

ASSEMBLAGE – CONSTRUCTING THE SOCIAL FOR EMPIRICAL CULTURAL RESEARCH

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Today, the concept of assemblage is mentioned in anthropological texts in many different ways. Sometimes, it is used in a generic way to introduce complex, messy phenomena which are difficult to study and can hardly ever be fully permeated ethnographically; occasionally it is used more specifically for setting up a research design as a guiding notion for constructing the research field; in other perspectives, it is used in a more explanatory way to relate and conclude on heterogeneous insights. Drawing from the rich diversity of these approaches, a theory seminar in the Master degree *Empirische Kulturwissenschaft* at the University of Hamburg was set up in the winter term 2019/20 to explore the conceptual quality of assemblage in anthropological literature and to apply it to the students' own research projects. There was a particular focus on learning when and how assemblage is a useful concept for anthropological research. We tried to gain an understanding of ›assemblage‹ as a specific lens for observing social and cultural phenomena and were interested in the range and scope of this lens in empirical cultural research. Moreover, we wanted to explore how the idea of an assemblage can be applied in our own research projects, facilitating and limiting what we study and observe in our field work. At the end of these explorations, we also asked how to write up the research, which again is a crucial process of anthropological knowledge production. In this special issue, we share our experiences with these epistemological explorations of assemblage in empirical cultural research from concept to research to text.

The idea of ›assemblages‹ originates in philosophical thinking and has experienced great attention across disciplines² in recent years, both in theoretical discussions and in empirical qualitative social research. In this context, assemblages can be understood as a heuristic concept for exploring and describing social reality as complex and dynamic socio-material processes in which heterogeneous elements, such as people, objects, bodies, expressions,

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- 1 Manuel Bolz, Florian Helfer, Jana Hotz, Bianka Schaffus and Skadi Sarnoch contributed their ideas, questions and discussions to this text. Without their perspectives developed in the course of the seminar, their empirical approaches and reflections, this text could not have been written in the current form and this issue would not exist. In the best sense, this is an outcome of collaborative research across qualifications and personal backgrounds, intergenerational research as we call it, with its specific challenges, limitations and poetics.
 - 2 See, among others, the Special Issue of *Ben Anderson/Colin McFarlane: Assemblage and Geography*. In: *Area* 43/2 (2011), pp. 124–127 and the debate in the journal *CITY*, edition 2/2011 to 6/2011; *Dianne Mulcahy: Affective Assemblages: Body Matters in the Pedagogic Practice of Contemporary School Classrooms*. In: *Pedagogy, Culture & Society* 20/1 (2012), pp. 9–27 or *Joanie Willett: Affective Assemblages and Local Economies*. London 2021.

places etc., are assembled in specific relationships with each other.³ Thinking in and with assemblage highlights the dynamic, the procedural and the inconsistent dimensions of social orders rather than their structural dimensions in and beyond societies. Philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst Félix Guattari have pointed out the randomness of these social connections and use the term ›assemblage‹⁴ to emphasize materialities (bodies, actions, passions) in relation to their concrete expressions/articulations (statements, plans, laws). The connections do not follow a linear, hierarchical arrangement or logic, but express themselves *rhizomatically* – root-like – in all directions.⁵

While its origins clearly lie in the philosophical reflections of Deleuze/Guattari on the rhizomaticities of social realities, by now there are multiple receptions and interpretations of this tradition of thought. This is due to the fact that assemblage has not been framed as a theory or even empirical method, but always describes a search process:

»In short, part of the reason assemblage is being increasingly used across a wide range of contexts is its very manipulability: it can be used as a broad descriptor of disparate actors coming together, as an alternative to notions of network emerging from actor-network theory, as a way of thinking about phenomena as productivist or practice-based, as an ethos that attends to the social in formation, and as a means of problematising origins, agency, politics and ethics.«⁶

The metaphor of a rhizome, a hidden layer connecting heterogeneous elements of the social information, has evoked research and theorizing in various disciplinary traditions. An important reference point in the debate on assemblage has been set by philosopher Manuel DeLanda with his development of an assemblage perspective (for which he coined the term »neo-assemblage theory«⁷), in which he attempts to systematize the ideas of Deleuze/Guattari and to develop them into a consistent social science theory, which various contributions in this issue take up, albeit in a critical way. The focus of the empirical cultural analysis of assemblages is the emergence and unfolding of socio-material fields and the tracing of just such inherent processes of change by the various human and non-human actors. In particular, the randomness of connections and the recognition of the ambiguity of social realities in which the disruption of existing structural categories

3 *Adrian Parr*: The Deleuze Dictionary, Revised Edition. Edinburgh 2005, here p. 8; *Jae Eon Yu*: The Use of Deleuze's Theory of Assemblage for Process-Oriented Methodology. In: *Historical Social Research* 38/2 (2013), pp. 196–217.

