



Why
I fell for

Assemblages

INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM

Assemblage
THINKING

THEORY, ANALYSIS, PRACTICE & GOVERNANCE
DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY | UNIVERSITY OF THE AEGEAN
2, 3, 4 JUNE, 2017, MYTIQNI, LESVOS, GREECE

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Preliminaries

Conceptualizing and theorizing

Analysis and applications

Policy and governance

Power and politics

Open challenges, future research

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Preliminaries

A revisable account of the main reasons that

- render the assemblage ontology/analytic and Assemblage Thinking suitable for handling complex objects of reference and, simultaneously,
- pose exciting and important research and application challenges.

From a broadly-conceived decision analytic and applied studies point of view, with particular emphasis on socio-ecological issues.

Positing that **setting the ontology right first** is a definite priority in all studies to safeguard the validity and usefulness of their findings, because,

the ontological framing and assumptions critically influence the problem definition and pertinent theorizing, analysis and governance recommendations.

Preliminaries

Majority of applied studies:

- ontological reductionism – the reductionist ontology of wholes, or
- ontological void – do not discuss ontology at all

Assemblage Thinking provides an alternative to both.

Assemblage, an integrative notion

- captures the **dynamic constitution** of complex objects of reference out of multifarious components through **praxis** and
- underscores the **unique character/becoming** (hacceity) of the **emergent** individual singularities that possess **agency**.

Discuss the value of assemblage-based approaches for:

- Conceptualizing and theorizing
- Analysis and applications
- Policy and governance and
- Power and politics

Conceptualizing & theorizing

In applied studies,

Common tendency

- Treats concepts as homogeneous, undifferentiated, with unambiguous, uniform, and identical meaning across individuals, places and time
- Disregards particular context of application and use
- Positive or negative connotations and moral undertones, historically acquired in particular scientific and socio-cultural contexts, are often uncritically adopted and remain invariable when transferred to other contexts.

Examples: system, state, planning, policy, resilience, vulnerability, climate change, degradation, adaptation, economic impact, social network, etc.

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Conceptualizing & theorizing

Assemblage-based approach

- treats concepts as nonhomogeneous that are assembled out of human and nonhuman components, reflecting an ontology of becoming.

Praxis and the **purpose** of praxis come center stage.

Praxis: the habitual and other practices and mechanisms through which components are assembled and dis/re-assembled

Purpose: a broader-than-functional/operational sense;

Deleuze & Guattari's **desire**, desiring machine, consistency, that underlies the emergence of assemblages.

“There are no internal drives in desire, only assemblages.

Desire is always assembled; it is what the assemblage determines it to be” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 229)

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Conceptualizing & theorizing

In effect, the **concepts** involved in a problem under study (including the problem definition) **are reconceptualized as assemblages and co-constituted** in the space of assemblage that determines their situated definition and meaning.

But, because components, practices and their place- and time-specific relationships vary, **concepts** have multiple actualizations. Thus,

Concepts are better conceived as multiplicities constituted by assemblages as Deleuze and Guattari put it. This reconceptualization carries over to analysis and governance.

The assemblage ontology enables a non-reductionist, integrative, **context- and issue-sensitive** conceptualization, theoretical and analytical treatment of complex concepts/objects of reference as **concepts-in-use** in socio-ecological and other applied studies.

Conceptualizing & theorizing

An example

‘Human responses to land degradation (LD)’ and

‘The effectiveness of human responses to LD’

Conventional understanding

Human responses are specific actions or policy instruments (response options); e.g. land management practices, subsidies, infrastructure and the like

Effectiveness is assessed by means of conventional measures (indicators, etc.).

Assemblage-based approach

Human responses to LD conceived as **Response Assemblages (RAs)**

“Geographically and historically unique, provisional, open, territorial wholes, complex compositions emerging from processes of assembling biophysical and human components from an affected focal and other SESs, to serve human goals”

LD and responses to LD are not separate entities.

