

# USING ASSEMBLAGE THEORY IN POLICY ANTHROPOLOGY. ASSEMBLAGES AS CLAIMS ON SCIENTISTS AND READERSHIP

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A great number of keywords are used to describe a new way of constructing and thinking about the social in current ethnographic and cultural anthropological research, which constitutes the subject of this journal; formations, ›Gefüge‹, assemblage, ensemble, symmetrical networks, dispositive, apparatus, agencement, symmetrical or relational anthropology and many more. The complexity of the social world and the question of how we can analyze and describe this complexity without reducing it is not an easy one. On the one hand, we as scientists need to explain the world's phenomena and create knowledge in a way that is understandable and usable not only for our scientific community but also for society in general. This requires a reduction of complexity. On the other hand, scientists need to observe the social as it is, in all its complex multiple and heterogeneous ways, without generalizing or keeping it unreflective. As cultural anthropologist Gisela Welz recently summarized at an empirical cultural studies conference: We have entered a new epoch in the history of our planet, the ›Anthropocene‹, »in which the impact of human activity exceeds that of any other biophysical force«<sup>1</sup> and »the human agent has grown to the dimension of a natural phenomenon«<sup>2</sup>, which brings into question the epistemic distinction between nature and culture. We must tackle the questions of agency, be it non-human or human, socio-material, praxeographic or discursive agency, and find out how they link together.

Within cultural anthropology,<sup>3</sup> assemblage theory or assemblage thinking as a research methodology can have the advantage, unlike in other disciplines without the long and rich tradition of reflecting the construction of the research field, of dealing more concretely with the questions of how heterogeneous elements connect and relate to each other; and it allows us to apply the

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1 Gisela Welz: More than Human Futures: Towards a Relational Anthropology in/of the Anthropocene (13), 2021, pp. 36–46, p. 36.

2 Bruno Latour: Anthropology at the Time of the Anthropocene. Distinguished Lecture at the 2014 American Anthropological Association meeting. Washington, D.C. 2014.

3 As students, we spent one semester studying this new way of thinking which some scholars refer to as assemblage and which has grown to be called ›assemblage theory‹. We accepted the challenge to write articles for the institute journal. The idea was, besides having introductory articles about the assemblage theory, for each of us to link our own master thesis topics and try to think of them as assemblages or through an assemblage perspective, and thus to discuss the adaptability of assemblage theory for the field of cultural anthropology in general.

idea of ›flat ontologies‹ in empirical cultural research – since flat ontologies are one of the key ideas of assemblage theory.

»Flat ontology«, as the human-geographer James Ash describes, is an epistemic model to describe a reality that states that »all objects, even those that are imagined, have the same degree of being-ness as any other object«. <sup>4</sup> No entity is more a subject than any other. It is therefore a radical abolition of ontological hierarchies in the research process and the construction of the research field.

Most of the works in critical urban studies or policy research in political science, geography, or other disciplines combine assemblage above all with an ethnographic sensitivity and research methodology. Cultural anthropology can go beyond this long-developed ability to the question of the concrete ways of connecting and relating the heterogeneous elements observed in the field, aka assemblage. While researching different elements, we also must conduct research by different methodologies. How can praxeographic observations be combined with discursive analyses within semiotic-material networks? And how can we describe them? Can scientists be required to have this all-encompassing view? And can we ask readers to read studies (consisting of perhaps several hundred pages) that try to describe these assemblages in their procedural origins and decompositions, as it was done recently, for example, by Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing with her first part of an ›capitalist ethnography‹ about a Japanese mushroom? <sup>5</sup>

In this paper, I would like to show my understanding of assemblage theory by combining different texts and trying to connect them with current approaches in policy research in cultural anthropology. I will show a divergence within the social sciences as it can be shown by critical theorist Ian Buchanan who challenges the well-cited ideas of Manuel DeLanda or Jane Bennett about assemblage theory, which its founders never intended to be a theoretical concept in the first place. Even though the ideas from a *thousand plateaus* have enriched the discussion on how we construct the social as a scientific field, as I will point out, it could be misunderstood in many ways. And as the term assemblage is currently used in many articles, books, and journals around the globe, we have to be careful not to misinterpret it as a theory or methodology, which at this point it simply is not. With this in mind, I will end this article by showing my research for my master's degree in which I study the agency and subjectivity of administration employees in the field of policy-making within cultural administration. For this paper, I would like to show ideas on how thinking in terms of assemblages is both demanding and promising in terms of anthropological research.