4 On the difficulties of translation from French to English and unavoidable linguistic inaccuracies see *John Phillips*: Agencement/Assemblage. In: *Theory Culture and Society* 23/2-3 (2006), p. 108.

5 *Gilles Deleuze/Félix Guattari*: *Rhizom*. Berlin 1976.

6 *Anderson/McFarlane*, as in fn. 2, p. 126.

7 *Manuel DeLanda*: *A New Philosophy of Society. Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*. London 2006, p. 4.

and dichotomies such as social-material, animate-inanimate, nature-culture, human-non-human, object-subject, micro-macro, or structural-practices is prevalent. The unmasking of these dichotomies as specific, often anthropocentric world views offers fruitful starting points for ethnographic research in the fields of political, educational, environmental or medical anthropology.

Contextualizing assemblage in anthropological debates

Without giving a comprehensive overview over the emergence and the use of ›assemblage‹ in anthropological research, we would like to provide some indications of the ways it is discussed here. We thus aim to contribute to an understanding of the multiple strands of discussion and why assemblage has gained such prominence in anthropological theory and research.

Following on from the discussion strongly influenced by philosophy, the seminal anthology of anthropologists Aihwa Ong and Steven Collier »Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics, and Ethics as Anthropological Problems«⁸ signaled the migration of the concept into anthropological research and started a broader discussion about its potentials for empirical research. The authors combine case studies on technology, medicine and ethics with investigations of how assemblages form in a globalized world »from reform of the public sector in Russia and Brazil, to bioscience and pharmaceuticals in Africa and Argentina, to the trade in human organs in Moldova, Israel, and India, to accounting and finance in Tokyo, Chicago, and the Middle East«⁹ and even offers an analytical heuristic with their »Regimes of Living«¹⁰. Another important, empirically oriented book focused on urban studies was offered by urban studies scholars Ignacio Farias and Thomas Bender with their anthology »Urban Assemblages – How Actor-Network Theory Changes Urban Studies«¹¹. Based on the example of the cross-disciplinary research field of urban studies, they highlight the relevance of the assemblage concept in Actor-Network-Theory (ANT), where it is widely employed to focus on the emerging aspects in the relations of humans, nature and things assembled in networks.¹² By relating both approaches, the anthology introduces a mode of ›assemblage thinking«¹³ within ANT when trying to »grasp the city as a

8 Aihwa Ong/Stephen J. Collier (eds.): *Global Assemblages. Technology, Politics, and Ethics as Anthropological Problems*. Malden, Mass. (USA) 2005.

9 Ibid.: *Global Assemblages, Anthropological Problems*. In: Ibid., pp. 3–21, p. 4.

10 Stephen J. Collier/Andrew Lakoff: *On Regimes of Living*. In: Ong/Collier, as in fn. 8, p. 22–39.

11 Ignacio Farias/Thomas Bender (eds.): *Urban Assemblages. How Actor-Network Theory changes Urban Studies*. London/New York 2011.

12 Bruno Latour: *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*. Oxford 2005.

13 Colin McFarlane/Ben Anderson: *Thinking with Assemblage*. In: *Area* 43 (2) 2011, pp. 162–164.

multiple object, to convey a sense of its multiple enactments. «¹⁴ Still, beyond ANT the perspective of assemblage as forms and practices of field construction has become relevant in cultural analyses in general. If we focus not only on space but also on temporality in assemblages, we enter the context of the ›anthropology of the close future‹. This concept, brought into discussion by Paul Rabinow and George Marcus,¹⁵ connects past, present and anticipated actions and thus relates to another field of current professional debates about a speculative anthropology. Meanwhile, the perspective of assemblage plays an important role in the training of young researchers and the reflections on constructing research fields, doing ethnography in an ethical way, and the connections between local spaces and processes of globalization.¹⁶ As an approach in empirical cultural research, its critical potential and its interdisciplinary nature are particularly relevant.¹⁷

