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REASSEMBLING INTERNATIONAL THEORY

Assemblage Thinking and International Relations

Edited by

Michele Acuto
Simon Curtis

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Reassembling International Theory: Assemblage Thinking and International Relations

Edited by

Michele Acuto

Senior Lecturer in Global Networks and Diplomacy, University College London, UK

and

Simon Curtis

Lecturer in International Politics, University of East Anglia, UK

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Notes on Contributors

Rita Abrahamsen is Professor in the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Ottawa, was previously Lecturer in the Department of International Politics at the University of Aberystwyth, and has authored *Security Beyond the State: Private Security in International Politics* with Michael Williams.

Michele Acuto is Senior Lecturer in Global Networks and Diplomacy in the Department of Science, Technology, Engineering and Public Policy (STEaPP) at University College London, and Fellow in the Institute for Science, Innovation and Society at the University of Oxford. He is the author of *The Urban Link* and editor of *Negotiating Relief* and *Global City Challenges*.

Roland Bleiker is Professor of International Relations in the School of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Queensland, and is the author of *Aesthetics and World Politics*.

Antoine Bousquet is Senior Lecturer in International Relations in the Department of Politics at Birkbeck College, University of London. He is the author of *The Scientific Way of Warfare: Order and Chaos on the Battlefields of Modernity.*

Christian Bueger is Lecturer in International Relations in the Department of Politics at Cardiff University and was previously Leverhulme Fellow at the Greenwich Maritime Institute in London and Fellow at the Institute for Development and Peace in Duisburg.

David Chandler is Professor of International Relations and Research Director of the Centre for the Study of Democracy at the Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Westminster, and editor of the Routledge book series *Studies in Intervention and Statebuilding*.

Stephen Collier is Associate Professor of International Affairs at the New School, New York, USA.

Olaf Corry Lecturer in International Relations at the Open University. He was post-doctoral researcher at Cambridge University and obtained his PhD in International Relations from the University of Copenhagen in 2006. He is the author of *Global Polity*.

Simon Curtis is Lecturer in International Politics at the University of East Anglia. He was previously Michael Leifer Scholar in International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science. His research interests are in international theory and international history. He is currently working on a monograph entitled *Global Cities and Global Order*.

Xavier Guillaume is Lecturer in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Edinburgh. He is the author of *International Relations and Identity*.

Graham Harman is Distinguished University Professor at the American University in Cairo. He is the author of *The Quadruple Object*, editor of the Speculative Realism book series at Edinburgh University Press, and (with Bruno Latour) coeditor of the New Metaphysics book series at Open Humanities Press.

Debbie Lisle is Senior Lecturer in International Relations and Cultural Studies in the School of Politics, International Studies and Philosophy at Queen's University Belfast and the author of *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing*.

Aihwa Ong is Professor of Socio-Cultural Anthropology and Southeast Asian Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, and is the author of *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*.

Mark Salter is Professor in the School of Political Studies at the University of Ottawa University of Ottawa, and is the editor of *Politics at the Airport* (2008) and *Research Methods in Critical Security Studies*.

Saskia Sassen is Robert S. Lynd Professor of Sociology at Columbia University and Co-Chair of The Committee on Global Thought, Centennial

visiting Professor at the London School of Economics and is the author of *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages.*

Peer Schouten is PhD Candidate in Global Studies at the University of Gothenburg and Editor-in-Chief of *Theory Talk.* He holds a BA in Language philosophy (University of Amsterdam), a BA in Portuguese Studies (University of Utrecht) and an MA in International Relations (Complutense University of Madrid).

