

HANDBOOK
of
MATERIAL CULTURE

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PART III

SUBJECTS AND OBJECTS

Within the social or human sciences, material objects have rarely been a focus of attention simply in and of themselves. Rather, they have been of special interest primarily for the insights they may provide into human social and cultural worlds. Emerging as these sciences did out of Western philosophical and religious traditions, they commonly formulated the relations of humans and material things with reference to the broader conceptual opposition between subject and object. To be sure, 'object' is a category which, in its fullest scope, is considerably more abstract and far-reaching than the word understood in its material sense. It can, for example, denote the patient of an action, the grammatical complement of a transitive verb, the cognized concept, or the phenomenological focus of attention. Approaches to material objects have, however, drawn heavily on these more abstract treatments of objects, and the correlative concepts of objectivity and objectification. The earlier approaches in social theory tended to presuppose some *a priori* opposition between subject and object, privileging the former as the locus of agency, meaning and ethical concerns. Later work has often sought to overcome the subject-object opposition, with varying degrees of success. Even analyses that refuse to treat subject and object as *opposed* are likely to find that some *distinction* between the terms stubbornly persists.

Four basic understandings of the relations between subject and object predominate in the classic traditions of social theory. These focus respectively on the (1) production, (2) representation, (3) development and (4) extension of subjects (in most cases identified with humans) through objects (primarily material things). The chapters in this part reflect these themes, indicate some of their limits and suggest new directions in which we might develop and go beyond them. This introduction begins with a brief critical review of the four classic approaches, showing some of the ways in which the chapters that

follow it draw on and shed new insights into them. It then discusses the limits of meaning- and agency-centred approaches to objects. In conclusion, the introduction sketches out the case for a modified philosophical realism as a starting point for the social analysis of material things. I suggest that a fully social and historical understanding of objects demands a more robust appreciation of the relative autonomy of objects from human projects. Further, an understanding of this relative autonomy should point the way to a more vigorous, but dialectical and non-deterministic, approach to the place of causality in social phenomena.

The focus on *production* is exemplified by Karl Marx. According to Marx, subjects that had once, in pre-capitalist relations of production, realized themselves through the transformation of nature into artefacts now, under capitalism, confront objects as external to them. There are two aspects of this approach of particular relevance to thinking about material culture. First, *non-artefactual* objects are largely of analytical interest only as raw material for possible artefacts, as unmediated elements of nature such as water, wind, minerals, mountains, plants, undomesticated animals. Second, there is an implicit semiotic and, one might even suggest, a cognitive dimension to the subject's self-realization, since that self-realization depends on the subject's being able to read the traces of human labour in the material thing. Under capitalist relations of production, tools, for instance, may still serve as *practical* means to human ends, much as they had before, and products may still bear the marks of the *labour* that produced them, but producers no longer *recognize* themselves in either tool or product. The very concept of objectification, in dialectical analysis in the Hegelian-Marxian tradition, is one in which the outcomes of active processes congeal as so many static entities, appearing as mere givens within the experienced world. (To be sure, this is not purely

a conceptual problem. Much depends, for instance, on new kinds of property relations, such that workers under capitalism are no longer full masters of the means of production, and the commodity form, such that products seem to be endowed with agency independent of producers. But recognition nonetheless plays a crucial role in accounting for the ultimate political consequences.)

This basic production-oriented narrative underwrites much subsequent analysis. In the chapters before us, for instance, Bender (Chapter 19) shows that the affective and cognitive power of landscapes derives, in part, from human activities that have shaped them. The traces of human activities are reflected back to their subjects as apparently natural environments. The modernist anxiety about homelessness described by Buchli (Chapter 16) seems to derive from notions of home that presuppose a prior, unalienated relation to the shaped environment. But, within this tradition in social theory, the purported relations of subject to object under unalienated conditions have tended more to be assumed as some prior condition, or aspired to as some utopian future, than themselves subject to close analysis.

The second classic approach focuses on the ways in which objects also serve as *representations* of and for subjects. Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, for example, argued that so-called primitive classification is embodied in the physical layout of houses and settlements in ways that diagrammatically reproduce the cosmological and social order of a given society. As in the productivist tradition, the object is of interest mainly as an artefact of human labours, something that has implications for the acting and self-knowing subject. In a somewhat similar spirit, Max Weber explicitly defined the domain of interpretive sociology in such a way that it excluded those aspects of the objective world that did not enter directly into intentional actions, such as floods and demographic cycles. The underlying assumption is that there is a world of natural givens that remains distinct from that of humans, in so far as the latter are understood as acting and self-knowing subjects (and not, in this tradition, merely organic beings). Natural givens enter the picture only once they are transformed by intentional actions.

