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“Material Culture Studies” and other Ways to Theorize Objects: A Primer to a Regional Debate

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Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell open their edited collection, Thinking through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically, with the question “What would an artefact oriented anthropology look like if it were not about material culture?” This question might perplex an outside observer not schooled in the tradition of British Social Anthropology or currently working in the United Kingdom. They might ask what is the difference between artifacts and material culture? What exactly is artifact-oriented anthropology? What do the editors think material culture is? It is my intention, by reviewing two recent books, Thinking through Things, and Daniel Miller’s Stuff, both concerned with thinking critically about the relationship between people and things, to explain why Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell have asked this question, and to untangle the somewhat impenetrable thinking behind it. In doing so, I hope to give those readers not based in the United Kingdom or working in the British anthropological tradition a glimpse into a body of work that is part of a global reawakening to the interpretive and analytic purchase of “thinking through things.” Both books provide a fascinating entrance point into not just the ways in which people make objects and objects make people, but also what objects can do for anthropological theory.

“Material culture” studies have in many ways come full circle within anthropology. Objects were a starting point for the thinking of early museum anthropologists (roughly 1840–1920; see Stocking 1985). They fell out of fashion as

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analytic tools with the turn to the study of structure, symbolism, and semiotics, in which language, cosmology, and ideology were viewed as immaterial ordering frames. However, material culture has returned to the fold with the emergence of Marxist anthropology, an ongoing interest in production, exchange, technology, and consumption, a lively anthropology of art extending into visual anthropology, and a closer theoretical integration of archaeology and anthropology. The *Journal of Material Culture* was founded by a group of anthropologists with interests in many disciplines (art history, archaeology, geography, architecture), working within the Department of Anthropology at University College London. In its opening editorial, the editors announced the emergence of a “new” field that was resolutely *not* a discipline (Miller and Tilley 1996). They framed material culture studies as a forum for interdisciplinary research into the ways in which “artefacts are implicated in the construction, maintenance and transformation of social identities…. the investigation of the relationship between people and things irrespective of time and space.”¹ The editors conceived of this relationship as an ongoing dialectic rather than dichotomy—subject creating object creating subject (see Miller 1987). The members of the Material Culture research unit at University College London have all gone on to interrogate the place of materiality within sociality, and vice versa, through fine-grained, long-term ethnographic research. Important theoretical touchstones are Melanesian anthropology with its focus on gift exchange (e.g., Mauss 1992 [1925]; Strathern 1988; 1990; Munn 1986; Weiner 1992); Science and Technology Studies’ parallel complication of the emergent boundaries and processes between people and things (most notably Latour 1993); a sociological awareness of the ways in which things are implicated in power relations (e.g., Bourdieu 1979; Hebdige 1988); and a provocative conversation about agency and objects initiated by Alfred Gell in his book *Art and Agency* (1998).

Of course, this recent energy is by no means restricted to University College London (and Cambridge is the *Appellation d’origine contrôlée* for the contributors to *Thinking through Things*²), or to the United Kingdom. The reemergence of the object world at a more general vanguard of anthropological investigation has reopened debates about interpretation, translation, representation, and knowledge, in which objects once again sit center stage. In the United States, where the term “material culture” is more prominently associated with folklore, cultural history, and archaeology,³ discussions in the

¹ Miller and Tilley 1996: 5.
² Full disclosure: I studied for my Ph.D. in the Material Culture group at University College London, although of course my sphere of academic influence is not delimited by the M25, (London’s ring road).
³ See Jason Baird Jackson’s comments on the weblog Material World about this, alongside a host of references: http://blogs.nyu.edu/projects/materialworld/2010/05/an_anthropologist_looks_at_eng.html (last accessed 14 June 2010).
anthropological world increasingly take place under the rubric of “materiality” (e.g., Keane 2003a; 2003b; Myers 2004). In these current iterations both materiality and material culture refer to a vision of human experience in which subjectivity is profoundly material.4 The two volumes under review are testament to the specific contributions of anthropology, with its commitment to long-term engagement on the ground and the continual dialectic of cross-cultural comparison, to the study of materiality.

