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Assemblage Thinking and International Relations

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Abstract: In this introduction to the volume we locate the growing interest in assemblage thinking for international relations in its intellectual and historical context. Arguing that many different approaches to assemblage thinking exist, and eschewing the temptation to try to pin this style of thought down to a fixed theoretical perspective, we try to allow this volume to be an exploration of the potential for these ideas to transform international theory. We outline the multiple intellectual roots of assemblage thinking, and we show how some have treated it as an ontological position, while others have used it in a more tactical way in their research programmes. We then go on to consider the political stances for which assemblage thinking offers resources.

Introduction

Many scholars grappling with the problem of how to conceptualize the social world have been drawn to the figure of the 'assemblage.' One of the attractions of this style of thinking is that it offers a radical break from many existing theories that seem to have run up against their limits in a period of rapid social change. As the pace of transformation has quickened in areas such as biotechnology, climate science or the global financial markets, a pressing need has developed for theoretical perspectives and methodologies that can enable us to understand the impact of the changing configurations of the natural and the social worlds.

Assemblage thinking offers an approach that is capable of accommodating the various hybrids of material, biological, social and technological components that populate our world. It moves away from reified general categories and ill-defined abstract concepts beloved of modernist thought (state, market, city, society and capitalism): abstractions that have made successful analysis of contemporary crises, and, as a result, effective political intervention, problematic. Assemblage thought also moves away from the anthropocentrism that characterizes the vast majority of historical and political writing, replacing it with a form of materialism that lays emphasis upon the creative capacities of matter and energy, and the processes that instantiate them in their great variety of forms, including those that emerge in social interaction. The 'human' comes to be seen as component, not the limit, of society: doors, traffic lights and animals also take centre stage in a series of accounts where social interaction is a heterogeneous affair linking actors of all sorts, whether human or not. As such, 'assemblage' is an approach that mostly takes its place in the recent revival of materialism' and the turn to relationalism.²

International Relations theory is something of a latecomer to assemblage ideas. By engaging assemblage views of society and space, researchers in human geography and anthropology have already made important steps towards understanding what it means practically to deploy the figure of the 'assemblage' to unpack complex socio-cultural processes such as those of neoliberalism (see Ong and Collier 2004) and intricate socio-technical realities such as those that characterize cities (see Farías and Bender 2011). Can parallel developments be prompted in IR? Can the ideas of assemblage and assembling further the refinement of international theory as discipline and practice?

In this volume we invite a range of IR scholars to reflect upon what possibilities are offered by assemblage thinking for the study of world politics, as well as what its limits and aporias may be. Our hope is that the present volume, in addition to serving as a brief introduction to assemblage thinking, will also operate as the beginning of a productive conversation for scholars trying to open up new avenues for the study of international politics.

However, a preliminary and caveat is necessary before jumping into the exploration of these avenues. As discussions in geography and anthropology have already pointed out, we can now legitimately talk of many styles of assemblage thinking – a feature that makes this approach less of a *theory* and more of a repository of methods and ontological stances towards the social. We seek to encompass the diversity of approaches to assemblages that have been developed. We do not wish to limit the conversation to any one perspective: here you will find the assemblage thinking recovered from the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze (1987), considered in parallel with approaches that have been developed in quite different contexts, such as in the study of Science, Technology and Society (STS), where Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) has become increasingly influential. Moving closer to the core of IR, the work of Saskia Sassen (2006) has been an important milestone in applying assemblage ideas to the history of international transformation, while scholars such as Aiwa Ong and Stephen Collier (2005), Michael Williams and Rita Abrahamsen (2009) have recently attempted to trace the formation of *global assemblages*. Here, via three conversations with the editors, these thinkers reflect on the way they use assemblage thinking in their own work, and what value it may hold for the development of international theory.