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4 James Ash: Flat Ontology and Geography. *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 2020, 10 (3), pp. 345–361.

5 Cf. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing: *Der Pilz am Ende der Welt: Über das Leben in den Ruinen des Kapitalismus*. Berlin 2018.

## *What does assemblage mean, and why do I struggle?*

Assemblage theory has many authors and precursors. The original thought out of which this new theory developed was stated by the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guatarri in their post-structuralist piece »Mille plateaux«. <sup>6</sup> It was then Manuel DeLanda who published the book »A New Philosophy of society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity« and his recent book »Assemblage Theory«, in which he claims to reinvented a »2.0 version« of Deleuze and Guatarri's concept of agencement. <sup>7</sup> With this purely and explicitly philosophical undertake, DeLanda expanded this concept into an ontological paradigm in social sciences which we now have to deal with as social scientists on a theoretical and methodological level.

In attempting to understand and deal with this new trend, we try to link or unlink this idea with the Actor-Network-Theory (ANT), originally developed by Bruno Latour and Steve Wolger and now conceptualized in a whole study program of science and technology studies. It is a theory that is frequently mentioned in the same breath as assemblage theory, and its distinction is widely and critically debated amongst scholars. <sup>8</sup>

The premise of ANT is that the world we observe must not be reduced into text and discourse or into nature and society. »Signs, humans, institutions, norms, theories, things, and artifacts are mixed-beings, techno-social hybrids, that organize themselves in constantly changing networks«, <sup>9</sup> as John Law describes the ANT approach. In preparation for this article, having read much more about assemblage theory than any other cultural theory in my studies, I still do not have a satisfying answer to this question: What does assemblage theory bring to the table that Actor-Network-Theory could not? <sup>10</sup>

As a student of cultural anthropology, I struggle with cultural theories such as Bourdieu's praxeology, what Bourdieu meant exactly when he talks about practice, Foucault's discourse theory or Latour's materialistic approach in the Actor-Network-Theory and what he does or does not include in his networks and their specific adaptations to the world that I live in and which I try to scientifically observe and describe. As a cultural anthropologist, I also struggle with the limitations and boundaries of these concepts. And I struggle with the question of why there is the need for a paradigm shift and exactly

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6 Cf. Gilles Deleuze/Felix Guatarri: A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia. 1987.

7 Manuel DeLanda: A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity. London 2006; Manuel DeLanda: Assemblage Theory. Edinburgh 2016.

8 Cf. John Law: After Method: Mess in Social Science Research. London 2004.

9 Translated by the author: Andréa Belliger/David J. Krieger: Einführung in die Akteur-Netzwerk-Theorie. In: dies. (eds.): ANThology. Ein einführendes Handbuch zur Akteur-Netzwerk-Theorie. Bielefeld 2006, pp. 13–50.

10 For a better understanding of the debate about the differences and similarities of assemblage theory and actor network theory, I recommend: John Law: After Method: Mess in Social Science Research. London 2004.

which paradigms are shifting by using assemblage thinking in theory and method and not developing existing theories in a way that we can better describe more complex social phenomena. As scientists, we sometimes long for simple explanations. This naïve desire is unfortunately contradictory to the fundamental idea of assemblage theory, which is a concept of theoretical and methodological approaches that aims to include every »messy«<sup>11</sup> part of complexity which can be found in the field and beyond its borders and time.

Assemblage thinking, assemblage theory or methodology, or the way how an ethnographic field is constructed is intended to be used as a tool for representing the complexity of a field that »cannot be defined by fixed entities«<sup>12</sup>. This is the most frequently used definition I have read in various articles about assemblage. In general terms, to see a thing, a phenomenon, or the world in assemblages is to ask not what they are but how they come into being. The focus of research using assemblage theory is therefore not the *entity* itself, but the way, the process, how this entity is constructed in the socio-material network we would call an assemblage. The constructed things out of which an event or phenomena aka assemblage is formed can be anything: an idea, a practice, and even a material object. *The assemblage* can be anything as long as it adheres to the premise that it is constructed in a rather complex process. Or at least this is what I thought reading the first few texts in class about this new approach.<sup>13</sup> I was starting to struggle with this and asked myself: Why not use the Actor-Network-Theory or even more basic, the term »system«?