The idea that objects may mediate subjectivity has long provoked epistemological anxiety for those interested in extrapolating general theories of being from the experience of living with other people. This is primarily because of the interesting provocation that taking objects seriously makes to our understanding of agency. Reacting to his mentors, those early “museum anthropologists,” Malinowski heralded his fieldwork revolution with the comment, “The canoe is made for a certain use, and with a definitive purpose; it is a means to an end, and we, who study native life, must not reverse this relationship, and make a fetish of the object itself” (2002 [1922]: 80). Moving out of the museum, anthropologists established themselves as idealists—objects were illustrative or representative of social orders, ideas, and imaginings. They were in our service, and we should take care not to think otherwise, no matter what the folk conceptions of our interlocutors were about the power of things. Contemporary anthropologists who insist on consideration of the material world as constitutive of context, rather than contingent upon it, draw criticism similar to that which relegated museum anthropology to the far recesses of the anthropological storeroom. Material Culture proponents are accused of fetishism or a form of vulgar materialism, of dislocating agency, of privileging consumption over production and objects over people. The Journal of Material Culture editorial preemptively responded to this critique, commenting: “Many of us believe that it is a simple-minded humanism, which views persons outside the context and constraint of their material culture and thereby establishes a dichotomy between persons and objects, that is the true source of such fetishism. Indeed, it may be only material culture studies that has the will and the knowledge to undertake the key task of de-fetishising objects that is today as important a form of emancipating humanity as it was a century ago” (Miller and Tilley 1996: 11).

Alfred Gell’s work on agency (1998) has been influential in providing a way to talk about material efficacy without imputing life force to objects. For Gell, an object’s agency is a form of distributed personhood, exemplified in his

4 There are fascinating differences between the ways in which the anthropology of objects in the United States and the United Kingdom exemplifies fault-lines within material culture theory, with interesting tensions between symbolic/linguistic theory and a non-representational aesthetic theory, respectively. That is the subject for a longer paper, but for a selection of these perspectives, see Gell 1992; Pinney and Thomas 2001; Layton 2003; and Morphy 2009.
memorable example of the landmine brutally asserting the agency of the soldier
many years later as it finally explodes. Gell takes care not to conflate the effects
of inanimate objects with agency, which itself must be understood as a product
of social relations. Art objects, by his definition (1992), are made through an
enchantment of technology—the extension of sociality into material form, so
successful that it often effaces the reality of its own production. Objects may
have impact (like falling meteorites), but in order to have agency they must
be entangled within social relations and indeed within our own humanity
(like the meteorite on display in a darkened room, spot-lit, at the American
Museum of Natural History, which “teaches” schoolchildren about geology
and outer space). Objects mediate agency in seemingly independent ways,
but are in fact intimately entangled within networks of human sociality.

It is instructive to return to the work of Daniel Miller, one of the most ener-
ggetic contributors to the extensive body of ethnographic and theoretical
material that constitutes the field of material culture studies. From his influen-
tial study Material Culture and Mass Consumption (1987), which lucidly
emphasized the mutual constitution of persons and things using theoretical
sources as disparate as Hegel’s dialectics and Munn’s work on Gawan
canoes, through to his position paper on materiality (2005) in which he outlines
a theory of materiality as immanent to sociality, Miller has maintained a com-
mitment to ethnographic exploration of how everyday people use everyday
objects to transcend their everyday experience and to connect and mediate
what, in his view, are universal human experiences: loss, separation from
loved ones, death, grief, social anxiety, and love.

In recent years Miller has published a series of books which use his method—
presenting pithy insights into social relations and human emotion fostered by
close attention to the ways in which people make themselves through their pos-
sessions—to bring anthropology to a wider audience. The Comfort of Things
(2008), which explored the strategies by which everyday Londoners living in
the environs of a single street dealt with mourning, loss, and their sense of
their selves, was received enthusiastically in mainstream media—an achieve-
ment for a book which is also essentially also an everyday introduction to
anthropology.