It is the RA that determines what they are; the state of an area in a period.

The effectiveness of responses to LD is expressed as the socio-ecological fit of the RA and not as the socio-ecological fit of particular response options (e.g. SLM).

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Conceptualizing & theorizing

Theory building

Common approach to theorizing in applied studies:

Adopt a micro- or a macro-reductionist, economic or sociological, approach, draw a general and abstract theoretical schema (at best) and employ context-invariable concepts.

Even the Panarchy model (Gunderson and Holling 2002) for integrated theorizing of complex socio-ecological problems did not manage to shun this orientation.

Assemblage-based approach

Addresses the need for substantive, context- and issue-specific theorizing for the analysis and governance of complex problems.

Conceptualizing & theorizing

Major implication of the assemblage-based approach:

Fundamental shift in framing and defining problems, conceptualizing concepts, identifying relationships, solving problems, making decisions....

From	To
Essentialist and reductionist approach Euclidean space of externally defined 'systems-as-a-whole'	Processual-relational, non-reductionist approach Multidimensional, smooth space of multiplicities immanently constituted by diverse entangled assemblages

... that renders

- binaries and typologies pointless
- stage theories of linear socio-spatial development extraneous
- pre-determined, formal solutions revisable

Plan and policy implementation are open-ended and contingent on the place- and time-specific mechanisms through which heterogeneous, relatively autonomous components are constantly (re/dis)assembled ... thus, **their effects and outcomes are unpredictable.**

Conceptualizing & theorizing

Most important consequence in applied contexts:

The formal-informal distinction (e.g. activities, settlements, planning, governance) becomes blurred and partially irrelevant because,

- (a) the formal (institutionalized)-informal boundary changes and
- (b) formal concepts and processes are informalized during implementation (contextualization, translation) while informal processes may get formalized.

What matters is the individual singularities, the assemblages that emerge.

Note that informal does not necessarily mean unstructured; informal may be very striated, coded and organized as customary rules, law and institutions evince.

Analysis and applications

Assemblage-based analysis essentially becomes **the simultaneous (and revisable) operationalization** of:

- the spatio-temporal frame of reference **and**
- the style of structuration (composition and processes of assembly) of the assemblages constituting the study multiplicity

Spatio-temporal frame of reference

In applications, a **focal socio-ecological system (SES)**:

- is usually defined, following administrative boundaries, often determined by those setting the problem and vested with formal mandate and power to apply pertinent recommendations (e.g. sustainable land management) and
- considered the ‘system-as-a-whole’ for the ensuing analysis

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Analysis and applications

In assemblage-based analysis, the given focal SES may be loosely conceived as a 'socio-ecological milieu' hosting a multiplicity defined by emerging assemblages.

Analysis concerns individual **focal assemblages** and the emergent socio-spatial hierarchy, identified within a period, that **may not coincide** with the focal SES and the current administrative hierarchy.

Thus, **the spatial frame of reference has to be redefined**, anchored at the given focal SES but with revisable and dynamic cross-level boundaries.

Similarly, **the temporal frame of reference**, usually given at the outset, has to be redefined depending on the temporal reach and changes of the assemblages formed over time.

Analysis and applications

Which assemblages? Focal assemblages, associated with the problem under study, **and** other assemblages, sharing components, co-existing, folding and co-evolving with the focal one(s).

What is analyzed?

- the assemblage(s) constituting the study multiplicity
- the associated socio-spatial hierarchy
- the concepts/objects of reference
- the properties of assemblages
- the capacities and tendencies of the components and
- the relationships among components

Important point: all assessments concern the assemblages and **NOT** the “system-as-a-whole” because no such a thing exists...

Specification error – omission of important components and their relationships and/or inclusion of unimportant ones – due to missing data and other reasons.

Analysis and applications

How should it be analyzed?

The **basin of attraction and similar resources**: a fitting template to organize the **thick analysis** of assemblages via a **multi-method approach** and **synthesis** of quantitative and qualitative techniques.