In this spirit, we do not wish to offer a comprehensive definition of assemblages in this introduction. It is true that the various approaches discussed here seem to share some agreement as to what an assemblage is: a compound of artefacts and people (Law 1999), a cofunctioning of heterogeneous parts within a provisional whole (Anderson 2011), or in Deleuze's (2002: 69) well known statement:

> What is an assemblage? It is a multiplicity which is made up of heterogeneous terms ... the assemblage's only unity is that of co-functioning: it is a symbiosis, a 'sympathy'. It is never filiations that are important, but alliances, alloys.

Here we find some clues to the value of assemblage thought: its unwillingness to privilege either the social or the material, its resistance to totalizing systems of thought and the reification of entities, and its

insistence on the provisional nature of all assemblages as historically contingent entities.

So, instead of trying to pin the concept down in the first instance, we hope to allow this volume to be an exploration of what we might mean when we talk about assemblages, allowing the various contributors to develop the term as they see fit. A plurality of assemblages are discussed in these pages: cognitive assemblages, security assemblages, socio-technical assemblages, martial assemblages and conceptual assemblages. There are many points of similarity to be observed, and many connections to be made, between the various approaches. But there are also points of difference, contention and incompatibility. In this way, we hope that the volume shares the characteristics of the Deleuzian rhizome, operating as an open system that facilitates debate, developing new points of contact between theoretical traditions.

Assemblage thinking

It will be apparent from the approach set out that any intellectual history of 'assemblage' must have a tangled genealogy. Indeed, assemblage thought draws upon developments of huge importance in a number of intellectual fields. Deleuze and Guattari are crucial figures in the development of an ontology that includes assemblages as one of its core entities, a position sketched out in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Deleuze, it has been argued, belongs to 'an orphan line of thinkers', stretching back into the history of philosophy, including Spinoza, Nietzsche, Bergson: a 'deviant current' flowing against the canon, 'tied by no direct descendence but united by their opposition to State philosophy' (see Massumi's forward to Deleuze and Guattari 1987: x). But Deleuze also drew inspiration from a number of developments in scientific thought that matured in the twentieth-century such as the development of the non-linear sciences, with their battery of concepts: open systems, complexity, emergence and non-linear dynamics. He also made use of the tools that had been developed to describe such phenomena, drawing upon developments in mathematics (manifolds, attractors, transformation groups and the topological study of spaces of possibility) and biology (population thinking and selection). These form some of the foundations for a way of conceptualizing the various entities of the natural and social world as assemblages of heterogeneous components that are always transient and

open, and in process, never solidifying into a closed totality or system. More recently, Manuel DeLanda (2010, 2006, 2002, 1997) has taken Deleuze's arguments and developed a more comprehensive 'theory of assemblages' that, although meeting objections from some Deleuzians as being against the spirit of the original work, nevertheless has provided a clarification of Deleuze's ideas and the intellectual resources reinforcing them. As his most recent book (2011) makes clear, the rapid development of computer technology is also vital here in facilitating the methodological tools that enable scientists to uncover the dynamics of assemblages.[3]

Just as the dynamics of science and technology were crucial for Deleuze's materialist philosophy, STS has also developed a parallel interest in what we might term assemblages. As noted above, these have taken several philosophical shapes and methodological forms, ranging from more literal (and rare) applications of the Deleuzian term itself to variations such as 'actor-network' or 'actant' aimed at conveying the intertwined and post-anthropocentric form of society. We would argue that the difference between these terms is one of emphasis rather than kind. For instance, ANT, born as a response to the problems of technological determinism and anthropocentrism, opened up the material object as an arena of study. It considered how people and their material artefacts combine to produce historically specific orders. The strongest recent statement of an ANT view of assemblages has come from Bruno Latour (2005), who sought to develop a 'sociology of connections' of heterogeneous material and social elements in which neither the material or social are given priority. Latour has long argued (1993) that the 'bracketing' of the natural and social worlds, the separation of subject and object that underpinned the scientific revolution, has been a perennial delusion of modern thought. In his focus on process, association, rationality and hybridity, Latour echoes many of Deleuze's ontological suppositions, and deploys actor-network forms of assemblages as means to disentangle social processes from the constraints of modernist thinking, recharting the geography of the social as embedded in endless connections amongst 'actants', that is things, people and ideas that shape that very geography.