Nick Srnicek is Teaching Fellow in the Department of Geography at University College London, and PhD Candidate in the Department of International Relations at the London School of Economics and coeditor of *Millennium: A Journal of International Studies.*

Michael Williams is Professor in the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Ottawa, and was previously Professor of International Politics in the Department of International Politics at Aberystwyth. He is the author of *Realism Reconsidered: The Legacy of Hans J. Morgenthau in International Relations.*

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Assemblages and the Conduct of Inquiry

A Conversation with Stephen J. Collier

Abstract: *In this conversation with the editors, Stephen Collier reflects on his engagement with assemblage thinking in his collaboration with Aihwa Ong on 'global assemblages' and in his work on vital systems security. Looking forward to the various contributions from the central part of the book, Collier discusses the use and misuse of assemblage thinking and comments on its potential IR applications. Providing a bridge between the theoretical reflexivity of the two previous conversations and the thematic chapters ahead, Collier raises questions of adjacency and entanglement with the 'field' by assemblage theorists.*

How do you understand assemblages in your own work? How do these theoretical foundations play out in your empirical work?

SC   When Aihwa and I took this term up in *Global Assemblages* we were engaging with current discussions around globalization. In the 1990s there was a huge amount of push and pull over really big questions: Were the phenomena associated with globalization really new? Was globalization liberatory or did it simply reconfigure old forms of exploitation? Was globalization rendering the nation-state obsolete? These debates seemed a bit stuck, in part because the questions were too broad and the concepts being used to address them were too unwieldy. So we were looking for ways to address the problems raised in the globalization debates without resolving these big issues.

That said, I agree with Aihwa – and with others you have interviewed here – that we did not intend to bring along a complex theoretical apparatus when we referred to assemblages. We had a more pragmatic aim of getting a particular set of debates moving again. Or, perhaps it would be better to say that we wanted to show how the kind of work collected in *Global Assemblages* was already providing a different way into these issues. Actually this is a very important point. There were 24 chapters in this book, and the concept of assemblage featured in exactly one of them – that was our introduction. So the point was absolutely not to provide an exposition of 'assemblage theory' and to show how it could be applied. Rather, we invoked this term to characterize a style of inquiry we found in this work that drew on diverse theoretical resources.

Having said that, I want to make a couple points about what we imagined the contributors to *Global Assemblages* were and were not doing, because I think it points to some core issues one confronts in taking up this rubric.

The first point is that we did not mean for the term to suggest a new particularism. We were not arguing that the contributions just showed how things come together in accidental, contingent and unique ways – through 'immanently fluid and ever changing' processes, as Xavier Guillaume puts it here. In fact, the contrary is true. We wanted to show that the contributions identified novel but potentially enduring configurations of heterogeneous elements, and invented concepts to describe them. So the volume was an attempt to collect new tools of inquiry – concepts that are not universally applicable but that are significant beyond the sites or cases the contributors were working on.

The second point is related. We did not see the contributions to *Global Assemblages* as primarily negative or deconstructive. It is true that many of them show that concepts such as globalization or neoliberalism or capitalism or whatever are just too big, too unwieldy, and too imprecise to provide insight in many situations. But the critical work they performed was to be found somewhere else: in the discerning reflection made possible by a better conceptual apparatus. So once more, the accent is on a kind of reconstruction that is made possible by new concepts that change how we understand things, how we perceive the possibilities and constraints of particular situations.

Let me add one final thought about how I have taken up assemblage thinking in my own research. I have been particularly interested in how assemblages gain stability, consistency and scale. So, for example, I am writing a book right now with Andrew Lakoff about what we call vital systems security. We show that vital systems security first comes together in the context of nuclear preparedness planning in the early Cold War. A relationship is established among a number of disparate elements – techniques, organizational patterns, forms of political and technical reflection and so on. These relationships then stabilized and were reproduced in other domains. By the 1960s and 1970s you find vital systems security apparatuses in natural disaster policy, pandemic preparedness planning, homeland security, and other areas. So we are building up to a pretty broad claim about the shape of contemporary government, about contemporary biopolitics. This relates to a problem that Stephen Legg (2011) has recently explored: How might we think about apparatuses as a particular kind of assemblage that is prone to reterritorialization, scaling and governing? How do things gain a function of reality, or a truth effect? How is it possible for them to be scaled up, or to move across apparently diverse domains? And then, what kind of concepts can we invent to constitute them as objects of critical inquiry?

How do you think this might differ from the views of IR theorists (as represented in this volume)?

