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INTRODUCTION

Assembling culture

Tony Bennett and Chris Healy

In taking issue with what he takes to be the defining assumption of sociology – that is, the existence of the social as a specific domain or reality, distinguished from the economy and politics, for example, by laws and properties that are immanent to it – Bruno Latour proposes instead that the social should be defined ‘only as a very peculiar movement of re-association and reassembling’ (Latour 2005, p. 7). The task of social analysis, on this interpretation, becomes that of tracing the associations – the varied actor networks – through which particular kinds of social relations come to be assembled and made durable. Its concern, in tracing such processes of assembly, disassembly and reassembly, is with the complex distribution of agency – between people, objects, technologies, texts – where an actor is viewed not as ‘the source of an action but the moving target of a vast array of entities swarming toward it’ (p. 46). The resulting, so to speak, ‘shuffle of agency’ is one in which the forms of agency performed by an actor change – not incessantly, and not necessarily radically – in accordance with the overall configuration of the assemblages within which it is brought together, provisionally, and rarely exclusively, with other actors. And it is from this shifting shuffle of agency that particular kinds of power are made up, power understood as ‘the final result of a process and not a reservoir, a stock, or a capital’ (p. 64). In contrast to more conventional sociological conceptions of power as rooted in an underlying structure that can account for its genesis and function, Latour sees power as a force that can only be analysed by following the processes through which it is made up and, equally important, through which it is performed and exercised.

The questions that are explored in this double issue of the *Journal of Cultural Economy* concern the implications of this and related perspectives for the purposes of cultural analysis and the manner in which it should be conducted.¹ As Marcus and Saka (2006) suggest in their useful survey of assemblage theory, these are questions directed to ‘theory of the “middle range”’ (p. 101). If the social does not exist as a special domain but as ‘a peculiar movement of re-association and reassembling’, what implications does this have for how ‘the cultural’ might best be conceived? Is this too usefully thought of as composed of distinctive processes of assembly giving rise to ‘cultural assemblages’ which produce and exercise particular kinds of power? If so, how are we to think the relations between such assemblages and those processes and forms through which the economy and the social are made up? What new ways of thinking the relations between culture, the economy and the social might be developed by pursuing such lines of inquiry? And what are there implications for the relations between culture and politics? And what, finally, are the limits of recasting the concerns of cultural analysis through the prism of assembly/assemblage theory?

The perspective from which the contributors explore these questions, however, is by no means limited to the influence of Latour’s work. Some look back beyond Latour to

Deleuze and Guattari's (1988) formulations of the concerns of assemblage theory on which Latour draws even as he qualifies them in favour of his own stronger interest in the processual aspects of *assembling* than in the properties of specific *assemblages*. There is, in a related vein, also an interest in the opportunities for distinctive kinds of cultural analysis presented by the interfaces between assemblage theory and Foucault's account of the varied kinds of entities – texts, persons, objects, technologies – whose interrelations accounted for the distinctive make-ups of different *dispositifs* and the different kinds of action they are capable of performing (Foucault 1980, p. 194). Other contributors are more engaged by the properties of actor-network theory, especially their capacity to develop an account of cultural agency that is alert to the significance of non-human actors. The now widespread concern with the operation of social science research methods as, in John Law's terms, 'method assemblages' (Law 2004) in which entanglements of inscription and technical devices of various kinds make the social, culture, or the economy actionable in certain ways, also informs a number of the papers. The same is true of Michel Callon's concept of *agencement* (Callon 2005) and the claim that it offers a better rendition of the more fluid and mobile meaning of 'assemblage' in French and a better account than assemblage theory of the active role played by devices of various kinds in performing economic or social relations.

