studies, while Latour’s critique – alongside Lyotard’s – remains helpful as it reminds us of the necessity to stay firmly committed to an analysis ‘without the guarantees’ of teleology, closure, essentialism, and determinism, to avoid treating totalities as metaphysical, and to maintain an attitude of principled, self-reflexive skepticism vis-à-vis our own (inevitably selective and interpretive) constructions, his conclusion – to discard all notions of totality – simply will not do.

And, it may be added, it did not really do for Latour himself either, whose writings continued to be haunted by the very specters he was trying to exorcise: of the totality, which, through notions like ‘collective’ or ‘gathering’, kept on resurfacing in distorted form, and of the political (and/as critique), which in his late texts (esp. 2017, 2018, 2019; Latour/Schultz 2022) came to assume a quite unexpected centrality, a shift that could almost be interpreted in terms of something like a ‘coming out of the closet’ of his self-declared (and never really convincing, esp. for a theorist of hybridity) apoliticism. In the last book published during his lifetime, Latour even openly made use of a class discourse and of the thought of Gramsci, and developed an argument that can legitimately be characterized as a hegemony-theoretical one (Latour/Schultz 2022).⁶ It would seem as if the accumulating and overlapping crises of the more recent past, in particular the escalating dynamics of climate change and the loss of biodiversity, somewhat put an end to Latour’s self-imposed ‘dogmatic slumber’ regarding politics. And indeed: In this time of crisis, in the age of the Anthropocene, is not our need to ‘see it whole’ greater than ever? Already we can observe a decidedly revitalized interest in the ‘big picture’ on the part of the general public, an interest to which a growing number of (popular scientific) publications

6 Although at first sight, this is indeed surprising, on closer inspection, Latour’s thinking seems to me to have long had certain (latent) affinities with that of Gramsci.

offering comprehensive theories of contemporary society and holistic explanations of the contemporary moment have begun to respond (cf. Reckwitz/Rosa 2023). Here, I am convinced that Cultural Studies can and should contribute, by doing what it always has: trying to tell better stories.

In an interview from 2010, Martin Jay, the great chronicler of the permutations of the Marxist notion of the totality (1984), expressed his conviction of the ongoing analytic need for some conception of totality, albeit an updated, “softer” version” which, through an image that resonates strongly with the understanding elaborated here, he compared to “a spider’s web without a spider in the middle: it’s connected but there’s no one who controls it” (in Lijster 2010: 97). Tellingly, in view of my case study of the Corona pandemic in the next chapter, the main reason he gives for this necessity is today’s unprecedented degree of global interconnectedness: “when you sneeze in Beijing you get a cold in New York. So there is a need to think on at least a fairly ambitious level.” (in Lijster 2010: 97) These connectivities are contingent. While they did not have to be the way they are, and may change again, and while there is no spider centrally in control of them, they nevertheless have momentarily come to assume this distinct form, and this form is not merely accidental, but has particular, specifiable conditions of possibility. It is the result of (articulated) articulations. And these articulations are not fortuitous either. Rather, as Hartmut Rosa puts it, what needs to be acknowledged and analyzed is “the existence and persistence of forces that have a formative structural and cultural effect across or through all differences” (2023: 103). One such force is what I continue to call capitalism.

How, then, do we understand capitalism? How can we think the formative power of these forces? Once again, my answer will involve an encounter of Cultural Studies and the nonhuman turn. With these questions, what we effectively (re-)turn to is a subject that has always accompanied discussions of the totality: the question of determination, which, in turn, is closely connected to debates about other issues such as agency and the relation between ‘base’ and ‘superstructure’. These debates hold a central place in the history of Cultural Studies. While the field undoubtedly developed as a decidedly (post-)Marxist project, the relationship between the two bodies of work never was, as Hall has pointed out, “a perfect theoretical fit” (1996a: 265). Particularly the work of Hall himself stands testament to the protracted and intensely passionate debates with Marxism. Besides Marx, key interlocutors in these conversations were Gramsci and Althusser. Particularly the latter, Hall later recalled, he ‘wrestled’ with: “I warred with him, to the death.” (1996a: 266) While Hall resolutely rejected what he read as the “superstructuralist mistranslation” (1996a: 266) of Marx(ism), most notably in Althusser et al.’s *Reading Capital* (to which he preferred *For Marx*), and while he generally privileged a different, lower level of abstraction (namely that of concrete social formations), Althusser’s thought nevertheless proved vital for his own work, in particular the ways in which, especially through an innovative, complexity-sensitive rethinking of the notion of the social formation

