Variations on a Theme: Assemblage Archaeology

Gavin Lucas

This paper provides a commentary on the other contributions to this special section. It offers an extended reflection on some emergent themes in this collection, themes which resonate with my own perspective on assemblage theory. Two issues in particular are addressed: typology and time.

Introduction

The idea of assemblage is clearly a productive one in current archaeological theory, blending as it does a conventional archaeological term with a core concept in the philosophies of Gilles Deleuze and Manuel DeLanda. In many ways it could even be described as a typical concept metaphor, in the sense that Henrietta Moore uses this phrase to describe the dominant tool of theorizing in the social sciences and humanities today (Moore 2004): that is, the use of a loosely defined term with weak ontological commitment through which different disciplines can articulate their own empirical questions. In the case of the assemblage concept, although DeLanda and Deleuze are the names most commonly associated with this term, it is clear there is also a strong affinity with the actor network concept of collectives and indeed the broad spectrum of relational ontologies which privilege relations over essences, networks over nodes, lines over points. Moreover, as Hamilakis reminds us, even DeLanda and Deleuze's concepts of assemblage are not quite the same, the latter's being a poor translation of *agencement* (also see Phillips 2006). The various papers in this volume attest to the diverse ways of reading this concept of assemblage, as each draws out a slightly different thread to explore. None of this is necessarily to detract from the utility of this concept; indeed, Moore's argument is precisely to underline the strength of such flexibility. My use of the term tries to sketch out my own translation of assemblage, drawing mostly from DeLanda (see Lucas 2012), and it shares a great deal in common with many of the papers here. However, rather than focus on these similarities (or differences), I want to use this opportunity to offer an extended reflection on some emergent themes in this collection, themes which nonetheless resonate with my own perspective on assemblage theory. Given the short space available, I will focus on two issues: typology and time.

David Clarke's missing chapter

Several of the papers address the connection between assemblage and typology, most explicitly those by Andrew Jones, Chris Fowler and Oliver Harris. Both Jones and Harris stress the importance of seeing the idea of assemblage as extending beyond physical aggregations of things, where stylistic elements and similarities between things—from the design on the Folkton Drums to a class of monuments like causewayed enclosures—act as signatures of such assemblages. These are what I have described as serial objects or assembling through iteration and enchainment (Lucas 2012). Fowler would seem to be closest to my own way of articulating this idea through the concept of typology but it was another aspect of Fowler's paper that drew my attention here—his discussion of David Clarke's work from the 1970s and his idea of assemblages cutting across different scales. David Clarke is an interesting figure for assemblage theory because there is blind spot in his theoretical system which attends directly to the issue of assemblages and typology.

Clarke's system, outlined in his major theoretical text *Analytical Archaeology*, first published in 1968, adopts a hierarchical framework of seven levels, each containing what he calls archaeological entities (Clarke 1978, 206, fig. 49). Clarke's whole system has a certain presumption of realism built in, exemplified by the fact that he refers to the objects in these levels as entities and not as concepts. Moreover he is

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Attributes	-	Artefacts	-	[Chapter 4]
Artefacts	-	Type	-	[Chapter 5]
(Type	-	Assemblage)	-	[Missing]
Assemblage	-	Culture	-	[Chapter 6]
Culture	-	Culture Group	-	[Chapter 7]
Culture Group	-	Technocomplex	-	[Chapter 8]

Figure 1. *Clarke's system of archaeological entities and his missing chapter.*

quite clear that each entity is actually built up as an aggregate from lower-level entities and one whereby the aggregate has new, emergent properties (Clarke 1978, 150). Clarke's starting-point was the nature of archaeological facts and data and the need to establish, among other things, the fundamental entities that make up the archaeological record (Clarke 1978, 19–20). Thus his system works on a hierarchy of *aggregation*, from the bottom up. Starting from attributes, it moves up successively through artefacts, types, assemblages, cultures, culture groups and finally technocomplexes at the top. Now Clarke uses the term aggregation to define a process which Fowler links more generally to the idea of assemblage. But what is interesting here is that if you look at the organization of Clarke's book, each chapter is devoted to a study of the relation between levels in his hierarchy (e.g. attribute–artefact, artefact–type)—all levels that is, *except one*: there is a missing chapter dealing with the type–assemblage relation, which ought to occur between his chapter 5 on artefacts and types and his chapter 6 on assemblages and cultures (Figure 1). Why is there this gap?