*If something can be everything it must be considered as nothing.*

This can be seen as the outstanding critique of an assemblage approach that remains undefined and explained in a variety of ways. The object-oriented ontologist Levi Bryant extracts several of Deleuze's statements about assemblage from an interview in which he defines assemblage as follows:

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- 11 Cf. *John Law*: Akteur-Netzwerk-Theorie und materiale Semiotik. In: Tobias Conradi/Heike Derwanz/Florian Muhle (eds.): *Strukturentstehung durch Verflechtung. Akteur-Netzwerk-Theorie(n) und Automatismen*. Paderborn 2013, pp. 21–48.
  - 12 Cf. *Aihwa Ong/Stephen J. Collier* (eds.): *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics, and Ethics as Anthropological Problems*. Malden 2005.
  - 13 Cf. *Colin McFarlane*: *Assemblage and Critical Urbanism*. *City* 15 (2), 2011, pp. 204–224; *Colin McFarlane*: *Learning the City: Knowledge and Translocal Assemblage*. Chichester 2011; *Ong and Collier* (2005); *Martin Müller/Caroline Schurr*: *Assemblage Thinking and Actor-Network Theory: Conjunctions, Disjunctions, Cross-Fertilisations*. 2016; *Tom Baker/Pauline McGuirk*: *Assemblage Thinking as Methodology: Commitments and Practices for Critical Policy Research*. In: *Territory, Politics, Governance*, vol. 5, 2016, pp. 425–442; *Manuel DeLanda*, as in fn. 7; *Sabine Hess/Maria Schwertl*: *Vom »Feld« zur »Assemblage«? Perspektiven europäisch-ethnologischer Methodenentwicklung – eine Hinleitung*. In: *Sabine Hess/Johannes Moser/Maria Schwertl* (eds.): *Europäisch-ethnologisches Forschen. Neue Methoden und Konzepte*, pp. 13–39. Berlin 2013.

»Assemblages are composed of heterogeneous elements or objects that enter into relations with one another. These objects are not all of the same type. Thus, you have physical objects, happenings, events, and so on, but you also have signs, utterances, and so on. While there are assemblages that are composed entirely of bodies, there are no assemblages composed entirely of signs and utterances.«<sup>14</sup>

From this, I take the understanding of assemblage as an approach to combining those recently listed theories of French philosophers, cultural and social scientists, such as discourses, practices, and materiality, and a focus on the relations between them. With a dominant focus on the materiality as well as the desire that guides the objects of the world, there can be assemblages only with objects but no assemblages which are only meanings. In other words, the egg was always there first before we could call it an egg.

Assemblage theory to this point is neither clearly conceptualized nor does it contain a clear methodological approach, at least not yet. There could be a strong tendency for assemblage to be used only in a descriptive way, resulting in a joining up exercise or in a thin and endless description.<sup>15</sup> For a research perspective such as ethnography, this seems to be a very harsh, if not to say fatal critique. Alexa Färber blames the structure of scientific working conditions with fixed-term contracts and the conditions in scientific journals which simply do not allow a thick and complex description, if the empirical research even provides such a thing, and is not able to give the room to this new style of describing assemblage fields. A fact which also applies to this article.<sup>16</sup>

The Deleuze and Guattari expert Ian Buchanan writes in his newly published book »Assemblage Theory and Method – An Introduction and Guide« about this erosion of a concept, which its founders, Deleuze and Guattari, explicitly never intended to be a scientific concept but only a philosophical thought.<sup>17</sup> Buchanan is very critical of recent texts on assemblage and especially of Manuel DeLanda's works about assemblage theory. He criticizes DeLanda for claiming that there are ›half a dozen different interpretations‹ of assemblage by Deleuze and Guattari, which he claims to bring together to create a unified version of the concept.

»The trouble is, to do that he modifies the concept, introducing new ways of thinking about the assemblage which, on the one hand, he dismisses as ›harmless‹ additions and, on the other hand, extols as

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14 Cf. *Lewis Bryant*: Deleuze on Assemblages. 2009. <https://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2009/10/08/deleuze-on-assemblages/>, accessed 8/6/2021.

