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Assemblage and Critical Urban Praxis: Part One

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This paper offers a discussion of what assemblage thinking might offer critical urbanism. It seeks to connect with and build upon recent debates in City *(2009) on critical urbanism by outlining three sets of contributions that assemblage offers for thinking politically and normatively of the city. First, assemblage thinking entails a descriptive orientation to the city as produced through relations of history and potential (or the actual and the possible), particularly in relation to the assembling of the urban commons and in the potential of 'generative critique'. Second, assemblage as a* concept *functions to disrupt how we conceive agency and critique due to its focus on sociomaterial interaction and distribution. Third, assemblage, as collage, composition and gathering provides an* imaginary *of the cosmopolitan city, as the closest approximation in the social sciences to the assemblage idea. The paper is not an attempt to offer assemblage thinking as opposed, intellectually or politically, to the long and diverse traditions of critical urbanism, but is instead an examination of some of the connections and differences between assemblage thinking and strands of critical urbanism.*

Introduction

It seems at first sight an odd task, to ask what a particular idea that is itself not very well elaborated in the social sciences, might offer critical urbanism. Nonetheless, I want to outline a conception of assemblage and consider how it might connect, differ and add to critical urbanism. In the face of the growing popularity of assemblage in urban research, it is timely to consider what, if anything, the notion might add to existing debates and approaches to critique. In doing so, the paper seeks to contribute to recent debates that have taken place in *City* (2009) on what

critical urban theory is and what it might do (see Vol. 13, Nos. 2–3, 2009)—not to oppose that debate, but to ask how assemblage thinking might resonate with and add to how we think and conduct critical urbanism. I do not see assemblage as an outright contrast to the complex and varied history of debates on critical urbanism, including urban political economy, capital accumulation, inequality, and so on. Moreover, in considering what assemblage might offer, I am not seeking to oppose a broadly realist political economy tradition of critical urbanism with a broadly poststructuralist approach to critique. It is too easy to set up these sorts of wide distinctions and the net

effect is often to create or entrench (often artificial) divisions, and ultimately to limit rather than deepen our capacities to think through questions such as those around critique. There are not two broad camps at stake here; there are several traditions and modes of thought being put to work.

There is nothing *necessarily* critical about notions of assemblage anymore than there is anything necessarily critical about notions like capital, labour, space or urbanism, but there is a potentially useful conversation to have when assemblage is brought to bear on critique. That said, in the Deleuzian tradition of assemblage thinking — which is just one history of assemblage thinking amongst several (for a range of examples see the forthcoming edited collection by Anderson and McFarlane, 2011) — as Nicholas Tampio (2009) has argued, the notion of assemblage was always political, for instance, in Deleuze's hope that the left might organise itself in assemblages, or 'constellations of singularities', of cautious, experimental egalitarianism. The concept of 'left assemblages' is a political subjectivity oriented towards the actualisation of ideals and the realisation of potential:

> 'A left assemblage can take the form of a political party, a non-governmental organization, an anti-war rally, a school environmental club, a punk rock collective, a campaign to legalize gay marriage, or any loose and provisional material and expressive body that works for freedom and equality. Deleuze envisioned the left as a network of intersecting and conflicting assemblages—a garden rather than a tree … Deleuze constructed the concept of assemblages precisely to show how the left could nurture diversity and disagreement.' (Tampio, 2009, pp. 385, 395)

In what follows I will attempt to think through what might usefully emerge from bringing assemblage into the disparate debate around critical urbanism, that is, for thinking and acting towards a more socially just and ecologically sound urbanism. I start with a brief overview of the growing use of assemblage in urban research. From there, I consider three sets of questions, forms of analysis and orientation that assemblage brings to critical urbanism: a descriptive focus—where explanation emerges through thick description—on inequality as produced through *relations of history and potential*, or the actual and the possible; a rethinking of *agency*, particularly in relation to distribution and critique due to assemblage's focus on sociomaterial interaction; and a particular critical *imaginary*, through the register of urban cosmopolitan composition. In the next section, I reflect upon two examples from that very rich collection of papers in *City* which I think give a useful sense of some of the crucial traditions upon which critical urban theory is built, and which serve as important reference points for opening out to what assemblage might offer critical urbanism.

Critical urbanism and assemblage thinking

The first example is Neil Brenner's intervention (2009, p. 199), which argues that central to the whole project of critical urban thought has been unmasking the 'myths, reifications and antinomies that pervade bourgeois forms of knowledge' about capitalism. This entails exposing existing forms of urban knowledge as elitist and self-perpetuating but as nonetheless not inevitable, and offering alternative formations of a more socially and ecologically just city. If this is an interpretation of critique that emerges first and foremost from the disparate work of the Frankfurt School—especially Benjamin, Horkheimer, Adorno and Herbert Marcuse—it is a conception of critique that echoes more widely in urban thought. It is a classic formulation of critical theory, but what is specifically urban about it? In response to this, one of the most interesting claims by Brenner is that the pervasiveness of urbanism—not just in terms of its spatial extent, but urbanism as a defining feature of the human condition—means that critical theory must by necessity be a critical

urban theory. Urbanism, he suggests, can no longer be viewed as distinct, but has become a generalised, planetary condition in and through which capital, politics, everyday social relations and environmental politics are simultaneously organised and fought out. So rather than look for the specificity of the urban in critical theory, Brenner turns the question on its head and asks us to consider whether it is possible to have a critical theory which *isn't* urban.

There are, of course, other ways of pursuing critical urban theory—whether in the shape of the resurgence of urban Marxism in the 1970s (e.g. Harvey, Castells, Lefebvre, Katznelson) and its impacts, or the critical urbanism of figures as different as Benjamin, Debord or Berman. But the second example I want to highlight is the lively and important tradition of *public* urban critique. This is a current of critical urbanism that does not stop at the theoretical work of the Frankfurt School and its Marxist antecedents, but that takes those debates to different urban publics within the city. One useful example here is the intervention in Peter Marcuse (2009) in the same collection of *City* as Brenner's piece. Marcuse draws more on a 'right to the city' discourse associated in particular with Henri Lefebvre. What distinguishes Marcuse's account is its *participatory* reading of critical urbanism. He offers a three-fold schema for critical urbanism in this respect: *expose*—analysing the roots of an urban problem and making clear and communicating that analysis to those that need it and can use it; *propose*—working with those affected to come up with actual proposals, programmes, targets, strategies, to achieve better forms of urban life; and *politicise*—clarifying the political action implications of what was exposed and proposed, and informing action. Politicising includes attention to issues of organisational strategy and day-to-day politics and where appropriate, supporting organisation directly with interventions in the media and raising issues with and through social movements, community groups, policymakers, and so on. In examining what assemblage

might offer to this disparate debate, it is worth reflecting on some of the ways in which assemblage has appeared in critical urban debates.