and through the use of concepts such as overdetermination and relative autonomy, the French philosopher made significant advances in the endeavor of going beyond those aspects of the Marxist tradition that had increasingly come to be seen as limiting: its teleology, its economic or class reductionism, or the holism of its notion of an expressive totality. Alongside Gramsci's, it was particularly this work that allowed Hall and others to reconceptualize the totality of the social formation in the manner elaborated upon above, as an articulated unity-in-difference, and to leave behind the simplistic notion of base-superstructure determinacy. Yet, as Hall showed, in Althusser's thinking, eventually there often came a rather problematic "hardening up" (2016: 99) of the structuralist line, to the extent that Althusser ultimately fell back upon a rigidly functionalist account according to which the economic remained the determinant factor after all, if only, as he famously put it, 'in the last instance' (2005: 87–128), so that all events and practices of the other 'levels' of the social formation, despite having their own dynamic and specificity, which makes them more than a mere reflection or expression of the mode of production, in the final analysis nevertheless correspond to the latter by inevitably guaranteeing its effective reproduction. Even though he somewhat equivocally declared that "the lonely hour of the 'last instance' never comes" (2005: 113), Althusser therefore in the end tended to reproduce the very reductionism he set out to get beyond. Moreover, as Hall, Grossberg, and others pointed out, there was also an (again, we might say 'superstructuralist') tendency to reify the different levels of the social formation Althusser identified and to turn them into essentialized and isolated pieces. As Grossberg observes, it was as if "[t]he threat of chaos and radical uncertainty that the concept of overdetermination brings with it had to be compensated for" (2006: 25) through various means. By contrast, Cultural Studies scholars were resolved to hold on to the notion of overdetermination, to take it seriously and to draw the necessary conclusions from it, to think the different 'levels' of society in their complex and conjunctural entanglements, and consequently "to think about different levels and different kinds of determination" (Hall 2016: 122).

I believe that this work is extremely helpful for an attempt to theorize capital-ism as itself an assemblage and to reconceptualize determination in a complex, non-reductionist way, beyond both (economic) determinism as well as (political) voluntarism. Once again, this is a theorization from within the characteristic 'third space' of Cultural Studies, the space of the 'anti-anti-essentialism' of articulation and 'no necessary correspondence'. Remarkably, such an endeavor can find valuable support in the work of Althusser himself – though a different, later Althusser⁷, the one of the fragment posthumously released under the title "The Underground Current of

7 Like those of so many influential thinkers, the writings of Althusser in their various shifts and permutations bear out the Foucauldian/poststructuralist argument about the power effects but actual groundlessness of unifying notions such as 'author' or 'oeuvre'.

