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# The New Time-Space of Families in a Pandemic World:

## Invitation to a Nomadology of the Sofa

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What is the etymology of the word ‘family’? In early 15<sup>th</sup> century., it corresponded to the “servants of a household” coming from Latin *familia* “family servants, domestics collectively, the servants in a household,” thus also “members of a household, the estate, property; the household, including relatives and servants”<sup>1</sup>. It then evolved in English to the sense of the “collective body of persons who form one household under one head and one domestic government, including parents, children, and servants, and as sometimes used even lodgers or boarders” from 1540s. Later in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, it included the idea of parents with children and/or “whether they dwell together or not”. Although possibly tights to phenomenon such as ‘communities’, ‘contracts or ‘couples’, family is thus a homeport, a time-space of fixity in a world in movement. Initially, fixating and anchoring made possible servitude (‘for’ and ‘in’). Beyond servitude, family has become in the modern and contemporary periods the most primordial time-space of solidarity, a place interwoven with the true locus and power of intimate ‘I’s and ‘we’s, the epitome of a ‘bubble’ grounding experience, the most crucial inhabitation process: home (Sloterdijk, 2011). Indeed, “speaking about inhabitation in the world does not mean simply attributing domesticity within the gigantic to those who exist: for it is precisely the possibility of being-at-home-in-the-world that is questionable, and to pre-suppose it as a given would be a relapse into a physic of containers” (Ibid., p. 335)<sup>2</sup>. On this way, the house of being is not “a casing in which does who exist come and go (...). Its structure is more that of a ball of care in which existence has spread out in an original being out “(Ibid., 335).

Familial house has for long been either the main time-space for life and work activities before its separation from a specific place devoted to work (compania, manufactories, firms... see Hatchuel and Glise, 2003; de Vaujany, 2010, 2022) and the emergence of third-places in-between home and work

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<sup>1</sup> See Oxford Etymology Dictionary here: <https://www.etymonline.com/word/family>

<sup>2</sup> In a way, Sloterdijk (2011) opens the way to a nomadology, in particular when he defines his theory of spheres as “a morphological tool that allows us to grasp the exodus of the human being, from the primitive symbiosis to world-historical action in empires and global systems, as an almost coherent history of extraversion” (p. 67). But this nomadic path is different from the delezian one I chose for this short essay.

(restaurants, hotels, pubs, malls... see Oldenburg, 1982, 1989). Historically<sup>3</sup> 'outside' of what gradually became a workplace, family embodied more and more a private, intimate time-space from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Obviously, modernity set up major bifurcations, although numerous families still hosted couples helping each other in the context of a shared, craft-oriented activity or peasantry.

But the ongoing pandemic revealed in most western countries an increasing pattern of familial activities which has been strengthened by our crisis. More and more, family members, familial spaces, places, and objects, have been contributing to a paradoxical set of loosely coupled and deterritorialized activities, willingly cultivated as ambiguous (i.e., beyond traditional categories such as work-leisure). All members of the same family, men, women, children, are involved today in productive activities taking place within the same time-space, at home. Adults telework at home for their own activities. Women and men manage their activities. Children also work at home, and sometimes (in the context of lockdown or infection), exclusively at home<sup>4</sup>. Everybody shares the same facilities (a wifi, a printer, family tablets, collective laptops...) with different individualized access. Surprisingly, new kinds of mutual help happen at home (couples help each other for their distinct work activities, children help their parents, parents help their children, friends of the children help the children and the parents, etc.).

In big cities, apartments become sometimes contested spaces. Who should access to this room likely to be transformed into an office? Who should have the best seat close to the window in the dining room? Who should work in the kitchen? What should be done when all children are at home at the same time and need to work at home? What should appear on the screen for the collaborators? What should be concealed? Suddenly, the quietness of homes is disturbed. It is not any more a private place including stable sub-private spaces. It becomes a stage, a movie set, a modular space, an unexpected liminality... People keep moving inside of it, from it, around it, through it. The intensity of activity inside home is increased while movements do not accelerate<sup>5</sup>. We move from there, make the world move, keep transforming the world, from an immobile landscape around our sofa. Indeed, the house itself keeps moving. We bring and expand our intimacy in and through our nomadic ways of working. People's second home becomes a semi-first home part of the week (for families without children or whose children are old enough to have their own life). As people stay longer together at home, quietness is more and more searched in a walk around, a reading in the park, a jogging, an escape in the digital landscape...home and homing experience becomes an itinerant reverie.