Assemblage—whether as an idea, an analytic, a descriptive lens or an orientation— is increasingly used in social science research, generally to connote indeterminacy, emergence, becoming, processuality, turbulence and the sociomateriality of phenomena. In short, it is an attempt to describe relationalities of composition—relationalities of near/far and social/material. Rather than focusing on cities as resultant formations, assemblage thinking is interested in emergence and process, and in multiple temporalities and possibilities. While we might immediately think of Deleuzian-inspired readings of assemblage (e.g. De Landa, 2006; Dovey, 2010), actor-network theory (ANT) takes on heterogeneous relations (Law and Hassard, 1999; Latour, 2004a, 2005), and nonrepresentational accounts of practice, materiality and affect (e.g. Thrift, 2007; Anderson and Harrison, 2010), the use of the term extends well beyond these terrains and draws on histories that far exceed them. In critical urban geography debates, for example, there are two central ways in which assemblage is becoming popularised: first, as a descriptor of sociomaterial transformation, and second, in relation to urban policy mobilities.

In relation to the first, critical urban geography has witnessed a surfeit of work on urban socio-natures, cyborg urbanisms or urban metabolisms (e.g. Swyngedouw, 2004, 2006; Gandy, 2005; McFarlane, 2008; Farías and Bender, 2009), which sometimes deploy the notion of assemblage, generally as a descriptor of sociomaterial transformation. Swyngedouw (2006, p. 108), for instance, writes of 'assemblages of metabolic transformation' that take shape through the mobilisation of nature and labour in the generalised production of commodities. Gandy (2005, p. 40) describes the cyborg concept as a lens for capturing not simply the technologically enhanced human, but a 'vast assemblage of bodily and machinic entanglements which

interconnect with the contemporary city in a multitude of different ways' and which is deeply fractured by inequality and exclusion, for instance, in the experience of splintered urban public space. Moving beyond assemblage as a descriptor to assemblage as an analytic, Farías (2009, p. 2), in seeking to 'test' the contribution of ANT for rethinking the city, offers assemblage as a foundation for grasping the city as a decentred object, 'as an object which is relentlessly being assembled at concrete sites of urban practice or, to put it differently, as a multiplicity of processes of becoming, affixing sociotechnical networks, hybrid collectives and alternative topologies' (see, for example, Graham and Marvin's *Splintering Urbanism*, 2001). If this conception of assemblage draws broadly upon Deleuze and Guattari's notion of *agencement* (1981)—a term for the alignment of different elements—for Farías (2009, p. 3; my emphasis) the contribution of ANT is to offer not so much a theoretical foundation as a '*sensibility* towards the active role of non-human actors in the assemblage of the world'.

Second, and quite distinctly, assemblage is used to describe the relations between travelling policies and their localised substantiations. For example, McCann and Ward (2011) use assemblage to capture the production of urban policy as simultaneously mobile and territorial (and see Allen and Cochrane, 2007, 2010; Ong, 2007; Sassen, 2007; McGuirk and Dowling, 2009). McCann and Ward (2011) use the notion of assemblage as a rubric through which to frame the travel, translation, struggle and connections that are brought together to constitute urbanism. In both these very different usages, assemblage is deployed as a descriptive term that signals a relational process of composition. This emphasis on relational composition is not, of course, restricted to ANT or to studies of policy mobility, but has been a concern of quite disparate traditions. By way of contrasting illustration, we might consider how E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) is in large part precisely concerned with composition. In his account, experience—as

the product both of social being and of the collective subject reflecting on social being—can yield a particular social consciousness. The working class as a movement was composed through a conversion of collective experience into a social consciousness that defined the class itself—a collective identity emerging from shared experiences, mediated through value-systems, traditions, ideas and institutional forms. As he famously wrote in the preface: 'The working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time. It was present at its own making' (Thompson, 1963, p. 9). Or to take a more urban example, we might consider how Manuel Castells' *The City and the Grassroots* (1983) attempted—with mixed success—to understand how social movements generated particular urban meanings through alliances of multiple different groups, and in the process of composition became aware of itself *as a movement* (rather than a class, for example) (e.g. see Mayer, 2006).

There is, then, no singular history of assemblage to be told, particularly when we contextualise assemblage thinking as expressed through grammars of gathering, networking and composition more broadly (Anderson and McFarlane, 2011). Nor is there any consensus amongst urban researchers about how assemblage might specifically be used, and I do not believe there necessarily should be. As Edward Said (1984, p. 237) memorably argued, theory changes both as it travels and in according to context, and rather than legislate for what a theory or mode of thinking should look like, or insist on a kind of slavish reproduction of theory, it is rather 'part of the critic's responsibility … to judge misreadings (as they occur) as part of a historical transfer of ideas from one setting to another'. As a general working definition I use the broadly Deleuzian conception of assemblage as 'a multiplicity constituted by heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them' (Deleuze and Parnet, 2007, p. 52). For Deleuze, the only unity of assemblage is that of 'co-functioning: it is a symbiosis, a "sympathy". It is never filiations which are

important but alliances, alloys; these are not successions, lines of descent, but contagions, epidemics, the wind' (ibid.). This means that urban actors, forms or processes are defined less by a pre-given property and more by the assemblages they enter and reconstitute. The individual elements define the assemblage by their co-functioning, and can be stabilised (territorialised or reterritorialised) or destabilised (deterritorialised) through this mutual imbrication. But this is not to say that an assemblage is a direct result of the properties of its component parts. It is the *interactions* between human and nonhuman components that form the assemblage—interaction as mutually constitutive symbiosis rather than just parts that are related—and these interactions cannot be reduced to individual properties alone. As a form of spatial relationality, assemblage thinking is attentive to both the individual elements *and* the agency of the interactive whole, where the agency of both can change over time and through interactions. The changing nature of assemblages through interactions is one of the ways in which, as Manuel De Landa (2006, pp. 10–11) has argued, assemblages operate as wholes characterised by 'relations of exteriority'. The other sense in which assemblages are characterised by relations of exteriority is that component parts may be detached and plugged into a different assemblage in which its interactions are different.

Assemblage is both a particular object in the world (e.g. a policy assemblage) *and* an orientation to the world that focuses on the interactive co-constitution of human and nonhuman agents through relations of exteriority and unequal capacities. As objects, urban assemblages are structured, hierarchalised and narrativised through profoundly unequal relations of power, resource and knowledge. Rather than a kind of opposition to structural hierarchy, the spatialities and temporalities of urban assemblages—for instance, in relation to urban policy or urban infrastructure—can, of course, be captured, structured and storied more effectively and with greater influence by particular actors or

processes than by others. As the varied history of critical theory has taught us, we cannot think critically without exposing the power relations through which urban forms and processes like gentrification or privatisation are made—or attempted to be made—'normalised', 'inevitable' and 'universal'.

There are three contributions that emerge from assemblage that I want to develop throughout the paper: first, a descriptive *orientation* to the city as produced through relations of history and potential (or the actual and the possible); second, as a *concept* that disrupts how we conceive agency and therefore critique; and third, as critical *imaginary* of the city with specific political implications. In these three sightlines, assemblage features as an orientation, a concept, an imaginary and a process. These three points are connected by a mutual focus on process, materiality and potential alterity, and positioning them alongside one another reveals the broad scope of assemblage thinking. It is, of course, not uncommon or necessarily a problem for ideas to be put to work in these multiple ways (think, for instance, of how notions as diverse as the 'everyday', 'power', 'network', 'scale', 'cosmopolitan' or the 'urban', have been variously put to work as approaches, objects or processes in the world, or names for social relations). Assemblage functions in this paper as a heuristic, a disposition, a form of thinking from which theory and critique might depart. If we want to consider what assemblage might offer urban critique, then it makes sense — to begin with at least — to consider assemblage *expansively*, in its different uses as a concept, process, orientation and imaginary.