Fundamental to current research is the questioning of the supremacy of humans over their environment in the Anthropocene. Important considerations are offered by the debates on the dissolution of boundaries, for example between nature and culture, in the reflections on multi-species ethnography and the more-than-human perspective. The representatives of New Materialism, especially philosopher and physicist Karen Barad and political theorist Jane Bennet as central theorists, have taken the aspect of agency to its extremes by emphasizing the eventfulness and the ›agentic capacities‹ of human and non-human actors and thus also further develop the considerations on how agency emerges in and through assemblages.¹⁸

14 *Ignacio Fariás*: Introduction. Decentering the Object of Urban Studies. In: Fariás/Bender, as in fn. 11, pp. 1–24, here p. 14.

15 *Paul Rabinow/George E. Marcus/James D. Faubion/Tobias Rees*: Designs for an Anthropology of the Contemporary. Durham 2008.

16 *Gisela Welz*: Assemblage. In: Peter Hinrichs/Martina Röthl/Manfred Seifert (eds.): Theoretische Reflexionen. Perspektiven der Europäischen Ethnologie. Berlin 2022, pp. 161–176. *Sabine Hess/Maria Schwertl*: Vom »Feld« zur »Assemblage«? Perspektiven europäisch-ethnologischer Methodenentwicklung – eine Hinleitung. In: Sabine Hess/Johannes Moser/Maria Schwertl (eds.): Europäisch-Ethnologisches Forschen. Neue Methoden und Konzepte. Berlin 2013, pp. 13–37; *Michi Knecht*: Nach *Writing Culture*, mit *Actor-Network: Ethnografie/Praxeografie in der Wissenschafts-, Medizin- und Technikforschung*. In: Sabine Hess/Johannes Moser/Maria Schwertl (eds.): Europäisch-Ethnologisches Forschen. Neue Methoden und Konzepte. Berlin 2013, pp. 79–106. For assemblage as a perspective of the practice of reflexivity see *Jörg Niewöhner*: Reflexion als gefügte Praxis. In: Friederike Faust/Janina Hauer (eds.): Kooperieren – Kollaborieren – Kuratieren. Berliner Blätter, 83 (2021), pp. 107–116.

17 *Alexa Färber*: Potenziale freisetzen: Akteur-Netzwerk-Theorie und Assemblageforschung in der interdisziplinären kritischen Stadtforschung. In: sub\urban. zeitschrift für kritische stadtforschung 2 (2014), 1, pp. 95–103.

18 See for example Karen Barads concept of ›intra-action‹ in which different matter interacts with each other without the human, cf. *Karen Barad*: Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter comes to Matter. In: Corinna Bath/Yvonne Bauer/Bettina Bock von Wülffingen/Angelika Saupe/Jutta Weber (eds.): Materialität

The prominence of assemblage therefore emerges from a variety of theoretical discussions and methodological reflections in social and cultural studies, and in different research and theory traditions. In one way or another, they inquire how the relevance and the relations of the material and the non-human for human's way of life can be adequately conceptualized. The different strands of discussion turned out to be a source of inspiration for thinking conceptually and methodologically in the seminar. In order to approach the assemblage concept and determine its potentials for our empirical research projects, we developed specific questions for exploring the potentials and limitations of the concept rather than focusing on one tradition or operationalization. Based on the examples of specific projects in the group, we asked how assemblage can be used fruitfully for ethnographic research rather than searching for a specific answer or a universal definition.

Heuristics for a cultural anthropological assemblage research

Working conceptually with assemblage theory in empirical research is a difficult approach. In our study of relevant literature, we found that we share this experience with other researchers. In the conclusion of a debate on this topic in a special issue on ›Assemblage and Geography‹, we came across five challenges of engaging with assemblages in empirical social and cultural research, which we experienced similarly in our research: 1) taken the particular specificity of the (absent) elements into account while focusing on the relations between them; 2) what kind of cohesion emerges and gives shape to the assemblage; 3) how can we capture voids and practices of absence in relations; 4) what opportunities do we have to perceive change in different arrangements; 5) and last but not least: what does the multiplicity of the assemblage approach mean for the methodological stance of empirical research.¹⁹

In light of these considerations and experiences we made in exploring assemblage theoretically and empirically, the following conceptual questions arise for the cultural anthropological study of assemblages:

What are the core elements (epistemological objects) of assemblages?

