

**The Body without Organs
Nonorganisational Desire in Organisational Life**

by Torkild Thanem

*Paper presented at the Critical Management Conference 2001,
Manchester, July 11-13,
The Passion of Organizing Stream*

Abstract

This paper introduces Deleuze and Guattari's (1988) notion of the body without organs (BwO) as a means to think about the nonorganisational forces of desire that upset the homogeneity of organisational life and potentially overpower organisations to such an extent that they cease to be organisations.

Keywords: Deleuze and Guattari, the body without organs, organizational life.

Contact details: Torkild Thanem, Warwick Business School, University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL, UK. Email Torkild.Thanem@warwick.ac.uk; telephone +44 (0)24 7652 2730; facsimile +44 (0)24 7652 4650.

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Introduction

Organisation theory has thus far had little to say about the forces that on the one hand are the implicit problems targeted by organisational activities whilst on the other hand constitute the powers that subvert, interrupt and escape these same organisational activities. Preoccupied with the ways in which organisations organise, the majority of the discipline has been less concerned with the bodies and desires that organisations fail to fully organise. This lack of attention, I suggest, may be seen in relation to a particular concept of organisation that still dominates the field of organisation theory: the view that organisation is a matter of organisational entities (e.g. Parsons 1956a, 1956b; Donaldson 1985; Sorge 1996). And as most organisational researchers view organisation in terms of bounded entities that enjoy ontological stability and sovereignty, it is not only organisational life itself that is reduced to a simple homogeneous condition. The entire world is reduced to a matter of organisation, which means that all bodies and all desire is seen as passive objects of lucid control and order. Under this condition, there is nothing that precedes, exceeds and overpowers organisation, and it is difficult to identify any point at which an organisation ceases to be an organisation.

One way to recognise the point at which organisations cease to be organisations is to reintroduce the nonorganisational forces of desire that channel themselves through bodies and transform organisational life into a dynamic field of heterogeneity. More specifically, this may be achieved by invoking a perspective that recognises the power of nonorganic embodiment. It is in order to do so that I in this paper invoke Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the body without organs.

The Body without Organs

The body without organs first appeared in Deleuze's (1990) *The Logic of Sense*, then in Deleuze and Guattari's (1984) *Anti-Oedipus* and then in Deleuze and Guattari's (1988) *A Thousand Plateaus*. The term was first coined by Antonin Artaud in the 1940s, and Deleuze and Guattari (1988: 150) suggest that Artaud made himself a body without organs when committing suicide on the 28th of November 1947. In order to pursue the affinity between an ethological ethics and the body without organs, I will however invoke the conceptualisation developed in *A Thousand Plateaus*.

In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari associate the body without organs with Freudian psychoanalysis, schizophrenia and capitalism (capitalism is given as the cardinal example), and view the body without organs as a non-productive entity that interrupts flows, arrests desire and aims at stasis (cf. Deleuze and Guattari 1984: 10). In *A Thousand Plateaus*, on the other hand, the body without organs is depicted as a

force productive in its own right – independent of the purposive and unequivocally goal-directed workings of the capitalist political economy, and irreducible to the Freudian mommy-daddy-me triangle. Invoking the body without organs, Deleuze and Guattari (1988) offer a different way of thinking about the body that contrasts with the biomedically founded notion of the organism. According to the Deleuze and Guattari commentator Ronald Bogue (1989), the Spinozist body is literally a body without organs because it consists not of organs but of affects. However, this is not why I want to invoke a Spinozist reading of the body without organs here. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari are less opposed to the organs than they are to the organism:

A body without organs is not an empty body stripped of organs, but a body upon which that which serves as organs ?...? is distributed according to crowd phenomena ?...? in the form of molecular multiplicities. ?...? Thus the body without organs is opposed less to organs as such than to the organization of the organs insofar as it composes an organism (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 30).

Furthermore, Deleuze and Guattari insist that being opposed to the organism does not make the body without organs a dead body:

The body without organs is not a dead body but a living body all the more alive and teeming once it has blown apart the organism and its organization. Lice hopping on the beach. Skin colonies. The full body without organs is a body populated by multiplicities (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 30).

Deleuze and Guattari introduce the chapter wholly devoted to the body without organs by emphasising its dynamic, experimental and practical nature. The body without organs is not a matter of being reducible to a finished object of metaphysics, but a matter of endless becoming. It is also not a concept, but an experimental practice into which desire must be continuously invested. The body without organs cannot be taken for granted, but needs to be created. In the words of Deleuze and Guattari (1988: 149-150):

At any rate, you have one (or several). It's not so much that it preexists or comes ready-made ?...?. At any rate, you make one, you can't desire without making one. And it awaits you; it is an inevitable exercise or experimentation, already accomplished the moment you undertake it, unaccomplished as long as you don't. ?...? It is not at all a notion or a concept but a practice, a set of practices. You never reach the Body without Organs, you can't reach it, you are forever attaining it, it is a limit (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 149-150).

As one can see, a lot is going on at the same time in Deleuze and Guattari's treatise of the body without organs, and usually a lot more than in Deleuze's sole-authored works. It therefore does not take long before they both undermine the organic functioning of the body *with* organs and challenge the psychoanalyst's search for unitary selfhood by emphasising that there is no end to the process of creating a body without organs:

Is it really so sad and dangerous to be fed up with seeing with your eyes, breathing with your lungs, swallowing with your mouth, talking with your tongue, thinking with your brain, having an anus and larynx, head and legs? Why not walk on your head, sing with your sinuses, see through your skin, breathe with your belly ?...?. Where psychoanalysis says, ‘Stop, find yourself again,’ we should say instead, ‘Let’s go further still, we haven’t found our BwO yet, we haven’t sufficiently dismantled our self.’ ?...? Find your Body without Organs. Find out how to make it. It’s a question of life and death ?...?, sadness and joy. It is where everything is played out (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 150-151).