The actual and the possible

The first area in which assemblage offers a specific contribution to critical urbanism is in its *descriptive orientation to urban inequalities as produced through relations of history and potential*. This relation is a tool for disclosing the multiple temporalities

through which urban inequalities emerge and might be challenged and reformed. As Tania Murray Li (2007) has argued, assemblage thinking is concerned with how different spatio-temporal processes are historically drawn together at a particular conjuncture and often made stable through the work of particular powerful actors, but can then be made to disperse or realign through contestation, shifting power relations or new contexts. Assemblage places emphasis on the depth and potentiality of urban sites, processes and actors in terms of their histories, the labour required to produce them and their inevitable capacity to exceed the sum of their connections (McFarlane, 2011). By 'depth', I am referring to the crucial role of multiple and overlapping histories in producing habits of practice, ways of going on, and trajectories of policy and economy that shape urban inequality—that is, on the historical labour and power of urban *formation*.

By 'potentiality', I am referring both to the intensity and excessiveness of the moment—the capacity of events to disrupt patterns, generate new encounters with people and objects, and invent new connections and ways of inhabiting everyday urban life—and to the potential of urban histories and everyday life to be imagined and put to work differently, whether in the form of blueprints, models, dreams or hope for a better city, or in the capacity of random connections to generate the possibility of new ideas, encounters and collectives. We often see this generative potentiality in the work of urban social movements, for instance (Featherstone, 2008; Nicholls, 2008; McFarlane, 2009). As Tampio (2009, p. 394) has put it, assemblage is attuned not just to practices of formation, but to the actualisation of the new:

> 'The brilliance of the concept of assemblages is that it describes an entity that has both consistency and fuzzy borders … [it] has some coherence in what it says and what it does, but it continually dissolves and morphs into something new.'

In this sense, assemblage as a constellation of singularities (Tampio, 2009) insists upon the city as multiple. Assemblage, as Farías (2009, p. 15) argues, is 'a double emphasis: on the material, actual and assembled, but also on the emergent, the processual and the multiple'.

In its focus on process and emergence, the assemblage approach is not to describe a spatial category, output or resultant formation, but a process of doing, practice and events produced through different temporalisations and contingencies (Li, 2007). This has implications for critique. One example here is McGuirk and Dowling's argument (2009) that the analytic of assemblage offers one possible route for conceiving neoliberalism not as a universal and coherent project, or even as a generalised hegemonic process characterised by local contingencies, but as a loose collection of urban logics and processes that may or may not structure urban change in different places. They seek to conceive urban change through the lens of 'situated assemblages' of different logics, actors, histories, projects and practices that serve not to reify neoliberalism as hegemonic and ascendant, but as one set of possibilities among many. This is an inherently empirical focus, a call to examine practices 'on the ground' in a way that remains 'open to the practical co-existence of multiple political projects, modes of governance, practices and outcomes generated by and enacted through' specific urban strategies (McGuirk and Dowling, 2009, p. 177). This is not to underplay the role of neoliberalism, but to focus on the key drivers of inequality on the ground, of which neoliberalism may only be one.

The contribution of assemblage to critique here lies not simply in stressing that the city is reconstructed through processes that exceed neoliberalism, but to 'weaken the defining grip of urban neoliberalism on our theoretical imaginations and on the range of analytical possibility' (McGuirk and Dowling, 2009, p. 184). As Dovey (2010, p. 16; and see De Landa, 2006) has argued, assemblage thinking is an explicit attempt to avoid reductionism and essentialism 'through a concentration on

the historic and contingent processes that produce assemblages'. Echoing McGuirk and Dowling's position, Ong (2007, p. 5) argues that assemblage offers an orientation to neoliberal logic as a 'migratory technology of governing' that is formed only through inter-action with situated circumstances, practices and political rationalities, that is, through the 'asymmetrical unfolding of emerging milieus'. If the message here is to attempt to expose, through thick historical description, how urban inequality arises, rather than attribute power to particular pre-established trajectories, one challenge posed by assem-blage to critical urbanism is to trace the oper-ation of an exclusionary and punitive form of urban neoliberalism that clearly *is* increas-ingly entrenching inequality in cities across the globe, while being primarily attentive to the processes that drive capitalist accumula-tion and inequality in and through specific urban sites. This involves identifying rela-tions of actual–possible through attention to how different 'on the ground' forms of power are historically produced and exercised. Urban assemblages are structured through various forms of power relation and resource and information control (see, e.g. John Allen's work (2003, 2004) on multiple forms of power and their diverse geographies). In tracing the multiple geographies of power, the spaces of critical intervention multiply in the context of the 'asymmetrical unfolding of emergent milieu' (Ong, 2007, p. 5).

In emphasising potential through its orientation to assembly, reassembly and constitution, assemblage focuses on the disjunctures between the actual and the possible, between how urban inequality is produced and lived and how relations might be assembled otherwise. In this, of course, assemblage thinking connects with some of the broad contours of what Frankfurt School critical theory sought to achieve (Brenner, 2009, pp. 203–204)—an emphasis on how urban inequality is produced through history by capitalism and on how urbanism might be more justly reconfigured through political economic shifts, social movements,

and the construction of new norms in urban form and living. The relation of history–potential is rooted in the traditions of critical theory, given that critical theory of different hues—for example, from Adorno and Horkheimer (1979) to Marcuse (1972) and Lefebvre (1971)—has always sought to iden-tify the constraints and restrictions capital-ism and culture have historically created, while developing possibilities for collective recognition and refusal. Here, assemblage supports this line of critical thinking by drawing particular emphasis to thick description of how urban inequalities are produced through different temporalities (e.g. the temporalities of policy, capital accu-mulation and of everyday cultural practice), and how at each space-time they may—under conditions of often radically unequal power relations—be assembled differently. This echoes the description of critical urban approaches provided by Brenner *et al*. (2009, p. 179) as concerned with analysing 'the systemic, yet historically specific, intersec-tions between capitalism and urbanization processes' and to 'demarcate and to politicize the strategically essential possibilities for more progressive, socially just, emancipator and sustainable formations of urban life'. The imperative of potentiality, for instance, was central to the work of the Situationists in the late 1960s and early 1970s, where the city, as a possible space of collective recogni-tion and reciprocity, became the locus of radical potential (see McDonough's 2009 edited collection of Situationist urban writ-ing). The Situationists' cultural experimenta-tion with *dérive*, or of the architecture of 'unitary urbanism' that explicitly sought to challenge alienating norms of modernist urbanism, were inventive attempts at appro-priation of urban space for the desires and needs of the alienated and oppressed (McDonough, 2009).

The dialectical approach developed by Herbert Marcuse (e.g. 1968) echoes the emphasis assemblage brings to the play of the actual and the possible, that is, between urban life as it is experienced and life as it could be.

Indeed, there is a broad synergy here between assemblage and dialectical thinking as a key strategy in the pursuit of critical theory and urbanism. If dialectical materialism is an effort to identify the means through which society is produced and transformed, for instance in the mutual implication of capital, labour, use-value and consumption, assemblage is similarly concerned with how collectives are produced, not as an aggregate, but as a process that takes its emergent force precisely from its processual interaction. As David Harvey (1989, p. 11) has argued, dialectical thinking as a mode of argument 'allows us to follow how antagonisms get resolved under capitalism and how each contradiction gets internalised afresh in new realms' (and see Doel, 2006). Harvey (2009, p. 244) has elsewhere drawn an explicit connection between dialectical thinking and assemblage, arguing that dialectics can be seen as a form of thinking through 'coevolving ecological moments within what Lefebvre would call an "ensemble" or Deleuze an "assemblage" of interactive processes'. For Harvey, assemblage resonates with Marx's 'method of moments'—where 'moment' equates to a particular coming together of multiple agents—an interplay of socioecological processes of place-formation. The dialectical approach developed by Harvey requires not reducing any particular moment 'to a simple refraction of the others'. He suggests that 'there is no automatic response that sets a predictable (let alone deterministic) pattern of interaction between the moments … the evolution is contingent and not determined in advance' (ibid., pp. 243, 244).

But we should be careful here not to leap from these ostensible similarities to then collapsing assemblage and dialectics—or indeed assemblage thinking and the strains of critical theory highlighted above—into one another. Dialectics seeks to uncover shifting relations in the opposing forces and contradictions of capitalist development, for instance, through the ever-expanding subsumption of life by capital, or through the more hopeful potential of workers and activists to subvert

the social totality (Negri, 2009). Here, objects remain both *within* the whole, and in isolation in terms of their specificity and differences even while they alter through interactions. For Negri (2009), there is little space here for politics and movements that exist in relation to but which nonetheless move outside of capitalist development. As he has argued, 'dialectics cannot avoid being constituted as a "representation" of the whole of the process that leads to the affirmation of truth' (Negri, 2009, no pagination). The interaction of assemblages, in contrast, is a symbiosis defined less by conflict and contradiction and more by the lines of flight that run through them, where 'line of flight' names the possibility of creating something new. Assemblage is a latent possibility of new politics and movements based on desire and becoming that can both emerge through and exceed capitalism. The relations of exteriority that characterise assemblages shift attention from parts-within-wholes to the transformative potential of multiplicity and experimentation emerging through often irresolvable differences. The orientation to lines of flight insists on a nonlinear reading of the possible, that is, it rejects the necessary causal relationship between content and action that Deleuze and Guattari (1986) found so frustrating within dialectical thinking. Rather than straightforward analogy between dialectics and assemblage, the question for critical urbanism becomes when and how is it theoretically and politically useful to use dialectical or assemblage modes of thought, and what the relative possibilities and limits are as a result of that choice in relation to a given problematic.

Moreover, in contrast to a great deal of the critical theory highlighted above, assemblage thinking places a particular emphasis on the *process of reassembling*, that is, by emphasising how urbanism might be produced otherwise, assemblage thinking asks us to consider how an alternative world might be assembled. Not by implying a particular content of alterity, whether socialist or otherwise, but through the concern with the *making* of alterity; 'materially, the left becomes

concrete in assemblages' (Tampio, 2009, p. 393). But what is it that might be assembled, and how does that assembling take place? Here, I highlight two orientations of assemblage thinking: first, the assembly of the commons, and second, the assembling potential of 'generative critique', where assemblage functions as a potentiality of gathering for working towards a form of critique that is constantly generating new associations, knowledges and alternatives. First, if assemblage is concerned with the actualisation of ideals through interactions across difference (Tampio, 2009), an important part of the response here must be a commitment to assembling alternatives that are produced and held *in common*. There is a close affinity between assembling a just and equal urbanism, and recent accounts of making 'the commons' through decentred multiple knowledges and ways of being. Politically, assemblage can be read as a form of commoning, of bringing into imagination, debate and realisation forms of thinking and doing that are resolutely held in common. As Hardt and Negri (2009) argue, the commons is a practice of interaction, care and cohabitation (and see Negri, 2006). The 'common' is not the same as the public because it refers to common culture and knowledge, but neither does it signal a body of content. Instead, it is a process of becoming, a doing that constitutes 'an assemblage of affects or ways of being, which is to say, forms of life—all of which rests on a process of making the common' (Hardt and Negri, 2009, p. 124). As Negri (2006, p. 67) earlier argued, 'the common is an activity, not a result; it is an assemblage (*agencement*) or an open continuity, not a densification of control'.

The common, then, is a kind of gathering of multiplicities through the political work of assembly. In Hardt and Negri's formulation (2009), the commons resonates with their earlier notion of the 'multitude' in that singularities are not required to shed their differences in order to form the commons—a close mirroring of a Deleuzian conception of assemblage (Tampio, 2009). The commons is not a category of sameness, but an 'affirmation of singularities' (Hardt and Negri, 2009, p. 124; and see Ruddick, 2010, on 'emancipatory assemblages'), where the very idea of the commons is predicated on assembly and reassembly through difference. In order to be truly common, the struggle for alternative worlds can only occur through 'revolutionary assemblages' (Hardt and Negri, 2009, p. 340), that is, through the parallel coordination of movements composed of a multiplicity of issues and concerns and not around a singular cause (e.g. that of class, race or gender). The common here is an emergent formation that can only be constructed through a 'cooperative fabric that links together infinite singular activities' (Negri, 2006, p. 71). One political challenge, then, is to counter the accumulation of capital with *an accumulation of the commons*, meaning 'not so much that we have more ideas, more images, more affects, and so forth, but, more important, that our powers and sense increase: our powers to think, to feel, to see, to relate to one another, to love' (Hardt and Negri, 2009, p. 283). Here, the accumulation of the commons signals an experimentation with cooperative spaces, processes and possibilities across multiple differences, and emerges both in relation to and in excess of assemblages of enclosure (on the ambivalent relations between enclosure and the commons, see Jeffrey, McFarlane and Vasudevan, forthcoming).

Making the commons is the process of realising the 'potential' in the history–potential relation. The potential for the assembling of the commons is especially relevant to the city, which for Hardt and Negri (2009, p. 25) is 'the space of the common, of people living together, sharing resources, communicating, exchanging goods and ideas'. Hardt and Negri are particularly concerned with how the common features as the basis for biopolitical production, by which they mean not just the natural common of land, minerals, water and gas, but the 'artificial common' of language, image, knowledge, affect, code, habit and practice

(ibid.). As a space of encounter—the encounter with alterity—the city produces both positive forms of the common—for example, local culturally plural spaces—and negative forms of the common—for example, pollution, traffic or social conflicts around issues as diverse as the provision and use of public services and infrastructures, parks, libraries and community centres to noise and garbage collection. In the face of the increasing escape from the city of encounter by elite groups into gated enclaves, the politics of assemblage thinking is to emphasise the democratic equality of *assembly itself*, of assembling commonality as an open multiplicity. But if the commons is a potential possibility of assembly, we need to consider how assemblage helps us to consider how that process of assembling might take place. Here, I turn to the idea of 'generative critique', that is, to assemblage's focus on the potentiality of gathering different knowledges, voices and concerns.