In the past decade, working within the paradigm of assemblage thinking from historical, sociological and anthropological trajectories, we have also seen thinkers such as Saskia Sassen, Aiwa Ong and Stephen Collier using this mode of thought to uncover the construction, and the disassemblage, of social formations. Sassen (2006) has deployed

the concept of assemblage as a tool with which to unpick the dynamics of how the modern world emerged from the social structures of the premodern world. She then employs it to chart how global assemblages are being constructed from the very components that comprised the modern world, as those components are reoriented to different projects beyond the national assemblage. Similarly, Ong and Collier (2004) also seek to understand the governance logics of the diversity of the 'global assemblages' that have emerged in recent decades, as articulations through which economic, technological and social forms gain significance transnationally (Collier 2006). Further demonstrating the composite nature of assemblage thinking, Ong and Collier also draw on Foucauldian concepts in their emphasis on the technologies and strategies of governing instantiated in these assemblages. Sassen, Ong and Collier, but also Latour and Deleuze have been progressively invoked in contemporary IR writing. These approaches are implicit critiques of many of the theories, concepts and tools that we currently have for understanding social change and the reconfiguration of institutions – they evidence a dissatisfaction with the closed systems and reifications that IR scholarship in particular has been all too willing to tolerate. Yet what sort of 'theory' do they promote in international thinking?

Ontology

We should stress that not all scholars want to go so far as DeLanda does in making assemblages the building blocks for an entire ontology or metaphysical system. Sassen for one, as her contribution to this volume makes clear, eschews such lofty considerations in her insistence that she uses assemblage as a methodological tool to destabilize established discourses and meanings in her pursuit of the dynamics of social change. But in Deleuze, DeLanda and Latour, we have self-conscious metaphysical operators shaping empirical considerations. If, as Colin Wright (2006: 2) has argued, 'politics is the terrain of competing ontologies,' we need to ask: of what features does an assemblage ontology partake, and why might such an ontology offer an improvement on those that IR scholar's have held?

Assemblage theory is driven in large part by dissatisfaction with the dominant ontologies that have characterized social theory, including international theory. One of the defining characteristics of mainstream

approaches to IR has been state-centrism. Assemblage theory's most obvious promise is that it rules out such reification: it seeks to replace such abstractions with concrete histories of the processes by which entities are formed and made to endure. Something like 'the state' can only be talked about in terms of the heterogeneous elements that comprise specific historically situated states, and the processes and mechanisms that provide it with the emergent properties and capacities of statehood. The same holds true for 'capitalism' the 'city' or 'society' – these categories are too blunt to offer the fine-grained analysis of concrete historical processes and entities that assemblage thinking forces us to focus on.

Traditional thinking in IR has, building from the reification of states as units, tended to emphasize simple and relatively closed systems, leading to the familiar assumptions about equilibrium, cyclicality and predictability that we find in the rationalist IR paradigm. In such theories, systems are commonly seen as no more than the sum of their parts – thus ruling out emergent properties. Shifting to the type of complex-systems paradigm that assemblages offer opens up a new theoretical vista, and engages fully with concepts such as emergence, non-linearity, openness, adaptation, feedback and path-dependency (Bousquet and Curtis 2011). Although predictability in complex systems is tightly constrained, the possibilities for analysis of the system's historical development offer a much richer resource for understanding transitions from one systemic configuration to another.

One of the useful results of thinking this way about parts and wholes is that we are left with a 'flat ontology' of individuals (Latour 2005). Any assemblage, as a concrete historical individual, has the same ontological status as any other assemblage, regardless of size or scale.[4] Given that IR has moved in the general direction of pluralist conceptions of the international system, this ontology can provide a valuable starting point for the analysis of various social actors, including transnational corporations, institutional networks, epistemic communities, nation-states, cities and terrorist networks, which are often kept separate in theories founded on ontologies that make them incommensurable. In DeLanda's sketch of the nested formation of different assemblages, larger wholes always emerge from the interaction of heterogeneous parts at a lower level of scale. This process of assemblage takes place repeatedly at various scales, as larger entities emerge from arrays of smaller components: individual persons emerge from a range of sub-personal components, communities

emerge from the interaction of individuals, institutions and networks emerge from the interaction of communities, cities emerge from these networks and institutions, and states emerge from networks of cities as well as other networks and institutions. In this way, assemblages become the component parts of other assemblages, and the previously reified notion of society may be viewed as a historically specific assemblage of assemblages, open to transformation.

