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# Assembling geographical knowledge of changing worlds

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# Assembling geographical knowledge of changing worlds

## **Abstract**

This piece is sympathetic to the critical questions and epistemological arguments Larner (2011) presents for the current conjuncture of global transformations. I mobilize Larner's arguments for process-oriented assemblage thinking and apply them to the particular conjuncture through which one of these transformations - climate change - is being problematized in the Australian empirical context, and its connection to existing and emergent institutional and political formations and knowledge practices. I also point to emergent process-oriented, situated scholarly accounts of climate change in Australia and their potential to expand the contestable spaces whereby alternative politicizations and alternative political and institutional forms might be imagined and enacted. In closing, I reflect on the connection between situated accounts, such as these, and the potential performative effects of situated theorizing.

## **Keywords**

assembling, geographical, knowledge, changing, worlds

## **Disciplines**

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## **Assembling geographical knowledges of changing worlds**

### **Introduction**

Larner's 'C-change: geographies of crises' is ambitious in scope and will be, to some at least, a provocation. The paper points to the current forging of a qualitatively new world, challenged by a conjuncture of economic, environmental, cultural, socio- and bio-technical transformations problematised and politicized as crises. But while Larner lays out possible research agenda around each of these arenas of transformation, her more substantive argument is epistemological. She makes the case for a move away from the concepts, categories and analytics of epochal-thinking which have characterized analyses of previous global political-economic transformations. In its place, Larner proposes process-oriented assemblage-thinking as a more effective way of knowing arenas of change and their co-constitution with new political, institutional and governmental formations, as the boundaries and orderings of territories, socio-political domains, species, bodies, knowledge-forms and spaces are differentially reworked under 21<sup>st</sup> century conditions. For Larner the critical questions for social science inquiry, and particularly for human geography, include how current transformations are being problematised; how new forms of thought and action, subjects and objects are brought together in and through these problematisations; and what are the implications of how particular arenas are known for how they are acted upon—politicized and governmentalised—through the evocation of new political and institutional forms.

My commentary reflects a deeply sympathetic stance towards Larner's epistemological arguments. The analytics of process-oriented assemblage thinking provide a capacity to grasp the specific groundings of processes of global transformations, including the ways in which governmental logics are enacted as systemic. As an epistemological approach aimed "to carefully consider the processes

through which heterogeneous elements are configured into these new political assemblages, the mutations and transformations that happen as an integral part of these redeployments, and the objects and subjects that are constituted in these terrains” (pg x), assemblage-thinking works *with* the inherently situated, contextualized and diverse operation of social process. It presents an epistemology aimed to grasp processes’ situated enactment; how objects and subjects are framed, politicized and rendered mobile; and how the governance of social process is institutionalized through practice. Grounding categories and concepts resists the drift to placeless abstraction that can be packaged with epochal-thinking. And herein lies the potential that Larner identifies for it to produce constitutive and generative analyses (pg x) that might mobilize new forms of knowledge, develop alternative, productive problematisations that suggest alternative subjects and objects for action, and the potential to envisage new possibilities for interventions to address regressive power relations produced through existing and emergent governmental and political processes.

In what follows I want to draw on process-oriented assemblage thinking and rehearse the critical questions it poses to provide a distinctly Australian perspective on one of Larner’s 5 C-changes—Climate Change. I want to reflect on the particular conjuncture through which climate change is problematised as crisis in the Australian empirical context, and its connection to existing and emergent institutional and political formations and knowledge practices. In particular I want to point to emergent process-oriented scholarly work that has the potential to open up new understandings of objects and subjects for climate action and, in turn, contribute to constituting productive politicizations and institutionalizations. In closing, I reflect on the connection of situated accounts, such as this, to situated theorising.

