Author response

Assemblage theory and the ontological limitations of speculative realism

Dallas Rogers
University of Sydney, Australia

Introduction

It is a rare privilege to have four international scholars with interests as disparate as economic geography and housing finance (Ashton), housing sociology and social justice (Jacobs), urban planning and Asian urbanization (Shatkin) and human geography and migration (Koh) read your work closely. There is little space here to respond to every comment and it seems unfeasible to dedicate space to every question raised. Therefore, I have prioritized the comments from the four essays, leaving aside the favourable comments and dividing the provocations into critiques that are focused on the internal coherence of the book, and those that critique what is missing from the book. While internal and external critiques coexist in each essay, the absent material is harder to respond to in this short-form reply. Hence, I briefly respond to two external critiques to allow for a more nuanced discussion of Jacob's internal critique, and his charge that a realist ontology underwrites the analysis. This provocation has broader implications for the use of assemblage theory in human geography and deserves more space.

Property models and the financialization of land and housing

Ashton's interesting essay argues I draw on a possessory 'use value' model of property and this, therefore, rules out other possible case study vignettes. Ashton wanted more analysis about how

property became an asset class within the global spheres of capital circulation (which we note in Rogers and Koh, 2017). To this critique of property models, I would add the conceptualizations of property being advanced by settler colonial scholars (Kennan, 2015). But *The Geopolitics of Real Estate* takes aim at an historical period where the use value of the house was important to the settlers. One aim was to investigate the continuity of the historical practices that land claimers and real estate actors use to claim land and sell real estate (Rogers, 2016: 17). Ashton covers the recent case of the Mortgage Electronic Registration System. He might be correct that the 'politics of circulation is far more complex than a focus on property purchases', but I did not write an economic geography about circulating assets or capital. I analysed the geography of the politics and practice of land claiming and property purchases, and this is how I conceptualize the *geopolitics* of real estate.

Shatkin adds breadth to Ashton's argument by focusing on the 'financialisation of land as a tool of state-corporate regime building' in Asia. Shatkin (2017) uses his work to take up the narrative about the land ownership policies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), a short period after my vignette on land mentalities in China ends. He argues, from 1988, the CCP introduced a series of policies that drove the financialization of land. He cites the astounding estimate that between 60 and 75 million people were evicted from their work unit housing and/or

neighbourhoods in China from 1990 to 2007. Shatkin's analysis reveals two alternative state-driven phenomena that are motivating Chinese outbound foreign real estate investment.

Thus, I agree with Shatkin and Ashton; additional property models and vignette discussion could have been included had the manuscript word limit been less restrictive. Shifting now to Jacob's internal critique and Koh's ontological commentary, the following discussion explores whether assemblage theory can be deployed epistemologically without including the controversial speculative realist ontology.

Assemblage theory and the revival of critical realism

The philosopher and assemblage theorist Manuel DeLanda (2016: 13) argues, '[h]istorical explanations are inevitably shaped by the ontological commitments of the historians who frame them'. Jacobs seems to agree, and his essay draws out one of the central ontological challenges with using assemblage theories within human geography. Jacobs frames the problem this way: that I have deployed 'a realist ontology that purports there are processes that though not directly observable, nonetheless underpin contingent or surface realities'. Jacobs counters with an argument against critical realism from the 1990s and the proposition that there is nothing *beneath the surface* of the empirically observable material world. This is a powerful provocation, and one rendered even more palpable when contextualized within the recent reformulation of realism as speculative realism that is being promoted by DeLanda and philosophers such as Graham Harman (see Delanda, 2016). I agree with Jacobs; we need to proceed with caution when applying assemblage theories to human geography, especially when they are ontologically framed by speculative realism.

For those who are sceptical of speculative realism, the question thus becomes: is it possible or useful to extract some epistemological and methodological utility from Deleuze-Guattarian and DeLandian inspired notions of assemblage without accepting the ontological baggage that comes with

the speculative realist framing of the concept? Or is it the case that the realist ontology is sticky and its residue will forever taint at least this notion of assemblage? Or that the ontological framing is all there is to assemblage theory? DeLanda's popularity as an assemblage theorist 'shows an additional element of paradox since his ontology is an uncompromising *realism*, still a minority position among continental philosophers despite the onset of a broader speculative realism movement' (Harman in DeLanda, 2016: vii).

Speculative realism and human geography

DeLanda published *Assemblage Theory* as a part of Harman's speculative realism book series in May 2016. Thus, his book was unavailable while I was writing *The Geopolitics of Real Estate* (published in October 2016). This is unfortunate because in this lucid text, DeLanda outlines his speculative realist position in relation to assemblage theory (see chapters 5 and 6). It is a position that *ups the ante* on Jacobs' concerns.

DeLanda (2016: ix) defines his 'mind-independent' realist ontology by arguing 'assemblages are *independent of the content of our minds*' (p. 38, original emphasis); 'all the diversity that is given to us in experience depends for its existence on something that is not phenomenologically given' (p. 112). There is limited space to explore this ontology, but DeLanda outlines very precisely the concept with which Jacobs takes issue, *the depth*.

> Assemblages are characterised by enduring states defined by properties that are always actual, existing in the here and now. But in addition to properties, assemblages also possess dispositions, tenancies and capacities that are virtual (real but not actual) when not being currently manifest or exercised...(p. 108) Because in addition to existing as part of concrete assemblages, [there is] a space of pure virtuality, a cosmic *plane of consistency*...'. (p. 109, original emphasis)

At the level of ontology, I (perhaps like Jacobs) find it hard to accept that there is a cosmic plane of consistency. Jacobs takes 'the view that "surface" or

empirical realities are all that there is', and he might not accept these 'virtual' dispositions, tenancies and capacities as 'real' unless they can be captured empirically *on the surface*. Human geographers should take Jacobs' claims seriously, even if the flat ontologies of speculative realism differ from critical realism (DeLanda, 2016: 143).

Surface and depth: Ontology or epistemology?

Several details of my methodology might not fully undermine but they certainly complicate Jacob's realist charge. First, I draw on diverse relational theories to build my methodology (Deleuze, Guattari, DeLanda, Castells, Elden, Sassen, Ong) as well as the philosophy of technology (Ellul, Simondon, Heidegger) and discourse and media scholarship (Foucault, Kittler). I note, '[e]ach notion of assemblage has its own ontic framing, and at the level of ontology, these diverse theories are in many cases not wholly compatible' (Rogers, 2016: 20). Drawing on DeLanda's (2006) earlier and denser *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*, I suggested: 'I depart, quite radically, from DeLanda's (2006) notion of assemblage'. I suspected at the time that my ontological framing of assemblage would be 'wholly unsatisfactory for DeLanda' (Rogers, 2016: 21). But perhaps not! A decade later, DeLanda (2016) shows how assemblage theory can be deployed epistemologically (see chapters 1 through 4) without including the 'controversial' (p. 133) realist ontological components.

Second, while my methodology is comprised of five interrelated conceptual tools, only the first and last relate to surface and depth (i.e. semblance and assemblages). Jacobs takes aim largely at the first (i.e. semblance, which I draw from Massumi). When I use phases like 'deeper historical realities' (Rogers, 2016: 2) and 'accessing the hidden realities' (p. 12) in the opening chapter on semblances, I agree that this terminology could be construed as realist. However, I am not claiming to have gained access to some cosmic, metaphysical plane below. I was surprised to hear even DeLanda (2016: 126) 'speaking of such a cosmic intersection [as] still

partly metaphorical' in *Assemblage Theory*. There is a degree of metaphor built into my concept of semblance too; it is a rhetorical device used in chapter 1 that has little analytical utility until chapter 8.

Third, I note that my book is not a philosophical inquiry into ontology (p. 19), but rather an empirical analysis principally undertaken via the 'three conceptual registers' (p. 18) of organizing technics, mediating technologies and discursive code. Vis-à-vis Ashton's assessment that my book is a *long duree histoire de mentalites*, these heavily Foucauldian epistemological tools sit between the bookend 'meta-concepts' (p. 18) of semblance and assemblages.

Thus reflecting on her own monography (Koh, 2017), Koh reads the 'ontological reframing' of *The Geopolitics of Real Estate* astutely as a 'reading for absences [to] expose *the invisibilised stuff* that has remained hidden in the crevices of historical grand narratives . . . [to] "unthink" the phenomena of real estate'. Koh is right. I wanted to assemble a different suite of empirical data across a nonlinear timeframe to write a counter-history about foreign land claiming and real estate investment. The historical data I assemble are from *the surface* of the empirically observable material world; and I make few claims about discovering or accessing some realist mind-independent cosmic 'reality' below. In fact, I end up analysing *subject(ivity)-body-object-event*[1] assemblages that are very much mind-dependant – that is, collective real estate subjectivities as 'mentalities'. This could even be read as an argument with assemblage against speculative realism.

Note

1. As discussed in the book, this conceptualiszation does not rely on the old idealist mind–body dualism.

References

DeLanda M (2006) *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*. London; New York: Continuum.
DeLanda M (2016) *Assemblage Theory*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
Kennan S (2015) *Subversive Property: Law and the Production of Spaces of Belonging*. Abington: Routledge.

Koh SY (2017) *Race, Education and Citizenship: Mobile Malaysians, British Colonial Legacies, and a Culture of Migration*. Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Rogers D (2016) *The Geopolitics of Real Estate: Reconfiguring Property, Capital and Rights*. London: Rowman and Littlefield.

Rogers D and Koh SY (2017) *The globalisation of real estate: the politics and practice of foreign real estate investment.* International Journal of Housing Policy *17*:1, 1–14.

Shatkin G (2017) *Cities for Profit: The Real Estate Turn in Asia's Urban Politics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.