## **1. The deterritorialization of familial activities**

Family and familial activities, which used to be grounded, emplaced, territorialized a couple of decades ago, are now continuously on the move. Family is continuously deterritorialized. It becomes a continuous deterritorialization<sup>6</sup>, which is the most common experience of any nomad (Deleuze and

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<sup>3</sup> But the main argument I want to defend further in the text is more 'ontological' and 'metaphysical' than 'historical'.

<sup>4</sup> And beyond the current Covid crisis, the climate crisis, with the restriction it is likely to imply for transportations, is likely to accentuate this phenomenon.

<sup>5</sup> See Deleuze and Guattari (1980) for a distinction between speed (intensive) and movement (extensive).

<sup>6</sup> "For the nomad, on the contrary, deterritorialization is what constitutes the relationship with the earth, so that he reterritorializes himself from deterritorialization. Earth is what deterritorializes itself, as such manner that the nomad finds in it its territory."

Guattari, 1980<sup>7</sup>). Family members are the new nomads, tracing their way and their space in movement itself. Indeed, today familial immobility is always an illusion. Family is always making the world moving around. Children with their plays close to work activities at home, keep re-opening the space of home through the space of their play. Children playfulness is much more than a possible interruptions or disruptions of adults' telework activities. It contributes also to a more playful atmosphere and a continuous ambiguity of the space, always (re)opened for children as it can be (re)opened for nomads. Likewise, so-called 'digital space' is always in movement in the seated<sup>8</sup> space of most 'homes'. TV is always on. Tablets and smartphones simply fill the void of any waiting possibly opened by computers and TVs. Work is continuously happening in the precarious inside and bubbles settled at home. It pervades all moments. More subtly, it sometimes appears as something else, which is actually a free work (Casili, 2019). More radically, the occurrence of Twitter, Instagram, Tik Tok, Facebook or Youtube at home, more and more in a commodified way (followers are 'assets'), contribute to the radical metamorphosis of our 'sweet homes' and its aestheticization. What used to be beyond any resource as a 'space' and 'moment' we take care of in the Heideggerian sense of the term (Heidegger, 1927), becomes the mere shelter of heteroclit activities, the most extreme of all facticities enacted for an imaginary gaze 'outside' oppressively inside what used to be comfortable bubbles.

The time-space of families is not any more a territorialized bubble inside a world in movement, a provisional suspension. It is the highest of all intensities of our world. The major nexus of an assemblage ['agencement'<sup>9</sup> in French] through which our capitalism is continuously and brutally activated via our orders, our moods, the infinitude of our small movements, our trajectories (which are neither inside nor outside a private bubble but keep expressing intimacy inside the public space).

More than ever, a new nomadology is necessary to understand the new time-space of work. Home, 'homing', is an "aberrant movement" (Deleuze, 1980, 1985). Beyond any mean-end rationality, it follows its own concrete logic, primary logic, a nomadologic logic settling its own ephemeral way (Lapoujade, 2017). It happens as an unexpected 'smooth space' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980; Aroles and McLean, 2021; de Vaujany, 2022).

## **2. Invitation to a nomadology of the sofa**

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<sup>7</sup> A category they carefully distinguish from those provisionally deterritorialized and in search of territorialization (e.g., migrants). Nomadism is a continuous, cultivated, ambioned experience of deterritorialization.

<sup>8</sup> For Deleuze and Guattari (1980, p. 472) : "Of course, the nomad moves, but he is seated and he is never more seated than when he moves".

<sup>9</sup> According to Deleuze and Guattari (1980, p. 629): "Assemblages [agencements] are already something other than strata, but they operate in zones of decoding of environments: they first take a territory from the environments. Any assemblage is first and foremost territorial. The first concrete rule of assemblages is to discover the territoriality they envelop, because there is always one: in their trash can or on a bench, Beckett's characters make up a territory. (...) But what already means that the assemblage is not reduced to layers, is that expression becomes a semiotic system, a regime of signs, and that the content becomes a pragmatic system, actions and passions."