In the complexity of social worlds, empirical social and cultural research needs to reduce this complexity in a meaningful way by identifying the relevant objects and units for further inquiry. But what concept can we use for this research process, that emphasizes fluidity rather than given structures?

The central argument of the assemblage perspective according to DeLanda is that

denken. Studien zur technologischen Verkörperung – Hybride Artefakte, posthumane Körper. Bielefeld 2005, pp. 187–216.

19 Cf. McFarlane/Anderson, as in fn. 13.

»[t]he identity of any assemblage at any level of scale is always the product of a process (territorialization and, in some cases, coding) and it is always precarious, since other processes (deterritorialization and decoding) can destabilize it. For this reason, the ontological status of assemblages, large or small, is always that of unique, singular individuals. In other words, unlike taxonomic essentialism in which genus, species and individual are separate ontological categories, the ontology of assemblages is flat since it contains nothing but differently scaled *individual singularities* (or *hacceities*).«²⁰

Furthermore, philosopher Thomas Nail identifies »the rejection of unity in favor of multiplicity, and the rejection of essence in favor of events«²¹ as one of the major philosophical consequences of assemblage thinking by Deleuze and Guattari. If the heterogeneous elements in the assemblage change, the assemblage changes as a whole. There are no certainties, fixed structures or even an unchangeable core of empirical phenomena with fixed properties. This ›rejection of essence‹ is questioned by Deleuze theorist and critical thinker Ian Buchanan in his counter-argument that he detailed in »Assemblage Theory and Method«²². Buchanan refers to the concept of stratification into geological, organic and techno-semiological strata, which do not have any compelling evidence about the other areas as presented in the work of Deleuze/Guattari. He criticizes that many assemblage perspectives which have evolved in the last decades are based on misinterpretations of their writings – especially DeLanda's.²³ He acknowledges, however, that the multifaceted debate about assemblage has produced fruitful perspectives, but that these do not correspond to the understanding of assemblage according to Deleuze/Guattari. These different perspectives on the question of essentialism as attributions of fixed entities represent a point of conflict in the understanding around the assemblage perspective.

Which forms of agency are we talking about?

DeLanda focuses on the aspect of a ›relational agency‹ in assemblages, which renders it relational in a double sense: on the one hand, it is an expression of the internal organizing of the assemblage, and on the other hand, the capabilities only become apparent in relation to other assemblages.²⁴ Thus, the assemblage is an expression of emergent properties of the relational assemblage itself. Material conditions of life, practical action, and the arrangement

20 DeLanda, as in fn. 7, p. 28.

21 Thomas Nail: What is an Assemblage? In: SubStance 46/1 (2017), pp. 21–37, see p. 22.

22 Ian Buchanan: Assemblage Theory and Method. An Introduction and Guide. London 2021.

23 Ibid., p. 29. For a comprehensive discussion of Buchanan's critique, see the article of Florian Helfer in this issue.

24 Tania Murray Li: Practices of Assemblage and Community Forest Management. In: Economy and Society 36/2 (2007), pp. 263–293, see p. 287 ff.

of bodies and processes are components of social realities. Furthermore, the agency of assemblage is to be thought of in processual terms, as it and its connections emerge from processes in which they bring together different actors and engage in situational interactions.

Practice theoretical traditions as outlined in ANT conceptualize ›agency‹²⁵ as the potential to act and as the capacity of actors to bundle their own energies and forces and to pursue interests without assuming intentionality. The relationships that the elements enter into through their agency in assemblages are characterized by expressivity, which means that the single elements have the potential to interact with other elements and bring different options into action.²⁶ This agentic potential emerging in an assemblage is thus dependent on collaboration, cooperation, and interaction, which are formative to them in the first place and are constitutive for the social at large.²⁷ In the tradition of New Materialism, Jane Bennett also understands the agency of humans as relational and emerging in networks of different types of actors, but goes beyond this by emphasizing the material dimensions of these relations as ›vibrant materials‹²⁸, i. e. a flow of materialized energy.

But how can agency be thought of as a form of directed and materialized forces and energies from different actors? One possibility is the concept of ›distributed agency‹²⁹. This specific notion of agency counteracts the hierarchical settings between the elements of the assemblages and prevents the privileging of a human agency in the analysis. It seeks to overcome the idea that non-living matter is passive and only formed and treated by living species by highlighting the agentic capacities of all materials emerging from their physical and chemical processes. According to this understanding, the elements within the assemblage are executive media rather than fixed entities,³⁰ thus understanding agency as a force detached from the heterogeneous elements.³¹ The materialities are transformed from ›passive *representations of social* struggle to materially significant agents in their own right‹³².