the Materialism of the Encounter". As I see it, this text, which constitutes a significant break with the scientism of Althusser's other work (and that of many of his followers), is of historical importance as it arguably marks a point from which a particular strand of (post-)Marxist theorizing which has been close to Cultural Studies has managed to steer a course between the extremes of naïve totality-thinking and radical positivism of the Latourian type, and to effectively fuse critique with an emphasis on contingency, relationality, and processuality which makes it eminently compatible with much nonhuman turn-related work.⁸ In the manuscript, Althusser traces the eponymous subterranean current throughout the history of 'Western' philosophy, thus outlining a fascinating genealogy that includes Epicurus, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Spinoza, Rousseau, Marx, Heidegger, and Derrida. The strain of materialism emerging in the work of these thinkers, as Althusser now reads them, marks a rigorous break with all teleological, deterministic, and essentialist thought. This current, which resonates strongly with many of the new materialisms of recent years (cf. Coole/Frost 2010: 35), is a decidedly relational and processual one, which puts the emphasis on the radical contingency of *aleatory encounters*, those moments when a chance convergence of elements and forces leads to the appearance of a new, but only ever provisional constellation. We find again here the same stress on heterogeneity, emergence, and contingency that we already emphasized in conjunctural analysis and assemblage studies. Like these, the materialism of the encounter "does not take anything for granted" (Althusser 2006: 173). Here, things generally exist "in a 'floating state'" (198), and, as in conjunctural analysis, there are no guarantees for anything: An encounter may or may not take place, it may result in this outcome or that or another, it may be durable or fleeting. The basic assumption is hence that of a "radical instability": "since every encounter is provisional even when it lasts, *there is no eternity in the 'laws' of any world or any state*" (195, 174). Like so many nonhuman-turn theorists do, not least in the wake of Derridean deconstruction, Althusser struggles/plays with language in a most revealing manner. To use his terminology, a particular configuration only 'takes hold' or 'takes form' through a 'pile-up' or 'collision-interlocking' (Fr. *accrochage*) of disparate elements (191) – a vocabulary that distinctly resonates with that of assemblages, conjunctures, and articulations. Indeed, in a few scattered passages of the fragment, Althusser explicitly touches on the concept of the conjuncture and, significantly, in view of the argument developed here, even seems to suggest that this notion in fact always implied or held the potential of a materialism of the encounter (187). Consequently, a conjuncture is now conceived precisely in terms of a 'collision-interlocking', "the conjuncture itself being junction, con-junction, congealed (albeit shifting) encounter, since it has already taken place, and refers in its turn to the infinite number of its prior causes" (193). This certainly sounds a lot like

8 I would like to thank one anonymous reviewer for helping me to clarify my argument on this point.

our conjuncture as/and assemblage. Thus understood, conjunctural thinking effectively constitutes “an attempt to think not only the contingency of necessity, but also the necessity of the contingency at its root” (187). Referring to Althusser’s reading of Wittgenstein, we might say that a conjuncture is ‘everything that is the case’ (Ger. *alles, was der Fall ist*); everything that ‘falls’, everything that ‘comes about’ – where ‘case’, in the sense of *casus*, means “at once occurrence and chance, that which comes about in the mode of the unforeseeable, and yet of being” (190). Conjunctural analysis hence means taking “full account of the way the *conditions* present themselves, of the surrounding circumstances, of the ‘there is’ this and not that, [...] of these conditions and their history, that is to say, of their ‘having come about’ – in short, of the encounters which might not have taken place [...] and which have taken place, shaping the ‘given’ of the problem and its state” (186f).

Thus, importantly, Althusser, too, stresses that, in spite of their contingency, constellations still have effects and may still persist for a certain amount of time, but also – even though his rhetoric of fundamental volatility runs the risk of overshadowing this aspect – that they are subject to, or entangled with, specific forms of force or pressure. Thus, a conjuncture is a moment in which “the world of history [...] *gels* [...], with the taking-hold of elements combined in an encounter that is apt to trace such-and-such a figure” (194). Exactly *what kind* of figure is traced in actual fact, as well as the very fact of taking-hold itself, is in the end not only or entirely aleatory, but a result of contingency *as well as* necessity. This, I think, is where what Hall termed ‘lines of tendential force’ or ‘magnetic lines of tendency’ come into play. Yes, ‘there are encounters’ (Fr. *ça se rencontre*); yes, ‘things are thrown’ (191) – we are far away from any sense of sovereign agency or transparent intentionality here. Yet, as I read Althusser, we are not in the domain of ‘necessarily no relation’ either. As Althusser explains, encounters result from or consist in what Lucretius called the ‘swerve’, “a change of trend” (Lucretius 1910: 72), “the welling up of order from the very heart of disorder” (2006: 189f). However, as far as the world of history is concerned, this swerve never takes place in the philosophical void Althusser talks about but, precisely, always in the context of a ‘there is’, of preexisting conditions, of a given conjuncture. And here, we find a multiplicity of lines of force, inscribing multiple ‘trends’, imprinting various tendencies and dynamics, and in this uneven landscape, it is not so much or only a question of ‘what occurs’, but, as Althusser writes in his discussion of Machiavelli, of “*creat[ing] the conditions for a swerve*, and thus an encounter” (171).