Main challenge: how (which techniques) to describe and analyze the relational, the processual, the active processes of relating and fitting and the emergent effects?

Conventional, quantitative data analysis (e.g. statistical) techniques, are unsuitable; they assess contingent relationships among **outcomes** of the generating processes.

Recent efforts follow two broad approaches:

- (a) cellular automata and agent-based modelling (reductionist?) and
- (b) qualitative approaches (nonreductionist); e.g. narratives, hermeneutics, reasoned history, informed reasoning, expert knowledge.

Caution: reductionist and nonreductionist techniques assume different object of analysis (ontology).

Analysis and applications

Other issues

- availability of all required data
- limitations of conventional representation resources (charts, graphs, maps) and language (in narratives)

to successfully tell the full story of dynamic and elusive assemblages and avert the incidence of specification error

All kinds of data (visual, aural, olfactory, gustatory, tactile) should be combined as knowledge of the world is acquired through all the senses.

However, several pieces of important, such as experiential, personal information, cannot be easily accessed and expressed.

Analysis and applications

Applications

The difference assemblage-based approaches make is that:

- (a) the 'system-as-a-whole' is abandoned as meaningless and is replaced by the multiplicity and the assemblages that constitute it
- (b) assemblages are not separated from their context (there is no inside and outside) because they are compositions in smooth multi-dimensional space and, consequently
- (c) analysis and assessment of, e.g. resilience, effectiveness, etc., refer to, and are meaningful for the assemblages identified, revealing how their style of structuration shapes particular outcomes in a period.

Policy and governance

Assemblage-based approaches change the basis of policy and governance discourse, how policy and governance issues are conceptualized, framed and handled, because they reconceptualize the **“who, what, when, where, why and how”** of socio-ecological and other problems.

Policy and governance

Policies and governance of whom, of what, by whom and how?

Common approach

- pre-given 'system-as-a-whole' and administrative hierarchy, where a problem arises
- uniformly (pre)defined concepts (purpose, effectiveness) and
- classes of target-actors (farmers, businesses, administrators)
- linear problem-solving and policy process oriented towards uniform, OSFA, solutions and 'best practices'

Solutions, 'responses' to a problem, are:

- **separately** considered from the problem
- usually take the form of specific instruments (economic, financial, technical, etc.) and implementation procedures that pre-determined recipients and administrators follow.

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Practical necessities dictate several of these **essentialist and reductionist assumptions**, that lead to ...
implementation inefficiencies and ineffectiveness ...
because reality does not conform to these assumptions.

Unclear

- if and how people perceive the 'problem' (e.g. land degradation, climate change)
- to what they collectively respond
- if they respond to the problem as assumed by the policy
- how 'solutions' are implemented

People, more often than not, respond to more than one issue and pursue more than one goals

Assemblage-based approach

- Starts from the multiplicity of assemblages
- Emphasises the **emergent, situated outcomes** that may have been influenced by formal policy measures and procedures.
- The ‘problem’ and its ‘solution(s)’ are **not** separate

The assemblage expresses the ‘problem’ and its perception and embodies its solution.

However concrete and explicit the declared purpose of problem solving, **perception and purpose are been assembled in the course of making and implementing decisions.**

The actors involved:

- evaluate the state and properties of the assemblage(s) as well as the capacities and tendencies of the components in a period
- suggest alternative routes to follow **but, most importantly,**
- practice/perform ‘solutions’ (i.e. implement recommendations).

Solutions are **not OSFA** but **situated, assembled and dynamic**

How to assess the effectiveness of proposed and/or implemented solutions?

Common approach:

Assess value of **pre-defined**, usually **general-purpose**, measures of effectiveness within the pre-defined 'system' of interest ...

“Mission impossible” – **unfeasible to neatly separate and orderly describe the formal/informal, local/supralocal complex interactions** among components, unless heroic assumptions are made, **isolate the effects of a given 'policy response' from all other 'responses' at work on the ground**, collect data and perform impact analysis.

