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Powerful Assemblages?

Draft paper for *Area* - special section on *Assemblage and Geography*.

Eds. Ben Anderson and Colin McFarlane

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Introduction

When a novel term enters the geographical lexicon it is often greeted by many within the discipline, quite reasonably, with a degree of organized skepticism. ‘Assemblage’ is just such a term. If its use is to amount to more than a passing fad or intellectual fashion, then it should perhaps allow us to do certain things and enable us to think in certain ways that were not possible before. As Ben Anderson and Colin McFarlane suggest in their introduction, the task is not so much one of pinning down the ‘correct’ definition of assemblage or simply declaring a certain fidelity to Deleuze’s vocabulary, as it is one of exploring what avenues of enquiry are opened up and what questions are made possible by thinking through social and material formations as assemblages. In what follows, I first set out what I take to be one of the terms main attractions: that it offers the possibility of grasping how something as heterogeneous as nation states, for instance, or regional political formations, hold together *without* actually ceasing to be heterogeneous. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988; see also Deleuze and Parnet, 1987). The implications of this somewhat paradoxical stance are then considered for what they raise about how spatial and temporal orders may be understood and engaged. Finally, and briefly, some of the potential pitfalls of the term, its scope and limitations, are discussed. Throughout the paper I draw upon examples from the geographies of power and authority to illustrate my line of thought.

Holding it all together

Perhaps one of the first things to understand about assemblages, or if not to understand then at least acknowledge, is what, for me, is their guiding sentiment. For much of the time, the geography of this or that is made up of relationships and things that jostle, co-exist, interfere and

entangle one another. Some of the tangled relationships that lie before us may co-exist uneasily with one another, to the extent that it may seem odd that they are part of the same formation. The heterogeneity of such arrangements can throw into question the very idea that there is such a coherent and consistent formation out there or, indeed, that it is possible even to talk about such a given entity. In such circumstances, we may find ourselves forced to choose between a motley world of contingent practices which never amount to anything more than that or a tight seamless world of well-defined shifts and formations. Working with the notion of assemblage allows us to avoid such extremes, not by adding them together or splicing, say, the local and the global, but by facing up to the possibility that heterogeneous elements can hold together *without* actually forming a coherent whole.

The idea that institutional arrangements of power, for example, can more or less hold together, despite being made up of a co-existence of diverse logics and priorities, often pulling in different directions, suggests something of the tenuous achievement that institutions can display in achieving consistency across their practices. A UK region like the South East of England, for instance, is made up of bits and pieces of state authority, sections of business and any number of partnerships and agencies engaged in a 'politics of scale' exercise to fix resources and stabilize a geographical definition of the region to their advantage (see Allen and Cochrane, 2007). The sense in which there is a regional 'assemblage', however, rather than a geographically tiered hierarchy of decision making, lies with the tangle of interactions between part-private, part-public agencies, as well as parts of central, regional and local government 'lodged' in the region. The interplay of forces between these diverse actors is precisely what makes different kinds of regional government possible, but crucially this does not mean to say that the arrangement is itself institutionally coherent or without tension.

On this view, a regional authority is a relational effect of political interaction between a range of central, regional and local actors, not a bloc of pre-formed decision-making powers. It hangs together institutionally, not by the imposition of powers 'from above' or by the diktats of a ruling clique, but through the tangled and cross-cutting political relationships between actors engaged in a complex set of political mobilizations to secure, modify or translate their goals and interests. Central government actors, in that sense, are part of 'regional' assemblages, not bodies that sit over or apart from the region. Their manoeuvres and negotiations are entangled in regional governance structures and it is through such relationships that the constraints and impositions of the 'centre' are revealed. Just because the central state is 'higher up', institutionally and geographically, does not pre-judge whose will eventually prevails; in a regional assemblage that is an outcome to be unraveled from the tangled practices of power and authority. (The apparent 'flatness' to this arrangement, where outcomes are not pre-determined or assumed to be top-down, is what I take Jones, Woodward and Marston (2007) to imply in their critique of geographical scale).

Significantly, one can think as much about regional political formations in this way, as a tangled assemblage of relationships and practices, as one can think about any powerful arrangement which hangs together as an assorted heterogeneous mix of power and authority: from, say, the changing organization of finance and corporate business in a more demanding economic world to the shifting tactics of civil society movements in response to global harm and injustice. The mix assembled may be different, but the arrangements themselves hold together nonetheless as some form of consistent, if not coherent, entity.

Yet, critically, this does not mean that such assembled parties form a whole which is entirely separate and discrete in their relationships and practices. The open-ended nature of such

formations means that the same actors and institutions may find themselves entangled in quite different ways in more than one economic or political assemblage. In one particular setting, the relationship between a private business, say, and a regional development authority may revolve around the negotiation and inducement of waste contracts, yet that very same corporate firm may find itself the target of a bitter campaign against environmental malpractice by a distant NGO in a quite different setting. Each assembled heterogeneous mix of power is constructed through its relationships and interactions, and as those interactions change so, potentially, do the actors and materials in the arrangement (see, for instance, Bennett, 2010, on powerful human and non-human assemblages). What can be assembled to explore a particular avenue of enquiry may be reassembled to pursue another quite different set of questions and relationships.