The upward movement of processes of assemblage through these various (always provisional) wholes should not lead us to discount the causal power of 'structures'. Although assemblage theory offers a bottom-up perspective, it also contains an account of emergent top-down causality – the ability of entities at larger scales to react back on the parts that comprise them. As DeLanda (2010: 12) makes clear, 'once a larger scale assemblage is in place, it immediately starts acting as a source of limitations and resources for its components'. This bears similarity to the conception of structuration in Anthony Giddens's work (1984) or morphogenesis in Margaret Archer's work (1995), but here it is the concept of *emergent capabilities* that explains the structuring capacities of heterogeneous social entities. Sequence and temporality become vital: assemblages are born into a pre-existing configuration of other assemblages – so although theoretically we are asked to follow the upward movement of processes of assemblage, social reality is actually inherently *non-linear*. Assemblage thinking is thus comfortable with modelling structures while seeking to undermine *structuralism*.

It is also important to note that an assemblage approach to agency asks important questions about where agency is to be found. When we talk about the agency of an assemblage of heterogeneous social and material elements we deal with a form of agency that is both emergent and distributed across the entire assemblage (Dittmer 2013). As Nick Srnicek argues here, in his consideration of the cognitive assemblages developing around climate science or financial markets, it is the entire assemblage that acts – and these are assemblages that include in their components not just individual persons and groups and their knowledge, but also the technological tools and measuring instruments that have been developed to allow modelling and inter-vention in the market and the climate: data collection tools, computer models, software and data sets. This concept of distributed agency, with its attendant decentring of the human subject of modern liberal thought, and as part of the wider turn to post-anthropocentrism or

post-humanism (Cudworth and Hobden 2011), makes some scholars distinctly uncomfortable with the implications of assemblage thought, a view reflected here in the chapter by David Chandler.

Analytical tactic

Importing the figure of the assemblage into IR can therefore help to fur-ther destabilize reified meaning and anthropocentric rationalities, while prompting a reassessment of the ontologies of the discipline. Thinking with assemblages is, however, not just an exercise in developing new theoretical stances on the nature of being. These ontological consid-erations are foreshadowed, in much assemblage theory, by a variety of applied methods that make this 'new philosophy of society' (DeLanda 2010) into a complex of empirical stances too. Assemblage, to put it simply, is as much a toolkit of analytical tactics as it is a set of ontological assumptions. If assemblage views tend to depict a more heterogene-ous (i.e. contingently socio-technical, where 'things' can act too) and indeed 'messier' picture of how global affairs unravel, these views also come with several methods on how to unpack this intricate picture of society. As Bueger points out in his contribution to this volume, invok-ing assemblages does not only require us to acquaint ourselves with the ontological stances described above, but it also demands a recognition of a series of empiricist projects that see these worldviews being applied to in-depth analyses.

Assemblage is in this sense a method. As noted above, the very genesis of 'assemblage thinking' as a *modus operandi* for the social sciences brings evidence of this way of operating, being itself a composite of complex and diverse ideas coming from political philosophy, sociology and STS, making up for a theory of assemblages that is itself an assemblage of views and methods. Yet, how can we then understand the empirical challenge of thinking with assemblages?

For many of those that could be deemed 'assemblage theorists' this approach has as much to do with rethinking as it does with unpacking and unveiling. Sassen for instance, as she notes in the following chapter, sees assemblages as 'an analytic tactic to deal with the abstract and the unseen'. Assemblage, as an empirical approach, calls upon us to confront unproblematic categories such as those of 'the state' or 'the city' or routi-

nized realities like those of global finance, and pull them apart into the components of their assembled wholes.