But in this approach, by contrast to those that focus on production, objects are of interest mainly in their capacity to express intentional projects, such that they then have cognitive effects on social subjects. The physical world, as a second nature for humans, a nature created

by and for humans, is both an effect of human understandings of the social and, as an object of experience, reflects those understandings back to the human subject. Objects materialize and express otherwise immaterial or abstract entities, organizing subjects' perceptual experiences and clarifying their cognitions. The very materiality of objects, their availability to the senses, is of interest primarily as the condition for the knowability of otherwise abstract or otherwise invisible structures such as divinities, cosmological principles or relations among clans. (Underlying this approach tends to be a somewhat distinct assumption that the raw materials of experience do not themselves fully determine how they will be grasped even as mere elements of subjective experience. Rather, some further organizing force or principle aside from sensory percepts themselves is required for there even to be coherent objects of experience. The Durkheimians find that principle in a given society's collective representations. A somewhat similar view of the cultural contribution to what is otherwise underdetermined raw experience runs through much of the American cultural anthropology influenced by Franz Boas.)

An important twist on the Durkheimian view appears in Claude Lévi-Strauss's distinction between the *bricoleur* and the engineer in *The Savage Mind*. In his analysis, the material qualities of objects are indeed crucial mediators of human understanding: sweet, for instance, serves to form a distinct contrast to sour, smooth to rough. But whereas the engineer's tools in themselves express the intentional projects for which they were made, the bricoleur works with objects that have no such entailments. They are merely what happens to be at hand. One consequence, to whose significance I will turn shortly, is that the causal processes by which they come to be at hand have, for the analyst, no bearing on their ultimate disposition and thus, for those who follow this line of thinking, can be excluded from consideration.

The representational perspective underlies several of the chapters in this part. It is especially germane to the analysis of landscape and, as we can see in Blier's and Buchli's chapters, architecture. In addition, in so far as clothing and furnishings give material form to social categories and hierarchies, this analysis runs through the chapters by Schneider (Chapter 13) and St George (Chapter 14). The socialist modernism and other reformist movements discussed by Buchli seem to draw quite consciously on an inverted version of the representational perspective. If traditional settlements and

dwellings expressed existing social structures, utopian architecture would bring into existence as yet unrealized social structures by making them available to the imagination, diagrammatically, it would seem. And of course representation is definitive of the category of Australian Aboriginal 'art' discussed by Myers. In contrast to objects defined in directly functional terms, those defined as 'art' have often been analysed in quite distinct ways. Their sheer materiality is often overlooked in favour of their representational character, including their capacity to index the social identity of the producer. This is one reason why it is a scandal when a non-Aborigine produces Aboriginal art; in material terms, such an object may be identical to one produced by an Aborigine, but its capacity to represent its maker has been transformed. Furthermore, once Aboriginal objects are reclassified as art, certain material qualities may emerge as the basis of future reclassifications. Paint may be viewed in formal terms, as abstract painting, rather than as by-products of certain no-longer-visible ritual activities. A similar reframing of materiality can occur in architecture. As Buchli observes, to treat architecture as a schema or diagram is to dematerialize it. The representational approach invites the analyst to see *through* the material of the object in the effort to grasp the more abstract structure it is supposed to express. The subject tends to be identified with the resulting abstractions, the object, as something material, remains apart.

A third tradition concerns the internal *development of subjectivities* in relation to objects. In various psychological and psychoanalytic traditions, subjects develop in part through encountering and appropriating objects within an environment of already existing artefacts. Things may serve as objects of fascination or of obsessive recuperations of loss, as in the classic model of the fetish. For example, Freud, like Marx, adapted the terminology 'fetishism' from early comparative religion to name a kind of misunderstanding. The agency of humans is imputed to things, and thereby things become objects of a self-displacing subject. A somewhat different psychoanalytic tradition focuses on the role objects play in the child's self-realization as an agent within a world of things that are separate from the self, can be manipulated, and which resist its actions. Both traditions are interested in objects in so far as they are encountered in experience as things to be felt, smelled, touched and worked upon. Material properties, such as weight, visibility, persistence and perishability, are crucial to the

formative character of these encounters. In many cases, the developmentalist approaches come closest to overcoming the *a priori* opposition of subject and object, postulating, for instance, a dialectic through which subjects and objects are mutually produced by acts of separation and reincorporation (see especially Daniel Miller's psychologically informed rereadings of Hegelian dialectic in *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* and *The Dialectics of Shopping*).