Generative critique

Bruno Latour (2004b, p. 225) begins a provocative paper on critique by asking: 'What has become of the critical spirit? Has it run out of steam?' Latour's concern is that academic critique, broadly conceived, has failed both to keep up with changes in the world 'out there', and to generate new questions and debates. His concern is not just one of engaging the present, but of critique's orientation towards the present. For example, rather than debunking 'matters of fact' put forward by organisations like the state or the media, Latour encourages us to develop critical tools that speak about, care for and generate 'matters of concern'. So, one important route for Latour is tracing how matters of concern are produced and maintained.

Latour (2004b, pp. 245–246) argues that the notion of 'gathering' offers a new direction for critique, where critique is not 'a flight into the conditions of possibility of a given matter of fact, not the addition of something more human that the inhumane matters of fact would have missed', but a 'multifarious inquiry' that seeks to detect '*how many participants* are gathered in a *thing* to make it exist and to maintain its existence'. By 'thing', Latour is referring to the ways in which 'matters of fact' require, in order to exist, 'matters of concern', that is, they must mediate and assemble a whole variety of different relations. In this reading, and with echoes of the discussion on the commons, the role of the critic is to participate in the gathering process, meaning that

> 'the critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who *assembles*. The critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of the naive believers, but the one who offers the participants *arenas in which to gather* … the one for whom, if something is constructed, then it means it is fragile and thus in great need of care and caution.' (ibid., p. 246; my emphasis)

Rather than a form of critique that would seek to debunk—that is, disassociate from and subtract from 'matters of fact'—assemblage emerges as a form that would seek to be more closely associated with its objects by tracing and multiplying the relations with those objects.

Now, while I would defend the enduring importance of debunking 'factual' claims—for instance, I've often found in my research in Mumbai, the claim, often widely accepted by particular publics, by the local state that it is people living in 'slums' that are to be blamed for shortages of water because they 'steal' and 'waste' it—Latour nonetheless opens an important set of issues here in terms of how assemblage might function as potentiality within critical urbanism. Indeed, one of the reasons the local state in Mumbai can make this 'factual' argument about the so-called 'pilfering' of water by slums is because a multiple set of 'matters of concern'—debates on state capacity, water privatisation and cultures of corruption; questions of rights and citizenship; histories of prejudice; questions about the conditions of water pipes

and levels of monsoon rainfall, and so on—are variously ignored by influential forces in the constitution of a 'fact'. Debunking this claim is crucially important to be sure, but how might we generate new associations around water? How might we multiply the range of opportunities and spaces in which disparate groups might gather in the constitution of a different, more just, sort of water settlement? We might not only debunk such urban inequalities, but rather trace, assemble and thereby generate potentially new forms of association and spaces of political elaboration, for example through developing community activist forums that bring together matters of concern ignored by the state — including the state's complicity in informal water economies and privatisation — to generate left assemblages that create new relations.

This is in principle not new to critical urbanism, which has always sought not just to expose, but to propose, and often by generating a whole variety of links with activists and public groups. This, after all, is what Peter Marcuse's intervention (2009) discussed earlier is about, albeit from a different direction and tradition—generating links with different publics in the proposing and politicising of alternative urbanisms. The idea of generative critique has a history in urban debates that has taken quite specific forms, some critical and some conservative. We can think here of the effort by urban policymakers to assemble different groups, whether for reasons of consultation or, less commonly, because this gathering process might lead to a different kind of urbanism. From one-off town hall meetings to sustained efforts at radical forms of participatory budgeting, the assembling of cities is often constructed as a multifarious and generative matter of concern. Of course, the prospects for marginalised groups to influence the trajectories of urban change are often very limited in practice—indeed, critical urban literature has demonstrated how buzzwords like 'partnership', 'participation' and 'empowerment' are so often just that: buzzwords that are at best

tokenistic, and at worse a rueful extension of state efforts to governmentalise the marginal (e.g. Atkinson, 1999; Sintomer *et al.*, 2008).

But we can be overly cynical here. For example, a key instance of the possibilities of urban gathering are those of participatory budgeting from Porto Alegre, where different groups come together across the city in budget forums that function as a space for local demands and problems to be aired and addressed, for information to be divulged about the functioning of government, and as a regular meeting place for activists, all of which raise the question of what sorts of criteria and procedures might facilitate the gathering together of different groups and concerns (e.g. Abers, 2000; Baiocchi, 2001; Sintomer *et al.*, 2008). In critical urban scholarship, the most radical antecedent and symbol of revolutionary gathering of the poor and marginalised remains, of course, the Paris Commune, celebrated by Debord and Lefebvre as a festival against alienation and oppression through which, in Lefebvre's words, 'a scattered and divided city became a community of action' (1965, reprinted in McDonough, 2009, p. 174). If that radical urban tradition lives on, there are also a variety of other, more everyday strategies for assembling different groups and generating multiple matters of concern, from focus groups and public inquiries, to consensus conferences, and citizens' panels and juries—none of which are themselves satisfactory for urban dialogic democracy, but which ask us to consider how variants of the *forum* might offer techniques of assembling that facilitate generative forms of critique (see, e.g. Callon *et al.*, 2009, on science controversies and the generative possibilities of uncertainty). For urban critique and intervention, at stake here is the question of the collective, that is, the forms of interaction, learning, discussion and action—in short, critical praxis—that facilitates more inclusive forms of urban production. In this sense, assemblage's orientation to the practice of assembling—to generating and gathering actors and knowledges in the hope of moving from an exploitative real to a

socially just possible—is not only a particular and persistent reminder of critical urban theory's long commitment to struggling for a better urban commons, but crucially a significant shift in focus from the task of debunking alone to one of generating and gathering spaces of potentiality as diversified urban commons.

Agency and critique

The second contribution that assemblage makes to critical urbanism lies in the implications of assemblage for how we conceive of *agency, and therefore critique*. Agency, as Farías (2009, p. 15) argues, is an 'emergent capacity of assemblages … it is the action or the force that leads to one particular enactment of the city', and this force is simultaneously social and material. In approaching agency as an emergent process that is distributed across the social and the material, assemblage thinking requires careful consideration of how different materials might matter within assemblages for how we conduct urban critique, whether those materials be glossy policy documents, housing and infrastructure materials, placards, banners and picket lines, new and old technologies, software codes, credit instruments, money, commodities, or of course the material conditions of urban poverty, dispossession and inequality. Here, the history–potential relation is distributed by the assemblage idea across social and material, that is, potentiality can emerge in the interactive relations of materials themselves. In this sense, assemblage closely connects with much of the impetus of ANT, but with two distinctions. First, more than ANT, assemblage, due to its focus on relations of exteriority, attends to the agency of the interactions *and* the component parts, rather than the former alone: the agencies of the assemblage's human and nonhuman parts are not exhausted by the interactions alone. Second, assemblage is more attuned to the possibilities of human and nonhuman relations holding together in

uneasy interactions even where there is an absence of coherence and rigidity in the relations (Ong, 2007; Allen and Cochrane, 2010; McFarlane, 2011).