15 Cf. Hess and Schwertl as in fn. 13.

16 *Alexa Färber*: Potenziale freisetzen: Akteur-Netzwerk-Theorie und Assemblageforschung in der interdisziplinären kritischen Stadtforschung. In: *suburban. Zeitschrift für kritische Stadtforschung*, 2014, pp. 95–103. p. 101.

17 *Ian Buchanan*: *Assemblage Theory and Method: An Introduction and Guide*. London 2021.

necessary changes to make the concept immune to certain logical difficulties that are, in DeLanda's view, inherent in Deleuze and Guattari's version of the concept.«<sup>18</sup>

Ian Buchanan goes on to say that simplifying Deleuze and Guattari's thought, as he claims DeLanda tries to do, leads to avoiding rather than working through conceptual difficulty.

»[...] it necessarily leads to a diminished understanding of the concept. And yet that tends to be the way most commentators go about dealing with the concept of the assemblage, which no doubt explains both the uniformity of interpretations and the apparent reluctance in the field to return to the original source material.«<sup>19</sup>

The uniformity within assemblage theory and the reluctance towards the original work of Deleuze and Guattari is not necessary, as Buchanan argues that a thousand plateaus contain direct and explicit tools on how we can make assemblage theory useful as researchers.

Manuel DeLanda writes in his book »A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity« that assemblages are against totalism and essentialism, which I want to point out as the first major misunderstanding of Deleuze's and Guattari's work that Buchanan explains with the concept of »stratification«. The concept of stratification shows the world view of Deleuze and Guattari which is not to be adapted but to be understood to comprehend the concept of assemblage as a whole. Everything is distinguishable in different »strata«, the *geological*, *biological*, and the human strata as *techno-semiological*, and he argues that each level of distinction does indeed have essentialist elements that distinguish it from others. Even though in the assemblage approach we try to be open to different potentialities of different elements, according to its founders each potentiality is bound to the strata it is combined with and no entity can be explained by an element of a different strata.<sup>20</sup> Humans will always be different from rocks:

»In other words, contra DeLanda, assemblage theory does not avoid *essentialism*, it entrenches it at its very heart: geology, biology, and techno-semiology are formed differently, they evolved differently, and are defined by an organization of relations that is specific to each stratum.«<sup>21</sup>

The second major misunderstanding, Buchanan explains, has been the connection to the concept of desire in favor of the dominance of materiality. As previously stated, materiality might come before discursive meaning, but the desire is what holds the materiality together in an assemblage.

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18 Buchanan, as in fn. 17.

19 Buchanan, as in fn. 17.

20 Cf. Buchanan, as in fn. 17.

21 Buchanan, as in fn. 17, p. 29.

»Desire is primary; it is desire that selects materials and gives them the properties that they have in the assemblage. This is because desire itself is productive. This is what Deleuze and Guatarri mean by materialism: productive desire. 'If desire produces, its product is real. If desire is productive, it can be productive only in the real world and can produce only reality«. <sup>22</sup>

Many references to and considerations of desire are consciously excluded from the discussion as either unnecessary or simply too messy. Or, as Jane Bennett declares, desire is not necessarily the best category through which to think about assemblages<sup>23</sup>:

»Assemblages are thereby reduced to mere apparatuses, which is precisely not what Deleuze and Guatarri intended as they constantly caution us against taking a mechanistic view of things«. <sup>24</sup>

Assemblages are not mere systems of things; it is desire that animates them.

The third casualty is the multidimensional nature of the concept of the assemblage. According to Buchanan, this manifests itself in two ways: on the one hand, the assemblage is treated as a stand-alone concept, which Buchanan says it is not, and on the other hand, the assemblage is treated as though it consists of only one kind of component, namely the machine.

»As a consequence, much of what goes by the name of assemblage theory today is an emaciated and innervated version of the full body of ideas and concepts Deleuze and Guattari bequeathed us«. <sup>25</sup>

This anti-DeLanda and pro-Deleuze/Guatarri approach to assemblage is also used by Thomas Nail, who extracts potential key elements about assemblages from the original works of Deleuze and Guattari. Nail explains, using Deleuze and Guatarri's terms, the »general logic of assemblage« with two major philosophical consequences about assemblage thinking he describes as »the rejection of unity in favor of multiplicity, and the rejection of essence in favor of events.«<sup>26</sup> More importantly, based on Deleuze's and Guatarri's work, Nail analyzes the basic structure of assemblages and how assemblages change and work, and he gives us the ontology of what exactly we as social scientists are analyzing by observing our field of studies as an assemblage.

