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What is This?

Assemblage

George E. Marcus and Erkan Saka

Abstract This article shows how, in recent works of cultural analysis, the concept of 'assemblage' has been been derived from key sources of theory and put to work to provide a structure-like surrogate to express certain prominent values of a modernist sensibility in the discourse of description and analysis. Assemblage is a sort of anti-structural concept that permits the researcher to speak of emergence, heterogeneity, the decentred and the ephemeral in nonetheless ordered social life. There are other related concepts, like collage, which have been used to give these values substance in research, but currently assemblage is enjoying a popularity perhaps because of the continuing fascination of the work of Deleuze and Guattari.

Keywords collage, Deleuze and Guattari, emergence, ethnography, heterogeneity, neologism

Certain influential tendencies of theory over the past two decades have encouraged a focus of attention in research about social process and cultural meaning on the ephemeral, the emergent, the evanescent, the decentered and the heterogeneous, all the while not giving up on a long-established commitment to account for the structured and systematic in social life. These essential characteristics of modernist perceptions of contemporary life in urban/industrial civilization, developed mostly in literature, art and architecture, first in the 19th century, and then much elaborated by early 20th-century avant-gardes in these fields, have finally entered into the more staid traditions of social theory that have regulated the disciplinary research programs and empirical investigations of the social sciences. This entry of modernist sensibility into empirical research traditions did not occur so much through epochal problems that researchers were having with macrotheories or grand narratives (e.g. Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Freud, Parsons). To be sure, these were indeed thoroughly challenged by the spread of and fashion for post-structuralist thinkers, for example, but the reception of such critiques by researchers was often on a level that did not transform the basic frameworks and habits of research. What really mattered has been how researchers in different methodological and disciplinary traditions (and here we will have anthropological ethnography primarily in mind) have operationalized their understandings of the bodies of theory that carried a modernist aesthetic, how they practice so-called theory of the 'middle range', in which they create concepts for their purposes by deriving them from the alternative authority of macro counter-discourses that invest in the emergent and the heterogeneous.

This process of derivation and invention of conceptual apparatuses for particular contemporary research programs of a modernist sensibility, which are still shaped by macrotheoretical traditions, but have abandoned the theories (or conceptual apparatuses) of the middle range that have served them, is a fascinating, relatively unstudied phenomenon. While not one of the prime or key terms of recent and past discourses of theory in the social sciences, like rights, agency, culture, practice, etc., assemblage in its uses here and there is actually keenly symptomatic of one of the major, if not the major, thrust of critical social and cultural theory toward the emphasis on the modernist focusing of attention on the always-emergent conditions

of the present. Pragmatically, it has become a concept that seemingly offers hope of a working access to the difficult and elusive objects that the modernist influenced sensibility to research in the contemporary, in ruptured relation to major traditions of social theory, has imagined. Assemblage is not the only such term in use. Collage, for example, is a closely related one. Sometimes writers create neologisms for the same work of revising theory for the purposes at hand. But within this predicament of the use of theory in research to materialize a modernist object of study, assemblage is a kind of distinctive choice of concept.

Assemblage is thus a resource with which to address in analysis and writing the modernist problem of the heterogeneous within the ephemeral, while preserving some concept of the structural so embedded in the enterprise of social science research. Indeed, the term itself in its material referent invests easily in the image of structure, but is nonetheless elusive. The time-space in which assemblage is imagined is inherently unstable and infused with movement and change. Assemblage thus seems structural, an object with the materiality and stability of the classic metaphors of structure, but the intent in its aesthetic uses is precisely to undermine such ideas of structure. It generates enduring puzzles about 'process' and 'relationship' rather than leading to systematic understandings of these tropes of classic social theory and the common discourse that it has shaped. It offers an odd, irregular, time-limited object for contemplation. Whoever employs it does so with a certain tension, balancing, and tentativeness where the contradictions between the ephemeral and the structural, and between the structural and the unstably heterogeneous create almost a nervous condition for analytic reason. Indeed, one might argue that once relaxed in terms of the heightened tension it promotes, assemblage becomes something more sober like actor-network theory. The latter is a conceptual apparatus somewhat more domesticated to classic theory, and thus easier to map, describe and hold stable. For the sake of mapping a time-space and stabilizing its dynamics for modeling, so to speak, it relaxes precisely those dimensions of modernist perceived realities that the use of the concept of assemblage retains.