SC   Well, the contributions here are very diverse. So maybe the more pertinent question concerns the range of approaches. Some authors here are obviously using assemblage thinking as primarily a deconstructive tool. Others are trying to figure out how it might recast and improve existing concepts and questions, to frame them differently. This latter approach is closer to my own interests. So, for example, I am very drawn to Nick

Srnicek's exploration of monetarism. As I read it, the aim of his piece is not in the first instance to expose monetarist assumptions as false but to account for the conditions of their acceptability. This does involve a deconstructive moment. His account does not accept that monetarism simply got things 'right' where a previous Keynesianism had been wrong – being able to account for stagflation seems to be a necessary but not sufficient condition. But there is also a reconstructive moment: What technical and institutional conditions made it possible for monetarist propositions to gain an authoritative status? Obviously both moments are important, and it is probably helpful to think of them in some kind of productive relationship.

Looking at the discussions in the volume, what do you think 'thinking with assemblages' might contribute to the study of the international?

SC   I am an outsider to this field, so I can't really answer this question. But let me make an observation based on my impression from reading the chapters here and from reading some bits of critical IR in other contexts.

One thing that has often struck me about critical IR is the extent to which it takes *conventional* IR as the primary target against which the instruments of criticism have to be turned. You see this tendency in at least some of the contributions here. Assemblage thinking is valuable first of all as an alternative to conventional IR, which is taken to be too positivistic, too attached to a realist ontology or a rationalistic model of action. As an aside, for me this has always presented a kind of 'barrier to entry' into critical IR discussions. They sometimes seem to be wrapped-up in a very inward-looking conversation. But in any case I'm not sure that this is the most interesting contribution that assemblage theory can make in thinking about the international.

Let me give one well-worn example. One very frequently hears the claim that IR theory takes the nation-state for granted as a 'container' of societies, as a coherent entity that can act, that can have strategy and rational choice, and that a more dynamic ontology would recognize more fluidity and flow, as well as the contingency of this nation-state form. Of course there are many important phenomena in the world today that cannot be understood by this particular figure of the nation-state; if the national state is taken for granted many of these phenomena will be obscured. But seen from any historical perspective one of the remarkable things about the world today is that these things called nation-states are basically universal – almost everyone on earth lives in one – they do contain things we

call societies that have substantial effective reality, and the governments of these nation-states can organize coherent action at an astonishingly large scale. That doesn't mean we should think of the state as a pre-existing reality that is in the natural order of things. But it is an important feature of *our* order of things. For me the role of assemblage theory should be to account for these reality-effects of the nation-state – their conditions of possibility, their principle of reality – rather than endlessly pointing out that there is nothing natural about the nation-state, or that it is a gratuitous assumption of IR theory, or that it doesn't account for everything.

This suggests a somewhat different relationship between assemblage thinking and IR theory. It does not mean we have to see conventional IR theory as a transparent window on an objective reality and accept its assumptions. Rather, it suggests – again – that we should try to grasp the conditions of acceptability and intelligibility of IR theory. So I am drawn to the chapters here that take 'conventional IR' not as the primary object of criticism but as one part (and it is important to emphasize *only* one part) of the thing to be accounted for: the constitution of the international. This approach also draws our attention to other forms of reflection, types of authorized expertise, practices, institutions, material structures, and so on, that are involved in constituting the international. To me these are the questions provoked by assemblage thinking, and I do see a bit of a tension between this way of proceeding and some conventions of critical IR – perhaps more than is recognized.

What are the drawbacks/limits of these approaches? Could IR learn from any other existing approaches?

SC   I see a lot of pitfalls in the way that assemblage thinking has been taken up in various fields. One is that in some cases the premises are taken as the result. A scholar posits a dynamic and fluid ontology and then continually discovers contingency and fluidity, or keeps tracing how associations are assembled to show how associations are assembled, or *that* they are assembled rather than pregiven, natural or self-evident facts of the world. So again, the methodological starting point is also the finding. To be either effective or convincing assemblage thinking has to get beyond this.