Some pages later, they also re-emphasise the opposition between the organism and the body without organs:

The organs are not the enemies of the BwO. The enemy is the organism. The BwO is opposed not to the organs but to the organization of the organs called the organism (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 158).

As hinted at the beginning of their chapter, this statement takes much inspiration from Antonin Artaud:

Artaud wages a struggle against the organs, but at the same time what he is going after, what he has it in for, is the organism: *The body is the body. Alone it stands. And in no need of organs. Organism it never is. Organisms are the enemies of the body.* The BwO is not opposed to the organs; rather, the BwO and its ‘true organs,’ which must be composed and positioned, are opposed to the organism, the organic organization of the organs (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 158).

This highly polemic statement should however not be taken too literally. This becomes clear after Deleuze and Guattari (1988: 159) on the next page ask ‘What does it mean [...] to cease to be an organism?’ In other words, and as the title of their chapter asks, ‘how do you make yourself a body without organs?’ First, they claim that this is an easy task. But it is also a task that must be attacked with caution, ‘since overdose is a danger. You don’t do it with a sledgehammer, you use a very fine file’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 160). Further on, having first invoked Artaud, Deleuze and Guattari dissociate the task of destratifying the organism and creating a body without organs from committing suicide:

You invent self-destructions that have nothing to do with the death-drive. Dismantling the organism never meant killing yourself, but rather opening the body to connections that presuppose an entire assemblage [...]. [...] You have to keep enough of the organism for it to reform each dawn [...]. [...] You don’t reach the BwO [...] by wildly destratifying. [...] If you free it with too violent an action, if you blow apart the strata without taking precautions, then [...] you will be killed, plunged into a black hole, or even dragged toward catastrophe. Staying stratified – organized, signified, subjected – is not the worst that can happen; the worst that can happen is if you throw the strata into demented or

suicidal collapse, which bring them back down on us heavier than ever (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 160-161).

Creating a body without organs is therefore a matter of cautious, patient experimentation. This may however easily be forgotten, as readers become so taken aback by the Deleuze and Guattari rhetoric that they ignore Deleuze and Guattari's own warnings. Although there is a danger that the non-organic is ignored and the organism is taken for granted, there is also a danger, when reading Deleuze and Guattari, of adopting the body without organs as some utopian solution to all problems of life. I share this scepticism with Keith Ansell Pearson, who rightly points out that Deleuze and Guattari never attributed such a status to the body without organs – most notably because they construed no binary opposition between the body without organs and the organism. In the words of Ansell Pearson (1999: 154):

no abstract opposition is to be set up between the strata and the body without organs. [...] The aim is not, therefore, to negate the organism but to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of it by situating it within the wider field of forces, intensities, and durations that give rise to it and which do not cease to involve a play between nonorganic and stratified life. Creative processes inform *both* the body without organs and processes of stratification.

This means that the organism as well as the body without organs can be seen in terms of creative involution. The becoming of the body without organs, then, is 'the "powerful nonorganic life" that escapes the strata and is implicated in transversal modes of communication, which are modes that cut across the evolution of distinct phyletic lineages' (Ansell Pearson 1999: 154). Furthermore, the organism that is involved in such creative processes is another organism than the one Deleuze and Guattari are attacking. According to Ansell Pearson (1999: 154),

The organism that Deleuze and Guattari are attacking, I would contend, is not a neutral entity but rather the organism construed as a given hierarchized and transcendent organization.¹

Since the body without organs is not the total negation of the organism or the suicidal solution to life, Ansell Pearson (1999: 154) says that treating this question from the angle of Spinozist ethics is the only way to avoid these traps:

On my reading the ethical question is the only way to make sense of Deleuze and Guattari's statement that 'dismantling the organism has never meant killing yourself'. [...] The ethical question concerns the theory and praxis of opening up the body to connections and relations 'that presuppose an entire assemblage' [...] (Ansell Pearson 1999: 154; my omissions).

¹ This notion of the organism is explicitly adopted by Deleuze and Guattari (1988: 159): 'The organism [...] is a substratum on the BwO, in other words, a phenomenon of accumulation, coagulation, and sedimentation that, in order to extract useful labor from the BwO, imposes upon it forms, functions, bonds, dominant and hierarchized organizations, organized transcendences.'

As we have seen, there is always a danger with opening up too much. Nevertheless, what Deleuze and Guattari encourage us to do when posing to us this Spinozist ethical challenge of creating a body without organs, is to openly experiment with new and different bodily habits and ways of life. I.e., they encourage us to experiment with what a body can do. In conclusion, the body without organs may enable us to use our bodies and express corporeality in unpredictable ways that disturb and upset the boundaries laid down by the organism and by the guardians of biomedical discipline and social normality.

Conclusion

What, then, does this imply for our understanding of organisational life? Insofar as making oneself a body without organs implies opening up the body and connecting it to an entire assemblage, the body without organs is by no means cut off from organisational life. On the contrary, as it is part of a heterogeneous assemblage, the body without organs contributes to the unpredictable heterogeneity of organisational life and exceeds the mechanisms of order and control that typically attract so much attention from the mainstream of organisational research. And by so doing, it may at least help us begin to understand the complex interrelationship between the desiring forces that constrain and homogenise organisational life on the one hand, and the desiring forces by which organisational life is upset, expanded and enriched on the other.

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