In human geography, where a similar debate on the value of thinking with assemblages has occupied the pages of key journals, this approach has mostly emerged as a 'mode of response' to perceived limitations of current ways of geographical thinking, both in the sense of assemblage as 'critique' and of assemblage as 'orientation' (McFarlane and Anderson 2011; Acuto 2011). Assemblage thinking, several contemporary human geographers argue, is a response to tensions within relational thought itself (Anderson et al. 2012; Dittmer 2013). It allows us to think through processes of composition and decomposition, and as such is attractive to critical geographers precisely because it allows us to see how different spatial forms, processes and orders hold together. Drawing on the heritage of Deleuzian and Foucauldian thinking, assemblage thinking tends to push for the problematization of the ordinary and the deconstruction of wholes and totalities, such as the 'global' into contingent realities where society is, even if temporarily, stabilized in networks, institutions and routines. Assemblage becomes a way of investigating the social, not just a philosophical stance on it. For instance, by depicting assemblage thinking as a 'style of structuration', Jane Bennett demanded greater attention to how 'throbbing confederations' of humans and 'vibrant materials' are 'able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within' (2010: 23). Representing both the descriptor of the relation between the parts of a volatile but somewhat functional whole' and at the same time the analytical principle by which we can make sense of such a 'confederated' complex, assemblages are in Bennett's case mobilized to tell the story of how socio-technical networks come together, persist and fail. Somewhat similarly to Latour and Callon's version of Actor-Network Theory, and somewhat more systematically than DeLanda's more philosophical ruminations on society, assembling and disassembling is what the social theorist *does* to convey the stabilities and fluidities of the world one is trying to describe. In this sense, the analytics of assemblage are embedded in an account of immanence and change. As a *modus operandi* for the social scientist, assemblage thinking demands substantial tolerance for the fluidity of society.

Yet, as a challenge to many existing accounts of social processes, assemblage thinking is not free from methodological critiques. Many see inherent analytical dangers of thinking with assemblages. As a method for unpacking categories, this approach can easily fall prey of

a self-reinforcing process of endless deconstruction, never reaching what is from the start an impossible end: assemblages like 'the state', once opened, bear the risk of unveiling other 'smaller' totalities which, in their turn, might also hold internal realities in need of disentanglement, eventually resulting in the question of where to stop assembling and disassembling, and how. This kind of critique embodies a number of dissatisfactions with assemblage thinking's inherent risk of privileging description over prescription, undisciplined narrative versus theoretical research aimed at highlighting predictable realities, or even, as Chandler suggests in his chapter in this volume, risks the 'erasure' of human aspirations in a quintessentially assembled world. Actor-Network-Theory has often been criticized for these potential shortcomings, and other assemblage strands are equally vulnerable to such critiques. Yet, rather than acknowledging these as unsolvable confrontations, or providing some overarching solutions to such quandaries, we have decided to allow for the variety of approaches represented in these pages to find their own voice amidst the limits of theorizing with assemblages. Here we seek to turn these contrasts into a signifier of an important and yet often overlooked element of this line of thinking: the politics of assembling.

The politics of assembly

Assemblage thinking emerges then as a potentially very productive tool for unpacking and recasting the boundaries of the 'political' and the 'international'. Nevertheless, as noted above, assemblage as a theoretical orientation has been raising more than a few proverbial eyebrows in social theory. This criticism, however, is not simply a mirror of academic quarrels: along with methodological underpinnings of 'thinking with assemblages' also comes normative stances and political orientations. What does assemblage mean *politically*? It seems crucial to us here, and to many authors later, to point out how assembling and reassembling politics also implies a politics of assembling, and a politics of the assemblies that this worldview convenes in its tales. For instance, in his contribution to the volume, Mark Salter reminds us that theorists working from this particular worldview tend to become 'partisan[s] for assemblage theory' while potentially forgetting that the manner of intervention the intellectual deploys to make sense of the world is after all a 'deeply political'

affair in itself – a view espoused by many of the contributors, as in Mike Williams's and Rita Abrahamsen's case.

