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Critique in the Study of Religion: Past, Present, and Future

Area: 1. Theory

Assemblage thinking and theory for a critical study of religion

Introduction

Assemblage thinking and theory are not new in critical studies of religion; the work of Jasbir K. Puar (2007) and related discussions (see *Culture and Religion* 15 [2] 2014) have already introduced them to the field. In response to Puar, Melissa Wilcox (2014, 156–57) writes, “Within the study of religion, the assemblage might be useful not simply as a way of elaborating ritual practice, but also as a way of seriously approaching the multiple effects of power that religion carries, expresses and is subject to.” However, if assemblage thinking is so promising, I ask why so few people use it. This study accordingly draws attention to assemblage thinking and theory for critical study.

Assemblage thinking

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s book *Mille Plateaux*, published in 1980 in French and in 1987 as *A Thousand Plateaus* in English, is the main work regarding what is termed *assemblage thinking*. The book was the second part of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* and a sequel to their first collaboration, *Anti-Oedipus*, published in 1972. Though Deleuze and Guattari did not actively participate in the events of May 1968—“mass protests, street battles, and nationwide strikes,” in France—their collaboration can be viewed in the light of this “cultural and social [revolution] that in a stunningly short time changed French society” (Rubin 2018). Anti-capitalist in orientation, Deleuze and Guattari promoted a “rethinking of political concepts” (Buchanan 2008, 19) and “power structures” (10). Deleuze can be classified as a theorizing and philosophizing academic who resisted traditional structures of philosophy. His fellow academic Guattari, meanwhile, may be understood as a “grounded theorist” in the sense that his thoughts are intrinsically connected to his political activism and his clinical practice as a psychotherapist (Buchanan 2008, 5–7; Holland 2013, 2–4). In terms of philosophical context, “Deleuze brings a whole set of conceptual resources from Spinoza, Leibniz, Hume, Kant, Nietzsche, Bergson, and Jung, just as Guattari brings [...] a set of invaluable resources from Marx, Hjelmslev and Lacan” (Holland 2013, 4).¹

¹ It seems debatable whether Deleuze, deeply engaged with structuralism, should be called a post-structuralist or understood as enriching structuralism (see Streetli [2021] on https://www.reddit.com/r/askphilosophy/comments/npqmmv/is_deleuze_a_poststructuralist_if_so_how_doe)

While assemblage is one of the key terms in *A Thousand Plateaus* ([1987] 2013), the book concerns more than assemblage, and, at least ostensibly, it is not specifically dedicated to establishing assemblage thinking as a theory. Rather, it is a treasure trove of different philosophical thoughts connected to assemblage and other conceptualizations that have been united in academic practice under the umbrella of assemblage thinking.² In Chapter 1, “Introduction: Rhizome” ([1987] 2013, 1–27), the authors introduce three key terms— (a) *multiplicity*, (b) *rhizome*, and (c) *assemblage*—that can be used interchangeably because they denote specific characteristics of each other:

- (a) Deleuze often refers to “us” as *multiplicities*: “It’s always a multiplicity, even in the person that speaks or acts. We are all groupuscles” (Deleuze and Foucault 1972). The subject becomes “a by-product of residue of experience itself,” and their life “consists precisely and only of the connections composing the patchwork.” Instead of “exist[ing],” subjects “con-sist,” which “entails being-with rather than standing-out” (Holland 2013, 10–11). “Multiplicities are rhizomatic” (Deleuze and Guattari [1987] 2013, 7), and multiplicity is a characteristic of rhizomes.
- (b) To Deleuze and Guattari, the act of depicting the *rhizome* as well as the depicted rhizome itself transport general epistemological, ontological, anthropological, ethical, and political ideas (see Holland 2013, 30–31). First, a rhizome encompasses heterogeneous elements, “dimensions” or “directions in motion” (Deleuze and Guattari [1987] 2013, 20) that connect to each other. This is especially important in the realm of linguistics: “A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, science, and social struggles. A semiotic chain is like a tuber agglomerating very diverse acts, not only linguistic, but also perceptive, mimetic, gestural, and cognitive” (6). Second, rhizomes remain multiplicities and do not become unities, as they are “flat”; they are “defined by the outside: by the abstract line, the line of flight or deterritorialization according to which they change in nature and connect with other multiplicities” (8). A rhizome “is an acentered, nonhierarchical, non-signifying system, [...] defined solely by a circulation of states” (20). Third, upon destruction, rhizomes always continue to exist in one form, as they are embedded in and related to a rhizomatic environment. Fourth, a rhizome is a map; it is “open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification” (12). A rhizome is only one possible actualization of a virtual realm and therefore cannot be traced (5–22).
- (c) An *assemblage*, in turn, is the “machinic” aspect of rhizomes; it is the process of change in rhizome and multiplicity; it is an agent that generates becoming (24). In addition, the