25 In this article, we use the term ›agency‹ as an umbrella term for both agency and agentic potentials, although a detailed examination reveals that agency potential is a prerequisite for agency.

26 *DeLanda*, as in ft. 7, pp. 13 f.

27 In order to include the socio-material perspectives of the social to a greater extent and not to further centralize the human being, the constructional character of human agency must be emphasized in any research, cf. *Jane Bennett: Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things*. London 2010, p. 34.

28 *Ibid.*, pp. 3–13.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

30 *J-D Dewsbury: The Deleuze-Guattarian Assemblage: Plastic Habits*. In: *Area* 43.2 (2011), pp. 148-153, here p. 149.

31 *Bennett*, as in fn. 27, pp. 23 f.

32 *Graham Pickren: The Global Assemblage of Digital Flow: Critical Data Studies and the Infrastructure of Computing*. In: *Progress in Human Geography* 42/2 (2018), pp. 225–243, here p. 234.

Bennett illustrates this with the example of a power outage in North America in 2003 which affected 50 million people over twenty-four thousand square kilometers and traces the tension of an agentic assemblage in her analysis between electricity, infrastructures such as power plants and transmission wires, consumers and laws like the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (1992). She provocatively asks whether electricity is not simply a resource, a commodity, or an instrument in this context, but thinks of it more radically as an actor, a directed flow of energy, which positions itself towards the other actors involved in the assemblage ›blackout‹. She tries to answer how the agency of assemblages can be distinguished to other social theories of agency, how it can be understood as a relationship of human and non-human entities and what this means for the notion of moral responsibility.³³ According to their understanding, agency includes the following characteristics: efficacy, trajectory, and causality. Efficacy emphasizes the creativity and the capacities of the actors to act, to be allowed to act and to have to act. Trajectory asks about the direction of action, and causality about the interconnections between modes of action. Agency is no longer expressed by moral capacity, but by the intentionality of the actors in the assemblage. The assemblage therefore has its own agentic capacities vis-à-vis the vitality of materialities that condition it.

What brings assemblages together and for how long?

Assemblage as a concept emphasizes the emergent, changing, fluid, flexible and formative processes of the social rather than its structures. This does not mean that socio-structural dimensions do not matter anymore, but that they are not sufficient to explain processes of change and (re-)invention. However, some kinds of stabilization and binding forces need to be in place in assemblages too and thus give evidence of their existence. There are different ideas and terminologies for describing what holds assemblages together. *Affect/Desire/Wish/Shi/Energy* are different framings that denote the forces and energies in the elements and in the assemblage itself. While developing unique ideas of the processes of stabilization, the different perspectives agree that each of the heterogeneous elements has its own vital forces that emerge and are negotiated in relation to the interests of the other elements. While all perspectives highlight the dynamics of and within assemblages, they do not say much about the temporality of assemblages and thus the stability of these socio-material arrangements. Even though it is an important issue for our intention to explore range and scope of assemblage thinking, we demarcate this as a desideratum to be discussed rather than diving deeper into the exploration of the temporal issues in the different strands of assemblage thinking ourselves.

33 Bennett, as in fn. 27, pp. 20–38; Jane Bennett: The Agency of Assemblages and the North American Blackout. In: *Public Culture* 17/3 (2015), pp. 445–465.