What could be the new nomadology from the sofa I want to emphasize here? It is a new time-space<sup>10</sup> revealed (not just 'produced' or 'accelerated' by our contemporary crisis). Beyond the idea of the blurring of private and public spheres (which would appear as pre-constituted or essential categories<sup>11</sup>), *I want to stress here a new eventfulness of our world, a cosmological move*. Spacing and timing of the world happen differently. The intensity of our world is different. It keeps swirling and bifurcating because ontologically all the assemblages that constitute it draw and exploit a continuous incompleteness of the world (de Vaujany, 2022). Ontologically, novelty is continuously called beyond what could be continuously new (a primordial originarity, see Heidegger, 1938). Managerial apocalypses are part of this new world as the continuous revelation of a new world already in the process of becoming in our present, imminent in our experience, already at stake now. "Buy this new version of software Omega. The last version we sent you one year ago is obsolete." Or more surprisingly: "Do not change your smartphone, we will update all its surface and give you a new software to make it last.". Even sobriety becomes a new time-space for incompleteness.

We are stuck in a 'One Thousand- and One-Nights' type of narrative, continuously calling for the next sequence. This is a material force part of the assembling process (agencement) itself. Narrative events inside managerial assemblages continuously reinforce this nexus of 'incompleting' events.

Homing opens the way to an unexpected 'smooth space'. For Deleuze and Guattari (1980, p. 472), sedentary space is striated by walls, enclosures and ways between enclosures, whereas nomadic spaces are smooth, only marked by lines erased by the trajectory. (...). The nomad distributes himself in a smooth space, he occupies, lives, and holds this space, and here is his territorial principle".

Home is becoming the strange core of this phenomena. What used to be the stable homeport of the becoming of our societies, what made possible sometimes the worst conditions 'outside', at work, is part of the new managerial apocalypses. It is the main part of its pre-figuration. Incompleteness mainly happens there. And lockdowns, quarantines, remote work just make this trend stronger and most of all, more visible.

Developing a nomadology of the sofa is becoming urgent. Beyond mobile work, digital nomads and gig economy (which are also important topics but are not at the heart of my argument here), it is becoming urgent to understand the nomadology that produces our ephemeral selves which are not yet subjectivities. Why? Far from the expectations of Deleuze and Guattari (1980), we are authentic nomads in practice, but we are not free. Our patience and ability to wait is lower than ever<sup>12</sup>. Our smooth spaces and spacing contribute indirectly to striating the space of others or the space of our future. The State and war machines described by Deleuze and Guattari (1980) are not so much the problem. Indeed, they do not seem to fight the kind of nomadism or State I describe here. During the pandemic, the State kept encouraging and inciting the paradoxical familial nomads pointed out in this short essay. Both the State and capitalism seem to find their way with this new nomadism.

We walk more and more on an infinite desert of bits, inside a huge landscape of digital sand. But on this way, provisional passage points and the lack of destination are illusory. The assemblage borrowed for the process of walking keeps performing subtly our non-destination, our drift, while it transforms gradually smooth spaces into striated spaces and striated spaces into smooth ones.

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<sup>10</sup> Something very close to the Riemannian space described by Deleuze and Guattari (1980, p. 60). A non-homogeneous space made of neighbourhoods whose closeness is indeterminate in the broader time-space. The experience of soon-late, close-far between these different prehensions (neighbourhoods) is indeterminate.

<sup>11</sup> Directions I find highly problematic.

<sup>12</sup> In strong contrast to the kind of nomads described by Deleuze and Guattari (1980, p. 472): "The nomad knows how to wait, he has infinite patience."

In a way, we come back to the old world of 'families', that of servants, of a domesticity. But this domesticity is not a place here and a time now for those involved in it. It is more and more a comfort for others, farther and later. Those likely to exploit the data.

Maybe it is time to contest and question politically the most intimate time-space we share with those and that closest to us? Maybe it is time, in the studies and experimentations about so called new ways of working and living, to elaborate of politics of home? A politics of home and homing grounded into nomadology.

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