We did not, in asking our contributors to engage with the questions we have posed above, specify any particular interpretation of culture or any specific set of cultural practices as privileged vehicles for these concerns. We indicated merely that we wanted to explore how culture (of diverse kinds) is assembled by bringing together heterogeneous elements (artefacts, people, texts, architectures, archives, etc) and organizing these into distinctively configured relations to one another. Collecting institutions; heritage sites; community arts projects; libraries; media; quantitative and qualitative cultural data – these are some examples of the kinds of 'cultural assemblages' we suggested might be considered. We were, however, keen that discussion should focus on the role played by different forms of expertise – demographic, statistical, marketing, museological, communications – in the processes through which such assemblages are put together, whether in transitory or more durable form. We also asked that this concern with the role of specific kinds of expertise and knowledge should translate into a consideration of how the processes of cultural assembly they are enmeshed within give rise to specific ways of differentiating culture from the economy or the social (or both) while also organizing particular kinds of action on or in relation to them.

It is accordingly in terms of the different kinds of expertise they are concerned with, the kinds of assembling that they are associated with, and the mode of their relation to the economy or the social that the papers brought together here can be grouped into a number of distinct clusters. The first two papers are concerned with the processes through which populations are assembled statistically as a part of modern technologies for 'governing through numbers'. This is, of course, well-trodden ground. The accumulation of data about populations and their cultural attributes in centres of calculation and administration has been a significant aspect of modern practices of government, whether liberal or illiberal. As such, it has played a key role in organizing the 'surfaces' through which government acts on the social: from the role of nineteenth-century statistics in producing class as a surface of government, through its role in organizing caste as a relay of government in post-1857 India, to its role in the contemporary agendas and practices of multiculturalism, or the management of public opinion, for example.

Evelyn Ruppert and Tim Rowse both review and join this literature in examining the role of censuses in relation to the Indigenous populations of Canada and Australia. Drawing on John Law's concept of method assemblages, they review different aspects of the difficult and often contested processes through which Indigenous peoples have been – with varying degrees of success – included in national censuses. Where they add a new perspective to these concerns, however, is in the attention they pay to the interfaces between such processes of statistical assembling and different aspects of Indigenous cultural practice. In Ruppert's case, this attention focuses on the complications involved in inscribing the Aboriginal inhabitants of Canada's Far North into census data alongside other sections of the population. Through a detailed examination of Canada's first national census in 1911, Ruppert chronicles the difficulties the census enumerators had in engaging with or enlisting the Indigenous populations of the Yukon and Northwest Territories as 'census subjects' whose characteristics could be translated into the census categories on the same terms as those developed for Canada's non-Indigenous population. Nomadic practices; the absence of practices of dating age in relation to calendar time, the difficulty of producing a match between the defining aspects of Aboriginal personhood and the census grids requiring information about occupation, for example, or nationality: in these and a host of other minor technical ways, the aspiration of the census to 'produce population' in a new national form was rendered incomplete by its failure to adequately transform Aboriginal people into the kinds of 'census subjects' who, by aligning their lives with the census categories, were able to tell the truth about themselves in the forms the state required for the development of its administrative practices.

The matter has not, of course, rested there. Ruppert concludes her discussion by tracing aspects of the subsequent processes through which attempts to impose census categories onto Aboriginal people have been transformed into more dialogic forms of interaction through which the terms on which they have been included in census returns have been negotiated. It is these processes that Rowse is primarily concerned with, approaching them through the prism of John Law's conception of 'ontological politics' to describe the active role played by social science methods in making up social worlds, defining the kinds of persons and groups that inhabit those worlds, and making them amenable to specific kinds of political intervention. The empirical focus of Rowse's attention is with the ontological politics produced by the relations between censuses and the Aboriginal and Maori populations of Australia and New Zealand over the period since the 1960s. Examining the role of censuses in producing 'the population binary' that has made it possible to measure Indigenous forms and levels of deprivation relative to non-Indigenous Australians and New Zealanders, Rowse discusses the different political positions that Aboriginal and Maori intellectual and political activists have taken up within this space. His main concern here is to identify the implications of these positions for different strategies for translating administrative constructions of Indigenous populations into new forms of Indigenous peoplehood produced by active engagement with the new realities that census practices produce and make visible. He writes not against the ontologies produced by censuses but in search of ways in which ontologies beyond those of Indigenous/non-Indigenous might be aggregated differently in support of distributive justice.