»[A]ll assemblages are composed of a *basic structure* including a condition (abstract machine), elements (concrete assemblage), and agents (personae). Although the content differs depending on the kind of

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22 Buchanan, as in fn. 17, p. 56.

23 Cf. Jane Bennett: *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*. Princeton 2001, p. 37.

24 Buchanan, as in fn. 17, p. 5.

25 Buchanan as in fn. 17, p. 5–6.

26 Thomas Nail: *Deleuze, Occupy, and the Actuality of Revolution. Theory & Event*, vol. 16, Issue 1, 2013, p. 22.

assemblage (biological, amorous, aesthetic, and so on), the structural role or function of these three aspects are shared by all assemblages. Second, all assemblages are arranged according to *four basic political types*: territorial, statist, capitalist, and nomadic. Each type describes a different way in which the conditions, elements, and agents of the assemblage are ordered. Each assemblage is always a mixture of these four types to varying degrees. Finally, all assemblages are constantly changing according to *four different kinds of change* or ›detritorialization‹: relative negative, relative positive, absolute negative, and absolute positive.«<sup>27</sup>

I will try to use Nail's conceptualizations and Buchanan's input on desire as a concept and to describe my own field using its vocabulary to answer the question whether this ontology is useful in describing and analyzing a field of study.<sup>28</sup> First, however, I would like to briefly situate my field of study within the anthropology of policy research and the opportunities of understanding policy as assemblage.

### *Policy Assemblages*

Administration in governance, though it might not seem that way, can be a very complex field of study with multiple human and non-human actors, various institutions, and a complex composition or ensemble of different ideologies and belief systems.

Classical policy analysis ›is finding out what governments do, why they do it and what difference it makes.«<sup>29</sup> An anthropological approach is often not taken because the field is occupied by other disciplines such as political science, sociology, or the science of public administration. As an anthropologist, my expertise is to relate my field very closely to the ideas of the anthropology of policy and policymaking, developed by Susan Wright and Cris Shore, and the German debate of an anthropology of political fields by Jens Adam and Asta Vonderau and the dimensions of political fields by Johanna Rolshoven that has evolved from it.

I will try to link this well discussed field of political anthropology with the ideas of assemblage theory originating from the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, which was later conceptualized in cultural theory by Ian Buchanan and Thomas Nail, as described in the previous chapter. The ideas

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27 Thomas Nail: What is an Assemblage. In: SubStance, 46/1, 2017, pp. 36–37.

28 I will not be able to explain every part of the assemblage structure that Deleuze and Guattari formalized and recommend for an approach to assemblage theory close to Deleuze and Guattari. For further details, I recommend a close reading of the work of Thomas Nail and Ian Buchanan.

29 Georg Wenzelburger/Reimut Zohlh fer: Handbuch Policy-Forschung. Wiesbaden 2015, p. 15.



which Jens Adam and Asta Vonderau developed in their book »Formationen des Politischen« will be helpful in this endeavor.<sup>30</sup>

The importance of studying policy and, by extension, public administration through the methodological and theoretical lens of cultural anthropology lies at the core of cultural analysis. Policy and, by inclusion, the public administration of governance are major organizing principles of modern society – just like family, nation, class, citizenship, or ethnicity. Policy is a fundamental »organizational principle« for the design of contemporary societies that permeates, connects, changes, or even creates different contexts, societies and in this always »mobilizes cultural meanings«.<sup>31</sup> Yet, as policy anthropologists Janine Wedel and Gregory Feldman state, anthropology as a discipline has not given policy, as a social, cultural, and political construct, the explicit attention that it deserves.<sup>32</sup> And more problematically, they see that the validity of anthropological policy research is often »called into question«, justified by the study of policy being the domain of other disciplines.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, these disciplines often analyze the field of policy in a model of rational decision-making similar to the functionalistic concepts of Max Weber as he studied the administration of government.<sup>34</sup>

Chris Shore and Susan Wright wrote their books »Anthropology of Policy« in 1997 and »Policy World« in 2011 and define policy as an »ensemble of rational, logical and linear actions to solve objective problems«,<sup>35</sup> starting with the formulation by decision-makers and the legislative process, wandering through different administrative levels to finally be implemented institutionally and locally. In terms of assemblage theory, policy is assembled in a socio-material formation aka assemblage.

