

Making things international 2: Catalysts and reactions

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The second volume in the series, *Making things international 2: Catalysts and reactions* continues a ‘new materialist’ intervention into dominant understandings of global politics. Following the first volume subtitled *Circuits and motion*, Mark B. Salter has assembled another provocative collection of 24 essays that focused on different ‘things’ ranging from benches to smartphone. To tie these wide-ranging, seemingly disparate essays together, Salter argued for an assemblage approach to study international relations (IR) in his introduction. Each essay “looks at unique objects that catalyze political assemblages,” and collectively they demonstrate both the emergence of a flat ontology of more-than-human interactions and a proliferation of contemporary global assemblages (p. vii). Although it is directed explicitly towards IR, this collection situates nicely with recent debates in geography on flat ontology and scale, assemblages and non-representational theory, and actor-network theory (ANT). With such a catholic theoretical orientation and expansive empirical coverage, it is impossible to evaluate the essays individually. Instead, I depart from Salter’s introduction and push on certain themes that were stated but could be more thoroughly explored in the essays.

A key theme that runs throughout this collection is the productive tension between assemblage theory and IR. As noted in the introduction, much of the work on assemblage advances a flat ontology that eschews hierarchical scales and privileges networks and connections (cf., hierarchical constellations comprised of nested assemblages, which sound rather scalar; p. xi). Hence, scholarship on assemblage often draws from ANT. However, assemblage thinking seems to run against IR, which *prima facie* prioritizes the international scale of analysis. Salter instead proposes a thought experiment of sorts, asking the readers to assume that all contemporary assemblages are already international (hence the series’ title). All essays then began from this assumption and attempted to demonstrate this claim. The results are rather uneven, however. From geography we have seen similar attempts from ‘follow-the-thing’ approach. The issue with some essays in this collection is the lack of real estate; what I mean by that is in their attempt to write short, accessible pieces that explicitly centers on an object and its international connections, the length ended up working against it, as the authors only superficially engage with the historical-geographical contexts. Conversely, essays that were most successful in this regard had an explicit argument that grounds different vignettes or a more modest coverage that focuses on a specific period or region (e.g., “Orange prison jumpsuit”). If this collection’s goal is to have the essays demonstrate the analytical utility of an object-centric assemblage approach in IR, then the analyses must go beyond placing these objects and instead describing what *additional* work these assemblages do internationally and *how*. Occasionally, the essays just ask the readers to assume too much, and the factually questionable overstatements (like “There is no NSA without big data; there is no big data without pervasive networked computer use,” p. 198) and politically suspect errors (like referring to Chelsea Manning as Bradley and with masculine pronouns, p. 173; cf. p. 207) do not help either.

This segues into another key theme of the collection, which advances a ‘new materialist’ approach to assemblage that incorporates non-human actors. Central to this approach is the claim that non-human actors are agential. Said more simply, ‘things’ themselves act to produce the international, and the range of their actions is a product of their material properties. While this framing is prominent in the introduction, the rest of the collection curiously said little about the actual ‘stuff’ of things. Certain passages even reinforced the human/non-human duality. For example, in an otherwise excellent essay on the international politics of asbestos, the author claimed that “unlike

humans and other beings, materials do not die” (p. 260). This seems to counter the new materialist approach, which would argue that humans and other beings have material properties of their own that condition their agency and mode of interactions with other actors (and the rest of essay actually demonstrates this point brilliantly by tracing asbestos removal programs’ displacement of body politics that shifts toxic burden onto asbestos removal workers’ bodies; p. 271). This instance of theoretical slippage demonstrates the persistence of this duality despite the proliferation of new materialist philosophy. Furthermore, other essays attribute agency to things anthropomorphically rather than imagining how things can ‘act’ differently. In “Military manuals” for example, the authors wrote, “Military manuals attempt to solve the problem of unprivileged belligerency by offering soldiers concepts that organize their sorting activities” (p. 23). But in practice, ‘military manuals’ themselves do not ‘attempt to solve’ anything (this problematic framing exists in “Flags” as well); they are a product of negotiations among internationally recognized martial laws, different military branches military, and succession of regimes, just to name a few, and they are the basis—but not the total determinant—of soldiers’ conduct, as military personnel of various ranks interpret, negotiate, and carry out actions that may or may not result in their intended consequences. Not to mention, the narrative here says little about how different media of military manuals—their ‘material-ness’ (e.g., print vs. online)—impacts their agency. It also poses questions regarding how agency and causality are theorized, as some authors seem to think that agency implies total control of one’s actions and their consequences (e.g., p. 195). For this collection to reach its stated intellectual potential, I would encourage the authors to truly take the materials in ‘new materialism’ seriously in their analyses.

Despite these issues, there are some gems among the essays and *Making things international 2* remains an ambitious and provocative project, even though it does not always reach its stated goals. I find the essays “Barbed Wire” and “Protest Camps” excellent companions that explored the materialist genesis of some of the most pressing issues in contemporary international politics, for example. Given the wide-ranging nature of the collection, I think a concluding chapter that sums up the collective intellectual contribution would have been a worthy addition. Nonetheless, geographers interested in assemblage and IR would find this collection a thought-provoking and challenging read.

Sean H. Wang
Syracuse University