s_his/, accessed September 15, 2022). In the discourse, he became “the most important poststructuralist ‘philosopher of difference’” besides Jacques Derrida (Holland 2013, 2).

² I much prefer the image of a treasure trove to assuming, with DeLanda, that in the book “assemblage theory (...) is [all] over the place” and that Deleuze and Guattari have “two different assemblage theories” (DeLanda 2012, 4:11–5:42).

assemblage is “unattributable.” It has “only itself, in connection with other assemblages.” An assemblage can never be questioned with, “What is the meaning of an assemblage?” but rather with, “How does the assemblage function?” (2). Assemblages territorialize “functions and forces”; an assemblage territorializes the heterogenous elements and, in doing so, “transforms them.” The territorialized can thus become autonomous and “deterritorialized” and assume a role as an “assemblage converter” or start to compose new “deterritorialized assemblages” (378). Assemblages work in “milieus,” “the material environments (consisting of matter and energy flows) in which strata and territories are formed” (Holland 2013, 61), which are situated between the “plane of consistency,” a virtual realm of possibilities, and the “plane of organization,” the possibilities actualized by territorialization according to specific coding (56, 18–21). Assemblages relate to a “self-organizing” nature of the “chaosmos” and map “machinic processes of double-articulation.” Here, “content,” in the sense of matter, and “expression,” in the sense of discourses on the same matter, exist in reciprocity (58–9).

Manuel DeLanda is credited with what he calls *assemblage theory*. Born in 1952 in Mexico City, he moved to New York in the 1970s and started his career as an experimental filmmaker. Based on an interest in understanding his technical environment, he dove into symbolic logic and later analytical philosophy. DeLanda can be characterized as a philosophical realist in the sense of a realism that “insists on the independence of the world from thought” (Harman 2008, 369) and the independent existence of things (371–2). He argues that “a realist approach to social ontology must assert the autonomy of social entities from the concepts we have of them” (DeLanda 2006, 1). In this sense, he claims to be a non-essentialist materialist: His realism is linked to viewing individual entities as “product[s] of a process” (28) that “must be understood through the concrete historical-genetic process through which they appeared” (Harman 2008, 370). DeLanda bases these ideas on the philosophy of Guattari and especially Deleuze, which he aims to theoretically and practically solve in his own assemblage theory.

DeLanda (2012, 7:56–8:04) has claimed that “If [Deleuze and Guattari’s assemblage] theory is going to have any future, if this theory is going to be applied in social sciences at all, those rough edges are going to have to go.” Therefore, in his “synthesis” of assemblage theory (7:42), DeLanda merges Deleuze and Guattari’s inputs, especially those concerning multiplicity, rhizome, and assemblage. The result is a rather technical and practical framework that can be applied to concrete social and cultural matters. First, assemblages, “wholes,” have a history, are historically grown, and play the role of an “*individual entity*.” Second, assemblages are made of “heterogenous elements,” “*material and expressive objects*.” Third, “[a]ssemblages can become parts of larger assemblages.” Fourth, assemblages are a result of the interactions of the elements that compose them, but when established, assemblages can exercise influence on components and their interactions (DeLanda 2016, 19–21). Assemblages are shaped by two sets of “parameters”: “the *degree of territorialization and deterritorialization*” and “the *degree of coding and decoding*.” The