There is an ambiguity in the referential frames in the uses of assemblage. It can refer to a subjective state of cognition and experience of society and culture in movement from a recent past toward a near future (the temporal span of emergence); or it can refer to objective relations, a material, structure-like formation, a describable product of emergent social conditions, a configuration of relationships among diverse sites and things. In contemporary anthropological or cultural studies writing, its reference can shift from the cognition or textual plan of the analyst and writer, to the attributed cognition/experience of the subject, to a perspective on the heterogeneity of a distinctive heterogeneity of a form or object in a phase of develop-ment or 'becoming'. And of course, if not explicitly delineated, it can refer to all of these at once.

In the sorting out of these overlaps in actual cases of the use of assemblage in creating the conceptual scaffolding of research material and experience, the specific cases of deployment of the term can be traced genealogically to either a generic and rather ideological appropriation of the term as a desired association with or inspirational connection to the art, architecture and literary spheres of its creation (see for example Seitz, 1961; Elderfield, 1992; Waldman, 1992), or else to a much more rigorous and exegetical derivation from the work of Deleuze and Guattari (Deleuze primarily, see for example Deleuze and Parnet, 1987, Deleuze and Guattari, 2003, and esp. DeLanda, 2002). It is through the high theory appropriations of assemblage from modernist aesthetics by Deleuze and Guattari that virtually all substantive middle-range theory conceptual work that has employed assemblage in specific recent projects of research has in turn come. However, as expressed in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari see themselves as opening a radical or deviant current, primarily through Spinoza and Nietzsche, in relation to this modernist tradition.

The looser, more inspirational evocations of the ethos of the practice of assemblage from the aesthetic sphere have not been unimportant, but simply less substantive and less relevant if one wants to weigh the more intricate ways that the term has conceptually influenced the practice of research and analysis in fields like anthropology and cultural studies. Indeed, as an

ideological exemplar of modernist experimentation in conceiving the project of social and cultural research as well as its textual projects and writing strategies, in marking departures from standard genres (for anthropology, see Clifford and Marcus, 1986), the evocation of assemblage has been very important. In such writing and analytic strategies, there is often a presumption that the heterogeneous form of the text mimics or is homologous to the forms that the modernist subjects and objects of study take in the world. Assemblage is an experimental genre form that is thus organic to the contours of the object of study. This kind of experimental practice of assemblage, and the utopic hopes that it signified, was very characteristic of academic interdisciplinary writing during the 1980s and early 1990s, but is much less so now. At the time, I (Marcus) wrote of this trend of writing across a number of fields (as I saw it, a kind of text production pioneered in comparative literature departments and cultural studies programs and then absorbed into traditions of ethnographic writing) as the production of messy texts (Marcus, 1993). The work of scholarship as assemblage would have done as well, if not even better, in communicating the sensibility and hopes then in play.

Much more consequential for current research projects, however, are the derivations of uses of the concept of assemblage for the needs of middle-range theorizing within such projects by way of the specific influence of the works of Deleuze and Guattari. Manuel De Landa (2002) provides the most thorough interpretation of the technical, abstract and formal use of assemblage in the Deleuzian schema (we owe much of the following explanation to James Faubion). Assemblage is the source of emergent properties of what Deleuze and Guatarri call machinic processes. Assemblage is a topological concept that designates the actualizations of the virtual causes or causal processes that are immanent in an open system of intensities that is under the influence of a force that is external (or heterogeneous) in relation to it. Assemblages are thus the causally productive (machinic) result of the intersection of two open systems, and their properties are emergent in the sense in which that concept is deployed in logic, that is, not part of, and so not foreseeable in light of, either one or the other system considered in isolation, but instead only discernible as a result of the intersection of both such systems. Specifically, Deleuze and Guattari's 'desiring machines' are assemblages, and it is in the nature of such machines to break down, evoking a principle of entropy. Assemblages are thus finite, but they have no specific or distinctive life-span; they do not have a specific temporality. Furthermore, assemblages have no essence (nor does anything else in Deleuze's universe). The assemblage is productive of difference (non-repetition). It is the ground and primary expression of all qualitative difference.