### **Emergent Australian geographies of climate crisis**

The Australian empirical context presents distinctive challenges to the ethics, economics and politics of climate change. Australia’s economic base in resource extraction, stoked by high demand from a booming Chinese economy, was protected

from the excesses of the GFC. Yet the economy's resource base coupled with Australia's very high levels of urbanization, configured in low-density, high-emissions form, place Australia as the developed world's highest emitter of GHGs per capita (Garnaut 2010) and as highly sensitive to the economic and social implications of national or international carbon regulation regimes. The particular problematisation and politicization of climate change within Australia, and, the emergent targets and techniques of carbon governance across Australian economy and society, are fundamentally framed by this context.

Australia's political approach to climate change has been dominated thus far by unsuccessful attempts to establish marketised arrangements as an institutional fix for carbon governance through a national Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS). Despite strong community support for climate action, which positioned it as a central issue in both the 2007 and 2010 Federal elections, a powerful strand of resistance has now been mobilized arising from Australia's particular economic configuration, its specific vulnerabilities to regimes of carbon reduction and the effective leveraging of climate-science skepticism. Largescale resource extraction interests, especially the powerful mining sector buoyed by the positionings of the Federal opposition Liberal-National parties, have used established international political economy arguments to undermine popular support for an ETS: whilst no global commitment to reduction targets and techniques has been agreed, Australia's high-carbon national economy—and particularly its trade-exposed resource 'giants' and fossil-fuel-dependent producers—will be competitively disadvantaged internationally by operating within a national cap and trade scheme. These positionings have gained traction amongst an electorate fearful of the cost-of-living impacts of firms' offsetting rising production and energy costs to households, such that once strong community support for reform through ETS has been substantially weakened<sup>i</sup>.

These fears, and the failure of an ETS to travel successfully to Australia, have created a space in which wider arguments about the moral and ecological imperatives to pursue carbon reduction can be undermined in public discourse through the political engagement of climate science skepticism, particularly its positioning of global warming as anthropogenic, the labelling of carbon as a pollutant, and both the rigour

and political neutrality of wider scientific knowledge practices. Globally, the publicity given to the 'climategate' emails enlarged this space, but the intricacies of the Australian politicization of carbon and climate change have had greater impact on shaping the issue's governance and its emergent institutionalization. Political opposition to market-based emissions reduction measures<sup>ii</sup> has been brought together with questioning the particular problematisation of the climate change crisis rendered by climate science knowledge. Federal opposition leader Tony Abbott, along with senior Liberal colleagues, has regularly aligned with high profile skeptics amongst right-leaning radio broadcasters and print journalists to play on and explicitly politicise the instability of knowledges in circulation around climate change, claiming for example "I don't think we can say that the science is settled here....whether carbon dioxide is quite the environmental villain that some people make it out to be is not yet proven" (Maher 2011). This particular assemblage has seen a fracturing of Australia's political consensus on carbon pricing as a means of emissions' control. The current proposal of the minority Federal Labor government to introduce an interim carbon tax in 2012 (with compensation to the coal and electricity industries and low-income households) to transition to an ETS in 2015 has met with poor popular support, leaving Australia still without any national institutional mechanism to address even the modest emissions reduction targets endorsed in national climate policy (5% cut by 2020). Meanwhile, expected political polarities between the Labor and Liberal parties have been somewhat reversed with the Federal Labor government maligning the Liberal opposition's preferred 'direct action' approach on climate policy (direct incentives to the public, industry and farmers) as abandoning a commitment to market forces in favour of 'picking winners' through a centralized, bureaucratic process (Gillard 2011). And the Prime Minister has sought to win political support by invoking global competition with BRIC economies, linking climate change and carbon governance to the spectre of a changing geo-economic order in which China and India are better placed than Australia to operate in a future low-carbon clean-energy global economy (Gillard 2011).