There are indeed, as Guillaume notes in his chapter, deep conceptual politics behind the choices of assemblage thinking. As the chapters in Part 1 of the volume highlight, normative choices abound in the variety of ontological takes towards assemblages. Some threads persist across the landscape of 'assemblages', but analytical and theoretical differences also remain an indisputable feature of this mode of thinking. Not least, then, assemblage thinking is by default characterized by an internal confrontation amongst ways of assembling and, as we would like to suggest here, potentially diverse political orientations that reverberate through the various 'generations' of assemblage theorists. Working in the shadow of Deleuze and Guattari, as for instance in DeLanda's case, bears not just diverse empirical connotations but also normative flavours: from those entrenched in the mix of Foucauldian precepts such as Stephen Collier and Aihwa Ong to the Bourdieusian solution to the challenges of grounding assemblage typical of Williams and Abrahamsen. So, then, can we even speak of an 'assemblage theory' as a coherent system of ideas intended to explain specific realities? The jury on this matter is still very much out. DeLanda's contributions have gone a long way in terms of elaborating a philosophical position for assemblage thinking, but, as noted in the previous two sections, ontologies and epistemologies of this lineage only bear *similarities*, not conformity. If anything, many chapters in this volume seem to hint at the opposite, painting a view of assemblages as tactics, sensibilities, ontological stances or metanarrative tools rather than pointing at assemblage as an *-ism* in an IR sense.

Amidst this variety, where some consistency persists, politics are certainly not tempered down. For example, assemblages, in their heterogeneity and flattening tendencies, necessarily push towards further pluralism in the accounts and critiques of the international. Additionally, the commitment to critique found in assemblage work is itself a political orientation. Sassen's project of 'making visible' that which has been obscured by the master categories of modern thought seems to be driven by a desire to know the origins of dominant assemblages ('city', 'state' and 'finance'), and what holds them in place, so that we might have a firmer basis for critique of those forms. In this sense it is certainly worth noting that Deleuze held political commitments to anti-hierarchical forms of political and social assemblage, a stance catalysed by the events of May 1968 in France, and the social movements that they gave birth to. We

have already described how Deleuze opposed his 'rhizomatic' philosophy to the traditional Western cannon. Deleuzian thought developed, as all philosophical systems must, within a particular political context, and he himself had political commitments to which his radical philosophy was a contribution. Deleuze and Guattari wrote, then, in the context of leftist struggles, while, at the same time, seeking to break with the dialectical elements of the philosophical system that inspired Marx. This commitment is even more apparent in the biography of his sometimes collaborator Felix Guattari, who was a militant member of the leftist movement, with an interest in novel forms of communist practice. Both were attracted to the autonomist Marxism of which Italy was a hotbed in the 1960s (Anderson et al. 2012: 178). The bottom-up self-organizing dynamics of Autonomism finds its scientific echo in the complexity concepts that Deleuze was influenced by. Yet, does this mean that thinking with assemblages levels the playing field for more egalitarian political stances? Does it help us deconstruct *and advocate* against established socio-political hierarchies and economic injustice as well as it might do with macro-categories and established notions?

It seems to us that, for all its limits and loose boundaries, assemblage is charged with critical and political possibilities. For example, the question of agency within and of assemblages might inevitably raise new questions about the nature of power, but this does not mean that the inner analytical quandaries of assembling disappear. The materialist ontology (or at least an ontology including a form of materialism) that foregrounds many assemblage stances, and the distributive notions of agency that, from Latour to DeLanda, chart influence and mutual constitution in the heterogeneous world depicted by assemblage thinkers, necessarily leads to key metatheoretical challenges. As Jane Bennett has observed in her work, analytical challenges might ultimately also be a matter of prior 'political judgments' by the intellectual:

> should we acknowledge the distributed quality of agency in order to address the power of human-nonhuman assemblages and to resist a politics of blame? Or should we persist with a strategic understatement of material agency in the hope of enhancing the accountability of specific humans? (Bennett, 2010: 38)

Different normative propensities on this matter, even in the presence of similar (and by all means not always equal) ontological and empirical stances, do eventually lead to a diversification in the genus of assemblage

theorists and assemblages accounts. If this is true of social theory, a normatively charged realm such as that of IR theory is no less prone to look into the political underpinnings of what it means, *practically* not just theoretically, to think with assemblages.