None of the derivations of assemblage from Deleuze and Guattari of which we are aware is based on such a technical and formal analysis of how this concept functions in their writing. Few in the social sciences who have found the modernist sensibilities embedded in the concepts that Deleuze and Guattari deploy for their purposes to be attractive have appreciated, understood or incorporated those purposes in their own. Rather, it has been the power and often beguiling attraction of Deleuze and Guattari's language that has encouraged the piecemeal appropriation of certain concepts for the remaking of middle-range theorizing that informs contemporary research projects. Certainly it has been Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of states of temporal instability as emergence, combined with the heterogeneous as a productive property of the interaction of open systems, which are key ideas packed into their notion of the assemblage, that has made the latter an attractive concept with which to work in expressing these values and states within the basic conceptual apparatuses across an array of contemporary research projects with a modernist sensibility, marked by concerns with delineating the becoming of new social and cultural formations. The idea of assemblage has been variably used in such projects to express something of the modernist condition of particular subjects and objects of study along the dimensions of the temporal, the material, the relational and the perceptual.

In sum, Deleuze and Guatarri, in their use of assemblage as well as of the other concepts of their theoretical apparatus, mediate the two classic varieties of modernist thought: the playful and critically aesthetic (of the 'art and architecture' tradition of modernism) and the

formal and technical (of math, set theory, topology). The one indulges and even celebrates the intractably unpredictable and contingent in rapidly changing contemporary life; the other hopes for an understanding of the structural principles of order (and disorder) within the play of events and processes. These strands are evocatively condensed in the idea of assemblage and are indeed what gives the term power in its multiple borrowings in the work of bringing self-critiqued classic social theory to projects of contemporary research on culture. Assemblage, inspired by its specific use in Deleuze and Guatarri, is thus a resource to preserve a mix of the aesthetic and the structural in the current sustained revival of modernist thought as an alternative, supplement or antidote to the dominance of classic traditions of European social theory.

As an index of the use of assemblage, the following are very brief renditions of works that we have encountered in just over the past two years (2003–4) that employ the notion of assemblage as part of their conceptual apparatus (and traceable to their engagement with Deleuze and Guattari as source).

1. *Anthropos Today* by Paul Rabinow (2003). In an ambitious effort to rethink the basic terms of ethnographic research based on his recent researches in science studies, Rabinow borrows assemblage from Deleuze and Guattari to constitute his object of study between more conceptually stable states of 'problematization' and 'apparatus' (Foucaultian concepts). As he says:

> My recent anthropological inquiries have taken as their primary object 'assemblages.' Assemblages are secondary matrices from within which apparatuses emerge and become stabilized or transformed. Assemblages stand in a dependent but contingent relationship to the grander problematizations. . . . They are a distinctive type of experimental matrix of heterogeneous elements, techniques, and concepts. . . . They are comparatively effervescent, disappearing in years, decades, rather than centuries. Consequently, the temporality of assemblages is qualitatively different from that of either problematizations or apparatuses. (2003: 56)

Not an independent concept in his scheme, assemblage is nonetheless a crucial one for Rabinow in establishing the temporality of emergence in his research and in giving a structural quality to a contingent object of heterogeneous relations.

2. *Global Assemblages*, edited by Aihwa Ong and Stephen Collier (2004). Based on a conference in Prague, the articles in this book try to provide a comprehensive anthropological framework for the study of globalization, a very translocal phenomenon, from the habit of local, intensive studies, so characteristic of ethnographic research. As Ong and Collier say in their introductory chapter:

> . . . the chapters that follow focus on how global forms interact with other elements, occupying a common field in contingent, uneasy, unstable interrelationships. The product of these interactions might be called the actual global, or the global in the space of assemblage. In relationship to 'the global,' the global is not a 'locality' to which broader forces are counterposed. Nor is it the structural effect of such forces. An assemblage is the product of multiple determinations that are not reducible to a single logic. The temporality of an assemblage is emergent. It does not always involve new forms, but forms that are shifting, in formation, or at stake. As a composite concept, the term 'global assemblage' suggests inherent tensions: global implies broadly encompassing, seamless, and mobile; assemblage implies heterogeneous, contingent, unstable, partial, and situated. (2004: 12)

For the work of this volume, then, the use of assemblage does the work of giving the editors a manifesto-like vocabulary in terms of which they hope the reader can assimilate the diverse contributions of the collection (none of which themselves actually operationalize assemblage as a sustained analytic tool). The use of assemblage to grasp globalization provides the editors with a frame of specific complexity around the vision of unstable, heterogeneous structure.