first relates to the homogeneity of the components or the homogenizing capacity of the assemblage, while the latter “refers to the role played by special expressive components in an assemblage in fixing the identity of a whole” (22). Defining assemblages as characterized by “relations of exteriority,” DeLanda takes an open stance against what he considers the predominance in social science of ontologies based on “seamless totality,” “organic unity,” and “*relations of interiority*, [in which] the component parts are constituted by the very relations they have to other parts in the whole” (DeLanda 2006, 9). He contends that the “emergent properties” of wholes or assemblages must be analyzed through the “interactions” between their components. These components have certain characteristic properties and an “open list” of possible capacities to interact with each other, which are actualized only in interaction itself and which do not define the nature of the components that render it dependent (10). This also means that the “properties of a whole cannot be reduced to those of its parts [because] they are the result not of an aggregation of the components’ own properties but of the actual exercise of their capacities” (11). DeLanda states that this “realist social ontology [...] is all about objective processes of assembly: a wide range of social entities, from persons to nation-states, will be treated as assemblages constructed through very specific historical processes in which language plays an important but not constitutive role” (3). In comparison to Deleuze and Guattari, DeLanda considers the productive, machinic, and becoming nature of assemblages to be less important. He discusses assemblages as entities and products, but also as being able to exert agency. However, rather than understanding this as a shortcoming of DeLanda’s assemblage theory, this is something to be kept in mind when applying assemblage thinking.

Who uses assemblage thinking, how, and for what purpose?

Study of religion

In the context of the study of religion, assemblage thinking is probably most known for in the work of Puar (2007; 2012), though Puar does not explicitly pursue the “study of religion” herself.³ Her work focuses on “terrorist assemblages” as entanglements of “racism and racialization, homophobia and queering, nation and nationalism, religion and secularism, and other dynamics of ‘Othering’ that attend US politics today” (Wilcox 2014, 153). For example, she focuses on “turbaned [...] bodies” and the assemblages in which they are embedded; the assemblages form the conditions that the turbans worn and their wearers can act out affective capacities of “creating fear,” become “turbaned terrorist bodies,” but the assemblages also cause the turban wearers “feel the fear they create.” The assemblages, which range across the “organic/inorganic divide,” are characterized by their double articulation; “informational and surveillance technologies of control both produce the body-as-information and also impact the organic body through an interface” (Puar 2007, 174–75).

³ Puar’s work was discussed at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion 2011, which resulted in a “Special Focus” of *Culture and Religion* (2014).

The assemblage defines not the original nature of the turban-wearers, but rather their “affective economies,” performed as sensory capacities in interrelation and interdependence with different material and immaterial assemblage elements (174-175, 177, 181). The feared turban-wearer, who perceives the fear, but also the observer of the turban wearer, who enacts and experiences the fear, should be understood in the context of assemblages, and thus extend beyond the perceived physical boundaries of their bodies; they remain constantly evolving (Puar 2012, 57, 61). With the help of assemblage thinking, Puar demonstrates how social control over bodies must be understood as emerging in a complex correlation that determines the bodies’ “affective capacities and tendencies” rather than in “signification or identity interpellation” (63).

The “global religious historian”⁴ Jörg Hausteine (2021) has used Deleuze and Guattari’s “rhizome” and its characteristics to highlight the complexity of colonial entanglements leading to the establishment of the historical “Mecca letter affair.” He argues that this historical event is best understood as a “human-text machine, in which scribes, text, and reader produce one another,” a “machinic assemblage,” with the effect that no such thing as “the” letter as a “single version of the text” ever existed. Rather, the letter had come into existence on the basis of a “global chain letter” rhizome (Hausteine 2021, 331–33). This example shows that the elements of an event should be understood in terms of how they are made and remade in course of the event. In case of the Mecca letter affair, the term “Arabs” undergoes a reidentification process. In addition, events are never seen as rupturing or transformative; in the same example, Islam is merely deterritorialized from being solely religious and is reterritorialized according to secular and political needs (334–7). Hausteine emphasizes that the Mecca letter is not “a singular or key event,” but rather “a microcosm for mapping out an aparallel evolution of Islam and politics in German East Africa” (338).

