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**THE EMBEDDED-AGENCY PARADOX REVISITED: DISCUSSING  
DELEUZE AND GUATTARI'S CONCEPT OF *BECOMING* FOR  
INSTITUTIONAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP.**

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## **The embedded-agency paradox revisited: Discussing Deleuze and Guattari's concept of *becoming* for institutional entrepreneurship**

### **Abstract**

For neo-institutionalists, embedded agency is a paradox. With the help of the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari, the paper aims to offer an alternative understanding of how this paradox can be circumvented. Indeed, through their interest in *becoming*, which considers structure and agency to be completely intertwined, Deleuze and Guattari invite institutional scholars to consider institutional entrepreneurship less as a pre-determined and disruptive event, and more as a continuous process that takes place in everyday practices and actions. By promoting the exploitation of breaches through creative assemblages, considered as alternative resources for institutional entrepreneurship, we shed light on additional initial conditions for entrepreneurial actions within a field.

**Keywords:** embedded-agency paradox; institutional entrepreneurship; Deleuze and Guattari; becoming.

For institutional scholars, embedded agency is a paradox. For Deleuze and Guattari, it is not. The aim of this paper is thus to introduce and discuss the extent to which a Deleuzian perspective on institutional entrepreneurship can offer an alternative view of this situation and *in fine* lead to a new way to qualitatively study this phenomenon.

Institutional entrepreneurship is understood as *the “activities of actors who have an interest in particular institutional arrangements and who leverage resources to create new institutions or to transform existing ones”* (Maguire, Hardy and Lawrence, 2004: 657). In this perspective, institutional entrepreneurs are individual actors or collectives who are able to extract themselves from their institutional field (DiMaggio, 1988; DiMaggio and Powell, 1991) to intentionally influence their environment (Maguire, Hardy and Lawrence, 2004), drive institutional work (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006) or transform institutions (Battilana and D’Aunno, 2009). To do so, institutional entrepreneurs mobilize resources to initiate and actively participate in the implementation of divergent changes that break the current institutional order (Battilana, Leca and Boxenbaum, 2009). As described by Maguire and

colleagues (2004), successful entrepreneurs use three strategies: occupying positions with strong legitimacy; theorizing new practices; and connecting practices to stakeholders' routines and values. As such, institutional entrepreneurs are sometimes compared to “*modern princes*” as they challenge the established hegemony (Gramsci, 1971, cited in Levy and Scully, 2007).

However, studying endogenous institutional change in this way, quickly leads us to confront the structure–agency debate (Seo and Creed, 2002) and the challenge that institutional and embedded actors face in getting away from the institutional pressures that shape their cognition, behaviors and practices (Battilana, 2006). Indeed, if it were necessary and interesting for scholars to focus on agency to understand how institutions persist and evolve, this paradox would remain because, whatever ends entrepreneurs pursue, their activities and the organizational structures and the resources they use are simultaneously provided and constrained by institutional pillars (Meyer and Scott, 1983). Some studies have nuanced this statement to suggest that entrepreneurs can avoid, up to a certain point, being completely shaped by the institution they are embedded in. For instance, the notion of “*practical consciousness*” (Battilana and D’Aunno, 2009: 47), which means that entrepreneurs know they are institutionally influenced and thus can react accordingly, or the social positions they hold within their organization and field (Battilana, 2006), operate as promoters of this heroic vision of the institutional entrepreneur. Institutional scholars have also highlighted how institutional entrepreneurship can occur through the actions of peripheral actors with an open and strong motivation who mobilize external – and therefore less (if any) institutionalized – resources (*e.g.*, Battilana et al., 2009; Garud, Hardy and Maguire, 2007; Välikangas and Carlsen, 2020).

