**Assemblage urbanism**

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**Main text**

Nowhere is “thrown-togetherness” truer than in the increasingly globalizing cities, which challenge our understanding of cities premised on a dualist thinking of global–local, structure–agency, and social–material. Assemblage has been called on to envisage cities as imbroglios of flows and networks (Amin and Thrift 2002). Derived from post-structuralist ideas, the term is used to stress emergence, multiplicity, and indeterminacy.

Assemblage was first introduced by Deleuze and Guattari (1987:406), who used the term *agencement* (French for assemblage) to highlight the way in which human and non-human components, including actors, discursive elements (statements, plans, and policies) and materials (nature, infrastructure, etc.), are linked in a *rhizomatic* network. Assemblage components “from near and far” made up of “fixed and mobile expertise and regulations” are always in the process of “coming together (territorialization), just as [they are] always also potentially pulling apart (de-territorialization)”. In this light, an assemblage describes the dynamic process of constellation in which a composition of heterogeneous elements forms a provisional socio-spatial relation but is always subject to change.

**Application of assemblage to urban studies and the varying treatments**

In urban studies, assemblage is employed in large loosely related bodies of work that focus on relational thinking. These studies include actor network theory (ANT), non-representational thinking, “new materialist” geographies, politics of knowledge, among others. After Latour’s (2005) celebrated book *Reassembling the Social* that introduces the ANT, relational thinking has attracted growing attention in urban studies. The different human and non-human elements are entangled in assemblage as they have been frequently demonstrated. However, we can still roughly discern two priorities through “the things” studies follow: those that follow material elements and those that follow discursive elements.

The new materialist geographies call for a shift from humanistic reading of cities to a technological one of cities by exploring the entanglement of social–material factors in
urban assemblage. Graham and Marvin’s (2002) seminal book *Splintering Urbanism* remains one of the most influential works that introduced ANT to urban infrastructures studies. This book questions the usual assumption that takes urban infrastructures, such as telecommunications, transport, energy, and water waste networks, as public goods to deliver services to everyone and as networks that bridge connections within and across administrative territories. Using ANT, the hidden associations were unraveled between infrastructure projects and particular social groups with invested interests, which fragment the urban space into enclaves. In this network of enclaves, “new technologies are widely being adopted to allow favoured, rich and highly mobile travellers to pass seamlessly and quickly through ports, airports and rail terminals, whilst other passengers face traditional, and in many cases intensifying, scrutiny (Graham and Marvin 2002:37).” Moreover, it also ensures profit maximization for some industrial sectors by purposefully splitting continuous land into separate precincts of valuable and valueless, high-tech and low-tech, and rich and poor. These sociotechnical geometries of power embody congealed social interests and operate to customize corporate, consumption, transit, and exchange spaces.

Other influential works include Braun et al.’s collection *Political Matter* that questions the relations between scientific and political practices and ordering and Swyngedouw’s recent work *Liquid Power* that mainly examines the process of assembling hydraulic, social, cultural, and political process in a hydro-social constellations. In this light, materials, technologies, and science are not neutral but are objects of politics through a diversity of arrangements and practices.

The attention to mobility of knowledge has been productive, whereas the concepts of global assemblage (Ong and Collier 2005) and worlding (Roy and Ong 2011) require continuous efforts to explore new eventful and emergent modalities of power in ordinary cities. Studies on policy mobility and fast policy transfer (McCann and Ward 2011, Peck and Theodore 2015) explore the variegated forms of territorial governance in the broader context of capitalism.

Studies on policy mobility and fast policy transfer explore how “innovative” ideas, fast policies, and “best practice” models have travelled across global networks established by actors operating at different scales, including supranational organizations, mayors, consultants, and others. These policies include programs such as conditional cash transfers, business improvement districts, drug policies, urban regeneration of Bilbao, mega-events, and creative cities, as well as planning concepts such as new urbanism. The main concern is how policy models have been extracted from their origin and how the mutated or re-invented versions have been territorialized and perhaps exported again.