In this way, the issue of determination/agency is effectively moved beyond the dualism of determinism vs. free will and structure vs. agent. Though generally expressed in a different idiom, the extensive debates surrounding the base/superstructure metaphor within Cultural Studies partly already pointed in a direction not unlike the one that emerges from Althusser’s fragment, for instance when Williams defines determination as “setting limits, exerting pressures” (2005: 32) or when Hall

rethinks it along the lines of articulation and conceives it as that which “sets limits and opens possibilities, possible forms”, which inscribes a particular formation with “certain distinct tendencies” and endows it with “a certain configuration” (2016: 95, 119). For Hall, it is that which “define[s] the terrain on which historical forces move” and thus “define[s] the horizon of possibilities” (1986: 13). As Althusser points out, “the concept of possibility can be rooted in the concept of original disorder” (2006: 191). There is, in principle, always a “plurality of possible worlds” (191). Yet, only some actually materialize; only some acquire permanence. Determination is thus perhaps best understood in terms of an ‘un-’ or – as the horizon towards which it strives – an ‘im-possibilizing’, that is, of a reduction of possibilities, a circumscription of wiggle room, of a reinforcing of particular tendencies and an entrenchment of particular configurations and the simultaneous ‘improbable-ization’ – the ‘making-less-likely’ – of others – determination as the *production of orders of possibility*.

Thus understood, it can once again productively be linked to Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, provided that we somewhat “update and upgrade” (Gilbert/Williams 2022: x) the latter for the present age. This work has recently been significantly advanced by Alex Williams (2020) and Jeremy Gilbert (Gilbert/Williams 2022). Through a dialogue with theoretical resources such as the thought of Deleuze and Guattari or complexity theory, Williams in particular has produced what can also be seen as a more ‘posthumanized’ account of hegemony, one that makes it considerably more compatible with the field of the nonhuman turn and more attuned to the messy complexities of the Capitalocene. Here, hegemony, reconceived as ‘complex hegemony’, is defined as an *emergent* phenomenon, as a vector of *guided self-organization*, aiming at a state of *metastable equilibrium*, and as a form of *generative entrenchment* (the ‘autocatalysis of power’). It is worth quoting Williams at length:

Complex hegemony [...] emerges out of the interactions of diverse component parts (individual and collective, human and non-human). It gives rise to emergent properties that have downwards causatory impacts back onto the systems from which they emerge. Principle amongst these is the ability to guide the way the system self-organises. On the largest scales, complex hegemony involves leading complex network-hierarchies towards new points of relative metastability. Finally, complex hegemony ensures its own continued existence through mechanisms of generative entrenchment. By generating behaviours, processes, systems, and structures through guided self-organisation, hegemonically manipulated systems are able to take on indispensable roles, leading to increasing risk and cost associated with altering the underlying system. (2020: 156f)

In line with my reading of Althusser’s fragment, the problematic of determination is here effectively displaced into a question concerning the production of order, through specific articulations and the creation of assemblages, the governing of

the overall directionality of a given constellation, the de/formation of a particular terrain, “the construction of an uneven space of possibility” (Williams 2020: 148).