As with the challenge of analytics, the recent experience of human geography might be instructive here. Discussing the implications of assemblages on socio-spatial analysis, Anderson et al. (2012) have stumbled upon the very same challenges raised by Bennett's concerns. As they note, the intellectual's ethical or political obligations to the world under scrutiny, whether in the 'contained' assemblages of a suburban neighbourhood or in the diffused realities of global finance, do eventually demand that 'we cut and specify causality within assemblages in order to attribute responsibility and blame' (Ibid.: 186). Bennett (2010: ix), herself, sees the normative implications of assemblage thinking, with its recovery of the dignity of material objects, as pushing towards a more ecological sensibility, and away from 'the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter [which] feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption'.

Recently the attraction of assemblage thinking for activists within social movements has been apparent. Russell et al. (2011) specifically pose the question: what can assemblage thought do to empower political projects seeking social transformation? What they want specifically from assemblage thinking is then a resource with which to build anti-capitalist forms of social organization – a stance that, again, has readily apparent links with autonomous Marxism.

However, the ways in which assemblage thinking has been yoked by some to a political project of autonomy, emancipation and self-organizing worker dynamics are by no means the only possibilities to use assemblage thinking in the theory and practice of politics. A rhizomatic or network form is itself no guarantor of progressive politics. As Castells (1996) has argued in his work on the network society, networks can be directed to any goal. A networked form of assemblage might equally be turned to the purposes of terror or criminality as to the goals of a progressive social movement. And, as some contributors to this volume note, assemblage thinking might in itself not be as amenable to the type of theoretical clarifications and analytical simplifications needed for specific political projects. As it helps us to raise political questions and grapple with the need to conceptualize causal stability along with dynamic change and fluidity, assemblage thinking might, after all, remain a collage

of various and evolving interpretations, always greater than the sum of its many parts, always in change. It is in this somewhat paradoxical nature that assemblage thinking has pushed us, as many others before, to search for some preliminary answers and theoretical evolution through the comfort of collaborative academia. Far from being an exhaustive primer for the IR student keen to learn a textbook version of 'assemblage theory', this volume has instead offered us a chance to put assemblage thinking under the spotlight, question its boundaries, origins and limits, and discuss, collectively, why it is an intriguing idea for the scholar of international politics. One could then hope that, in light of the 'internal' diversity among assemblage approaches and the potential for reflexivity about the purpose of assembling, assemblage thinking will treasure the 'careful humility' (to borrow from Salter's chapter) it has demonstrated potential for, and promote humble but critical takes on the assembled nature of the international.

Notes

1 The recovery of the material components of social formations is one of the key objectives of assemblage thought. This, however, is part of a wider movement towards a 'new materialism', which seeks to step beyond the limits of 'historical materialism' and the over-determination of human labour processes and modes of production.

2 As a set of ideas associated with a focus on process and relations, it has been argued that the turn to assemblage is itself a signifier of a wider crisis or impasse in relational thought, a crisis for which it offers resources to think through the relationship between stability and transformation, structure and agency (Anderson et al. 2012: 172).

3 New technological capacities deriving from the digital revolution and the modelling power of computers must also then be seen as a crucial driver of assemblage thinking. But, more than this, as Bousquet argues here, assemblage thinking has the radical potential to reconceptualize the way we think about the relationship between technology and society, bringing with it a rejection of the 'conventional dichotomy between the technical and the social' and setting 'both domains in flux'.

4 The term individual here points at more than the 'human individual': in this ontology individuals may be biological organisms, but they may just as well be species, or ecosystems, or cities, or states, or actor-networks of heterogeneous components unified by their provisional co-functioning.