Rejecting the readings of globalization by both the political economy and the post-colonialist schools, Ong and Roy’s collection of “worlding cities” suggests
assemblage as an alternative approach. For Ong, things to follow are not singular logics but worlding practices: “non-ideological formulation of worlding” that usually rests in “the array of problem-solving and spatializing practices” that “creatively imagine worlds - [rather] than what already exists in a given context.” These practices include hyper-building fever in the fierce competition among rival cities, the “garden city” developmental model of Singapore that claims state capability of transforming a third-world city to a first-world one, waterfront lights in Vancouver and Dubai that combines the nostalgia of ethnic groups and a multicultural cosmopolitan city imaginary, and the posters showing world-class cities in Mumbai. Derived from post-structuralist ideas on emergence and eventfulness, worlding practices convert cities into milieus of intervention and fields of political regulation. They attempt to serve the local political intentions to claim the emergence of the local on the global landscape and perhaps reshape the geography of power.

Both strands of studies share the premise that knowledge, practices, and policies are mobile elements that travel across different decision-making fields and assemble in local political and economic contexts, the political economy approach posits global networks flows in the structure of capitalism whereas the global assemblage approach tends to argue for a shift from an analytics of structure to an analytics of assemblage, thus rejecting the assumption of “universal laws” and predictable outcomes. Given the different standings, they defer in how assemblage is treated.

Assemblage has been employed in a growing body of studies, but in different ways. Major treatments include using assemblage as method or descriptor, as ontology, and as ethos.

First, the school of political economy views assemblage as a largely descriptive approach or an indiscriminating methodology that is open to mobile elements (actors, discourse, and materials). For McFarlane, it is used as a noun rather than as a verb. In this account, assemblage describes the various forms of provisional unity across different territories. While acknowledging the dynamic mobility of ideas, policies, and actors on all scales, this account stresses the importance of politics in the twin processes of mobility and territorialization. The channel for policy mobility is politically constructed. Therefore, assemblage is used as a methodology that is “equally sensitive to the role of relational and territorial geographies, of fixity and flow, of global contexts and place-specificities, of structural imperatives and embodied practices” (McCann and Ward 2011:175).

Second, assemblage is used as ontology to construct a new way of understanding cities. McFarlane (2011) suggests that the French word *agencement* used by Deleuze perhaps better captures its core as it denotes the contingent process of aligning diverse heterogeneous elements into a provisional and temporal unity. What
McFarlane (2011, 4) stresses is the process, during which “multiple bits-and-pieces accrete and align over time to enable particular forms of urbanism over others” and how such processes may be “subject to disassembly and reassembly.” In a similar vein, Ong considers assemblage as an oblique point of entry that offers a shift from the dualistic analytics of structure and agency to the analytics of assemblage. She views cities as interconnected nodes of circulation that are situated while proactively engaging in the unstable global constellation of power relations. The interplays between global norms/logic and situated calculation of territorial regimes divide the local territory and society, leading to varying and unexpected outputs instead of predictable ones.

The third way of treating assemblage is ethos. Assemblage provides an orientation for research and more importantly, action, and therefore “opens the researchers up to risk, embraces uncertainty, expresses something of the fragility of composition (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:83).” Such a calling resonates with the argument of reflexive science that intervention is not only unavoidable but also a virtue to be appropriated in social research. For instance, the Extended Case Method, which is developed upon the reflexive argument, has been widely deployed in assemblage studies.

**Academic questions: from labor of agency to geography of knowledge**

First, one of the major concern is the hard labor of agency that assemble and re-assembles heterogeneous elements. McFarlane argues that the axis that distinguishes assemblage as a noun from that as a verb “involves a distinctions between (re)territorialising and deterritorialising movements as heterogeneous parts come together and come apart (p. 125).” Laclau and Mouffe (1985) describe a similar process of forming a hegemonic power: the practical accomplishment of urban governance requires a series of dispersed elements (e.g., political interests, rationalities, technologies, and realms of policy intervention) to be drawn into relation and articulated into a concrete conjuncture or a “nodal point” at which identities and relations are temporarily fixed. Therefore, assemblage is a dynamic and provisional process that relies on the hard labor of agencies.