I think it hints at a deep problem in Clarke's system, a fracture between the entities of type and assemblage. In this respect, it is interesting to note that Clarke adopts a definition of an assemblage as an associated set of artefact-*types*, rather than simply an associated set of artefacts (Clarke 1978, 245). This missing level of combination in Clarke's scheme points to a dislocation between types and assemblages which threatens the integrity of his whole system and must be linked to the problem of defining assemblages as composed of types, rather than individual objects. Herein lies the tension; to characterize an assemblage in terms of individual objects would have upset the levels of hierarchy in his system; yet not to do so would have raised all kinds of problems about how assemblages actually form solely from types. This should immediately alert us to the central importance of the relationship between assemblages and types in archaeology and the need critically to examine them further.

In many ways, the problem lies in Clarke's adherence to a hierarchical system, an adherence which Harris explicitly warns against in his paper. As Harris argues, while it is possible to think of assemblages in terms of aggregation—i.e. assemblages within assemblages, like Russian dolls, this is far too restrictive to be an exclusive model for assemblages. Indeed, one of the advantages of assemblage theory is the opportunity it offers for a non-scalar approach to materiality and Harris highlights, rightly to my mind, exactly where this breach in a scalar model lies: in typological assemblages which cut across hierarchical ordering. Clarke's missing chapter on the type–assemblage relation points to the intersection of a vertical or hierarchical mode of assemblage and a lateral or iterative one. His system did not allow the latter. This is why, for me, thinking about assemblages requires thinking about them along two axes; containment (the Russian doll model) and enchainment (the network model). Although the papers by Jones, Fowler and Harris generally express this in different ways, I would like to think we broadly share the same view of how typology can be viewed within assemblage theory. At the same time, it is clear that there are also other, very different ways to counter the reductionist idea of assemblage as aggregation or hierarchy (e.g. Hamilakis' paper, which foregrounds a host of attributes including the sensorial and affective).

Aleatory assemblages

The question of scale was raised in the previous section and both Oliver Harris and David Robinson make it a central part of their papers, especially linking it to another key Deleuzian/DeLandian concept: the virtual. Robinson adopts DeLanda's notions of capacities/properties to articulate this, while Harris draws on the virtual/actual distinction. In particular, Harris links this dyad to the question of time and change, suggesting that what defines a major historic change, such as the transition from the Mesolithic to the Neolithic, is not so much a change in the actual assemblages (these do change, but gradually, and piecemeal; change is constant in this respect, a point also underlined in Jude Jones' study of religious assemblages) as a change in the field of the virtual—the space of possibilities. What separates a Mesolithic from a

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Neolithic community is not the actual assemblages that define them, but the possibilities they permit. This is an interesting argument—but leaves a lot unresolved, not least the question of how the virtual itself changes. In many ways, this question gets to the core of assemblage theory and one of its most important challenges: what is it that makes the virtual actual? The Neolithic might be defined by a different space of possibilities to the Mesolithic, but some of the possibilities need to be actualized for the Neolithic to exist—as an assemblage. It is these actualities that, in turn, then re-configure the virtual. How does this take place—and why are some virtualities actualized and others not? This is not a theoretical question, but a deeply empirical one. I think this is one way to read the arguments in Rachel Crellin's paper about how to examine change through assemblage theory; explaining change is almost impossible, in the sense of reducing change to a simple linear or causal model. To understand change requires rather an intensive form of description. Indeed, the distinction between explanation and description, cause and effect, becomes highly unstable, a point also underlined by Fowler.

Although answering the question of how the virtual and actual are related is empirical (i.e. dependent on specific assemblages being studied), we can nonetheless ask another, related theoretical question: what happens when the virtual fails to be actualized? In a sense, the failure of actualization is also a moment when the virtual changes; when the possible becomes the impossible. Again, there is an empirical aspect to exploring this question which I cannot deal with here, but one critical theoretical issue concerns the question of futurity. The failure of actualization speaks, arguably, to changes in the space of the possible and is most evident when actualization is routinized or iterative; when I wake up every morning, I always make some coffee. This actualization fails if I have run out of coffee or if the global commodity chain of coffee production and distribution falls apart. The former failure is merely a temporary hiccup, the virtual remains untouched; the latter, however, is an extended catastrophe, one which potentially reconfigures the virtual space of my morning routine (and doubtless much more besides!). What has this to do with the future? Well, one of the crucial issues becomes predictability; certain events will have been unpredictable to those living it—'they never saw it coming' (however extended a phenomenon it was). Yet archaeologists write about it as if it was inevitable, because they occupy a position of hindsight. This hindsight is a handy thing—but it also forecloses a radical concept of the future where past futures, remain open.

