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UPROOTING CRITICAL URBANISM

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Abstract

This paper engages the debate between assemblage thinking as an emerging body of critical urban theory and the desire to contain it within a framework of urban political economy. I take critical urban theory to mean the broad intellectual engagement with the ways in which cities and urban spaces are implicated in practices of power. Assemblage thinking moves outside a strict political economy framework and embodies different ontologies of power and place, yet this is not a shift away from criticality. Such thinking connects disparate threads of current urban theory as it opens new modes of multi-scalar and multi-disciplinary research geared to urban design and planning practices and therefore to potentials for urban transformation. To contain emerging assemblage theory under political economy is to neuter it and potentially produce conservative forms of practice. The framework of urban political economy brings enormous explanatory power to our understanding of cities and will develop most effectively if it does not consume its offspring.

Assembling Theories

This paper is a response to McFarlane's proposal of assemblage thinking as critical urban theory and the counter from Brenner, Madden and Wachsmuth. McFarlane (2011) sets out three primary contributions of assemblage theory to critical urban theory. In sum he suggests that it reconfigures the methods and scales at which we conduct empirical research on the city to incorporate thick description and the microscale; it extends the notion of agency to built form and materiality; and it reinvigorates the urban imaginary, connecting critique into potential action. The response by Brenner et al. (2011) seeks to value such an approach for its new insights and methods, incorporating these within a political economy framework while rejecting any alternate ontology.

Deleuze once described his critiques of earlier philosophers (Spinoza, Bergson, Hume, Foucault) as a form of 'intellectual buggery' – approaching them from behind to produce intellectual offspring they had never intended (Massumi 1992: 2). With that warning I want to discuss one of the more interesting and cited theoretical papers of the past few years: 'Theorizing Sociospatial Relations' where Jessop, Brenner and Jones (2008) identify four key approaches to urban thinking – scale, territory, place and network – and argue for their integration into what they name the STPN framework. These are presented as overlapping and interconnecting bodies of theory that can benefit from the synergistic effects of an integrative framework. This is a fascinating prospect so far as it goes but it does not go much beyond a collection of pre-formed parts and some suggestive connections.

Network thinking is the paradigm within this framework most linked to assemblage theory, primarily in its Actor Network Theory variations. Here new forms of non-human agency are seen as embodied in things, spatial relations, buildings and technologies. While there are many overlaps of ANT with assemblage it is not wise to conflate them. As Thrift (2010) points out ANT has been most effectively applied in territorialized interiors such as trading rooms and laboratories rather than cities; there are modes of assemblage thinking aside from those in Farias and Bender's book (2010) and broader than the ANT or network paradigms (DeLanda 2006).

Territory is a fundamental category within assemblage thinking — assemblage as a verb is a territorializing process that takes part in a continuous movement of territorialization / deterritorialization / reterritorialization. This is a clear parallel to the creative destruction of markets that has played such a key role in critical urban theory; more processual than formal, focused on both construction and erasure of boundaries, and at every scale from the urinating dog to the nation. The study of the inscription of boundaries and spatial 'segmentarities' is crucially important and linked to the deterritorializations of markets and creative territorializations of architecture and urban design (Deleuze & Guattari 1987). Yet

in assemblage thinking such territorialization is as much an alignment of connections as a hardening of boundaries.

Place is a term that I have argued is largely synonymous with assemblage, indeed theories of place can be rescued from the charge of essentialism by replacing stabilized and essentialist Heideggerian ontology of being-in-the-world with a more Deleuzian notion of becoming-in-the-world (Dovey 2010: Ch 2). One of the published responses to the STPN framework was by Casey (2008: 403) who suggested that the framework contained a category mistake in that place subsumes the others: 'being itself ingredient in the other three dimensions, structuring them from within'. The prospect here is that anti-essentialist conceptions of place such as that developed by Massey (2005) can be further developed through assemblage theory in ways that cut across the subject/object and representation/materialist divisions.