3. *Ordinary Impacts: The Affective Life of US Public Culture*, by Kathleen Stewart (2004,

unpublished manuscript). This is an effort to write systematically about the emotional qualities of everyday life for ordinary people in the contemporary United States. In a sense, Stewart's career-long ethnographic work has been a effort to develop frames and vocabularies for communicating a sense of this place-based experience through her fieldwork participations. In a background and referenced way, Stewart has been very influenced by her reading of Deleuze and Guattari in writing this manuscript. Her occasional reference to assemblage arises in this context:

> This is a story of an everyday life buoyed and pierced by surging affects. Its obsession is with countless points of intensity that twist and turn with the forces at work in ordinary lives: volatile imaginaries, dense materializations, and the direct excitation of the senses. . . . It takes place in a United States caught in a long, still-unfolding present that began some time ago. A time when a wide mix of disparate forms and realms of life – technologies, sensibilities, flows of power and money, daydreams, institutions, dramas, bodily states, modes of attention, and ways of experiencing time and space – began to articulate (and disarticulate) into (and out of) a loose but sensate assemblage. . . . The assemblage of forces at work in the ongoing present was highly abstract and wholly concrete; it was literally constituted in the density and texture of things in their particularity: the affects, the technologies, the bodies, the events.

Stewart is after a particular kind of aesthetics in her manuscript. Assemblage is performed rather than analytically evoked, and it is primarily the perceptual qualities that surround the concept (in the Delueuze and Guattari corpus) in which Stewart is most interested.

   4. '(Un)masking the Agent: Distributed Cognition in Stanislaw Lem's "The Mask"', by N. Katherine Hayles (2006). Hayles is perhaps the premier writer out of literary studies who has been examining the implications of new technologies of life forms for the human (or the post-human) as this core trope has been developed by the humanities. In her work, she is constantly rearticulating dimensions of modernist sensibilities in considering advances in cognitive, information and biological sciences, and the emergent futures they portend. In this article, Deleuze and Guattari are a strong influence on her. The idea of assemblage informs her expressions of emergent machinic life forms.

   As she says:

> . . . we experience the dissolution of subjectivity urged by Deleuze and Guattari and mutate into machines running cellular automat programs. . . . Assemblages are the active enlistment of external objects into the human cognitive system. Although we can still exercise conscious agency, it works in conjunction with preprogrammed routines within and without that also control the outcome, sometimes, decisively. . . . Cognition in the wild is not confined to mind alone but extends outward in flexible arrangements that bear more than passing resemblance to Deleuze and Guattari's assemblages.

Assemblage serves Hayles as a token of theoretical authority in the sphere of the humanities that links the vision of modernism to the new forms, driven by technology, to which it might refer in the emergent present. The materiality that the idea of assemblage evokes is important for Hayles' reference to the term, as is the notion of systematic, functional relationships between former incommensurables (humans and machines). The idea that our minds are part of distributed cognitive realities of not fully known dimensions is one with which classic modernism would be basically comfortable (to the extent that it envisions the dissolution of subjectivity), but perhaps not fully into the techno-machinic (post-human) situations in which human cognition is being shaped. Assemblage is both a comfortable and disturbing construct here. It mediates the transition of the categories of old modernist thinking into scenarios of machinic potentials in technological advance.

   Not exactly chimerical, the various uses of assemblage do the work of establishing a grounded imaginary for analysis that is true to the components of a modernist aesthetic that has so stimulated ethnography and related genres in recent decades. Yet as such, the employment

of assemblage is peculiarly subject to what Jon Elster called 'by-product states' – states of mind or existence 'that can never be brought about intelligently and intentionally because the attempt to do so precludes the very state that one is attempting to bring about'. Sustained analytic or theoretical use of this construct falls to a nervous condition, as we termed it earlier, of trying to stabilize an object or subject state that is inherently elusive (as in the famous 'all that is solid melts . . .' comment of Marx on the condition of modernity).

So assemblage is a strategically deployed but passing term that evokes conditions under modernist theoretical influences with structural allusions. If pushed too far, if insisted upon too literally – if it becomes anything more than an allusion – assemblage rapidly becomes a dead metaphor in one's work. At best, then, extracted from the Deleuzian theory machine and made to do conceptual work in specific projects of cultural analysis and research, assemblage functions best as an evocation of emergence and heterogeneity amid the data of inquiry, in relation to other concepts and constructs without rigidifying into the thingness of final or stable states that besets the working terms of classic social theory. Finally, in current predicaments of theory, assemblage as a conceptual resource has to do with the imaginaries for the shifting relations and emergent conditions of spatially distributed objects of study in the contemporary period of so-called globalization, which has heightened older modernist aesthetics of perception and given them fresh empirical challenges.

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