The apparent stalemate in settling on an institutional form for national-scale carbon governance—through neoliberal markets or other means—has enlarged the space in Australia for diverse and often non-market forms of governance to emerge from other scales, particularly the scale of the city and the household. These have been reconfiguring the subjects of climate action (diverse networks and partnerships between states, markets, communities, households and citizens) and reconfiguring the objects of carbon governance (the corporate city, modes of mobility, everyday household practices) to shape heterogeneous political assemblages that are shifting conceptions of who and what is to be governed, and through which techniques (Bulkeley and Schroeder 2009, see Dowling 2010). Contrasting with the tenor of national politicization, in which cities and households feature primarily as consumers of resources responsive to wider economic and political forces (see Gibson et al 2011), an alternative politicization is emerging in which the agents of carbon governance and political authority are proliferated along with the possibilities for new, often hybrid, networked and multiscalar institutional forms (Bulkeley 2005). For instance, 109 Australian local governments have linked to the international Cities for Climate Protection program, committing to action to achieve emissions reductions targets well beyond national targets. New articulations between state, business and community are emerging: for example public-private partnerships such as *CitySwitch*, a program run by a partnership of city and state governments working with office tenants to improve office energy efficiency; local government consortia such as the Victorian government-sponsored *Alliances for Greenhouse Action* which builds collective action across groups of municipalities; and hybrid initiatives such as *Solar Cities* which is creating consortia across industry, businesses, municipalities and local communities to rethink energy production and use. Numerous NGOs, Not-For-Profits and locally-based climate action groups are diversely connected to these and other governmental forms of climate initiatives.

The specificities of the Australian climate change crisis, its current contentious politicization and the differentiated carbon governance landscape this has shaped have, arguably, produced a context that has nurtured research agenda and knowledge production practices that are deeply conscious of their role as

constitutive elements in the formation of heterogeneous political assemblages, such as those sketched above, their governance possibilities and the socio-political realities brought into being as a result. Two examples are illustrative here. The first relates to two recent Australian Research Council-funded projects on, broadly, climate change governance. Waitt, Gibson, Gill and Head's *Making less space for carbon* project (DP0986041) involves indepth investigation of households, positioning them not as reactive consumers but as active agents in carbon reduction enrolled in social, governmental and industrial networks and embedded in complex contexts of social practice that constitute the household as a social assemblage. The project aims to bring together understandings of how these various positionings articulate to shape household carbon emissions with wider analyses of economic and ecological systems (analyses which themselves articulate particular knowledges and exercise power). In an unrelated though parallel project on *Urban Carbon Governance* (DP110100081), M<sup>c</sup>Guirk, Dowling and Bulkeley adopt the city as a entry point for exploring the diverse forms, practices and spatialities through which carbon governance is being assembled in ways that blur boundaries between 'state' and 'non-state' actors, public and private authority, and territorialized and networked spatialities. Developing new understandings of this diversity—and the diverse ways in which carbon is framed and acted upon—will go hand in hand with an analysis of how new hybrid networks and partnerships activated around carbon reduction might shift the politicization of climate change, produce new governing subjects and shape new institutionalizations of carbon governance.

Both projects mobilise the constitutive role of knowledge production in the exercise of power in framing present and future climate governance. Both seek to find ways, in Gibson et al's words, to "plug geographically evocative empirical research into wider climate change debates, retaining...social and cultural idiosyncracies" (2001, 7). Both draw on process-oriented assemblage epistemologies to map the emergent subjects, objects and governance forms assembled though the particular framing of Australia's climate change crisis. In working to reveal specific politicisations of carbon governance and their effects on governmental forms and practices, both seek

to open up the space to identify alternative governmental practices and alternative, more effective and more just possibilities for how these might be realised.

A second example relates to the emergence of newly crafted, explicitly interdisciplinary knowledge spaces to address the complexity and uncertainty surrounding climate change impacts. In the context of the evermore intensely obvious vulnerability of Australia's settlements, economies and social organisation to changing rainfall patterns, extreme weather events, drought and fire, the Australian Government established the National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility in 2008. NCCARF's purpose is 'to lead the Australian research community in a national interdisciplinary effort to generate the biophysical, social and economic information needed by decision makers in government and in vulnerable sectors and communities to manage the risks of climate change impacts'

(<http://www.nccarf.edu.au/>). NCCARF, in one sense, demonstrates Larner's prefiguring of how the context of governing uncertainty makes feasible thinking 'environment, economy, security, and life in the same frame' (page x). Its priority themes traverse terrestrial, freshwater and marine biodiversity and resources; human health; settlements and infrastructure; social, economic and institutional dimensions; emergency management; primary industries and indigenous communities. NCCARF's related Research Plans and funding streams are targeted to bring academic, government and community actors into relation, build alliances between differently located actors and blur the institutional boundaries of sector, practice and knowledge forms. Scientific knowledges are to be brought together with diverse policy knowledges and, in some cases, local and traditional knowledges.