In the absence of any off-the-shelf wholes, whose properties, as Manuel De Landa (2006) would have it, cannot be reduced to those of its parts, we are left to trace connections and relationships, and that, in turn, raises the nature of the time frames and spatial orders of the actors assembled in the different power plays.

Assembling parts of elsewhere

Insofar as relationships of whatever kind are assembled across space and over time, the fact that there may be a mix of space/times embedded in the practices of the diverse actors which give shape to regional political (Allen and Cochrane, 2007) or, for that matter, environmental assemblages (Li, 2007) should alert us to the fact that we have moved beyond the mappable coordinates and distances of Euclid. A world in which power and authority is easily locatable and capable of extension over fixed distances with more or less uncomplicated reach over a given territory sits awkwardly alongside a geography of co-existence and entanglement where

proximity and presence are themselves not straightforward givens. When heterogeneous bits and pieces of power and authority hold together because, rather than in spite, of a clash of diverse logics and practices, the geography itself only really starts to make sense in a world of relational space/time (see Harvey, 2006; Massey, 2007).

A recent attempt to capture such a mixed spatial and temporal assemblage can be found in Saskia Sassen's *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (2006), where 'global' financial centres like the City of London are said to reveal a new geography of power. The financial formations that she has in mind are, for her, configurations of territory, authority and rights that combine older elements of legal and bureaucratic governance with new economic capabilities and norms drawn from elsewhere. Part private, part public, with bits and pieces of institutional authority, legal rights and territorial infrastructure, the emergent assemblage, which is neither 'national' nor 'global', represents an unstable power formation in the making. The instability, however, is not only a product of co-existing economic, political and legal relationships which rub up against one another; it is also because such relationships are deemed to operate according to quite different temporal rhythms and paces that have the potential to clash in ways which, in her terms, 'unbundle' formerly exclusive financial spaces like the City of London.

The open-ended nature of such formations implies that, over time, relationships folded in from elsewhere may work to disassemble and reassemble 'national regional' or 'global regional' spaces like the City. The mix of space/times embedded in the practices of different actors – from global banks and supranational institutions to state agencies and regulatory authorities – take their shape from the variety of relations that stretch across and beyond the Square Mile and the Docklands, yet are simultaneously 'lodged' within those urban spaces (see Allen and Cochrane,

2011). The ‘lifting out’ of forms of private authority from one context to another made possible by new networked arrangements provides a kind of arm’s-length reach into financial centres, whilst the ability to establish near instantaneous reach through a variety of telecommunication and media technologies enables actors to connect in real time (see Callon and Law, 2004; Allen, 2010).

Bruno Latour (1999, 2005) perhaps, rather than Sassen, is better at grasping the topological nature of such intensive relationships, where forms of rule-setting established elsewhere are folded into the here and now and the gap between ‘near’ and ‘far’ dissolved, rather than traversed. When relationships are understood topologically, presence and absence are reconfigured so that the distance between ‘here and there’ or between ‘the local and the global’ is not anything that can be measured in miles and kilometers. The way that things hold together in assemblages is down to their relatedness, so to speak, rather than simply their topographical setting and location. In that sense, geometric scale and the idea that actors move up and down them, or ‘jump’ them even, is somewhat misplaced, as is the conventional assumption that power and authority is something that can merely be extended outwards through networks across a flat surface (see Allen, 2009, 2011, forthcoming).

Flat-pack geographies?

It is perhaps a banal observation, but no less important for that, to note that carving out assemblages from the plethora of stuff around us is a fallible business. There is no blueprint to follow, only suggestive guidelines as to how one might possibly approach such a task (see, for instance, Law, 2004, on method assemblages). Nor does it follow that thinking through assemblages is always the most helpful way to approach geographical questions and puzzles;

philosophical eclecticism may sometimes be the more appropriate stance. That said, two possible pitfalls or shortcomings associated with the use of assemblages come to mind, the scars of which I still bear.

One concerns the ease with which the notion of assemblage lends itself to endless description. . . . If we succumb too readily to the ontological certainty that the world is heterogeneous, multiple and contingent, it is all too easy to follow our senses and piece together what can best be described as a nominalistic mess. Experience, and our attempts to assemble the bits and pieces of the world 'out there', is best not thought about as an exercise akin to a flat-pack construction. Second, and relatedly, there remains a place for rigour and conceptualization in the construction of heterogeneous assemblages. The significance of what lies before us cannot simply be taken for granted, nor should everyday certainties be accepted as such. A tangled bundle of co-existing logics, each beating to its own rhythm, has first to be apprehended before it can be comprehended. With luck, looming assemblages, sharply conceived, should open up new questions, as well as new forms of engagement, not merely tell us what we have known more or less all along. If it turns out to be the latter, then they are indeed likely to end up a passing intellectual fashion.

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