Miller’s latest book, Stuff, aimed more specifically at the level of undergradu-
ate teaching and to a more general audience, is an attempt to synthetically
present his perspective on material culture studies. In each chapter Miller
revisits his own ethnography to advocate for an anthropology engaged with
the material world as entry into the most pressing concerns of what it is to
be human. His anthropology is particularly concerned not with contestation,
hierarchy, discrimination, or politics, but rather with a focus on individual
emotion and affect, and their dependency on the fabric of life. Each chapter
picks up on a key theme that has emerged within the framework of material
culture studies. The first, on clothing in Trinidad and London, describes how
self-making, truth, and identity may be understood to be on the surface rather
than somehow deep within us, without the value judgments usually associated
with depth and surface. Chapter two, drawing on his first archaeological field-
work in India, gives a potted history of the central place of objects within
theory, drawing on not only anthropology but also art history and sociology,
and referencing his key theoretical informants (Goffman, Gombrich, Bourdieu,
and Mauss). Here Miller reiterates a founding perspective on materiality,
a regard for the “humility of things”: “The surprising conclusion … that
objects are important, not because they are evident and physically constrain
or enable, but quite the opposite. It is often precisely because we do not see
them. The less we are aware of them, the more powerfully they can determine
our expectations, by setting the scene and ensuring appropriate behaviour…. They determine what takes place to the extent that we are unconscious of
their capacity to do so” (p. 50).

Chapter three draws on fieldwork in London and Caribbean houses to look at
ways in which the material world structures everyday experience of governmen-
tality and ways in which people use material culture to imagine themselves as
having agency within the external structures of their lives. Chapter four looks
at the so-called immateriality of media and digital technology, specifically the
Internet and mobile phones, to understand how form (technology) effects and
mediates social connections. Chapter five examines experiences of life and
death in London to highlight the pivotal, even transcendent role of objects in
mediating the most profound of human experiences. Whilst Miller’s ethno-
graphy is highly diluted here, his analysis provides an invaluable framework for
understanding the importance of objects. Whilst gender, ethnicity, and political
structure play ethnographic roles, they do not, for Miller, alter the universal ways
in which objects mediate, effect, and alter both consciousness and experience.

The titles of the two books reviewed here capture some of the ongoing ten-
sions between what might be crudely perceived as materialist and idealist
understandings of the object world. Where Stuff summarizes Miller’s attempts
to reach into the prosaic world of everyday objects and to see how familiar
things may lead us to profound understandings about what it means to be
human, the theoretical agenda of Thinking through Things moves away from
an ethnographic interest in things or people, and instead analyzes their relation
to cast light on theories of being (and on anthropological theory). Henare, Hol-
braad, and Wastell in their Introduction draw on the philosophy of Aristotle and
Deleuze, the ethno-philosophies of Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros
de Castro, and the American Melanesianist Roy Wagner to discuss the “onto-
logical” paradigms that organize meaning and the different ways in which
persons and things are made (or unmade). In doing so, they ask provocative
questions about meaning, interpretation, and agency.

Adopting an approach they describe as “radically essentialist” (p. 2), they
argue that “things might be treated as sui generis meanings” (3), by which
they mean that the separation of meaning from object rests on a problematic
and non-universal dichotomy. By arguing for a move from “worldview” to
“worlds” (10), they posit that instead of multiple meanings that stand in
relief to a singular, objective reality, there are multiple ontologies—or worlds—
which each stand apart from one another. This interpretive slippage is therefore
extendable to the way in which we understand any part of the so-called objective
world, including “things.” The borders of ontology are not defined (are they cul-
tural? political? temporal?). Instead, despite an ostensible resistance to reifying
dichotomies, the emphasis on “multiple ontologies” in fact itself becomes the
blueprint of radical dichotomization between cultures (or ontologies).

By trying to move beyond material cultures and create a notion of “multiple
ontologies,” the Introduction raises more problems than it solves. This is per-
spectivalism that has forgotten its origins: it disregards that the very concept
of perspective (if we think back to its emergence in Renaissance art)
demands an external point of convergence. Whatever people might say with
regards to substance and its effects, meaning cannot exist outside of human
sociality. Objects, however, can, and do. It is the ability to both be defined
by and transcend context that makes objects so interesting within our discus-
sions of meaning, interpretation, and translation.