These reflections focus instead on the power, intentionality, social positions and resources of actors. However, as recently mentioned by Abdelnour, Hasselbladh and Kallinikos (2017), this focus has not yet considered which institutional contexts might influence entrepreneurs' actions (*ibid*: 1778). Indeed, very few studies have so far analyzed the conditions that might enable, or at least facilitate, institutional entrepreneurship – other than the will of one central powerful actor or more peripheral actors. More precisely, fields and institutions are not stable, homogeneous or consistent in time (Greenwood, Suddaby and Hinings, 2002). For instance, Abdelnour and colleagues refer to institutions as “*patchworks*” (2017: 1780) that challenge their “*monolithic and static notion*” to consider them “*fluid*” and “*heterogeneous*”. As such, the presence of tensions and contradictions within the field and their institutions can bring

inconsistencies and conflicts, which institutional entrepreneurs can build on to initiate change. For instance, in their study, Seo and Creed (2002) discuss the presence of critiques about the limits of existing institutional arrangements, which may inspire new ideas to develop. Likewise, Zilber (2002) emphasizes how struggles over meanings and interpretations of an established institutional order can generate actions for change.

This perspective considers that change is initiated by institutional entrepreneurs whose thoughts and ideas critique the limits of established institutional arrangements. This motivates them to act by proposing new ideas and bringing together core and peripheral actors, etc. to bring about change. However, the institutional literature has so far remained relatively silent about what can drive these tensions to emerge within a field and its institutions and what might help to initiate entrepreneurs' actions. Shedding light on what happens early in the institutional entrepreneurship process, through the exploitation of assemblages made from *breaches*, our study can enrich this literature by better understanding the initial conditions of entrepreneurial actions within a field. We believe it is important to dig more deeply into the field conditions that can lead entrepreneurs to act to change the established order.

In this sense, Deleuze and Guattari's work seems to us to open an alternative avenue for exploring this point and, thus, for enhancing scholars' understanding of how the embedded-agency paradox can be circumvented.

### ***Institution, Desire & Becoming***

Scholars often introduce Gilles Deleuze as the philosopher of creation and, like Whitehead, as one of the main original thinkers of the philosophy of *becoming* (Faber and Stephenson, 2011; Styhre, 2001) and, more recently, of "*aberrant movements*" (Lapoujade, 2017). His "*need to no longer see life in fixed and immobile terms*" (Colebrook, 2002: xx) may justify how he, along with Felix Guattari, avoids an explicit conceptualization of institutions and, correlatively, of what he calls a *majority* which "*assumes [...] a state of power and domination*" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 105). The Deleuzo–Guattarian approach to the institution, even if implicit, is nevertheless fundamental because, as Zourabichvili and Ichida (2002: 139) state, in Deleuze and Guattari, "*the institution [...] denatures desire as a creative moment, but it is no less positive in that it actualizes it and*

*constitutes a creation*". It is therefore not possible to analyze the Deleuzo–Guattarian process of *becoming* without understanding the role of a majority.

In *A Thousand Plateaus* (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), the notion of *majority* includes all the modalities in which a power measures and evaluates – for instance, through standards and norms used to striate spaces and to monitor and control every movement. This majority – sometimes referred to as the majoritarian (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 105) – constitutes a system (*ibid*, 471) which has the ability to interconnect various standards such as in “*adult-white-heterosexual-European-male-speaking a standard language*” (*ibid*, 105). A majority co-defines at the same time a *minority* – for instance, a majoritarian *man* specifies *woman* as minoritarian (Colebrook, 2001: 104). Yet, despite their institutional embeddedness, minorities are seen “*as potential, creative and in becoming*” (Conley, 2005: 165) in the way they provide the background from which becoming-minoritarian unfolds in a creative movement.

Creation occurs when a desire manifests itself through diversions or aberrations (Lapoujade, 2017) by deviating from the majoritarian standards and thereby impeding the institution from judging and evaluating the nature and value of these creations. *Consequently*, in order to guarantee their durability, institutions try to contain any desire that might lead to societal transformation (Mozère, 2005). They do so by capturing “*desire, by territorializing it, fixing it in place, photographing it, pinning it up as a picture, or dressing it in tight clothes, giving it a mission*” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986: 86).

The Deleuzo–Guattarian desire “*refers to the different ways in which life becomes or produces relations*” (Colebrook, 2002: xv). As such, it is an experimentation rather than a projection of a predefined ideal driven by a coherent intentionality. This creative desire has consequences both for the nature of that which desires and for the modalities of its propagation.

