Geoforum 51 (2014) 87–95

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Geoforum

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/geoforum

Beyond night-time economy: Affective atmospheres of the urban night

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 1 April 2013
Received in revised form 8 October 2013
Available online 12 November 2013

Keywords:
Night-time economy
Assemblage
Affective atmospheres
Urban geography
Practices

ABSTRACT

This paper develops the use of the concept of atmosphere in an 'assemblage urbanism' approach, as a way of reevaluating how we understand the night-time city. In doing so, this paper rejects what it sees as an overuse of the term 'night-time economy' as a synonym for 'urban night'. Instead, it seeks to describe the night-time city center as an affective atmosphere, emerging from the arranging of practices, bodies and materials. In this vision, an affective atmosphere is best understood as a form of 'placed assemblage'. My studies of taxi drivers and street cleaners in a British city are used to illustrate and explore how this occurs, drawing from an analytic framework developed out of the work of Deleuze and Guattari. As such, this paper offers a broader vision of the urban night, which sees the perspective taken by 'night-time economy studies' as reflecting just a portion of the practices which generate the affective atmosphere of the night-time city center.

1. Introduction

'Assemblage urbanism' has come to the fore in attempts to bring together practice, affect and materialist oriented approaches to understanding what the city is and how it functions. Assemblage urbanism has emphasised the continuous construction and production of the city through practices and the movement of materials (Anderson et al., 2012; McCann and Ward, 2011; McFarlane, 2011). This places new questions at the centre of urban studies, as part of a wider shift in the epistemology of geography and social science. The key issues for research become: "how do things fit together and hold together across differences? How to think the irreducible contingency of order?" (Anderson and Harrison, 2010: 18). This paper is an attempt to explore these questions in relation to the night time city. To date, research into the night-time city spread across criminology, geography, sociology, anthropology, history, epidemiology and more has captured and explored the changing nature of cities at night, as new sorts of spaces, which Chatterton and Hollands (2002) label as playscapes. These have developed according to urban governance strategies that have prioritised the creation of large (chain) bars, pubs and restaurants. Research has mainly centred on the British and Australian contexts, though it has also explored night-time cities in Europe, North America and East Asia. Through this research, 'night-time economy studies' has had a close affinity with alcohol studies (Jayne et al., 2008; Nicholls, 2009). Reviews of progress of this field in the last 5 years (Jayne et al., 2011a; Roberts and Eldridge, 2009) have indicated indicating a certain level of academic maturity in this field, mirroring an end to a period of growth in England of alcohol consumption in the urban night.

Approaching the urban night from an 'assemblage urbanism' position, however, can raise the question of whether this area of research has been too quick to equate the urban night with the night-time alcohol and leisure industry ('the night-time economy'). Rather, there may be space to explore how non-economic and non-alcohol based practices intersect with more visible features of the urban night. In doing so, I add recent work on atmosphere (Anderson, 2009; Bissell, 2010) into the assemblage-related vocabulary, arguing that this offers a particularly geographical understanding of the role of assemblage in the city. My work also builds upon recent attempts to begin to push research into alcohol and the night in new directions, incorporating the affective and atmospheric dimensions of night-time cities (Edensor, 2012; Eldridge and Roberts, 2013). In this paper, my empirical focus remains on the night-time alcohol and leisure industry. However, it does so by focusing not on the night-time city as a singular 'economy', but as an 'affective atmosphere'. I work through a mixture of theoretical and empirical exploration, drawing on my research with taxi drivers and street cleaners in the city centre at night in order to explore both how atmospheres of the city centre are generated, and also where they start to spill out and connect to the rest of the city. Developing this, I then argue that if we understand an affective atmosphere as a form of 'placed assemblage', we can create a powerful tool for using assemblage-as-description of the night-time city. In other words, I argue that certain assemblages emerge from multiple practices which collaborate and gather together to control a time and place, producing particular 'affective atmospheres'. Many features of what has previously been labelled the 'night-time economy' are then better understood as one such

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2013.10.005

atmosphere, a placed assemblage developed out of multiple practices of which the sale, regulation and governance of alcohol is just one part.

2. Assemblage urbanism and atmosphere

Though geographers and people in urban studies have been working with the ideas of Deleuze and Guattari for several years (e.g. Doel, 1996; Nandrea, 1999), the concept of assemblage has come to the centre of attention only more recently, in conversation with the multiple other forms of 'relational' geography that now dominate the discipline (Harrison, 2011). This slow emergence and conversation between multiple perspectives means that the contemporary concept of assemblage in urban geography is not a simple development of the word 'agencement' from Deleuze and Guattari (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Phillips, 2006). Particularly, it also incorporates: perspectives which focus on the notion of daily life and the urban as 'assembled', that is, as constantly in-production (McCann and Ward, 2011); and the vocabulary of actor-network theory, in which the topic of study is the way in which society is brought together, that is, assembled (Latour, 2005). Crucially, assemblage in all its forms is interested in "a process of emergence, process and stabilisation, and connotes a sense that relations might be reassembled through changing forms of authority" (McFarlane, 2009: 261). In this section, I want to offer a brief review of assemblage, noting that a number of articles in recent years have attempted to offer much longer and more in-depth explorations of the idea (Anderson et al., 2012; Anderson and McFarlane, 2011; McFarlane, 2011; McFarlane and Anderson, 2011), before focusing on how it might connect to and be brought into contact with the concept of 'atmosphere'. From here, I will move onto discussing work on night-time economy and, through my empirical examples, explore the different ways of understanding the night-time city that this offers.