Similar to the assemblage approach, Shore and Wright focused on processuality and non-linearity in the development of policy and pleaded for the analysis of diverse actors such as local residents to interest groups, local institutions and authorities, the media, national government and, in some cases, international agencies. The way these processes of policy-making developed is neither a linear movement down a hierarchy, from policy-makers at the top to policy recipients at the bottom, nor a linear sequence of activi-

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30 *Jens Adam/Asta Vonderau*: Formationen des Politischen. Überlegungen zu einer Anthropologie politischer Felder. In: Jens Adam/Asta Vonderau (eds.): Formationen des Politischen: Anthropologie politischer Felder. Bielefeld 2014, pp. 7–32.

31 *Jens Adam*: Ordnungen des Nationalen und die geteilte Welt: Zur Praxis Auswärtiger Kulturpolitik als Konfliktprävention. Bielefeld 2018, p. 32.

32 Cf. *Janine Wedel/Gregory Feldman*: Why an Anthropology of Public Policy? In: Anthropology Today, vol. 21, 2005.

33 *Wedel/Feldman*, as in fn. 32, p. 1.

34 Cf. *Radhika Gorur*: Policy as Assemblage. European Educational Research Journal 10, 2001, pp. 611–622, p. 614.

35 *Cris Shore/Susane Wright* cited by Adam as in fn 31, p. 33.

ties through time, from formulation through decision making to implementation.<sup>36</sup>

Policy in that sense and in the assemblage approach is not seen as *policy making* and not even as *doing policy* but rather as the *occurrences of policy* in a complex multileveled heterogeneous network or assemblage of non-linear processes including all different sets of agencies and motivations aka desires. With this, I do not want to say that policy is a random happening that just occurred without any describable agency or desire. But policy is not created in the same way it is planned by politicians or other institutions, it is evolving in complex assemblages with different actors that make the outcome or adaptation of policy and its impact on society rather unpredictable.

In their anthology »Formationen des Politischen«, Jens Adam and Asta Vonderau explain two approaches in the study of political fields as formations or assemblages of policy. First, the empirically tangible material traces in physical space represent a possibility »to ethnographically trace political rationalities, government logics and power relations«.<sup>37</sup> These traces could be a new theater that is planned by the cultural administration or a new exhibition that was funded in a rather quick process by the ministry of culture. A second, somewhat different approach is through the investigation of localizable fields of interaction or contact zones of different groups of people and the intersecting life paths, political dynamics, and historical references.<sup>38</sup> These could be a rather random encounter of an employee of a cultural administration with the cultural art sphere which started his or her motivation to work in cultural administration. Speaking in assemblage terms, we might say that we have to expand our policy research from an actual event in its material manifestation, or from the interrelations between actors.

Both approaches thus open up ethnographic perspectives on the formation of political fields, in the context of which spaces are ordered, resources are distributed, people are categorized, and cultural meanings are produced. They encourage us to ask about the initially hidden political rationalities and longer-term processes based on the visible material traces, power effects, and social interactions.

»It is the concern of an anthropology of political fields to focus precisely on these dynamics and relations between the visible and the invisible in contemporary power constellations and thus on the confluence of heterogeneous elements into complex formations of the political.«<sup>39</sup>

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36 *Cris Shore/Susane Wright: Policy Worlds\_ Anthropology and the Analysis of Contemporary Power*. Berghahn 2011, pp. 86–104. p. 86; See also *Vonderau* as in fn. 31, p. 17.

37 *Vonderau* as in fn. 31, p. 9.

38 Cf. *Vonderau* as in fn. 31, p. 9.

39 *Vonderau* as in fn. 31, p. 9–10.