Assemblage, like place, is a multi-scalar phenomenon that can be understood at the level of the building, street, neighbourhood, district and city. Most urban thinking within the scalar paradigm remains focused on hierarchies of scale and embodies a valorization of the large scale over the small. The superiority of the 'large-scale', 'worldwide' and 'broader' is a discursive thread that runs throughout the critique by Brenner et al. Within such a framework the microscale specificities of urban space, public/private interfaces, pedestrian networks and everyday urban experience are often reduced to epiphenomena of larger scale processes and structures. Assemblage thinking opposes the tree-like thinking that privileges change from above and focuses on understanding the relations and dynamics between scales as socio-spatial change spreads up, down and laterally. This entails attention to micro-spatialities that may seem like a fetish to those schooled in the traditions of political economy, but it is here that one often understands tactics and strategies of power embedded in the morphology of the city and the ways that an assemblage of small-scale adaptations can produce synergistic emergent effects at higher levels. Such multi-scalar thinking is inherently interdisciplinary and requires that we think across the fields of geography, urban planning, urban design, landscape and architecture — overturning any hegemony between fields.

Assemblage thinking requires that we resist the temptation to draw the explanatory conclusion before we have entered into the difficulty of things. Urban assemblages are enormously complex and another prospect opened up here is a fertile connection with complex adaptive systems and resilience theory. Complex adaptive systems theory migrates from the information sciences, natural systems and complexity theory and lacks social criticality. However, it shares with assemblage thinking a source in the work of Bateson (2000 [1972]) and a focus on non-linear logic, self-organization, emergent effects, cycles of transformation and multi-scalar analysis. I have suggested elsewhere that the 'complex adaptive assemblage' is a better phrase in the urban and social context because it avoids confusion with Habermasian notions of 'system' with connotations of hierarchy and scale (Dovey forthcoming).

Power

One fundamental way in which assemblage thinking contributes to critical thinking and differs from much urban political economy, lies in a reconception of power. The Deleuzian conception of power relies in large part on Foucault's work on power as distributed micropractices that are insinuated within the field of operation rather than simply held by agents. For Deleuze this goes well beyond the production of the disciplined subject to link power to flows of desire and processes of becoming. In assemblage theory power is immanent to the assemblage, it operates and mutates through the connections between sociality/spatiality, people/buildings. As Hardt and Negri (2000:24) put it 'what is directly at stake in power is the production and reproduction of life itself'. We still find in much critical theory the negative use of the term power as oppression (power over) rather than power as capacity (power to). In this regard it is interesting to revisit Arendt's (1986) concept of power as a capacity that is produced through collective action and discourse in public space. Recent events in Tahrir Square (Cairo), Pearl Square (Bahrain) and Ratchaprasong (Bangkok) can be understood in this light as assemblages of people, buildings, plazas, performances, monuments, the state, the military, IT networks, cameras, internet and mass media that produce certain emergent effects— at times oppressive, emancipatory, transformative and tragic. In each case transformations of space and meaning take place in alignment with macro-scale change. Protesters choose places that are at once open in terms of access, exposed in terms of global media and vulnerable as node points in flows of people and capital that can be closed down to paralyze the economy. The outcomes are unpredictable and a great deal is at stake. In Bahrain

the Pearl monument, designed and constructed to celebrate and legitimate the Gulf States, was transformed within a week to become a symbol of resistance so potent it was demolished by the state (accidentally killing a migrant crane operator in the process). Whatever the root cause of the dissent we also need to understand the role of the city and its public spaces in the ways that power is produced and practised when these flows of desire align and coalesce. Writing about the events of May 1968 in France, Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 216) comment:

Those who evaluated things in macropolitical terms understood nothing of the event because something unaccountable was escaping. The politicians, the parties, the unions, many leftists, were utterly vexed; they kept repeating over and over again that “conditions” were not ripe.