Liz McFall's and Celia Lury's interests lie with the distinctive assemblages of culture, knowledge and expertise that are implicated in the organisation and construction of

economic relations and actors of varied kinds. The stress here falls on the ways in which such assemblages function to format the economy, laying it out in ways which render it amenable to particular kinds of management and organisation. For both authors, however, assemblage theory has its limitations. McFall's concerns centre on the development of markets for industrial branch life assurance in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Criticizing the concept of assemblage for what she sees as its somewhat static associations, she looks instead to Callon's concept of *agencement* with its stronger focus on the role of particular kinds of cognition and technical devices in equipping agents with the capacities and skills required to perform certain acts. Considered as an *agencement*, she argues, the life assurance agencies developed over this period equipped their collecting agents with a range of tools and techniques through which they were able to organize the new kinds of behavioural discipline among working-class communities needed to draw them into the new forms of risk management comprised by industrial life assurance.

Lury approaches brands as distinctive assemblages made up through multiple heterogeneous processes in which different forms of marketing, management and design expertise converge. Tracing different stages in the history of brand development, she examines how its range of functions has increased from, initially, a means of organizing consumption to, now, a means of also organizing a range of management and personnel practices within the firm. However, she suggests that this, its extended capacity, cannot be understood entirely with reference to its constitution as an assemblage of different techniques and devices. Attention has also to be paid to how, as Lury puts it, brands 'assemble culture' and here she looks to Simmel, Benjamin, Kracauer and the Frankfurt School to understand how brands – however specific a market niche they seek to construct – are parts of a system in which 'the masses' are continuously differentiated so that they might be integrated within the flow of economic products, good and services. By bringing together assemblage theory and early twentieth-century accounts of mass culture and the masses, Lury advances a distinctive account of brands as devices for the reflexive organisation of multi-dimensional relations between products and services through a series of spatializing and topological techniques whose operations Lury too, like McFall, argues are best captured by the notion of *agencement*.

Kay Anderson and Colin Perrin share McFall's and Lury's concern with the operation of particular devices in producing new realities. In their case, these devices comprise the instruments associated with the nineteenth-century science of craniometry considered in respect to their role in 'assembling the head' as a distinctive scientific assemblage that was implicated in the production of a new racialized nature-culture in which the distinctiveness of the human was figured in physical rather than metaphysical terms. While identifying the broader parameters of these new practices of head measuring, the techniques and instruments which made them possible, and their relation to the parallel moral technologies developed in association with phrenology, Anderson and Perrin's primary interest is in the role played by Georges Cuvier, the French comparative anatomist and palaeontologist, in assembling the head in a new and distinctive manner. They draw on Latour's urging the need for analysis to dwell on the material processes that have to be attended to in order to follow the micro-physical mechanisms through which power is, in Foucault's conception, made up. Their purpose in doing so is to account for the new forms of biological racism that were developed in the early nineteenth century not as the expressions of ideologies of racial hierarchy or difference but as the effects of new

assemblages of scientific knowledge and techniques of somatic calibration and classification that resulted in a reconstructive modelling of the human. The head, in their analysis, thus serves not as the prop for the articulation of racist ideologies but as the coordinating node of an assemblage which grounded race difference and human specificity in the body in what was to prove a devastating and lethal fusion.

In the next three papers, Tony Bennett, Sharon Macdonald and Helen Rees Leahy are all concerned with heritage understood as a process of disassembling diverse texts, artefacts, tools and technologies from their regular associations with each other in everyday life, or from their associations with one another in previous heritage assemblages, and their reassembly in specific heritage sites or collecting institutions.

There are strong historical connections between Tony Bennett's concerns and those of Anderson and Perrin. For his discussion of the new ways in which race was assembled and figured at the Musée de l'Homme in the 1930s is also, in part, an account of the ways in which the influence of Cuvier on the earlier development of French ethnology, and particularly on the craniometric practices of Paul Broca, was dismantled in favour of a new receptivity to a non-hierarchical ordering of racial and cultural differences. His more distinctive concern, however, is to consider how the Musée de l'Homme's role in relation to this new receptivity to difference inscribed its activities within new rationalities of colonial government. By drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's account of assemblages and relating this to Foucault's account of the different roles played by the concepts of the milieu and the public in mediating the relations between government and the population, Bennett argues that the Musée de l'Homme's engagement with difference acted on the social in quite different ways as between metropolitan and colonial contexts. His discussion of these matters is couched within a more general consideration of the new relations between museum, field and colony associated with the development of the fieldwork phase of anthropology. Latourian perspectives on the relations between fieldwork sites of collection and laboratory settings in centres of calculation provide a theoretical setting for these aspects of his concerns.