For my research, it is profoundly important to emphasize one criterion of research, as David Little recently concluded in his book »A New Social Ontology of Government«. <sup>40</sup> He identifies three important parts of government and, by extension, of policy research. First, the ontology of government is actor-centered. The practices of government are generated by the actors who make up the offices and agencies of government. <sup>41</sup> Second, government and policy research can be productive by researching with the theories of institutional sociology and organizational studies. Government is an assemblage of organizations, with social networks, authority relations, and modes of influence and culture that influence and shape the behavior of the actors within the organizations of government. <sup>42</sup> Third, government is inherently complex. It is a network of organizations encompassing many mechanisms of information gathering and analysis, priority setting, policy writing, regulation, and enforcement. <sup>43</sup>

### *The Assemblage of Public Administration and Policy Making*

In 1960, Theodor W. Adorno was lecturing in the context of his work on *Kulturindustrie*. Adorno starts his essay »Kultur und Verwaltung« <sup>44</sup> with the remarkable and well cited premise:

»Wer Kultur sagt, sagt auch Verwaltung. Kultur ist gemäß deutscher Begrifflichkeit der Verwaltung erst einmal entgegengesetzt. Sie soll das Höhere und Reine sein, das, was nicht angetastet und zurechtgestellt wird. Die Kultur ist damit der nackten Notdurft des Überlebens enthoben.« <sup>45</sup>

Adorno states the simple fact that culture and administration are always linked together, even though they are contradictory to each other in an etymological sense. Culture in the sense of the arts is free, and administration is limiting freedom to maintain a structure of order. Adorno goes on to state that the administrative view, the »administrative Blick«, is shown by the randomness of different arts, practices, and institutions that are combined under the term culture.

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40 *Daniel Little: A New Social Ontology of Government*. Cham 2020.

41 Cf. *Little* as in fn. 41, p. 162.

42 Cf. *Little* as in fn. 41, p. 162.

43 Cf. *Little* as in fn. 41, p. 162.

44 Translation: Culture and Administration.

45 Translation: »Whoever talks about culture also talks about administration. According to the German terminology, culture is first of all opposed to the administration. It is to be the higher and pure, that which is not touched and trimmed. Culture is thus relieved of the naked need for survival.« *Theodor W. Adorno: Wer Kultur sagt, sagt auch Verwaltung*. In: *Merkur*, Heftnr. 144, pp. 101–122, p. 102.

This contradictory connection between culture and administration, chaos and structure, is promising to be the perfect metaphor in exploring the field of the administration of culture in government.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, I conducted my research in the field of public cultural administration in governance. My research interest(s) were evolving around the actors in public administration offices like the *Hamburger Behörde für Kultur und Medien*, the *Kulturamt Frankfurt am Main* and the *Senatsverwaltung für Kultur* in Berlin. These employees or »Beamte« are official executive government employees. I was granted access to my research partners by assuring them anonymity in my observations. Therefore, I decided to expand my field of research from one public administration office to three in different city offices of public administration in Germany. Cultural administration offices at a municipal level are relatively small, with approximately 50–100 employees and sometimes only one employee in a specific department. Even without telling their names and department, it would be easy to link the city and project to one specific person.

With this limitation in my research analysis, it is almost impossible for me to analyze one of the most important parts of the policy-assemblage approach lined out in the previous chapter: the materiality in terms of events of things or, as Jens Adam states it, as the empirical tangible material traces in physical space. I cannot consider certain projects or events, for these things are easily traced to a specific person who can be seen as accountable to certain political actions in the government sphere.

My research interest is to figure out the agencies and desires of government employees. As the fundamental characteristics of government, action can be addressed by observing the individuals who make up various units and agencies of government. I want to ask about the values, motivations, and beliefs, as well as »ideas and feelings, [which] in assemblage terms is called desire«<sup>46</sup> that they bring to their work and analyze the institutional arrangements within which they work; the arrangements that address principal-agent problems and establish a degree of compliance within the organization.