In respect to the stabilizing forces of assemblages, Deleuze and Guattari use the term »Desire/Wish« for the circulating energy that the interactions, connections, and relationships produced through effects and affects in assemblages.³⁴ They refer to the motivations of the heterogeneous elements to connect, but can also dissolve interactions of the elements in assemblages.³⁵ Some strategies aimed at the stabilization and destabilization of power, which both DeLanda and Nail emphasize as central, refer to the developments of change in the assemblages, since fluidity and movement are genuine phenomena of an assemblage.³⁶ In order to understand how an assemblage (the politics of an assemblage) modifies, we need to be able to map out its different tendencies and political types. From a philosophical point of view, four types of change are coexistent in every assemblage and conceptualized as different forms of »deterritorialization«, that is, the ways in which assemblages develop, transform, or reproduce.³⁷ *Relative negative deterritorialization* is »change in order to maintain and reproduce an established assemblage«,³⁸ and therefore the existing assemblage adapts elements of the new one. *Relative positive deterritorialization* »does not reproduce a pre-established assemblage, but does not yet contribute to or create a new one«³⁹. *Absolute negative deterritorialization* is a »change that does not support any political assemblage but undermines them all«. *Absolute positive deterritorialization* are processes that help to create new assemblages.⁴¹ In ANT the stabilization of the assemblage in a network is an active engagement of the actors and described by Michel Callon⁴² as a process of translation in four steps, starting with a problematization, followed by the interesement of relevant actors, who decide about their enrolment in the problem, which leads to the mobilization of the allies in this network. The new mode of thinking about forming the social is accompanied by the development of a new conceptual language, which goes beyond established terms of social analysis. This provides a heuristic framework for empirical analysis which, however,

34 Gilles Deleuze/Felix Guattari: *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis 1987, p. 14; Parr, as in fn. 3, here p. 18.

35 Martin Müller/Carolin Schurr: *Assemblage Thinking and Actor-Network Theory: Conjunctions, Disjunctions, Cross-Fertilisations*. In: *Royal Geographical Society* 41 (2016), pp. 217–229, here p. 225.

36 Nail, as in ft. 21. For Assemblage and power cf. John Allen/Allan Cochrane: *Assemblages of State Power: Topological Shifts in the Organization of Government and Politics*. In: *Antipode* 42/5 (2010), p. 1071–1089.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

39 *Ibid.*

40 *Ibid.*

41 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

42 Michel Callon: *Some Elements of a Sociology of Translation: Domestication of the Scallops and the Fishermen of St Brieuc Bay*. In: John Law (ed.): *Power, Action and Belief: A New Sociology of Knowledge*. London 1986.

is discussed in respect to potential barriers for the collaboration with the sciences.⁴³

New materialism also emphasizes the need of a new vocabulary to describe the human and non-human relations.⁴⁴ In search of such a vocabulary, Bennett refers to the figure of thought of »Shi« (style/energy/propensity/trajectory/elan), which connects to cosmic notions of Japanese traditions of thought to a ›feeling of life‹⁴⁵ and is intrinsic to the specific arrangement of things, motivations, vibrations, and affiliations, but can take different forms of expression and change. The shi of assemblages is in permanent motion, which allows it to be described as »vibrating«. ⁴⁶ These energies are involved in processes of (de)stabilization and thus form practices within assemblages, which at the same time form and stabilize the assemblages. Assemblages likewise form common forces within the assemblage.⁴⁷

How can assemblages be made tangible and analyzable in ethnographic research?

The flexible nature of assemblages raises the issue of how to study them, which furthermore is then a question of the theoretical understanding of assemblages. While philosophical perspectives do not include empirics, social constructivist ANT research or new materialist approaches with their focus on flat ontologies call for an empirical approach, with empirically grounded theory building on assemblage as a concept for studying the social. A possible approach to assemblages that can be taken is to focus on processes and practices of ›assembling‹. According to geographer Murray Li, the practices that hold the heterogeneous elements together can be classified as follows on the basis of her qualitative research on forest policy in Thailand: »forging alignments, rendering technical, authorizing knowledge, managing failures, re-posing political questions and reassembling as the ground shifts.« She pays attention to the situationally exercised work of actors, without assuming prescribing modes of action and interests. According to her, »analytic of assemblage foregrounds the practices that fill the gap between the will to govern and the refractory processes that make government so difficult«. ⁴⁸

The ethnographic contributions in this issue follow on from existing research and give insights in different ways in order to grasp assemblages. Using the-

43 *Jörg Niewöhner*: Stadt als Praxis ko-laborativ wissen. Kommentar zu Alexa Färbers »Potenziale freisetzen«. In: sub|urban. zeitschrift für kritische stadtforschung 2 (2014), 1, pp. 126–129.

44 Cf. *Barad*, as in fn. 18.

45 For the concept of Shi see *Annelotte Piper*: Das Shi als Ausdruck des japanischen Lebensgefühls in der Taishozeit. Hagiwara Sakutaro und Takumara Kotaro In: NOAG 77 (1955), pp. 8–24.

46 *Bennett*, as in fn. 27, see p. 35.

47 *Ibid.*, pp. 20–24.

48 *Murray*, as in fn. 24, see p. 287.

oretical considerations and empirical material, they elaborate on the points at which assemblages become tangible and analyzable, where they overlap, and how they can be described. To trace these questions, the authors of this issue look at their own fields of research and discuss the potentials, challenges, and limitations of the assemblage perspective for ethnographic practice and its specific form of knowledge production and reality construction.

Bianka Schaffus examines how the planning process of a market area in Hamburg-Sasel emerges as an assemblage. First, assemblage theory is used to analyze the planning process itself. To this end, related components, as for instance diverging interests, conflicts and authorities as well as discourses are considered regarding their impact on the planning process. Second, she investigates the value of assemblage theory for urban research. Following planning processes, this writing reveals gaps and how they can be filled by using assemblage theory.

Within the field of policy anthropology and a research question about the agency of employees in cultural administration offices, Florian Helfer shows how ethnographic research can be enriched by the debate of assemblage theory. In doing so, he encounters a critical argument on the concepts of essentialism and desire in contrast to the dominant reception of assemblage theory.

Manuel Bolz uses actor-specific revenge stories to examine the connections between meaning-making narratives and narrating bodies, and the emotional dimension of revenge relationships that form affective assemblages. Through the practice of storytelling, his interviewees position themselves in relation to other actors, social relations, and things and attribute certain Eurocentric emotional qualities e.g. love, hate, shame, grief, anger or satisfaction to these connections. The identification of these constellations therefore reveals how unifying and at the same time repulsive emotions can be in the life worlds. As he shows, ›revenge‹ is not only destructive, but productive, (re)activating and ordering and produces specific social networks that can be described with the assemblage concept.

Lara Hansen examines to which extent the much-discussed assemblage perspective can be useful as a heuristic for a cultural-analytical approach to new forms of citizenship, especially urban citizenship in the context of social movements like ›Solidarity Cities‹. The example of city-identification cards illustrates the interlacing of the different elements and processes of change within the assemblage.

Conclusion or: Where does an assemblage start, where does it end?

These examples and explorations illustrate the challenges of working with and thinking in assemblages as concepts for empirical analyses. When describing and analyzing assemblages, there is always the danger of fixation and generalization in the field in the form of structures and patterns. The dif-

ficuity is not to reduce the individual situated subjects to a singular rationality or essence. Rather, the complexity of the structure must be acknowledged and mapped in an appropriate way. That is why scholarly articles can only offer one possible way of representing assemblages, and we would like to encourage thinking about non-linear formats as well.

Furthermore, this issue has a focus on present-oriented perspectives. An exciting question would also be to what extent the assemblage perspective can be fruitful for a historical consideration of research fields.⁴⁹ How can assemblages be made productive when the elements we study are in the past and thus ›historical‹? How do we incorporate historical materials such as archival sources into the assemblages? Furthermore, we could ask how assemblages could be visualized beyond textual presentations, as cultural anthropology aims to make knowledge visible and available to an interested public beyond academic spheres.

An open question, with which we would like to conclude at this point, is about the limits and the ›end‹ of an assemblage. Is the knowing moment of solidification, e.g. the decision of a city planning authority regarding the Saseler Markt in the city of Hamburg, the end of the assemblage? Does the assemblage and perhaps even the applicability of the assemblage end when solidification has taken place, such as the establishment of a specific ›culture of decision making‹? What does it mean for the researcher and the research practice when our position within the assemblage changes due to working or field logics, as in research projects with social movements like the Solidary Cities movement? Do assemblages end when social relationships and interactions fail, or can they be traced over long periods of time, e.g. when specific feelings and emotions are involved like love, hate or anger? Is it possible to ever erase the traces of social connections because they are always part of someone's life? Assemblage theory offers great potential for answering these questions. This special issue is a starting point, and we encourage other researchers to consider taking on this approach in their own research.

49 See for example: *Saskia Sassen: Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages*. Princeton 2008; *Ben Jervis: Assemblage Urbanism: Becoming Urban in Late Medieval Southampton*. In: *Archaeological Dialogues* 25/2 (2018), pp. 135-160; *Melanie Oppenheimer/Susanne Schech/Romain Fathi/Neville Wylie/Rosemary Cresswell: Resilient Humanitarianism? Using Assemblage to Re-Evaluate the History of the League of Red Cross Societies*. In: *The International History Review* 43/3 (2021), pp. 579-597.



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