Sharon Macdonald finds the processual concerns of assemblage theory of greatest value for the analysis of heritage sites. In a detailed discussion of two different moments in the post-war reassembly of Nuremberg as a heritage site – the immediately post-war reconstruction of the city's Old Town, and the post-1970s development of the out-of-city sites for the Nazi Party's Nuremberg rallies – it is the processes and entanglements involved in their coming to be and continuation that absorb her attention. Macdonald is equally concerned, though, with the spatial and temporalizing effects of different assemblages, and shows how heritage sites act as mediators in the relations between cities and their citizens in ways that have significant consequences for the developmental possibilities and trajectories of both. She is also alert to the ways in which such local assemblages get drawn into the operations of assemblages operating on a different scale. Her account of the relations between the conversion of the Nazi rally sites into heritage and the development of international human rights discourses, and the relations of both to the now widely recognized category of 'difficult heritage', offers a particularly compelling addition to the critical literature on the development of 'world heritage' in these regards. In concluding, however, Macdonald sounds a note of caution regarding the tendency of assemblage theory and its affiliate theoretical traditions to accord attention to the role of non-human agents at the price of failing to accord equal significance to the effects of human intentionality.

In her account of the relations between assembling art and constructing heritage, Helen Rees Leahy's point of departure is the successful 2008 campaign on the part of the National Galleries in London and Edinburgh to save Titian's *Diana and Actaeon* for the nation(s). Like Ruppert and McFall, Rees Leahy looks to the work of Michel Callon to develop the main theoretical line of her argument which focuses on how the commoditization of the work of art is only made possible as a consequence of its disentanglement from the varied assemblages in which the history of its use has enmeshed it in order that its market value and exchange might then become possible. However, she connects this argument to Latour's stress on the importance of 'following the actor', which, in this particular case, means following the history of Titian's painting as it has come to be entangled within and disentangled from different collections and exhibition practices from its initial arrival in Britain in 1798 to 2009. In allowing her to analytically net the meanings and values that have come to be caught up in the painting's trajectory through time, this approach suggests significant new avenues into the relations between the cultural and economic histories of works of art. In concluding her discussion Rees Leahy outlines the respects in which a Latourian insistence on the need to trace the material inscriptions of works of art calls into question the privilege that Walter Benjamin accords to the artwork's unique origins in accounting for its aura.

If the metaphor of cultural assemblage derives chiefly from cultural and scientific institutions of collection, then to think of media cultures as assemblages poses at least two significant challenges: media cultures are both geographically dispersed and temporally fragmented. Yet, if we think of locative media such as the use of GPS in mobile devices or data trawling of information flows, we can see that the logics of assemblage are central to the world of media networks. This, certainly, is Gerard Goggin's contention and one which he convincingly argues by considering the role of mobile television in assembling new kinds of cultures and generating new forms of action on the social. His interest in mobile television rather than, say, mobile phones or portable music and video devices, is that its modes of use, its distinctive affordances, and its regulation, are all still in a state of flux. It is, in short, a media technology that has yet to achieve a stable, 'black-boxed' form and so is a good case-study of the kinds of fluidity – the impermanency – of the varied cultural and technological bits and pieces that have become attached to, and detached from, it. Goggin thus examines how mobile television mediates, collects and brings together an as yet indeterminate range of cultural genres and territorially defined cultures (national, transnational, online, etc.) while also constituting an interface for a distinctive new set of nonhuman actors: mobile phone screens, 3G mobile networks, personal video recorders, etc. He also examines the forms of intellectual and regulatory expertise that have been implicated in the as-yet unsettled debates concerning mobile television's social consequences.

For Helen Verran, it is precisely the intersections between science and media and the kinds of knowledge and culture work they perform that is of interest. Her main purpose is to juxtapose two projects for the purpose of highlighting the different kinds of material-symbolic entanglements they effect when viewed from the perspective of John Law's concept of method assemblage. The two projects she examines are, first, the 1800–1803 expedition of HMS *Investigator* to scientifically reconnoitre what would later become Australia, and, second, a recent research inquiry into contemporary uses of digital technologies for the purposes of managing Indigenous knowledge. While evidently different in many particulars, these two projects share a concern with the relations

between processes of collection and the different material-symbolic assemblages in which collected data is then distributed. Verran's more particular interest in them, however, is that both provide examples of the role of knowledge and culture work in processes of world-making whose logic runs counter to those associated with the dominant paradigms of Western scientific knowledge and the processes of purification through which these produce the figure of matter set in space-time. Taking Latour to task for implying that the processes of purification are limited to modern Western science, Verran argues that aspects of both Yolngu Aboriginal knowledge and the classificatory schemes that Robert Brown developed for the personal collections he gathered during the voyages of the *Investigator* are examples of processes of purification that provide critical alternatives to dominant scientific paradigms.

We turn, finally, in the last two papers to two contrasting engagements with the political implications of assemblage theory. This not to say that political issues have been absent from the papers discussed so far. Far from it. For both Gay Hawkins and Andrew Pickering, however, a concern to assess the political value of assemblage theory and its varied close cousins – actor-network and cyborg theory, for example – constitute their point of entry into their respective topics. While Hawkins shares Lury's assessment of the significance of brands as distinctive socio-material entanglements of objects, practices and expertise, her interest in bottled water focuses on the impact that its specific materiality has had on the very stuff of politics. From this perspective, the brand is only one of the assemblages in which bottled water has come to be enrolled as a significant nonhuman actor. To place this in perspective, she examines how the varied regimes of living that have been enacted into being by bottled water have generated a new set of problem relations between 'matter, habit and politics'. If these problem relations all, in one way or another, occupy the space of biopolitics and its concern with how the mundane materialities of everyday life become the sites of complex ethical problematizations, Hawkins draws on Latour's arguments concerning the logic of *dingpolitik* to supplement Foucauldian concerns with an optic that is more readily alert to the performativity of matter in political processes. By examining how the habits associated with drinking bottled water are caught up in particular material affordances, Hawkins argues the need for a more complex approach to the politics of bottled water, specifically in its relations to branding and waste management, that refuses the terms of the good/tap, water/citizen: bad/bottled, water/consumer opposition that has characterized so much debate in this area.

Pickering, too, finds much to welcome in Latour's ambition to establish a 'parliament of things' and draws on the work of both Latour and Donna Haraway in a paper which he presents as itself an attempt to construct a new cultural assemblage: that is, a set of scientific, intellectual and cultural practices that will constitute a strategic (rather than holistic) alternative to the dualist ontology of the 'modern settlement' in its commitment to the clear separation of people and things. He prefers instead a nonmodern ontology which rather than trying to put the lid on what he calls the 'dance of agency' will be receptive to an open-ended mangle of practice in which human and nonhuman agency cannot be disentangled from one another. Reviewing a range of practices – from science, engineering, architecture and the arts – which exemplify this orientation, Pickering suggests that Heidegger's account of 'revealing' offers a critical alternative to his more familiar concept of 'enframing' by suggesting a more plural set of relations between knowledge practices and the world than the asymmetrical relation of domination suggested by the latter. In concluding his discussion, Pickering argues that Latour's

work remains committed to the conception of human specialness that has been produced by the various purifications that have led to and sustained the dualist ontologies, the division of human and nonhumans, that have characterized modernity.

There is, then, no settled or agreed assessment of the respects in which assemblage theory and its close relations offer new models for cultural analysis and, allied to this, the potential for opening up the relations between culture, economy and the social to new forms of investigation. But we never imagined that there would or should be such a settlement. It is rather in the range and variety of the engagements with these concerns that are brought together here that we see evidence of the exploratory approaches that are needed to develop an adequate repertoire of post-representational research strategies for probing the relations between culture and economy and culture and the social.

NOTE

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