In a not unrelated manner, Barad’s variant of new materialism, too, thinks space in terms of “a dynamic and ever-changing topology” (2007: 176f) which can only be adequately described by moving beyond received binarisms of interiority and exteriority, subject and object, pure cause and effect, absolute freedom and strict determinism. Instead, agential realism’s ‘intra-actions’ constitute “non-arbitrary non-deterministic causal enactments through which matter-in-the-process-of-becoming is iteratively enfolded into its ongoing differential materialization” (234). Because of this dynamic, “phenomena^[9] are forever being reenfolded and reformed”, and “[t]here is a vitality to intra-activity”, such that “[t]he world’s effervescence, its exuberant creativeness can never be contained or suspended” (177, 234, 235). At the same time, Barad also stresses that not “anything and everything [is] possible at any given moment” (234). Rather, “intra-actions are constraining but not determining”; they “iteratively reconfigure what is possible and what is impossible” (234). Similar to the other approaches I have discussed, power, for Barad, “is not an external force that acts on a subject”; “there is”, they explain, “only a reiterated acting that is power in its stabilizing and sedimenting effects” (235). There are distinct resonances here, both conceptually and in terms of metaphoricity, with Althusser’s materialism of the encounter and his rhetoric of ‘taking hold/form’, ‘gelling’, ‘congealing’, and so forth; with Williams’ elaboration of complex hegemony; with key terms of Cultural Studies such as ‘arbitrary closure’, ‘suture’, or ‘condensation’; as well as with a number of other conceptions from within the orbit of the nonhuman turn, for instance ANT’s interest in the stabilization of associations; Thomas Nail’s new materialist, kinetic Marxism and its notion of ‘pedesis’ or ‘kinetic dialectics’, where motion is “neither strictly necessary nor strictly random” but “directly related to [...] the history of motions leading up to it” (2020: 13), and where the kinetic web of flows is thought together with processes of ‘folding’; Nancy Tuana’s concept of ‘viscous porosity’, where, unlike ‘fluidity’, ‘viscosity’ “retains an emphasis on resistance to changing form” (2008: 194); Alexander Galloway’s and Eugene Thacker’s (2007) elaboration of ‘distributed networks’, as opposed to ‘centralized’ as well as ‘decentralized’ ones, which are characterized by ‘nodes’ of tenacious articulations; or Levi Bryant’s concern with the ways in which motion and change, understood as ontologically primary, are temporarily halted by means of the production of ‘paths’ and ‘nodes’ (2014: 140–74) and how assemblages and ecologies are constructed and sustained through what, rather than ‘power’, he terms ‘gravity’ (2014: 184–97) (which echoes Hall’s notion of magnetic pull).

9 This term has a very specific meaning in Barad’s theory. Yet, I believe that for our purposes, it is permissible to leave out the details of this and to retain a wider, more general sense of ‘phenomena’.

As Althusser points out, once encounters have taken hold/form, once articulations have been stabilized, once assemblages have congealed into particular shapes, enduring relationships, necessities, and (tendential) laws (can) emerge (2006: 195, 197). In that sense, I believe we may still retain the analytic notion of 'structure', but only if by that we now mean *not* a stable background opposed to human agency, but rather a *structuration* or *structuring*, an assemblage of assemblages, something emergent that has sedimented and acquired some durability; "nodes of totalization", as Deleuze has it (1995: 86), or, to adopt another concept of Bryant's (who himself borrows it from Lacan), 'quilting points' or 'catalytic operators' (2014: 223–26). As should be clear at this point, these structures, as *structurings*, that is, processual forms of organization, are wholly *immanent*; they do not transcend, stand above, hide behind, or lurk below the 'mesh' of relations and actants in which they operate. They are not beyond being affected. They are productive, they assemble or quilt, but they are also *themselves* produced, assembled, quilted. In fact, within Cultural Studies, Hall's (and Raymond Williams') notion of a 'double articulation' between 'structure' and 'practice', according to which "a structure is what previously structured practices have produced as a result" (2016: 125), already signaled such an immanence, albeit still in a way that remained somewhat anthropocentric in its exclusive focus on human practice¹⁰. As Barad puts it, "[s]tructures are specific material configurations/(re)configurings of the world" (2007: 237). To speak of 'structures' means to point to "the dynamic intra-workings of the instruments of power through which particular meanings, bodies, and boundaries are produced" (230). Materiality is here rethought as a contingent, "constrained but not fully determined, process of iterative intra-activity through which material-discursive practices come to matter, rather than as mere brute positivity or some purified notion of the economic" (237). I believe that it is only against the background of such a revised understanding that we can still, or once again, say with Hall that "[s]tructures exhibit tendencies – lines of force, openings, and closures – which constrain, shape, channel, and, in that sense, 'determine'" (2016: 125).

It is along these lines that we may now also conceive of *capitalist* structures. A conjunctural analysis of such structures certainly each time requires concretization and contextualization – after all, not only are economies always heterogeneous and not reducible to capitalist relations, capitalism, too, is not singular and homogeneous (cf. Gibson-Graham 2006; Grossberg 2010: 101–51). More than that, the 'economic' is itself a contingent, relational category. Nevertheless, at a higher level of abstraction, capitalism can now be rethought in terms of a '*meta-*' or '*overcoding*' *assemblage*, as a 'structure of structures', an 'assemblage of assemblages'. It, too, is a processual and relational affair; a sedimented articulation of a multiplicity of forces