This focus on distributed agency across social and material and its implications for how we conceive critique builds on critical theory's long-standing concern with a whole range of capitalism's materialisations, including the commodity, the materialisation of wealth and poverty through capital accumulation, neo-colonial raw material extraction, gated enclaves and neoliberalism. We might think, for instance, of David Harvey's (e.g. 2008) brilliant elucidations of how urbanisation has played a historically crucial role in absorbing the surplus product capitalists perpetually produce in search of profits, from the Haussmannisation of Second Empire Paris's infrastructure, to the suburbanisation of post-war USA, to the rapid urbanisation of China over the past 20 years. We can also think here of critical scholarship on the urbanisation of socio-natures (e.g. Heynen *et al.*, 2006). What is very different, however, is the particular emphasis assemblage thinking brings to the agency of the *materials themselves*. One example here is Bennett's argument (2010) for a 'vital materialism' that seeks to counter the privileging of a specifically *human* agency or politics by emphasising the agentic contributions of nonhuman forces in shaping the world. Bennett's effort is to try to comprehend materiality as both in relation to and independent of human life, that is, materiality as a process that sometimes encounters and sometimes exceeds the confines of human life and comprehension. Bennett (2010, p. 20) theorises materiality within assemblages not as a stable and isolated set of objects, but as a *process* of changing relations between humans and nonhumans within assemblages, that is, 'as much force as entity, as much energy as matter, as much intensity as extension'. Part of this vital materialism is to examine the shared experiences of people and materials, 'to take a step towards a more ecological sensibility' (Bennett, 2010, p. 10),

and potentially to a different rendering of critique.

In my work on informal settlements in Mumbai, for example, I've been increasingly concerned with the crucial role that various materialities play in the constitution and experience of inequality, and in the possibilities of a more equal urbanism. While the materiality of informal housing and infrastructure is well recognised as a fundamental problem of urban life, the material geographies of informal settlements remain 'unstudied in morphological terms' (Dovey, 2010, p. 79), including the ways in which people living within informal settlements locate, build with and manipulate these materialities, and how the nature, usage and experience of materialities alters over time (an exception here is Dovey, 2010). The materialities of the home—whether in the form of housing objects ranging from sack cloth and corrugated iron to brick, breezeblock and hydroform, or infrastructures of drainage, sanitation, water or electricity—play a central role in the everyday lives and hardships faced by the poor. Housing within informal settlements is typically—though not exclusively—constructed individually and incrementally, using locally available materials, and often clustered in ways that depend on closely shared roofs, walls and infrastructures. Building materials might be gathered from local construction debris, riverbeds, manufacturing waste or patches of tree cover; the city is both mined and recycled. Kitchens might be supplied with portable gas burners and cooking items might be hung up to save space, while a lack of windows often necessitates creating space for fans. During the monsoon the ground level may be flooded, especially in Mumbai's western suburbs, meaning that people are sometimes forced into living in the sleeping loft area. Toilets may be a long walk away, be unsafe, and due to a shortage in number give rise to intensive queues, especially in the morning and evening. Infrastructures and the housing materials themselves often change, are added to or discarded over time, revealing a complex rhythm of assembling and reassembling that is central to the form and nature of domestic life but which has been largely neglected in scholarly accounts. Housing is, in short, both *made* and *edited*, in contexts of deeply unequal resources and precarious lives.

The materials themselves are multiple and of differential lifespans, from the relative obduracy of red brick through to the throw-away character of stop-gap materials like sackcloth or polyester to plug holes in roofs or provide matting for rain-sodden flooring. Different materials within the assemblage are more or less stable, while some parts can have multiple uses and spend large periods of time unused, such as small storage tanks for times of water shortage, sandbags stored in anticipation of the monsoon or stored bricks for post-monsoon housing repairs. Construction often extends vertically, allowing generations of families to live together or to utilise roof space as a rental opportunity. Employment opportunities can demand a transformatory effect on housing, from small tobacco shops opened up within the domestic space to the production of *papads* or the rolling of incense sticks on porches. Materials also feature as hazards, for example, in the form of recycling plastic from discarded syringes, which can be infectious, or in damage to eyesight from needlework, or in the hazardous chemical treatment of hides for leather production—the materiality of informal labour can provide insights into the political economy of informality. The lack of space that characterises most neighbourhoods means that materials often spill over into public space, from children's toys to rickshaws, bicycles, cooking materials and drying clothes. Washing laundry is often conducted outside the house in an alley where lighting and drainage conditions are better. This material overspill disrupts boundaries of public and private space, and facilitates particular forms of sociability, commonality, discussion and conflict.

These material geographies are variously constituted by the state (e.g. through tacit

permission or service provision), victimised by the state (e.g. through denial of rights or through demolition) and operate in relation to the state (e.g. through personal, voting and party political links, or as a source of unregulated cheap labour). The variegated relations between the state, economy and informal settlements are vital to the sorts of material configurations that become possible and durable within informal settlements. Attending to the role of materialities can provide insight into how urban inequality is produced. For instance, the savage destruction of water pipes by the state in the informal settlement of Rafinagar in northeast Mumbai in 2010 due to so-called 'water scarcity' facilitated the intensification of informal economies whereby local state officials and private agents sold poor quality water from water tankers to often desperate residents for a higher price. The destruction and reassembling of materialities like infrastructure, or of informal housing, can provide important knowledge of how violent processes of enclosure, displacement, and accumulation operate (Vasudevan, McFarlane, and Jeffrey, 2008; Jeffrey, McFarlane and Vasudevan, forthcoming). A key question that emerges here is what a focus on the materiality of housing reveals about poverty and inequality within informal settlements, as opposed to other lenses (such as income, employment, health or education)? From the brief description above, materials are subject to and help to shape a variety of urban geographies for the poor. They play a complex and changing set of roles: they hard-wire the experience of urban poverty; constitute spaces of commonality, interaction and conflict; are demolished through the sometimes violent nature of state intervention; can be, to different extents, manipulated and can help people to cope with or respond to crisis; are sometimes recyclable; can sometimes be altered for income-generating purposes; and constitute a daily threat for precarious lives. An examination of the ways in which materialities function as actants in urban spaces can bring a different perspective on poverty which can then be

positioned not just alongside other measures of poverty and inequality, such as around shifts in political economy or changes in income, health and education, but as a particular window into these processes.

Similarly, urban materialities can act as important agents in urban resistance. For example, Jockin Arputham, a high-profile Mumbai activist who founded the Mumbai Slum Dwellers Federation, recounts how during the 1980s a range of mundane materials featured as agents of urban activism:

> 'We could keep organized and in touch with each other with the phones but our phone bill was very low because we discovered how we could use the public phone for free—by inserting a railway ticket into the receiver. This meant we could make all our phone calls to all the members of parliament. We also learnt how to block the phones of ministers. In the Maharashtra assembly, there were questions asked as to how 30 ministers could have their phones cut at one time. We had designed this in Janata colony, with 100 people assigned one day to go to all the minister's houses. Blocking their phones takes just a simple wire and two stones. It made it sound as if the phone was permanently engaged. We could block all 30 ministers' phones at the same time—simply knowing where they were and shorting out their connections.' (Arputham, 2008, p. 333)

Here, railway tickets, wires and stones, facilitate coordination amongst activists and the possibilities of resistance. In distributing agency across the social and the material, assemblage thinking involves attending to how a diverse set of materialities can play multiple roles in the experience and possibilities of urban life. It raises questions about how we see urban poverty being experienced and where we see urban resistance emerging and how. Of course, different traditions of critical urbanism have long involved description of material life—not least Engels' account (2009 [1845]) of the impoverished housing of the English working classes. But assemblage thinking requires that we go beyond this to consider the role of the materialities them-

selves. There are two implications in particular here for critical urban research: the first around methodology and the second around responsibility.