I like to see this question as one of how we might preserve an element of ignorance about the past—that is, writing about the past as if we did not know what happened next. Now you might think this is pointless, because knowing what happened next helps us to understand what happened before. To an extent I agree, but equally and paradoxically, *not* knowing what happened next actually also helps to understand what happened next. It hinges on the question of predictability in the past or the aleatory nature of assemblages (i.e. their randomness). We all operate under certain expectations—implicit operations of predicting the future (like there will be coffee in my cupboard tomorrow). Not all of life is like that, but a lot of it is, which is why we can describe so much social practice as routinized. But what happens when previously predictable patterns, certain expectations, fail to actualize? Occasional episodes like this can be dismissed but if they start to become endemic, we can say that virtual reality is changing. The future is becoming more unstable, more open. For me, this is the link between futurity and Harris' argument about change, or indeed Rachel Crellin's argument about explaining change. These are all inter-connected.

A nice study on climate change in the North Atlantic illustrates how we can explore this archaeologically. Using ice-core data to calculate weather patterns, and especially deviations from the mean, a team of environmental scientists and archaeologists identified key 'phase transitions' when past patterns of weather were no longer useful as guides to future predictability. Over the past millennium, they identified key shifts 11 times between the late tenth century AD and the eighteenth, the most significant being between 975–1040 AD and 1425–1525 AD (Dugmore *et al.* 2007). To be clear: these are not periods of climate change (which is constant and gradual), but periods when the pattern of climate behaviour shifts to become unpredictable before stabilizing along a new path. Although just one facet of virtual reality, climate predictability would have had major consequences for fishing and farming practices in the North Atlantic. Its very unpredictability or aleatory nature surely marks a reconfiguration of the space of possibilities and what DeLanda would call a phase transition. In other words, stable assemblages are typically predictable—their future, although always open, appears largely closed because the same things happen; it is only during moments of major change that assemblages become more aleatory or appear random, and it is precisely these moments when the future is most open. It is also precisely at moments like this that a sense of a past future needs to be recaptured and re-articulated in a way that recognizes that virtual reality

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is shifting, even if the actual assemblages appear to remain the same.

Concluding remarks

In reflecting on the arguments and points made by the papers in this collection, I have focused on what I see as the key themes of typology and time. The issue of scale is in a sense what connects them, but also the issue of explanation. How do we use assemblage theory as a means to understand the past? In many ways, Hamilakis offers us the broadest perspective on this question, insofar as I see his take on the assemblage concept as one which expands the idea of assemblage theory from solely an ontology into a way of thinking: assemblage as a mode of thought *as well as* a mode of being. In this regard, Hamilakis is certainly closer to the Deleuzian idea of assemblage, as he himself makes explicit. This may be something we need to engage with more fully. Certainly, in considering the topic of typology, it is clear how a DeLandian notion of assemblage theory can breathe new life into one of the oldest and most basic archaeological tools we have. And equally, DeLandian assemblage theory through the idea of virtual reality can help us to think about time in a way that preserves a sense of futurity in the past, while at the same time indicating that maybe different modes of explanation might be required depending on the aleatory nature of an assemblage. But Hamilakis may be demanding even more of assemblage theory than this, a demand which perhaps raises questions over potential faultlines within assemblage theory, especially between a Deleuzian *versus* DeLandian approach. Of course, one needs to avoid over-polarizing here, yet at the same time, as we archaeologists start to map out the operationality of a concept like assemblage, it may be inevitable that what started out as a broad concept metaphor we can all share, quickly becomes a terrain for misunderstanding.

However, let me end with an issue which, for me, encapsulates a major challenge for assemblage theory. One aspect of this theory that was not really explored in any of the contributions (as far as I could see) is the question of how assemblages stabilize or dissipate. In the last section, I talked about how an assemblage as a virtual space of possibilities starts to come undone, to become unpredictable; but how does this happen? And the converse—how does a space of possibilities coalesce around certain actualizations that persist, whatever the assemblage—whether as a type of monument like a causewayed enclosure, or a specific structure like a church? How does individuation happen? I suspect these, too, are questions for empirical observation, and while I think it vital that we continually debate and explore the concept of assemblage at a theoretical level, the papers in this collection also demonstrate the importance of empirical studies in developing the utility of assemblage theory.

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