10 However, a praxeological reinterpretation of this double articulation would go some way towards diminishing – though not erasing – this anthropocentrism (cf., e.g., Reckwitz 2002).

and elements, an interlocking or condensation of a wide array of heterogeneous relationalities, only ever partially stable. It is material-semiotic, natural-cultural, and it is by far not exhausted by its 'economic' components – the domains of the political, social, cultural, ideological, affective, technological, ecological, and more (these distinctions only have meaning as heuristic ones) are absolutely indispensable. A similar conception of capitalism also emerges in the work of David Harvey, who re-thinks capital in terms of seven distinct 'activity spheres': "technologies and organisational forms; social relations; institutional and administrative arrangements; production and labour processes; relations to nature; the reproduction of daily life and of the species; and 'mental conceptions of the world'" (2011: 122). While each of these spheres possesses its own dynamic, all of them are at the same time deeply entangled and affected by their relations with one another. There are "complex flows of influence that move between the spheres", "perpetually reshaping all of them" (Harvey 2011: 123), so that there is a strong element of contingency and none of the spheres is in a position of principled dominance. Harvey emphasizes that this, then, is not "a mechanical totality, a social engine in which the parts strictly conform to the dictates of the whole", but "a socio-ecological totality" or "*an assemblage*", in which "the inter-relations are fluid and open, even as they are inextricably interwoven with each other" (2011: 128). Similarly, William Connolly has begun to reconceptualize capitalism as an ecology, which, drawing on process philosophy, he situates within "a cosmos of open, interacting force fields", "each periodically flowing over, through, and around others" (2013: 25, 27). In this way, Connolly has arguably gone still further than Harvey in thinking entanglement in the direction of 'intra-relationality' and in taking into account the central role of nonhuman actants. Perhaps most helpful in this context is once again Barad's agential realism and its notion of a 'differential gear assemblage':

Imagine a differential gear assemblage (i.e., a gear assemblage in which the gear operations literally work through one another and in which an uneven distribution of forces results in, and is the enabling condition for, different potentials and performances among the gears) that in an ongoing fashion is being (re)configured/(re)assembled while it is itself in the process of producing other differential gear assemblages. Gears are remilled through intra-actions with other gears, and some gears are in the process of being enfolded into the assemblage as part of its ongoing process of reconfiguration. The assemblages are marked by these processes of (re)assembly. The sedimenting marks of time do not correspond to the history of any individual gear but rather are integrally tied to the genealogy of the assemblage and its changing topology, that is, to the processes of inclusion and exclusion in the reworking of the boundaries of the assemblages. Imagine further that the differential gear assemblages include humans and nonhumans, where the differential constitution of "human" and "nonhuman" changes with each intra-action. (2007: 239)

Despite the mechanistic nature of the metaphor, this assemblage is hence not a machine consisting of pre-existing, separate parts, but “a topological animal that mutates through an open-ended dynamics of intra-activity” (240). Accordingly, “the spatiality of capitalism is itself a contested and ever-changing topology that is iteratively (re)produced through the dynamics of intra-activity and enfolding” (243). While here, too, there is arguably something of the overemphasis on indeterminacy and fluidity that I have criticized with regards to much new materialist theorizing, it seems to me that this is nevertheless a very promising avenue for a rethinking of capitalism at the intersections of conjunctural and assemblage analysis – *a political economy of assemblages*.