The critical question for the hard labor of agency is “how”. Tania Li (2007) proposes a six-step practice that is generic to assemblages: 1) forging alignment, 2) rendering technical, 3) authoritarizing knowledge, 4) managing failure and contradictions, 5) anti-politics, and 6) reassembling. In other words, assemblage begins with alliance making between the rulers and the ruled, and it is followed by the technical and scientific problematization of the current practices in the city, be it a model of economy or a value of daily life. After the problem is identified, particular knowledge is then deemed necessary and proper for intervention. The fourth and fifth steps deal with failures and subversions, if any, respectively, by delimiting everything within the technical domain rather than the political domain. The last step of reassembling
enables regimes to move on to another round with new elements, new objectives, and so on.

The attention to hard labor of agency requires substantial studies on the situated regime and its calculations. As argued in global assemblage (2011), the advantage of the assemblage approach is its sensitivity to the various encounters between flows and situated aspirations and practices. Global assemblage requires one to look into the sites or milieus in which abstractable global forms are re-articulated and re-assembled by situated regimes to problematize local values, individual or collective, and consequently reduce them to technological, cultural and ethical problem-solving interventions.

Second, assemblage keeps researchers to be open to unexpected elements. Therefore, it exposes researchers to the complexity of actors, objectives, and means of actions. Li’s study uncovers the political alignments of government departments, conservationists, technical experts and activists, donor agencies, and villagers in the case of forest management. There are asylum-seekers, illegal migrants, and low-budget traders assembling in Chungking Mansion, forming the well-known ghetto at the heart of the world. If we take globalization as the circulation of capital, goods, ideas, and people, we will likely find only a partial understanding of the world by examining cities through the lens of high-profile vectors of global intersection such as in high financial and transnational companies. Policy mobility studies also caution the complexity of actors. The actors involved may come from various social fractures and function at different levels of decision-making, including city mayors and mid-level technocrats such as engineers as embodied agents.

Third, studies on the political economy school reiterate the importance of context, and thus more effort is required in the geography of knowledge. The process of policy mobilization, mutation, and realization has always been structured by power relations in the broader context of capitalism. The geography of knowledge maps out the unequal relationship between the two destinations of the flow of knowledge. For Peck (2011), the geography of knowledge reflects the constant search for a new spatial fix through transnational capital, thus determining the direction of the flow. The network is where officials often engage in what Clarke (1985) calls “policy tourism,” the practice of policy professionals who undertake “a brief and guided engagement with a mythologized, exoticised, spectacularised city.” Upon traveling through global networks, policies, expertise, and best practices do not move only to ensure efficient learning and application. Instead, the process entails the reconstitution of the fields of power because the network and circulatory systems between two destinations deliberately construct, are subject to, and in return remake the symbolic power relations of various decision-making fields. Through networks that connect places by virtue of the symbolic power carried by such networks in the first place, they create mental maps of “best cities” for policies that inform future strategies. Cities are constituted through their relations to other places and scales.
This approach compels us to focus on the networks of connection, exchange, and circulation in which such “policy packages” travel and transform.

Fourth, assemblages create territories. In the past decade, relational thinking witnessed a growing number of urban geographers who use assemblage to challenge other spatial concepts, such as scale, territory, and region, which assume the bounded, fixed, and hierarchical features of a place. The related concept of topology is introduced to help frame the relational thinking of cities. In topological thinking of territory, cities are taken as “a subtle folding together of the distant and the proximate, the virtual and the material, presence and absence, (and) flow and stasis” (Amin 2007:103). The new territories and modalities of power assemble the so-called advanced modes of production, expertise in soft and/or hard infrastructure building, modern science and technology, values, norms, authorities, and interest groups to repair the ills of society, fix the economy, and materialize political imaginary.

Future directions in research, theory, and methodology

Although a growing number of scholars agree that cities are best conceptualized as both relational and territorial, arguments exist on how to address the series of binaries used to assume structure–agency and fluidity–fixity, among others. Continuous effort is required to deepen our understanding of cities as the intersection of networked topology and local legacies (Amin, 2007, p. 103) or what scholars call the “relationality/territorality dialectic” of contemporary urbanisms.

Aside from that, the fragility and provisionality of assemblage has not been paid attention it deserves. As pointed out by Li (2007), assemblage has cases of failure and subversions that illustrate the provisionality of the assembled whole. Nevertheless, studies on gaps, fissures, failure and subversion remain fragmented.

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References


Suggested Readings


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