In relation to the first, this brief survey of some of the materilites of informal settlements in Mumbai only begins to open up the question of what attending to material agents might bring to urban critique. There is a methodological challenge and accounts such as Bennett's vital materialism can be helpful here. Bennett's methodological approach is to take seriously the cultural, linguistic and historical ways in which materials are understood, but not to reduce materiality to these lenses. For Bennett (2010, p. 17), 'vital materialists will thus try to linger in those moments during which they find themselves fascinated by objects'. Here, the researcher is caught in a tension: between the realisation that there is much about the agency of urban materials and the connections they are involved in that exceed our purview, and an effort to nonetheless attempt to appreciate the agentic force of materials in the sites we research. The guiding aim here is to go beyond the self-evident claim that human life is composed of many material parts, towards an appreciation of these materials as active and to understand the changing role of materials in constituting daily survival, experience, inequality and possibility. One example here might be a micro-focused ethnography of the ways in which urban materials function not simply as objects but as processes that are put to work in various ways. We might be talking here of informal settlements, or of policy documents, blueprints, models, infrastructures, and so on. One contribution assemblage thinking can make to critical urbanism here is through ethnographies of particular urban materials that would reveal the changing uses and possibilities that materials shape and allow, and which would provide a potentially different lens for linking everyday life, uncertainty and larger shifts in political economy.

Part of the point here is to say that assemblage thinking is *processual* thinking, that is,

the agency of assemblage emerges in process, in bringing different actors together, in their dissolution, contestation and reformulation. As feminist science studies theorist Karen Barad (2007) has argued, agency in this reading is less an attribute or property and more a name for the ongoing reconfiguring of the world. For Barad (2007, p. 151), materiality is understood not as a fixed substance, but as a 'substance in its intra-active becoming—not a thing but a doing, a congealing of [human and nonhuman] agency'. As Bennett (2005, p. 461) argues, assemblage asks us to consider the agency not just of each 'member' or the assemblage, but of the assemblage itself—the milieu, or specific arrangement of things, through which forces and trajectories inhere and transform in a context of 'fluid and intensive generation of potential' (Savage, 2009, p. 171). Here, assemblage can provide insight into the 'stuff' of inequality, and to how it is experienced.

In distributing agency in this way—and this is a second implication for critical urban research of attending to materiality—assemblage troubles at where we assign responsibility and causality when we conduct critique. As Bennett (2005, 2010) has argued in the context of the blackout of the North American power grid in August 2003, the inherently distributive and multiple nature of agency within such a sociomaterial assemblage casts questions over where responsibility, accountability and the ethico-politics of blame lie. Bennett (2005, p. 464) frames the problem of the distribution of agency as a binary judgement about where we strategically wish to attribute blame: humans or material agents (e.g. a failure in technology vs. a failure in governance or funding). But rather than choosing from one of two binary options, it seems to me that a potential contribution of assemblage thinking to critical urbanism here lies in the particular and often unexpected agency of different materialities. We might ask, for instance, what the particular agency of Richard Florida's sleek PowerPoint presentations of the 'creative city' is when set against existing local urban

plans? How do plans emerge, and through which sociomaterial geographies? For the critical urbanist, a focus on agency as distributed through sociomaterial assemblages opens multiple space-times of intervention within assemblages, where the imperative to act critically is one—to borrow from Barad (2007, p. 296)—of 'meeting each moment, being alive to the possibilities of becoming', an 'ethical call, an invitation that is written into the very matter of being and becoming'. In its orientation towards thick description of relations of history and potential, and in its conceptual focus on distributing agency across social and material, assemblage thinking diversifies the range of agents and causes of urban inequality, while potentially multiplying the spaces of critical intervention.

Assemblage and the critical imaginary

The third and final area in which assemblage contributes to critical urbanism lies in the *imaginary* of assemblage as collage, gathering and composition. In this section, I examine the orientation assemblage can bring to urban critique through the important issue of urban cosmopolitan composition, where the question at stake is whether the imaginary of the assembling city might allow us to work towards, as a political implication, a progressive cosmopolitan urbanism. Perhaps the closest approximation in the social sciences to the image of compositional mixture is the debate on cosmopolitanism. As a name for a particular kind of translocal relation, cosmopolitanism offers one potentially progressive site for how we conceptualise urban assemblage. As David Featherstone (forthcoming) argues in relation to 'subaltern cosmopolitanism', cosmopolitanism is not identitarian in the sense of 'being together', but in the mobile relational sense of 'becoming together'. Cosmopolitanism is a relation of encountering, managing or negotiating difference. In this sense, cosmopolitanism in the city might be described as a kind of 'worldliness' that takes at least four relational

forms: a *knowledge*, of how difference might be negotiated, or of how mutuality across difference might operate; a *disposition*, either as a progressive orientation to urban cultural diversity or as a regressive exclusionary sensibility deployed in relation to other cultures; a *resource*, a means of coping, getting-by, surviving and managing uncertainty in the city; and an *ideal*, an openness to and celebration of urban diversity and trans-local connection and togetherness that is to be worked towards (cf. Sandercock, 1998, 2004; Harvey, 2009). An encounter between assemblage and cosmopolitanism asks us to consider how urban assemblage might offer an imaginary of a progressive form of becoming together, that is, as both a disposition and ideal.

Of course, cosmopolitanism itself is often a sham, and can be a smokescreen for an elite-driven and regressive urbanism that implicitly privileges particular kinds of well-travelled, white, Western individuals whose politics is that of a conservative liberal 'tolerance', while masking the forms of urban polarisation and uneven spatial development so well documented in the critical urban literature. As Alain Badiou (2008) had recently argued, the same voices who would have us believe in the myth of a globally accessible urban world for all are also actively in the business of constructing new walls in the proliferation of enclaves, surveillance, controls and expulsions. For example, the so-called 'politics of immigration' that animates so many politically anaemic debates in the 'West', he writes, is in reality a process of exploitation and hardship of migrant workers that reveals the sham of globalisation or cosmopolitanism as a 'unified world'. If cosmopolitanism does provide an imaginary that comes close to capturing a progressive notion of urban assemblage, then, it is nonetheless operative within what Slavoj Žižek (2009) has called a deepening 'social apartheid' on a global scale. So why attempt to recuperate cosmopolitanism as a normative political project of urban assemblage?

One reading of cosmopolitanism as a normative political project is the sometimes

romanticised discourse of 'one-worldism'. To return to Badiou (2008, p. 39), in the simple axiom 'there is only one world' there is a political project of togetherness that affirms a decent standard of living for all. He writes:

> 'A first consequence is the recognition that all belong to the same world as myself: the African worker I see in the restaurant kitchen, the Moroccan I see digging a hole in the road, the veiled woman looking after children in the park. That is where we reverse the dominant idea of the world united by objects and signs, to make a unity in terms of living, acting beings, here and now.' (ibid.)