While there is no ontological ‘great chain of beings’, this does not mean that all entities are somehow the same or are all equal. Undoubtedly, some actants “exercise greater power over others and play a more significant role in structuring relations” (Bryant 2014: 115) between existents, a capacity significantly stemming from “their ability to ‘collect’ power and condense it” (Castree 2002: 141). We can still speak of ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ levels, yet no longer in any absolute but a relative sense, since “[s]o-called ‘micro-phenomena’ are always linked, spatially and temporally, to certain macro-phenomena, while these so-called macro-phenomena exist only as they are manifested in individual micro-situations” (Reckwitz 2023: 32; cf. DeLanda 2016: 20f). As Barad has pointed out, scales are connected, and this connectedness “should be understood not as linkages among preexisting nested scales but as the agential enfolding of different scales through one another” (2007: 245). Accordingly, if capitalism is understood as ‘bigger’ and more powerful than other assemblages – as an overcoding or meta-assemblage – then this is because it is far more widely connected (cf. Latour 1993: 121, 2007: 178f), strongly sedimented or ‘locked in’, and itself has a greater power of assembling, articulating, structuring, and stabilizing. As was outlined above, it is in this latter sense that it can still justly be said to be ‘determining’. In this vein, the Althusser of the materialism of the encounter defines the capitalist mode of production in terms of “a *structure* that imposes its unity on a series of elements”, a “structure of exploitation” (2006: 203). A similar point has been made in more detail by Castree, who likewise rethinks capitalism as a network of networks which, despite their heterogeneity, “have a common processual form or logic”, “work in unison” and “towards the same ends”, driven by “the central rationale of the circuit of capital”, that is, the “quest for profit” (2002: 130, 140, 137). These networks, in other words, “both determine and are affected by the value dynamics that make capitalist sociocultural ties so distinctive and dynamic” (Castree 2002: 140).

As should have become clear by now, the understanding of ‘capitalist determination’ I have outlined does in no way preclude what is traditionally called agency. However, in line with the reconceptualization of notions of structure, agent, and determination, and, indeed, with the abolition of the very conceptual opposition between structure and agency, our understanding of agency changes as well. Much re-

cent work associated with the nonhuman turn has already alerted us to the fact that agency needs to be rethought as something not reserved only for particular types of existents (esp. humans) and not inevitably linked with intentionality, but rather distributed between a multiplicity of actants. We now see that what is required is a properly *relational* account of agency, where agency emerges as “a relational effect generated by a network of heterogeneous, interacting components whose activity is constituted in the networks of which they form a part” (Whatmore 1999: 28). Consequently, it is not simply a capacity an individual entity possesses, intrinsic and fixed for all time, but rather a contingent and emergent potential, closely tied up with the mutable spaces of im/possibility elaborated upon above, a result of the particular articulation of an entity within specific assemblages. A useful tool to think with in this context is the concept of ‘affordance’, which first emerged in the field of psychology, was then widely used in discussions about technology, and has of late been taken up in a variety of contexts, from literary studies to political theory (cf., e.g., Felski 2015: 164f; Gilbert/Williams 2022: 179), precisely as a helpful means of going beyond received binarisms of context vs. agent. The concept highlights the ways the possibilities for action are always situationally structured, how certain possibilities are ‘afforded’, ‘made available’, or, as Hall might say, ‘pre-ferred’ (1993: 99), while others are ‘improbable-ized’, and thus replaces simplistic juxtapositions of subject and object, cause and effect, voluntarism and determinism, with a more complex and relational model. Here, agency emerges as a ‘doing’ rather than an ‘attribute’ (cf. Lemke 2021: 149–54). Agency, Barad explains, “is a matter of intra-acting; it is an enactment, not something that someone or something has” (2007: 235). As such, it is contextual and dynamic, changing as assemblages shift and change. As Barad puts it: “intra-actions iteratively reconfigure what is possible and what is impossible – possibilities do not sit still. [...] [Ne]w possibilities open up as others that might have been possible are now excluded: possibilities are reconfigured and reconfiguring. [...] The world’s effervescence, its exuberant creativeness can never be contained or suspended. Agency never ends; it can never ‘run out’.” (2007: 234f) It is caught up in a constant ‘dance’ (Pickering 1995), entangled with shifting spacetime-matter relations, reconfigured and reconfiguring in ongoing intra-action with changing possibility spaces. While Barad’s rhetoric here once again risks tipping over into the “relational enthusiasm” (Hörl 2017: 7) characteristic of many new materialist positions, with the attendant normative prioritization of volatility – by contrast, referring to Charis Cussins’ (1996) metaphor, we might insist that the ‘dance of agency’ is never without an element of ‘choreography’ – this reconceptualization of (human) action beyond the twin poles of pure cause and pure effect remains very helpful. In a world of processes and relations, full autonomy is as illusory as full determination. And thus, even though the future may not necessarily be “radically open at every turn” (Barad 2007: 235), always, to borrow Leonard Cohen’s famous words, there will be

cracks through which the light shines in. Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.

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