So what does that look like? A number of the contributions in this volume emphasize an 'empirical' or 'empiricist' moment, but I'm not sure that is the right term. Actually, in *Global Assemblages*, thanks in part to the intervention of Marilyn Strathern, Aihwa and I tried to avoid reference

to the 'empirical' altogether. Among other things, it fails to distinguish between two very different ways of proceeding. There is the ANT programme, where you trace associations, follow the actors. The critical scholar or Actor-Network Theorist is not supposed to 'add' anything to the description, as Latour puts it. For me that is not a realistic account of inquiry that can claim some interest or significance. As Olaf Corry argues (following Kenneth Waltz – a nice provocation!) assemblage thinking, too, has to 'strategically focus on a few, consequential things' out of an infinite range of possibilities. This means that the assemblage thinker does indeed have to add something, and to take responsibility for the kinds of simplifying assumptions she or he makes. My view is that this entails concept work as both the product of inquiry and as a source of tools for further inquiry.

Relatedly, for my taste there is too much time spent on abstract theoretical elaboration in discussions of assemblages and assemblage thinking. Or maybe it would be better to say that there is too much time spent on theoretical elaboration that is divorced from discussions of how to conduct inquiry, or that actually motivates inquiry. I'm just not sure we need another sub-discipline to throw itself into expositions of Latour or Deleuze or whomever else. But we do need more work on what successful assemblage thinking looks like. This is one of the reasons that I like to keep Foucault in mind as an assemblage thinker. Of course, Foucault has some bracingly clear things to say on a theoretical or methodological register. But his methodological reflections are always motivated by his investigations of particular assemblages or apparatuses. We really look to Foucault for the extraordinary array of concepts and distinctions he introduces in defining and analysing military-diplomatic apparatuses, disciplinary apparatuses, apparatuses of *polize*, apparatuses of security, and so on. These concepts and distinctions make it possible to redescribe or reconstruct major elements of our contemporary reality and our history in a way that changes our understanding, allows us to think in a more discerning, and, in that sense, critical way. We need more reflection on how *that* works, since it is not exactly straightforward. To put it a bit provocatively, we need more Foucault, less Latour. I imagine plenty of people would disagree.

Is assemblage a reflexive method? Are international, and more broadly social, theorists confronting the 'politics' of thinking with assemblages?

SC   Well obviously this depends on what one means by 'reflexive' – I suppose you mean to ask whether social theorists are thinking about

what they are doing when they are thinking with assemblages. On one level, this is obviously the case. There is more self-reflection and self-criticism in this area than in most, and the contributions here make that perfectly clear.

That said, there is a tendency in some work to apply this reflection in a fashion that is uneven or asymmetrical. Antoine Bousquet makes a nice point when he suggests that social constructivist approaches tend to take the background of society for granted. Assemblage thinking is of course entirely different from social constructivism; in some ways directly opposed. But similar problems sometimes appear. Critics' terms get a pass – they are exempt from scrutiny. So you see references to 'liberalism' or 'neoliberalism', 'the modern European West', or the 'Enlightenment' were invoked as though (and here I am following Latour) they have obvious points of reference and can explain other things in the field. But is there such a thing as the 'modern European West' that the assemblage thinker can constitute as a target of criticism, and of which they are not part? I am sceptical.

So my instinct is to position assemblage thinking a little differently, in terms of complicity, entanglement or what Paul Rabinow calls adjacency. I really like the point that Roland Bleiker makes on this score: there is no reason to think that 'critical' approaches are going to be any less universalizing than what are often called 'positivistic' approaches, or that 'hard' methods can't be incorporated into assemblage thinking. It's a great suggestion: assemblage thinking using statistics – or formal models! I don't know what they would look like, but it is very intriguing.

Xavier Guillaume makes what to me is an essential point: the 'heterogeneous elements' that make up an assemblage include forms of political, ethical and technical reflection. In my view, those must include our own forms of critique; as Tom Boland (2013) recently put it, critique, too, is a thing of this world. This implies that we should understand assemblage thinking not as an alternative to 'conventional' approaches so much as a way of relating critically and reflectively to these approaches: sometimes trying to give an account of them, understanding their conditions of acceptability; sometimes providing critical reflection on their assumptions and on their limits; and perhaps sometimes enlisting them as tools of inquiry.