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Authors
Sassen, S
Ong, A

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The Carpenter and the Bricoleur

A Conversation with Saskia Sassen and Aihwa Ong

Abstract: In this conversation with the editors, Saskia Sassen and Aihwa Ong reflect back on their different experiences of ‘thinking with assemblage’. They discuss the issue of deploying this approach as an analytic tactic to unveil the unseen and to unpack macro-categories. Referring back to some of their main works in the past few years, they remind us of the challenges of cross-disciplinary translation and the need for ‘untheoretical’ and grounded approaches even to global applications of the word ‘assemblage’. Reflecting on their respective differences, as a carpenter of social theory and and a bricoleur anthropologist, they consider the role of the assemblage theorists vis-à-vis one’s own assemblage of theory, field and theoretical assumptions.

How do you use and understand assemblages in your own work?

SS I should say that it is not so much about understanding what an assemblage is. Thinking of assemblages is an analytic tactic to use formats which enables me to bring into the picture pieces of what are, in more conventional thinking, thought of as fullyfledged institutions. What if I just want one part of these institutions, one part of them because I see in it an emergent reality that cannot be housed? In my case it all started with finance: I could not simply reduce finance to the financial firms or to the financial markets.

AO Me too. I am an anthropologist, so what I am really interested in is conceptual work, as opposed to actually developing macro-theory oriented towards looking at defining features of the epoch, so to speak. As you know, anthropologists work in diverse contexts of transformation and we have long questioned the idea that different places in the world are merely instantiations of single accounts like, say, Marxist theory. At the same time because we are working on contemporary periods, we want to understand what do we mean when we say something is ‘global’. In terms of ‘assemblage’ I owe a lot to Stephen Collier and our early discussions about anthropology. For us it is a question of how to develop methods or concepts to actually discuss how there are variable contexts in the world that are constituted through ‘the global’. How do we define that? In response to this, Stephen and I developed the concept of ‘global assemblage’ as a space of enquiry, not as a theory but a way to ‘frame’ our analysis, to put it rather simply.

SS Yes. For me, before method, assemblage is an analytic tactic to deal with the abstract and the unseen. First, my basic notion is to situate it so that it is not an abstract condition in a time where stabilized meanings are actually becoming unstable. The economy, the government, the family and the city – all these basic powerful categories are becoming less stable than they were during the Keynesian period in the West and I am sure that there are alternative versions of that in other parts of the world. As a research practice, assemblage allows me not to throw those powerful categories out of the window but actively destabilize them. The Global City and The Mobility of Capital and Labour are about that. I was respectively destabilizing the categories ‘city’ and ‘immigration’. Now, in Territory Authority Rights I am further destabilizing the meanings enclosed in the ‘state’ and the ‘global’. Along with confronting the abstract, a second part of this analytic tactic is to ask myself, when I
invoke one of these powerful categories, ‘what am I not seeing?’ A category is collectively produced, it has been ‘sorted out’, and because it is so influential in its power to explain (not simply describing everything, but as a way of sorting and as a distillation) it is hiding a lot of stuff. That is why I always say that my zone for research and for theorization is actually ‘in the shadow’ of powerful categories.

It sounds like what you want to get from this notion of assemblage is something that helps you to understand transformation and perhaps even historical turning points.

SS Exactly, assemblages help to understand transformation but also helps me to make visible the disassembling of existing institutional domains and collective understandings. For this reason I do not locate my theorization there in the category assemblage. For me it is a methodological issue: How can I discover? I think that is one difference that maybe Aihwa and I have. People think that I am a Deleuzian because I use the term ‘assemblage’; I am using it more like a ‘carpenter’ than as a Deleuzian. I really am a bit of sui generis so I am disruptive in that sense because I am not a Deleuzian, I am not a Foucauldian and I am not a Marxist. I am doing my own stuff and I am having a lot of fun with it as a kind of ignorant carpenter.

Aihwa? Do you recognize this difference?

AO Obviously my and Stephen’s idea of assemblage was inspired by Deleuze and Guattari in A Thousand Plateaus and the whole idea of ‘vibrating plateau’ that is constituted by lines of flight and lines of departure. Social realities are crystalized by dynamic kinds of articulation and disarticulation of flows of ideas, practices, technologies, actors and institutions. It is not a theory: assemblage is a way of reframing our inquiry, to grasp perhaps critical interacting elements that would help us in analysing what is happening. We are trying to capture things that are always in the midst of unfolding so the very value, for me, of a global established strategy of enquiry as a concept is that it takes into account contingency and uncertainty in a way perhaps that large theories do not because they have causal determinants in one way or another. In other words, to go back to Deleuze and Guattari and the idea of vibrating network of interactions and relationships they suggest, assemblages do not just happen. It is not just the patterning of the flight of the bumblebee, but also an effect of human decisions ...
crucial, then, is this kind of profound sense of the vibration of relationships. From this viewpoint, I am looking at the play of power and how the play of power and its strategies and tactics are shaping new kinds of spaces of contention.