Practice

McFarlane (2011) defends assemblage thinking from the charge that it ‘might be more relevant to the ‘how’ rather than ‘why’ questions of urban transformation’. One strength of assemblage thinking is that it keeps the connection between these questions alive. Philosophy, says Deleuze, is the creation of concepts; concepts are tools for thinking and assemblage theory is a toolkit. Philosophers, says Marx, have ‘interpreted the world in various ways - the point however is to change it’. In this task, as Lewin puts it: ‘there is nothing so practical as a good theory’. As McFarlane suggests, assemblage theory opens up the imaginary dimension of critical urban theory linking the actual with potential. Here is the prospect to connect geographic and social theory with practice in a fundamental way through a broader conception of the role of ‘design’ in urban transformation. While design can be conceived as superficial, in this broader sense it is a process of assembling possibilities out of actualities. Design connects us with vision, image and imagination; it produces hope and is productive of desire. Thrift (2011) has recently called for new ways of conducting urban research as a form of experimentation on the city, an approach that would seem to join an enlightened phenomenology to practices of public art and architecture in order to engage the threats and opportunities of what he terms ‘Lifeworld Inc’. In many ways architects are natural allies in this task since they have been conducting experiments on cities for centuries, gaining a reputation for getting so much so tragically wrong but, with a very long tradition in imaginative non-linear thinking, the challenge is to get better at it. Architects have a key position in the urban assemblage, at once thoroughly complicit in urban development practice yet with professional obligations to act in public interests and (if we wish to remain in the universities) to base such practice in theory.

The relation of theory to practice in architecture can be highly problematic in a field with a tendency to reduce ideas to formal images that feed cycles of architectural fashion. The danger is illustrated by what became known as the ‘critical architecture’ project, loosely based on critical theory and conceived in the 1980s as a way for architecture to resist a perceived mute role in the service of capital (Hays 1984). While scarcely a unified movement, it focused on the limited formal autonomy of architecture and the power of architects to encode a critique of social conditions into built form. In effect architecture was turned into criticism, practice was turned into theory through designs that embody a sophisticated critique of the contradictory conditions of their production. This was part of a more general movement of deconstruction and a reduction of architecture to text. Debates raged (and still do) over what was truly ‘critical’ (Rendell et al 2007) but the ‘critical architecture’ project eventually came under attack, seen as clichéd and stifling of innovation (Speaks 2005). What we saw in this short cycle of architectural history was the way a supposedly ‘critical’ architecture was neutralized and entered a form of complicity with practices of domination (Dovey 2010: Ch 4). Theory was used to create symbolic capital for a meaning market wherein criticality carries caché. Such ‘critical’ architecture established reputations and enjoyed major global influence but one of its side-effects was to marginalize social engagements in architectural practice that were implicitly seen as not engaging with the root of the problem. Social engagement was traded for theoretical integrity.

The critical social theory that most helps us understand this is Bourdieu's work on how *avant garde* aesthetic production reproduces social distinction and camouflages practices of power. Bourdieu's work is ignored by most within the ‘critical architecture’ project because it unsettles the social ‘field’ of architectural practice rather than the formal debates within it and his work has some parallels with assemblage theory. From Bourdieu we learn how the habitual practices and structures of the *habitus* lock us into a ‘sense of place’ that is also a ‘sense of one’s place’ in the world (Bourdieu 1990: 113). The microscale structures of the *habitus* are aligned with macroscale fields of power wherein both economic and non-economic forms of capital (social, cultural, social, political) circulate. There are significant

consistencies between Bourdieu and Deleuze: both begin from the view that spatiality/sociality are integrated, as are subject/object. Both habitus and assemblage are immanent to everyday life rather than transcendent abstractions; the rules of the habitus can be read as codes of the assemblage. Each embodies the concept of a socio-spatial *field* where flows of capital (Bourdieu) and desire (Deleuze) are mediated. Bourdieu and Deleuze share a concern to integrate material practices with representations, and an opposition to reductionism. If Deleuze gives us a sophisticated account of becoming and of how things change, Bourdieu provides a convincing account of why they do not and of how the appearance of change is often the cover for more of the same. The major contrast is that Bourdieu stresses the inertia embodied in the habitus while Deleuze and Guattari stress flow, change and potential.

Informality

I now turn to the example of urban informality discussed by McFarlane and Brenner et al. The potential to understand and re-think the ways formal and informal processes play out in cities is one of the greatest prospects for assemblage theory. Informal urbanism is the major mode of urban design and development over the past 50 years, housing around a third of all urbanites and growing. One hesitates to call it urban planning but it is the emergent effect of millions of small-scale designs — fuelled by desires for a better future in terms of jobs, shelter, security, community, sanitation and ultimately tenure and upgrading. Beyond the general descriptions of incremental housing, recycled materials, makeshift construction and so on there is little detailed research on the morphology, materiality or semiotics of informality. Informal settlements can clearly be linked to transnational economic and geopolitical forces, yet urban informality, unlike slums and poverty, is neither necessarily a problem nor an effect of capitalism — all cities embody a mix of informality/formality and urbanity requires informality. The informal/formal connection resonates with a series of conceptual twofold concepts that are key to assemblage thinking: rhizome/tree, smooth/striated, network/hierarchy, minor/major, molecular/molar, difference/identity and becoming/being. Most informal settlements are productive and resilient. Upgrading of slums is ultimately a task of formalization but it cannot be achieved from the top down without displacement from employment and disruption to domestic modes of production; but we know little about such morphologies and modes of production.



Figure 1: Mumbai 2008 (Photo: Kim Dovey)

Brenner et al. (2011) suggest that: ‘the building materials under discussion here are highly polysemic and promiscuous. Graffiti paint, unadorned brick, dirt in backyard gardens, corrugated metal—each can be an expression of precarious impoverishment or of dominating, aestheticized prosperity, depending upon its context’. This is an important point but it is being used to suggest that details don’t matter because meanings are transformed by context and again by the ‘context of context’ — the hegemony of scale again. The relationship of informal urbanism to the production of meaning in the larger urban field is a vital research issue since these are places of entrenched negative symbolic capital. To understand the dynamics of identity formation and semantic inversion is critical, whether in Pearl Square or the sums of Mumbai. How are these districts, fragments, strips, compounds, escarpments and waterfronts seen and understood within the broader socio-spatial field of the formal city (Dovey & King 2011)? What is their influence on the image of the city and how are they portrayed in the mass media? How does this visibility and morphology impact on the politics of upgrading and eviction/demolition? What is the aesthetic attraction of slum tourism and how does it cut across the larger political economy of urban spectacle and place marketing?



Figure 2: Yogyakarta (Photo: Wiryono Raharjo)

Brenner et al. (2100) accuse McFarlane of 'naive objectivism' of mindlessly gathering facts that can presumably speak for themselves: '...does the thick description of assemblages offered in his analysis suffice to illuminate the specific forms of inequality and deprivation under investigation?'. Are we trying to prove that poverty is caused by capitalism or to understand how it is practiced as urban assemblage, as mode of production, as power? It is difficult, and perhaps dangerous, to seek to make an empirical point within a theoretical paper and some of McFarlane's examples are not particularly illuminating. Consider another thick description from Benjamin and Lacis' (1978: 171-2 [1925]) famous essay on the slums of Naples:

...the house is far less the refuge into which people retreat than the inexhaustible reservoir from which they flood out. Life bursts not only from doors, not only into front yards... From the balconies, housekeeping utensils hang like potted plants. From the windows of the top floors come baskets on ropes, to fetch mail, fruit and cabbage. Just as the living room reappears on the street, with chairs, heart and altar, so — only much more loudly — the street migrates into the living room... Poverty has brought about a stretching of frontiers that mirrors the most radiant freedom of thought.

Brenner et al. (2011) suggest 'our intention is not to attempt to patrol the boundaries of theoretical innovation in urban studies' yet they also suggest assemblage theory must be 'circumscribed rather precisely'. McFarlane is criticized for: 'almost no reference to the key concepts and concerns of radical urban political economy—for instance, capital accumulation, class, property relations, exploitation, commodification, state power, territorial alliances, growth coalitions, structured coherence, uneven spatial development, spatial divisions of labor and crisis formation, among others' (Brenner et al. 2011). How much recognition is enough; must one recite the catechism? This identification and referencing of an underlying root cause carries the same danger that we saw with critical architecture — that theory can stand in for practice. What is threatened here is not a loss of criticality but a loss of ground and a loss of roots. The metaphors of 'ground' and 'roots' are threaded through this critique of assemblage — political economy is presented as a 'ground' for an assemblage theory that otherwise has 'no clear basis' and might take flight if not properly 'rooted'. The charge that it doesn't get to the 'root' is the culminating point of the critique. Assemblage thinking suggests we are not dealing with a tree and that the task of urban change is more complex than finding a root cause.



Figure 3: Bangkok 2007 (Photo: Kim Dovey)

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