Assemblage-based approach:

Effectiveness is assembled in the space of particular assemblages and, thus, **situated, composite and distributed**.

I have proposed the non-reductionist SEFRA for a realistic assessment of 'effectiveness' (fit) of responses-in-context that include 'responses' of interest to policy makers and managers.

Policy and governance

Finding effective points and means of intervention

Common approach

Pre-defined actors and means to put a solution to the pre-defined problem to action that will (linearly) bring the desired results.

Assemblage-based approach

Problem definition and its solution (policy formulation and implementation) **are assembled**

‘Experimenting’ with **interventions that may encourage the emergence of more ‘desirable’ assemblages,**

Interventions practically mean to add/remove/modify components and modify their relationships.

No perfect point of effective intervention; explore implications and be prepared to cope with their repercussions.

But ... **‘desirable to whom?’** ... is question of politics.

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Power and politics

Assemblage-based analysis evinces:

- **Composite, distributed and emergent nature of power** (who/what/how human and nonhuman components are included/excluded, related/not-related from which spatial level(s))
- **politics of the issue** under study
- influences of contingencies and the broader context

Thus, it helps explain:

- power (im)balances,
- the governability of assemblages,
- the persistence of observed (perpetuating the *status quo*) and the non-occurrence of other outcomes.

E.g., beneficial land management measures may not be adopted because of political/institutional implementation barriers (problematic or absent top-down communication) and not because of lack of education, interest, etc.

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Power and politics

‘Who produces what knowledge’

The **state of individual and collective**, always imperfect, **knowledge** influences the description and explanation of assemblages and the related management decisions.

Scientists and land/resource users continuously ‘produce’ scientific and traditional/local collective knowledge of the mind-independent reality.

Individuals constantly acquire knowledge through all their senses.

Two implications of the politics of knowledge and expertise:

- Knowledge is socially constructed and situated, thus, subject to uncertainty.
- The ‘system-as-a-whole’ ontology becomes unsuitable for the study of real world phenomena compared to the ‘assemblage’ ontology that recognizes and enunciates their uncertain, volatile, revisable and knowledge-dependent nature.

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Open challenges

Assemblage is the proper ontology to study complex problems in a **holistic** but **not totalizing** way.

Assemblage Thinking sensitizes both analysts and users of analyses (e.g. managers) to the **open-ended and revisable** nature of their objects of reference, **shake belief in certainty** and **experts' omniscience** and alert them to **expect all possible outcomes**.

It, thus, poses **important interlinked challenges** and suggests **stimulating future research directions** to explore and evaluate the worth of assemblage-based approaches.

- ❖ It offers an integrative conceptual apparatus and a flexible and malleable template to **reconceptualize concepts** (objects of reference) **as assembled** and **create an alternative lexicon** for **assemblage-inspired substantive theory building** through multi-disciplinary synthesis of theories and traditional/lay knowledge.

Open challenges

- ❖ It calls for **methodological openness and pluralism**, judicious and masterful **synthesis of quantitative and qualitative techniques** and, more importantly, **development of novel analytical approaches, methodologies and tools for relational analysis** and representation (mapping?) of assemblages and multiplicities.
- ❖ **The growing list of diverse applications should be augmented to produce new theoretical and methodological insights**
- ❖ It prompts a **reconceptualization of formal and informal governance, a revision of governance approaches** so far based on the 'system-as-a-whole' ontology and,
- ❖ **The development and practice of assemblage-based versions of adaptive governance** of real world entangled formal (arborescent) and informal (rhizomatic) assemblages.

Open challenges

- ❖ Notwithstanding the importance of material agency, the **role of personalities** demands particular attention because they are pivotal in encouraging the emergence of particular (power) assemblages and effecting their transformation if it is politically expedient.
- ❖ Last, but not least, AT calls for a **re-examination of issues of Ethics** given the close relationship of the political to the ethical and the grounding of both on human and human-material relationships.

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Thank you!

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