However, the ramifications of the “multiple ontology” view are not only phi-
osophical but also political. By diminishing the possibility of a shared ontol-
ogy, the authors of the Introduction also diminish the possibility of equal
cross-cultural exegetical exchange. By celebrating the multiplicity of ontology,
it is in fact the analyst who identifies these “ontological” approaches to the
material world as specifically non-Cartesian. Focusing on “worlds” rather
than “worldviews” claims to deny a form of conservative ethnography that
in fact is perpetuated by this radical relativism. Much as the editors of Thinking
through Things assert that power is the powder used in divination, or that
taonga (loosely translated in Māori as “treasured possession”) is incommensur-
able with property, or that Swazi law is in fact a “thing,” it is the centralizing
force of the concepts of power, property, and law that permits this analysis.
Their ethnographic examples and theoretical discussion bolster an anthropol-
gy in which genuine difference, and resistance to conceptual hegemony, is
lost in ethno-philosophical generalization. I find the concept of “reverse anthro-
pology” (Kirsch 2006) or provincialization (Chakrabarty 2001)—re-centering
(even resisting) without denying a shared conceptual and analytic frame—
much more efficacious in examining issues of meaning of shared concepts in
different places, and assessing what might, in fact, not be shared (see
Geismar n.d.)

The problem with Thinking through Things is really its Introduction. The
subsequent chapters, including those by the editors, go on to present the
ways in which the material world can take different forms and invoke different
meanings in different parts of the world, simultaneously emphasizing that there
is a universal engagement between the social and the material. They provide the reader with a number of rich case studies that demonstrate the benefit of looking at things as beings that genuinely participate in and inflect social relations. Adam Reed’s standout chapter describes the ways in which prison economies in Papua New Guinea circulate around cigarettes, themselves objects that gain greatest meaning by dissolving into smoke (Pijin *smuk*). The power of *smuk* to displace other values, to alter and affect behavior, underlines the transformative power of prison itself to act on people’s bodies. Andrew Moutu argues from examples as diverse as thieves in the National Museum of Port Moresby, Noah’s Ark, and the *oeuvre* of Alfred Gell, that object collections are as much a “way of being” as a grouping of artifacts, a materialization of classificatory processes that influence as much as represent social order. Rebecca Empson’s account of the household chests contained in Buryat Mongols’ living spaces describes how, taken as a composite whole of revealed and concealed objects, chests draw the viewer in through their regard of a central mirror into a dialogue with “exemplary” personhood. Morgan Pederson similarly shows how the cognitive ordering of Mongolian Shamanism depends as much on talismans in object form as it does on the agency of the human mind.

Taken together, these chapters provide a lively set of ethnographic case studies that decompose a universal understanding of object-hood and hold it up to the scrutiny of cultural specificity. Time, place, history, and space are all shown to matter in the ways in which artifacts are given meaning and how they then, imbued with meaning, become social actors. Henare’s discussion of *taonga* in Aotearoa New Zealand focuses on the incommensurability of Māori and Pākehā epistemologies, exemplified in discussions around what was divested within the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi. The notion of *taonga* becomes a consolidating category, which itself elides distinction between the material and the social or ancestral, and which resists colonization (in a settler-colony). Wastell’s chapter on law in Swaziland analyzes law itself as an artifact rather than as a discursive or structuring field. Understanding law as a thing loaded with meaning explains the resonance of legal practice and paraphernalia, which was sustained even when the state legal system was suspended. Holbraad’s chapter on Cuban divination makes an extended argument that, for Ifa diviners, power and powder are indivisible. However, when the agenda of the Introduction—to make claims about multiple or alternative ontologies—are addressed, the ethnography frequently falls into the very trap the Introduction to the volume seeks to circumvent: a focus on meaning which effaces the presence and vitality of physical objects. All three of these chapters focus more on discursive and idealist ‘frames’ rather than on drawing out the nuances of material form itself.

It is ironic that the editors of *Thinking through Things* draw so heavily on the building blocks of material culture studies—its longstanding critique of...
subject/object dichotomies, its emphasis on nonrepresentational theory of meaning, and its holistic account of sociality as a starting point—for their own ethno-philosophical endeavor, even as they efface their inheritance. The volume’s authors may not reproduce the familiar distinction between subject and object, but tensions between external and internal, substance and effect, are present within their ethnography and inform their analyses. This brings them much closer to the world of Stuff than they would probably like to acknowledge, but nonetheless it is what makes their work interesting and relevant to other contexts. These two volumes, taken together, and putting aside the quibbles over the semantics of describing the very field they both inhabit, map a field of enquiry in which objects, defined in many different ways, are central. They chart the ways in which a focus on materiality may give purchase into everyday human experience, and to the conceptual schema that underpins it.

REFERENCES