So essentially Saskia is saying ‘I deploy assemblage as a tactic to dismantle some established categories’. It sounds somewhat similar to what Aihwa is saying in respect to anthropology.

AO Yes, but that could be true in respect to all of the social sciences. Think of the nineteenth century categories of economy, society, government and culture, which for anthropologists was one of those categories that were sort of unthinkingly used as a unit of analysis while dealing with extremely variable and dynamic environments all the time. As anthropologists we are what I would call engaged in a form of ‘low-level’ theorizing, although I do not like calling it ‘theory’ because we are not just trying to explain but rather we are trying to stay close to practices in the sense of observing. Yet we cannot explain everything. So, in a sense, the concept of assemblage is driven by one’s own problem and mode of enquiry. These are going to determine the way one configures the elements that are going to, in a sense, be part of one’s own assemblage. That is why I say the space of problematization and intervention is the space of the assemblage, and this is not just true of the scholar but also of practitioners – the experts, as it were – whose job it is to configure a space of problematization and they do this through the assembling, reassembling, disassembling of different tools, different ideas that can work to solve the problem. She talked about the carpenter and I am going to talk about the Bricoleur...

SS The Carpenter and the Bricoleur, right!

AO ... because of Lévi-Strauss’ idea that anthropology is in fact ‘artisanal’ in nature that you actually grab the tools that are at hand. You do not go for an externally imposed formula and try to reproduce it in some way, but rather you are grabbing tools at hand to study what’s before you. So it is a kind of ‘collage’ that is emerging. The very things that you assemble to solve a problem to configure this space of intervention are going to give it a distinctive character, even though there is a very global element involved in it. That, for me, is very important because it helps us to understand the variability of globalized situations around the world.
Right. It just struck me that, in my work up until now, it is a bit the opposite in the sense that I want to start with very well established categories, and I want to 'do a job' on them. Practically I could also use 'assemblage' for the less identifiable and the less institutionalized, but right now it is the highly institutionalized that catches my eye. To go back to your interest in the 'trajectories' of genealogies, I think that a lot of existing theory has a strong sense of an origin but then it tends to simply hang in with that. In that sense we can recognize it. This is something I have been very interested in – trajectories. I want to take also arbitrary little things. My equivalent to the non-highly institutionalized that Aihwa was referring to, is elements that seem like nothing, certainly in a given present but, if you actually try to track them, you can see that there are important and hidden trajectories.

To what extent does assemblage make us have to go back and examine our historiographies?

That is partly a practical question. I decided that to understand the historical process I could not stick with nation states, so I had to find other categories, but significantly weighty ones that can illuminate whole sort of worlds, if you want. I chose territory, authority, rights and I chose authority, not power, and territory, not land: each one of those terms has already all kinds of complexities in it. The incentive was the dominance of the debate on the national versus the global, the only way to understand the global, if I wanted to simplify within this established field, is to say that the 'national' is something because the 'global' is there, but I think Aihwa has much to say about this.

Yes. When Stephen and I came up with the concept of 'global assemblage', why did we call it 'global' when we could have just called it 'assemblage', which is much more elegant. This was a move to signal that we wanted to look at the dynamism of global forces and relationships, identify those actual components that manifest our universal modernity. By specifying how global elements interact with situated practices beliefs and politics, we show that together, they put at stake what it means to be human today. So it clearly returns to the question of the human condition in a globalized modern world in a Weberian sense actually. It is not merely about assemblage just for the sake of mapping a space of enquiry, but also to see how the circulation of modern forms actually helps to transform a wide range of socio-political cultural environments and
at the same time makes that all rather distinctive while, yet, we are all somewhat unified by a state of being modern.

**So, how do you confront the boundaries of your assemblages? There must be an important relationship then between the idea of an assemblage and the idea of where the borders of that assemblage start and stop.**

SS Yes. For instance in my *When Territory Deborders Territoriality* develop an argument where I deal with the notion that the question of territoriality, or if you want the legal construct the sovereign authority of the state, is becoming increasingly a shrunken category and part of it is precisely that. What I want to recover there is the notion that territory is a far more significant category today than territoriality, which is true a system of power. As an assemblage, it is falling apart and its brutality is excessive. I try to avoid using the term neoliberal and so out of that the comes the ungoverned territory, so the expulsions looks at that shrinking of this effective authority. I mean, when we think of the authority of the liberal state it comes also with wealth, it comes with all kinds of thing and so it is a shrunken thing and it is not kindly at all and it is deeply linked with this corporate act. The ungoverned territory is precisely the which escapes the formal power of the state but is also invisible to the formal eye of the state. All kinds of counter-hegemonic movements fall in that category. They are there but they are not visible to the formal eye of the law and the state. This ‘misalignment’ between territory and the legal constructs that are encasing the sovereign authority of the state over its territory – territoriality – are critical. Thinking them as assemblage allows me to make visible how territory cannot be reduced to either national territory or state territory, and allows me to expand the category of ‘territory’ to a measure of conceptual autonomy from the nation-state

**What do you think, Aihwa?**

AO Well, the issue of sovereignty and its borders are also very interesting to me in this sense. Just very simply, authority has to be performed even when authorities are enshrined like in Buckingham Palace. My focus is on the performance and the practice – the exercise of power. I am really interested in the way these things are animated by everyday practice that include institutional practices and the uses of money and technology and knowledge to substantiate that kind of authoritative image. One difference with Saskia that, perhaps, we can highlight is the
I look at governing technologies in many different ways I guess. I look at governing without the government, where you do not need a state institution or written law to be involved in governing. Hence, even though places are ostensibly ungoverned they might actually be regulated by different actors.

SS I agree completely with you.

How do these theoretical foundations play out in your empirical work?

SS Well, in so far as it is, as I like to say, an analytical tactic or utility, I am very keen not only on expanding the meaning of territory but also expanding the meaning of how such terms that have been co-opted, like 'utility'. 'Assemblage' is actually a great word and it does sound so 'untheoretical' and so non-academic. I think of it as a utility and so I think that Aihwa also agrees along these lines, that it depends on one's mode of enquiry. Yet by definition, from my perspective, if assemblage is going to have explanatory power it will exclude stuff. In other words, when an assemblage is detected or one force it on a messy reality or a reality that is debordering its own institutional format, it has a temporality. It is not going to be forever whereas long-established institutions have a kind of life of their own. Institutions are, as I like to say, invitations not to think. We say 'the state' or 'the economy'. It is almost an invitation not to interrogate them, and so I see assemblages as just the opposite. They are also an invitation to interrogate one's own assemblage. What are the edges? How does it hang together? What is falling out? Assemblage is it in itself an unstable formation against a certain institutional stability and it allows particular insights. That is why it is not theory but really an instrument. That is my approach and why I need it desperately because in all my research projects I am moving across so many pre-existing conceptual borders.

AO Yes, I think that in fact assemblage as a concept is better than assemblage as a 'theory'. I think very few people today believe in metatheories of any kind because they are so aware of the kind of unfoldings and different kinds of variety of trajectories of social change. So assemblage as a concept is particularly useful because it is actually much more modest and honest, but also at the same time highlights our weaknesses as social scientists or social analysts of different kinds. In the past we tried to understand very fluid, indeterminate and heterogeneous social realities in terms of given frameworks and trajectories of social change,
and those are actually very rigid kinds of projections that we put on the past or on the contemporary, whereas assemblage is a much more careful, modest admission that we can only grasp a pretty limited part of unfolding contemporary life. One could actually mobilize the concept of assemblage to look at the past and that would perhaps provide a much more penetrating understanding of certain discussions of the past. The importance of assemblage for me is that it is a question. It forces the analyst to confront what he or she is trying to study as a question and not just something that has already been predetermined by the past or predetermined by our theories or categories.

SS Yes, I agree completely with that.

So, is assemblage a reflexive method?

AO Yes. I think it is a good observation to say there is a built-in modesty that arises out of a poverty of theory ((laughs)). I think that one strength of the idea of assemblage is that it focuses on relationality not just of actors, but actually relationality of things and people. As a reflexive method, assemblage incorporates the interaction between the observer and the observed, and acknowledges that the observer changes the very conditions by the mere act of observing. As second order observation, the concept of assemblage emphasizes the reflexive practices of modern subjects as they reflect upon global forms, call them into question, gain critical insights and devise their own kind of solution to situated problems of how one should live, politically, collectively and ethically, in global times.