To echo the discussion of the commons earlier in the paper, this relational one world-ism is not a homogenous unity. It is an invo-cation of a single world where an unlimited set of differences exist, and where these differences do not cast doubt over the unity of the world but are its *principle of existence*. Urbanism is, in part, assemblage through differences, and there is an important princi-ple here for critique in ensuring that this image is genuinely plural, hospitable and equal. One response, then, to the call for a normative cosmopolitanism is a kind of exis-tential cosmopolitanism as an image of assembly and reassembly, and that locates a privileged 'I' or 'us' in relation to suffering others in a way that insists on a decent stan-dard of living regardless of national identity and without understating the crucial role of power, conflict and difference.

The political consequences of this one-worldism is not to somehow eschew the ongoing inequalities of class, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, caste, disability or age that are actively folded into the constitution of cities. It is, instead, to demonstrate that we are constitutive parts of those inequalities. The response is not simply an espousal of sympathy, but an attempt to enter into the assemblage of a more socially just city. One image of the reassembled just city, then, is a progressive cosmopolitan urbanism that constantly invokes an alternative, more inclusive urban commons based on mutual recognition, solidarity and resistance. Again, we are not standing outside of the traditions of critical urbanism here, but instead echoing existing concerns through a spatial grammar of progressive cosmopolitanism. We return here, for instance, to Henri Lefebvre's famous invocation of the right to the city, a right cast not just as material access to urban space, but *a renewed right to urban life*. The right to the city, wrote Lefebvre:

> 'should modify, concretize and make more practical the rights of the citizen as an urban dweller and user of multiple services. It would affirm, on the one hand, the right of the user to make known their ideas on the space and time of their activities in the urban area; it would also cover the right to the use of the centre, a privileged place, instead of being dispersed and stuck into ghettos (for workers, immigrants, the "marginal" and even for the "privileged").' (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 2342, translated in Kofman and Lebas 1996, p. 3; Mitchell, 2003; Harvey, 2008)

This double affirmation—of both access to the city and active participation of a range of groups in the production of the city as a lived reality—closely connects to the image of urban assemblage as inclusive cosmopolitanism.

It is worth recalling at this point the discussion of agency and the nonhuman in the previous section, because this offers another sense in which assemblage might function as a critical imaginary in the shape of a cosmopolitan becoming together across difference. As Hinchliffe *et al.* (2005) suggest, cosmopolitanism can be conceived beyond rubrics of inclusion and participa-tion. In their work on urban wildlife and ecologies in Birmingham, they extend cosmopolitan thinking beyond a politics of inclusion and instead attempt to write an ontological project of generating experiments that constitute new collectives and politics. They draw on Stengers' characterisation of cosmopolitics (1997) in an effort to 'ecolo-gise the political', an experiment with a poli-

tics of changing engagements and ontological struggle in relation to urban wildlife biodiversity (Hinchliffe *et al.*, 2005, p. 650). Part of the 'experiment' here is to put knowledge 'at risk', to attend to the unexpected behaviour of urban wildlife in ways that co-produces new assemblages of knowledge, people and wildlife—'to allow others, of all shapes, sizes and trajectories, to object to the stories we tell about them, to intervene in our processes as much as we intervene in theirs' (ibid., pp. 655–656).

This cosmopolitical experimentation aims to develop not just better, more inclusive representations, but alternative ontologies of human–nonhuman collectivities that change in process, potentially evoking new possibilities for knowing and acting in the city. Away from urban wildlife, attention to urban nature and metabolisms has been an important part of different strands of critical urban thought (for example, Keil and Ali's 2007 account of global networked disease like SARS and its impact on urban governance; and see Heynen *et al.*, 2006; Swyngedouw, 2006). As an approximation of cosmopolitanism, the assemblage imaginary recalls the concern with the rights to the city but does so through a politics of recognition that has the potential implication of generating new urban knowledges, collectives and ontologies. Assemblage's imaginary of gathering and composition is one vehicle through which the rights to the city might potentially be realised, whereby assemblage extends the rights to the city as a process of agonistic composition.

Conclusion

In order to consider how it might connect with and differ from critical urbanism, I have discussed assemblage in expansive terms as an orientation, a concept, and an imaginary. As a relational process of composition, assemblage signals the emergence, labour and sociomateriality of the city, and the ways in which this process becomes structured and

hierarchical through inequalities of power, resource and knowledge. Assemblage underlines the ways in which urbanism is produced as an unfolding set of uneven practices that are—while being more or less open or enclosed—never inevitable, but always capable of being produced otherwise. It signifies the city not simply as an output or resultant formation, but as ongoing construction. What, then, does assemblage offer a reading of critique?

I have offered three intersections here. First, assemblage emphasises thick description of the relations between history and potential, that is, of the different processes that historically produce urban inequality *and* the possibilities for those conditions of inequality to be contested, imagined differently and altered. This focus on the actual and possible has clearly been at the heart of critical urban thinking, but assemblage thinking underscores an emphasis on the processes of assembling the urban commons and of the potential of generative critique. Second, assemblage distributes agency across the social and the material, and in doing so draws attention to the agency of the materials themselves as processes within assemblages. If this resonates with the long history of critical urbanism—for instance, around the materialities of the commodity, the gated enclave or indeed of urbanisation itself as a form of capital accumulation—assemblage thinking is particularly concerned with whether and how materialities might make a difference to the ways in which poverty and inequality are produced and experienced — not to pretend to tell the whole story (if that is ever possible), but to disclose different insights into how urban worlds are made. This focus on agency in part calls upon critical urbanists to consider how seemingly mundane micro-materialities—such as Jockin's train tickets in the example given earlier—change their function through new interactions within assemblages, and have effects in terms of helping to structure and maintain resistance campaigns. Third, the imaginary of assemblage as collage, composition and gathering contains a potential

political contribution to urban critique. Assemblage as composition is an imaginary of progressive cosmopolitanism which implicates a privileged 'us' with an exploited 'they' and uses that as a basis for collective recognition, forging solidarities and resistance, and which resonates with the Lefebvrian rights to the city tradition.

Assemblage thinking does not oppose the long tradition of critical urbanism, but it does offer some specific orientations and questions that could prove useful—three in particular. First, it offers an emphasis on potentiality. As a process of generating concerns and assembling difference, assemblage's orientation is as much on creating alternatives as it is on debunking existing claims. This focus on potential, however, casts up not just the possibilities of assembly, but the possibilities that remain unfulfilled: potentiality exists as a tension between hope, inspiration and the scope of the possible, and the sometimes debilitating recognition of that which has not been attained. Second, in drawing attention to the agency of materials themselves, and to how they might help shape inequality and the prospects for resistance and alterity, assemblage asks us to consider how critical praxis emerges through sociomaterial interaction rather than through a separation of the social and material. And, third, assemblage offers an imaginary of cosmopolitanism composition that can be used to carve out strategies for alternative urbanisms based upon mutual recognition and solidarity, and on the generation of new compositions across difference.

Acknowledgements

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