The assemblage *Blick* is particularly evident in the diversity of topics, described by Adorno, which are dealt with in administrative offices and authorities. The assemblage perspective does not allow the administration to be evaluated as topographic or as a fixed practice. Cultural administration is different depending on the location but also depending on the subject area that is managed by the administration. The administrative practice is fundamentally different when it comes to theatres or museums. Also, the administrative practice is completely different when we look at the admin-

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46 Buchanan as in fn. 17, p. 35.

istrative assemblage within the administration of projects of the culture of remembrance.<sup>47</sup>

Through the assemblage approach, the ontology of administrative practice can be questioned even more vigorously and put up for discussion in the first place. There is no administration as such. There is the administration of theaters in Frankfurt am Main and there is the administration of museums in Hamburg and even more fragmented, there are the administrative practices of person A within office B, who takes care of area C. Perceiving the diversity and heterogeneity of administrative practices and structures and localizing different practices within diverse fields of interaction, as Jens Adam would call it, should not lead to hiding behind an undeterminable complex heterogeneity of different elements of an assemblage and getting lost in a thin and endless description, but to working out a deeper ontology of the researched practice by questioning the ontology. Even if this is less all-encompassing, it may be more accurate.

What I found out so far in my seven interviews<sup>48</sup> with government administrators in the field of cultural administration is a common form of desire. As all of them explained to me, their intrinsic motivation is the motor of their work, such as »making it better for the artist« or »taking care of them«. They also implied that this question of desire is separating the employees into two groups: one of them with intrinsic motivation and the other without; and according to most of my interview partners, it is »extremely rare« to find the latter.

In the sense of Nail and the working of assemblages, the administration of culture in governance is first of all a state assemblage that tries to bring all its components together under one desire. The personae or agents form that desire from each individual to one homogeneous desire of the administration which becomes dominant in creating this specific state assemblage of public administration. At the same time, the territorial assemblage is working in parallel where the concrete elements define its workings. These can be seen as the organizing structure of the cultural administration offices where different departments are constructed by limitations to each other. Therefore, the concrete elements as departments define the inner workings of the assemblage and become dominant in relation to the personae or the abstract machine, aka agency and desire.

The way these types of assemblages work or change is first of all, as Nail explained, relative-negative deterritorialization. With relative-negative deterritorialization, we define »processes that change an assemblage to main-

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47 For this see the very interesting study of Red Chidgey about Memory Assemblages of Feminist Afterlife Chidgey 2018.

48 At this point, my empirical material is not yet finally coded and analyzed. As it is not the aim of this article to come to any conclusion about the practices of administration, I feel comfortable using material from the already conducted interview in order to construct my field of research in the assemblage framework.

tain and reproduce an established assemblage.«<sup>49</sup> Administration workers do not try to change their system, they »try to work on communicating the system«, as one interview partner stated, from the political side to the cultural side of artists and the other way around to make it better, but in general to maintain the system of culture and administration. Another example would be the case if a certain political leadership is not in line with the former one and certain projects in the administration offices. My interview partners explained to me certain ways of using their knowledge of the political system and certain timing to acquire funding or to just decide to »lie low« with certain projects in order not to jeopardize them in the long run. This for me is also defined as relative negative deterritorialization because the basic structure of the assemblage in cultural administration is not endangered by the practice of the administrative employees, but they still have the agency of changing the assemblage in their range of potential. The basic desire of most of the employees I interviewed also seems to shape the assemblage.

### *What I take from assemblage*

As the research focus in this article is the usefulness of assemblage thinking in anthropological policy research, I conclude that assemblage thinking is not a necessity for cultural anthropologists to question their ontology or to see their field of study in certain relations. Not every field of research ought to be analyzed in terms of assemblage. As described in the first part of this chapter, I advocate not considering assemblage as a fixed concept, let alone methodology. Assemblage is still in the making, and a debate about it is worthwhile. In my research, I have come across voices like Janine Bennett or Manuel DeLanda more often than, for example, those of Thomas Nail or Ian Buchanan. I wanted to give more attention to what I consider to be a conclusive criticism of the idea of essentialism or the relevance of the concept of desire for the ever-growing debate in the sphere of German cultural anthropology. I do not think that assemblage theory is a new way of thinking about the social that requires understanding the original texts by Deleuze and Guattari in their entirety. However, we should be more precise in dealing with the terms and not use assemblage as a fixed concept, which it is not. The general idea of assemblage can be very refreshing and as a researcher, you can gain better insight by asking different questions of the field, such as what the desire behind actions is and what makes the relations between those heterogenic elements work rather than defining them in an essentialist way, or at least not entirely. Assemblage theory might not be a paradigm shifting way in terms of how we, as cultural anthropologists, conduct research, but it may be a shift in the focus on our research material.

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49 *Nail* as in fn. 28, p. 34.



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