First, the “*subject*” of desire in Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy is not an agent who can reclaim the authorship of his creation. Rather, it is carried by a *multiplicity* to the point where, in the words of Jean-Luc Godard, “*you are no longer an author, you are a production studio*”

(*ibid*: 9). A *becoming* thus reaches a point “*where it is no longer of any importance whether one says I*” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 3)<sup>1</sup>.

Second, deployment of this desire does not follow a path that is mainly dictated by the goal to be achieved and does not mobilize and organize resources adjusted to predefined purposes. It unfolds through encounters whose accidental nature “*guarantees the necessity of what is thought*” (Deleuze, 2000:16). It is part of a rhizomatic process viewed as “*the path of a flow, like a stream that creates its own bed*” (Deleuze, 1980), which produces assemblages that emerge from contingent encounters and whose organizational consequences are largely unanticipated (Styhre, 2001). Above all, desire unfolds along lines of flight and takes advantage of the breaches of the institution that, like in other social systems, “*leak from all directions*” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 204). The exploitation of these breaches is what Lévi-Strauss labels *bricolage* (Deleuze and Guattari, 2000: 7), whereby resources drawn from the majority system are decomposed – Deleuze says “*molecularized*” – diverted and rearranged into assemblages in which creative desire is expressed and flows. Whenever a norm or an institutionalized standard of the majority system is hijacked, or becomes “*corrupted*” (Deleuze and Parnet, 2002: 57), or when relations between embedded resources are rerouted, the institution can no longer grasp what is happening.

These assemblages are not made to last as they go with the flow of desire. Indeed, exploiting breaches though the diversion of institutional resources weakens the institution but without any intention to change the way it operates. *Becomings* follow the opposite tendency because, in order to continue to create, these processes of creation must, at all costs, avoid institutionalizing themselves, *i.e.*, “*reconstructing the most rigid of segments*” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 205), and “*remake power and law*” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986: 86).

Becomings thus produce temporary, ephemeral assemblages that undermine the institution by widening breaches and emphasizing institutional contradictions. Instead of intentionally destroying the institution by breaking it, these aberrant assemblages play with the norms and standards of the institution without replacing them. However, may these assemblages offer

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<sup>1</sup> This being a consequence of “*the final enterprise of the becoming-imperceptible*” (Deleuze and Parnet, 2002: 45).

institutional entrepreneurship original means for creation, which can be weaponized for the intentional purpose of institutional change?

### ***Mobilizing Assemblages for Entrepreneurship***

In the current literature, institutional entrepreneurs initiate divergent changes to break existing institutional frames while actively mobilizing institutional resources to implement these changes (Battilana et al., 2009). Following Deleuze and Guattari's conceptualization of *becoming*, we suggest a complementary perspective to the debate about the embedded-agency paradox and how institutional entrepreneurship can happen despite the difficulties for institutional entrepreneurs in detaching themselves from existing rules and norms while being constrained by them in terms of cognition and action (Battilana et al., 2009; Hardy and Maguire, 2017).

The processes of institutional entrepreneurship and *becoming* never really intersect, even though they both challenge an institution. Nevertheless, we hypothesize that one can nourish the other. The former is explicitly aimed at institutional change or work, such as institutional creation (Laurence and Suddaby, 2006), using taken-for-granted resources that can be material, symbolic or human (Hardy and Maguire, 2017). Conversely, the latter exploits breaches within the institution, making it leak in order to access creative spaces and means for producing assemblages of desire. Insofar as the institution is a space for the actualization of desires (Zourabichvili and Ichida, 2002), *becomings* never aim to disrupt an institution.

Assemblages produced through *becomings* are more difficult to mobilize than the institutional and embedded resources that are usually leveraged by institutional entrepreneurs (Battilana, 2006). Nevertheless, they have two properties that facilitate their use as new resources<sup>2</sup> despite their '*untaken-for-grantedness*' to initiate change.

First, regarding their perceptibility, assemblages of desire are produced by a *becoming* whose "*guiding principle is to become imperceptible, to become rhizome and not to take root*"

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<sup>2</sup> Deleuze and Guattari (1987) talk about weapons, which fuel the process of institutional entrepreneurship.