It is too early to tell yet what NCCARF's knowledge production might yield, whether it will support development of the capacities and capabilities to produce the kinds of transformations to physical and social science that Larner envisages (page x), or to tell how it might reshape understandings of climate change, its politicisation and its governance. This will be determined in part by other politicized dimensions framing the intellectual terrain in Australia, particularly perhaps the imposition of neoliberal auditing techniques on universities' performance, most recently through the introduction of a research assessment exercise—Excellence for Research in Australia

(ERA). ERA's crude and unwieldy metrics militate against interdisciplinarity and against situated and applied work. They gel very poorly with NCCARF's vision of knowledge production aimed to cope with the challenges of governing uncertainty and have the capacity to derail already difficult conversations across knowledge traditions with diverse ontological foundations.

## **Conclusion**

My commentary attempts on a situated account of the Australian politicisation of the climate change crisis, knowledge practices being mobilised through it, and the current (and potential) political and institutional forms these shape. I have mobilised—in necessarily brief form—the critical questions Larner poses for the current conjuncture of global transformations by activating her epistemological arguments for process-oriented assemblage thinking. Assemblage thinking suggests situated accounts that 'stay close to the practices' as a productive form of analysis (Collier and Ong 2005, 17). I want to close with a reflection on the implications of such situated accounts, and of Larner's broader arguments, for theorising and for the productive possibilities of resisting the abstract theorizations associated with epochal-thinking in favour of what Connell (2007, 207) has labeled 'dirty theory—that is, theorising that is mixed up with specific situations...(aimed) not to subsume, but to clarify; not to classify from outside, but to illuminate a situation in its concreteness'. Connell's dirty theory has deep affinities with Sedgwick's weak theory (see Gibson-Graham 2006).

Situated, process-oriented accounts support a form of 'weak' theorising that is both modest, in that does not envisage abstract universals, and potentially generative in that it strips away the certainty associated with imagining singular lines of logic at work or prefiguring the connections or outcomes such logic might produce in different contexts. It resists reductivism, amplifies multiplicity, highlights diverse articulations of elements and so expands the spaces of uncertainty, of contingency and, crucially, of contestability. Modes of thought and action, the knowledge practices that inform them, subjects and objects, political and institutional forms are rendered as politicized fields that are sutured together in contextual assemblages

that are and can only be works in progress, always open to contestation, to reassembly (McCann 2011, forthcoming). In inspiring situated, process-oriented accounts and mobilizing weak theory, Larner joins others—notably Gibson-Graham (2006)—in recognising the constitutive effect of academic knowledge practices. The intervention that ‘C-change: geographies of crises’ makes is to throw down the epistemological challenge of considering seriously how process-oriented assemblage thinking, and its theoretical analogue in weak theory, can underpin ‘constitutive and generative analyses’ that reveal the specificity of articulations that are shaping contemporary global transformations and their politicisation—climate change among them—and, in so doing, expand the contestable spaces whereby alternative politicizations and alternative political and institutional forms might be imagined and enacted. In my view, it presents a provocation worth significant attention.

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<sup>i</sup> The minority Labor government announced its deferral of an ETS until at least 2013, and its recent announcement that it would introduce an interim carbon tax has been met with further public disaffection, expressed in an historic swing against Labor in the March 26<sup>th</sup> 2011 NSW state election.

<sup>ii</sup> However debate over the comparative benefits of a market over a regulatory approach to mitigation has been muted.