The study-of-religion scholars Eva Spies and Rüdiger Seesemann (2016) have drawn on Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizome and multiplicity to “elucidate the *relational* and *emergent* character of areas”—in their case “Africa”—as “the result of the multiple and interactive ways in which agents and agencies on various sides perceive and engage with the world” (Spies and Seesemann 2016, 134–36).⁵

Geography

To this point, human geographers have made the greatest contribution to using assemblage thinking across the disciplines (see Anderson et al. 2012; Anderson and McFarlane 2011)—this deserves a closer look. According to Ben Anderson et. al. (2012, 171–72), assemblage

⁴ “Global religious history” aims to take a critical stance by focusing on the study of religion’s object “religion” and related events as historically constructed in global entanglements, where “non-Western” actors played an active role, to show that global situatedness and interrelatedness matter; it further argues that ignoring this is based on structural colonialism (Maltese and Strube 2021; Bergunder 2021).

⁵ At this point, I cannot and do not intend this to be an encompassing overview over the usage of assemblage thinking in the study of religion.

thinking has become a “descriptor,” “ethos,” and “concept” for geographers and has gained importance in context of the “relational turn” in social science. However, in some cases, it does so as a reduced version: They state the need to reintroduce the significance of the characteristic of “relations of exteriority” to geographic studies (172). They find that thinking with assemblage first helps them overcome the “particular spatial imaginary” because it focuses on the assembling, that is, “processes and compositions.” Second, it allows them to focus on the “endurance” of orders “across differences and amid transformations” while simultaneously keeping track of transformation. Third, it helps geographers understand how “particular sets of relations appear to hold together across multiple differences and contradictions, even in what appears to be incoherent relations,” which are enabled by, for example, “iterative performances of social differentiation in moments of encounter” (172–3).

The critical human geographer Eden Kinkaid has also promoted a change in the use of assemblage thinking in geography to exploit its critical potential. They argue that assemblage thinking offers the possibility of integrating the essential role of categories, such as race, gender, and sexuality, in the research of social and cultural phenomena, where “a remarkable diversity of sites, bodies, meanings, and processes are assembled through (and, in turn, productive of) social categories of difference.” The categories come to “matter,” first, in individual bodies and subjectivities, which result in the “localizations and condensations” of these categories as ““set(s) of social relations and trans-personal forces” (Kinkaid 2020, 460), and, second, in their machinic nature, in the way they influence social and cultural becoming (462). They claim “that assemblage is a way of thinking about how the world becomes ordered that challenges ideas outside of mechanistic, deterministic models. Assemblage makes an *ontological* argument that socio-spatial formations are always being remade & *are not given*.” Accordingly, “it challenges hegemonic understandings of society and space. If contingency & ontological openness is what composes socio-spatial orders, we can transform those orders!” (Kinkaid 2022). They highlight that assemblage thinking holds critical potential because it helps to shed light on social and cultural dynamics interlinked with “socio-spatial orders” of “inequality” (Kinkaid 2020, 469, 476).

Several recent works display the actual use of assemblage thinking in geography: Nicole Constable (2018) has used assemblage on a global scale to describe “the experiences and practices of migrant mothers, migratory families, and the spectrum of absent children,” which are shaped by “migratory technologies, especially technological, political and ethical reflexive practices, such as government apparatuses of citizenship and governance, border-crossing social welfare regimes, and competing systems of morality and expert knowledge” (Constable 2018, 168, 170). Gordon Waitt and Louisa Welland (2019) have employed assemblage to describe both the “social and material” relational heterogeneous elements as well as the relating forces of “bathing assemblages” that “constitute subjectivities” (Waitt and Welland 2019, 25). They write, “To conceive of bathing as an assemblage means thinking how material things (or parts of things) and expressive elements (discourse, affect,

emotions) come together in a working order with one another” (29). To capture non-verbal affects and the becoming character of the assemblage, Waitt and Welland seek “materials (including water, buckets, showers and baths), skin, bathing social norms and conventions, the spatial and the affective (articulated as pleasure and sadness, bodily gestures or tone of voice)” (31).

The critical potential(s) of assemblage thinking

In the study of religion, (1) Haustein (2021) has shown how assemblage thinking helps us consider historic events in their complexity. In this context, historic events become assemblages with a productive force and aftermath that extend into our own situatedness, from which we in turn perceive them. Further, assemblage thinking for a study of religious history means refraining from assigning historic events a singular and transformative social and cultural impact; rather, it means always seeing and understanding them in their situatedness and becoming. (2) Puar (2007; 2012) has demonstrated that assemblage thinking can help illuminate what she calls social and cultural affective economies, explaining how certain affects and emotions come to be in and circulate societies in assemblages, how they become the medium that relates the different entities that make up society, and how they create and form subjects by being attached to them by and within the assemblage. In this case, assemblage thinking leads us to understand the phenomena relevant to the study of religion on an affective and emotional level beyond the verbal. In human geography, (3) Kinkaid (2020) has argued that assemblage thinking concerns the identification of the power dynamics that produce social phenomena, for example, via certain social categories of difference. In this sense, assemblage thinking helps us identify how discourses and practices related to religion territorialize and deterritorialize, code and decode. For example, it reveals how they shape subjects and manifest in the capacities of subjects and how they lead to the establishment of certain social power structures. (4) Geographers such as Constable (2018) and Waitt and Welland (2019) have shown that assemblage thinking can also be helpful for understanding the generation of experience and the processes of subjectification initiated in the context of religious practice. Experience and subjectification can be understood as being generated by an assemblage of different heterogeneous elements that extend beyond the actual material environment of the practice towards political, social, and cultural discourses and power structures. (5) Anderson et al. (2012) have suggested that, by highlighting processes and becoming, assemblage thinking is important for geographers from a practical perspective because it helps them characterize their research objects as researchable entities. Those entities consist of different components that hold together, and this framework helps overcome the need to imagine them as fixed and stable—Spies and Seesemann (2016) have also recognized this added value and made it their own. Thanks to poststructuralist and discourse research in particular, this idea is not new in the study of religion. The discursive study of religion studies religions as discourses and examines the different entities involved. It also focuses on discursive verbal and non-verbal practices of

knowledge production and knowledge, thereby also addressing power distribution and dispositifs of certain knowledge and power structures, mechanisms, and dynamics that are linked to religion (Johnston and Stuckrad 2020, 1–3). A close examination reveals many congruencies between Deleuze and Guattari's and DeLanda's assemblage and the concept of dispositif that originated with Michel Foucault (1980, 194–95). However, in comparison with the dispositif, assemblage thinking, especially in the case of DeLanda, offers a highly analytical and illustrative concept to examine objects. Further, one might argue that assemblage offers a better point of departure than the dispositif to study not only power relations within, but also the power potential of the whole upon the entities within, as well as the stabilizing and destabilizing dynamics.

These examples show how assemblage can be used to describe social and cultural phenomena in their very being, including the micro-level of human subjects' experience and identities, other beings and entities, and the collectives they constitute. Assemblage thinking sheds light on the socially relevant interrelations and the productive, produced, and producing nature of these interrelations. It highlights the historicity, situatedness, and fluid and unfixed nature of the interrelations and of the interrelating assemblage components, as well as their resilience to change. Assemblage thinking considers territorializing and deterritorializing forces and processes of coding and decoding within social and cultural phenomena; most importantly, it addresses their manifestation, the way they matter in terms of becoming. The term "assemblage" also means more than the mere relationality of heterogenous elements. Assemblages are machines; they are more than what they incorporate, and they also act out an agency upon their elements. Those elements retain an identity of their own, which is influenced but not defined by the fact that they are part of an assemblage. Subjects do not retain their subjectivity merely by being part of a particular assemblage; rather, they act out a specific subjectivity in an assemblage, which influences their subjectivity.

Applying assemblage thinking to the study of religion, religions and their practices can first be analyzed as part of socially and culturally relevant assemblages—as elements with capacities or as relating affects—without neglecting their own assembled nature. We can also examine religions and their practices as assemblages to decipher their being and their social and cultural relevance and embeddedness. Moreover, with assemblage thinking, we do not need to determine the matter or materiality we study with certainty; instead, at least in theory, it is applicable to all research areas across the study of religion, such as material religion, the study of religious experience, religious history, and the sociology of religion.

Regarding the critical potential of assemblage thinking, we can turn to a conversation transcribed for *Critical Research on Religion* (Martin et al. 2014). Leslie Dorrough Smith concludes, "We are defining criticism as [...] 'the ability to be able to see the connections between things that might otherwise go unspoken.' By 'connections,' I mean not only causes and correlations, but also possible similarities and points of difference" (Martin et al. 2014,

310). Assemblage thinking appears to be a framework that can enable a critical study of religion—a study of religion dedicated to criticism—that would mean paying attention to the invisible relations between things, moving beyond a mere description of the visible and obvious, questioning the use of terms and one’s own perceptions by highlighting complexity and interrelatedness, and emphasizing the agentic nature of things.

Assemblage thinking and alternatives?

In conclusion, choosing assemblage thinking remains a decision for a particular philosophical “image of thought,” which dictates what we find with it (see Holland 2013, 35). For example, DeLanda explicitly positions assemblage thinking against an “organismic metaphor,” the idea of “seamless totality,” which he sees as prevailing in the social sciences (DeLanda 2006, 9).⁶ However, assemblage thinking does not have to be DeLanda’s assemblage thinking; other forms of assemblage thinking have similar characteristics yet different emphases, such as that of Jane Bennett (2010). In addition, there is always the heritage of the philosophical sources Deleuze and Guattari employed.⁷ Finally, if we choose to apply assemblage thinking, we always ask, “Given a specific situation, what kind of assemblage would be required to produce it?” (Buchanan 2017, 473). The main question is always the “how.”

I find assemblage to be a very mathematical and geometrical or, rather, spatial construct, which can be negative as well as positive. On the one hand, as it is somewhat restricting, I am reluctant to praise it over other philosophical frameworks. On the other hand, it entails the possibility of visualizing and illustrating; it provides a vivid visual metaphor and enables the imagination of the abstract. Therefore, it makes visible the social and cultural dynamics and modes of subjectification, which we must approach in a critical study of religion. Assemblage thinking seems to have the potential to become a containing concept for different critical theories, and this may be how we should use it. Ultimately, assemblage thinking does not release us from debating and reflecting on other theories. Rather, it draws our attention to details, such as how the diverse and heterogenous components of assemblages interrelate; however, this is also where its limits lie. Assemblage thinking is only an initial step. To foster the deeper understanding needed for a critical view, we cannot stop there. Instead, we must add on other frameworks which, once we became aware of them, treat transactions, affects, and relations more concretely.

⁶ In this sense, assemblage thinking, though intrinsically about relationality, does not encompass the “relational religion” framework of other study-of-religion scholars, such as those advanced by Volkhard Krech (2020). Krech perceives religion as “an autopoietic and self-referential entity,” which “emerges and proceeds by relating”—in assemblage thinking, a contradiction (99).

⁷ Let us say that I have omitted the details in the spirit of Deleuze himself: “What Deleuze objected to was the repressive way this history of philosophy was used to wrap thoughts in the straightjacket of the imperative injunction ‘you can’t do this until you’ve read that’” (Buchanan 2008, 4).

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