(Deleuze, 2006: 66).<sup>3</sup> However, this process needs to feed itself with existing institutional resources – for instance, even incomprehensible artists need exhibitions, book or record releases. In these moments of reterritorialization, the assemblages become perceptible by future institutional entrepreneurs who can, then, capture and use them as future resources.

Second, these potential resources are assembled from institutional resources that have been molecularized, *i.e.*, broken down into sub-elements, and then recombined. And like a bricolage (Lévi-Strauss, 1966), whose assemblage is syncretic more than synthetic, these new resources can, in turn, be disassembled – greatly facilitating access to them. Moreover, the heterogeneous resources that compose these assemblages are often diverted from their standard purpose and, as such, are transformed from solid, normatively and institutionally specified ones into “*liquid or gaseous*” means (Deleuze, 1995: 133) which can be employed in several ways (Deleuze and Parnet, 2004). Ultimately, *becomings* grasp institutional resources without care – but with the necessary caution to avoid attracting attention, by capturing or stealing them here and there (Deleuze and Parnet, 2002). *De facto*, the assemblage they contribute to producing cannot easily be claimed by anyone, especially since the author as an individual disappears in favor of “*production studios*” (Deleuze and Parnet, 2002: 9).

Such assemblages, which reveal breaches in the institution, can consequently provide resources for institutional entrepreneurship. We might argue, therefore, that institutional entrepreneurship is not just the result of an intentional aim to change the institution by radically (Battilana et al., 2009; DiMaggio, 1998; Hardy and Maguire, 2017) or incrementally (Välikangas and Carlsen, 2020) breaking it. In line with Deleuze and Guattari’s *becoming*, we might suggest that it can be initiated through breaches – *i.e.*, spaces where assemblages of desires are created using resources which were created without any intention to disrupt institutions.

Breaches highlight the institution’s inability to understand and categorize illegitimate uses of institutionalized resources. Nevertheless, as the assemblages of desires produced in such breaches can be captured, potential institutional entrepreneurs may be able to use such heterogeneous and diverted resources to challenge the institution. This is why we suggest a

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<sup>3</sup> This is the authors’ translation as the official English translation, *i.e.* “*the secret is to become invisible and to make a rhizome without putting down roots*” (Deleuze, 2006: 66) denatures, according to us, the genuine conceptualization of Deleuze in French.

“*change through breaches*” instead of a “*change by breaking*” perspective. Indeed, as assemblages weaken current institutional arrangements and amplify the already existing breaches or contradictions, none of these resources, i.e., assemblages which come from breaches, are institutionally embedded, but they can nevertheless be used as such for institutional entrepreneurship.

It is important to state here that if institutions regain control over breaches that enable deviations from its rules, norms and behaviors (e.g. through comparison, analogy and categorization), the breaches can become institutionalized and any desire to create or experiment will be dashed.

Thanks to Deleuze and Guattari (1987), we suggest complementing a recent and rising trend in institutional theory which considers reintegrating dynamics and the “*patchwork*” nature of institutions and fields (Abdelnour et al., 2017: 1786). Instead of regarding institutions as static and uniform (Battilana et al., 2009; Seo and Creed, 2002), we understand them as multifold and in movement, linked to Deleuze’s philosophy of aberrant movements (Lapoujade, 2017). As such, institutions can be considered as something that ‘*happens*’ rather than something that ‘*is*’.

Deleuze and Guattari invite us to consider change not as a punctual, predetermined event, but as a *becoming*, something that is effected progressively through breaches, by people or organizations that do not necessarily want to initiate change but nevertheless enable it and make it an indirect consequence of (desired and creative) actions. More generally, this article advances the idea that institutional entrepreneurship can be considered less as a disruptive, and more as a continuous, process that takes place in everyday practices and actions. In doing so, we suggest that the interesting question is not whether institutional entrepreneurs, seen as *Modern Princes*, can detach themselves from their pressuring context to break institutions. The question is, rather, how institutional entrepreneurship can happen in a more continuous and less heroic manner, using abandoned creations and exploiting institutional contradictions that are inherent in fields and institutions, thereby avoiding the so-called embedded-agency paradox.

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