Deleuze and Guattari use the term agencement, which is translated as assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Phillips, 2006). For them, assemblage is "larger than structure, system, form, process etc. An assemblage contains heterogeneous elements on a biological, social, machinic, gnoseological, or imaginary order" (Guattari, 2006: 415). In this quote Guattari details the complexity and depth of assemblage, which here is referring to both object and process. It is worth noting, as Phillips does, that Deleuze and Guattari do not use the French word assemblage (Phillips, 2006). The word agencement comes from adding a common suffix ('-ment') onto the verb *agencer*, translating as 'to arrange'. Arguably, a more suitable translation of agencement might thus be 'arrangement' or in a gerund form of '(an) arranging'. Indeed, assemblage fits perhaps best to the linguistic sense of the gerund in English, which can act in a sentence as subject, object or verb. So while Deleuze and Guattari typically write of assemblage as a noun, the word contains within it a strong sense of verb. It is this way in which it is possible to consider "assemblage as ethos", in which ethos is "potentially a commitment, a 'style', a form of responsibility or generosity" (Adey, 2012: 200), in other words, both noun and verb. Assemblage thus offers a combination of structure and process, forming contingent, vibrant arrangings that we interact with on a daily basis, both in their 'structural' form, and their 'processual' form. Here assemblage is thus about arranging co-existences: about how the stable and the unstable, the solid and the light interact to produce the thing.

An assemblage is located both in objects and practices that we can identify in the world, and in the realm of the potential, containing aspects which have not yet been realised. To return to Deleuze and Guattari's terminology, "one side of a machinic assemblage faces the strata, which doubtless makes it a kind of organism, or signifying totality, or determination attributable to the subject; it also has a side facing a body without organs, which is continually dismantling the organism, causing asignifying particles or pure intensities to pass or circulate" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 4). Crucially, this understanding of assemblage incorporates two aspects that are unique to the Deleuzo–Guattarian formation, and are not necessarily found in other uses of 'assemblage'. First, this requires that we consider the 'lively' (Bennett, 2005) nature of assemblages: assemblages in Deleuze and Guattari are of "lines" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987), of moments of meeting between different things. In other words, we are not looking at permanent connections between domains of practices, but the instances or places in which they sometimes meet. Second, assemblages in Deleuze and Guattari are ambivalent, that is, they incorporate both those practices which support an assemblage and those which undermine it. Returning again to Guattari, he describes assemblages as being "of possible fields, of virtual as much as constituted elements" (Guattari, 1995: 46). In other words, assemblage demands that we do much more than consider the networked relations between domains of practice. Rather, we need to explore where these relations form, where they fail to form, where they may form, where they cannot form, and so on.

While my understanding of assemblage sits most closely to that of Deleuze and Guattari, it should also be noted that other uses of the term share much with 'agencement'. For Latour, the task of the social researcher is one of 'reassembling' the social (Latour, 2005). Latour's assembling is used to define the social, that is, "a stabilised state of affairs, a bundle of ties" (Latour, 2005: 1). Through assembling, associations are created and from here the social emerges. While Latour's use of the assembling verb comes very close to Deleuze and Guattari's agencement, he does not use a concept that is similar to 'an assemblage', with the 'actor-network' being closest to this. An actor-network, however, seems to be more 'concrete' than an assemblage, giving priority to the actions that either have or haven't happened, rather than possible actions. In particular, Latour's work contains little of the sense of 'becoming' or the 'virtual' that is found in Deleuze and Guattari: as Harman argues, "A thing is real for Latour only if it affects and perturbs other things" (Harman, 2009: 106). Nevertheless, this is a relatively subtle distinction: most uses of assemblage in social science arguably have some sense of both Latour's and Deleuze and Guattari's formulation in mind simultaneously.

So assemblage involves within it an understanding of how co-existence occurs (McFarlane, 2009: 562), that is, it looks at how objects, agents, affects and discourses are gathered together. While this gathering is not inherently 'geographical', in other words, it is not always about things being gathered proximately to one another, equally the question of where these items are gathered is also an important one. Certain assemblages are placed, that is, they come to be located in and potentially to take over a particular time-space. These assemblages have, to borrow a phrase, their 'own space' (de Certeau, 1984). I argue that such assemblages seem to be very close to how academics have in recent years described atmospheres, with atmosphere best understood as a geographical phenomenon in which a particular assemblage 'gains place'.

As Brennan suggests, common-sense understandings of atmosphere describe it as something which is 'felt' when an individual enters a place (Brennan, 2004). The concept of the atmosphere, or the 'affective atmosphere', has received a significant amount of attention in recent years in geography (Adey and Bissell, 2010; Adey et al., 2013; Anderson, 2009; Bissell, 2010; McCormack, 2008). Concerns about atmosphere have emerged as writers on affect have attempted to explore further the relationship between space and bodies and, specifically, how changes in the constitution of a space, whether in its characteristics or in the bodies within it, alter the affective experience of these spaces. Atmospheres are thus understood as: