

INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM

Assemblage THINKING



Welcome!

Kαλῶς ἔλθετε!

THEORY, ANALYSIS, PRACTICE & GOVERNANCE

2, 3, 4 JUNE, 2017

DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY | UNIVERSITY OF THE AEGEAN
MYTILINI, LESVOS, GREECE

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How the idea of this symposium emerged and the symposium was assembled

While studying human responses to land degradation (LD) ... I felt that something was wrong with the ontology underlying human-environment or socio-ecological studies.

- My object of reference, human responses to LD, exhibited a wide variety of actualizations spanning the formal-informal spectrum and
- It could not be simply reduced to specific 'response options', such as administrative, policy, land management, economic, and similar measures, because empirical applications concerned specific responses at a specific place and time!
- There exist, and are still in use, various disciplinary conceptualizations, theories, models, and empirical studies of socio-environmental phenomena **together with**
- Post-1970s interdisciplinary endeavours within the sustainability discourse and its recent companion, Resilience Thinking.

How the idea of this symposium emerged and the symposium was assembled

Interdisciplinary endeavours share common concerns:

- (a) socio-ecological problems are complex and wicked, hence, requiring nonlinear approaches,
- (b) complex interactions exist between the material (natural resources and human artefacts) and the immaterial (economy, norms, culture, institutions) components of socio-ecological systems,
- (c) context matters
- (d) uncertainty prevails,
- (e) adaptive management and co-management and governance are required to maintain the socio-ecological resilience of these systems and achieve progress towards sustainable development.

Surprisingly, the prevailing, implicit or explicit, ontology underlying socio-ecological studies, still remains an ontology of ‘systems-as-a-whole’ and **positivism reigns supreme** in treating human and nonhuman components and their relationships.

How the idea of this symposium emerged and the symposium was assembled

No wonder, my decisive encounter with the assemblage literature in 2012 convinced me that:

- the nonreductionist and relational assemblage was **the** ontology of complex systems or, more correctly, of multiplicities comprising multitudinous assemblages and that
- the study of socio-ecological and other complex problems, such as the human responses to LD, might be better framed by Assemblage Thinking

The theoretical and empirical works employing the assemblage ontology/analytic are firmly founded in, and include, the seminal work of Deleuze and Guattari, **who encouraged multiple readings and interpretations of their ideas**, and

Manuel DeLanda's commendable down-to-earth, clear and digestible 'translation' of their often obscure, garbled and idiosyncratic texts as well as his personal contribution.

How the idea of this symposium emerged and the symposium was assembled

Despite the enthusiastic uptake in academic circles, the dedicated meetings organized and the insightful applications in many and diverse fields,

Assemblage Thinking has not diffused yet as widely as it should to make an impact on the outlook, approaches and study of complex problems and on the management recommendations offered.

Thus, the idea of assembling a multi-disciplinary, international group of scholars engaging in AT-related work to

- reflect on conceptual and theoretical, methodological, empirical and policy/governance issues,
 - present current research, identify open challenges and
 - outline an agenda for future research,
- naturally emerged and this symposium came into being!

Assemblage Thinking vs. Assemblage Theory

Assemblage Theory: more precise and circumscribed meaning ... interpreting 'theory' as focusing on a specific object of interest, assemblages in this case, making assumptions about its ontology and proposing how to systematically describe, explain and predict, with any degree of certainty, its structure and dynamics.

Assemblage Thinking: broader and more encompassing (like, e.g. Complexity Thinking, Resilience Thinking). It refers to

- a mode of relational thinking, including both ontology and theory,
- a way of approaching an object of interest not as a pre-existing whole, an essence, but as emerging from the coming together of heterogeneous, co-existing and co-functioning components that creates agency, an **assemblage**.

Diverse scientific fields and thematic areas have historically employed and contemporaneously employ the assemblage ontology/analytic: **philosophy, arts and architecture, the natural sciences, the social sciences and geography, through to informatics, management, planning and governance**, several of which are represented in this symposium.

Assemblage Thinking vs. Assemblage Theory

The diverse applications of AT reflect alternative readings and supports Anderson and McFarlane's proposition that **assemblage** is used as **descriptor**, **concept** and **ethos**.

AT-related continuously produced research exhibits shared premises:

- The assumption of a mind-independent reality
- The rejection of essentialist taxonomies, binaries and of clear boundaries among categories
- A processual view of phenomena, as **multiplicities** that emphasizes
 - (a) **praxis** and **habits**: the habitual practices and mechanisms through which components get assembled, but also those that disassemble them
 - (b) the **emergent, multiple** actualizations of phenomena
- A renewed and deeper emphasis on the materiality of objects of study even in fields where the material was traditionally present such as architecture, geography, human-environment studies.
- A flat, non-hierarchical ontology that overcomes the micro-macro- division.

Assemblage Thinking

- implies a radical change of outlook and attitude towards the world,
- captures the continuous unfolding of real world phenomena and, thus,
- advances a vibrant object of reference for theoretical studies and empirical applications that
- asks researchers to renegotiate taken-for-granted conceptual, theoretical, methodological and governance issues.

My hope and expectation is that this symposium will be one of those small acts that will bring about a big change to:

- (a) demonstrate the suitability of Assemblage Thinking to ontologically frame the study and governance of complex issues
- (b) indicate how to make it operational and accessible to a broader audience for academic and practical purposes, and,
- (c) eventually, answer the question of this symposium: “**Could Assemblage Thinking serve as a suitable template or paradigm for the study of socio-spatial and other complex issues?**”

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Thank you!

Ευχαριστώ πολύ!