We could, perhaps, group with these approaches those that concern things (which, notice, are not necessarily confined to artefacts) as anchors for emotional attachment and memory. The role in the formation and transmission of memory of the very material qualities of things, such as temporal durability and both social and geographical portability, is hinted at in Connerton's discussion of memory. One especially lively field of research in which earlier psychological thought has taken new forms is the study of consumerism and commodities. Why are commodities objects of desire? In what ways are subjects realized through acts of possession and consumption, in what ways are they thwarted, their self-understanding displaced (as in the Marxist tradition)? St George's discussion of furnishings shows some of the ways in which the proliferation of kinds and qualities of goods fostered new forms of sociality and even of subjective interiority. Schneider's account of clothing points to the important role of physical qualities, such as softness, durability or sheen, in the desirability of things. Foster shows some of the global consequences of the circulating of commodities and the stimulation of new forms of desire. But commodities may be desirable for reasons beyond their qualities. Circulation of Aboriginal objects, for instance, expanded dramatically once they were recategorized and entered cosmopolitan art worlds. In part this is due to obvious market effects. But we might also surmise that the category of 'art' gave new relevance to certain of the existing material qualities of these objects, which thereby became newly available for perception and desirability.

In these three approaches, the two senses of 'object', as material thing and as that towards which an action or consciousness is directed, tend to converge. Often the latter sense of the word predominates at the expense of mere physical properties. A fourth approach gives special importance to the very materiality of objects. It concerns the ways in which material objects realize subjects by pragmatically *extending* them. In some sense, this aspect of subject-object relations runs through all the approaches

just mentioned. But recent efforts to rethink or break down the distinction between subjects and objects place special emphasis on the object-like qualities of humans, and the ways in which objects seem to contain some of the attributes that define human agency. In *Art and Agency: an Anthropological Theory*, for instance, Alfred Gell proposed that the soldier's weapon is not merely an object that is appropriated by an acting subject. Rather, it is a necessary component of the soldier's agency; that is, the 'soldier' is a totality composed of the person plus the weapon. In a similar vein, Bruno Latour's *We have Never been Modern* argues that the very distinction between humans and things is the result of a historically specific effort at purification which denies 'hybrids'. The implication is that hybrids of humans and things (Latour's contemporary examples include psychotropic drugs, hybrid corn and frozen embryos) that mix nature and culture, things and humans are in some sense prior to the opposition of human subjects and thing-like objects. One virtue of such arguments is that they help shift the weight of analysis away from the role objects play in the self-knowledge of subject towards an examination of their practical role in mediating actions. Although the mediation of action had always been part of the other analyses, in this case the object is seen not just to facilitate the acts or point back to the actor, but to expand, or even bring into existence, the subject. By stressing new possibilities, Latour points out the ways in which subjects take on object-like qualities in the process of extending themselves into the world of other objects (an approach that, in some of its dimensions, was anticipated by earlier approaches, from Mauss to Bourdieu and Foucault, to the human body and its socially structured habits and disciplines). The subject is not simply constituted through its *opposition* to and encompassment of the object; rather, it is amplified by merging *with* the object.

The limits of meaning-centred approaches to objects are explored in several of the chapters that follow. Foster's discussion of globalization (Chapter 18) asks how space is mediated by the motion of things through it. This mediation involves production, representation, development and extension, but cannot be reduced to any of them. Globalization studies show how moving objects link local social and material effects to distant causes. Subjects are also set into motion. As Bender points out, studies that stress the meaning of familiar places tend to play down power relations. Victims of displacement, for instance, may struggle with spaces that remain recalcitrant to any meanings they

may attempt to construct. In space they may confront an object world opposed to subjects and their projects.

Studies of artefacts commonly treat them as objects that are encompassed by subjects, but globalization and landscape suggest forms of materiality that encompass their subjects. In a sense the house forms a transition between these and the small things over which humans seem to have greater mastery. In Blier's Chapter 15 we can see a struggle between these two aspects of subject-object relations, as houses seem at once to express relatively unconstrained human imaginings yet are determined as well by unyielding environmental requirements.

Even clothing and furnishings can be recalcitrant. The studies St George reviews (Chapter 14) begin by emphasizing how furnishings express human purposes, especially social differentiations and display. But a second theme emerges, how the phenomenal characteristics of furnishings, once they have become given components of peoples' objective contexts, shape persons, through comfort, demarcations of space, channelling movement and posture, and by making possible new forms of possession and interiority. Schneider shows how furnishing the body itself cannot escape the causal chains linking the politics of display and of production. For instance, the very meaning of certain kinds of goods may be inseparable from the prices they carry under certain labour regimes, or the difficulty of obtaining certain materials.

Objects may thus convey into the world of socially realized meanings the *indexical* traces of causal processes that remain otherwise unexpressed. (The semiotic concept of indexicality refers to actual links between signs and their contexts or causes, independent of any 'meanings' produced by such things as resemblance or social conventions.) Without in any way *determining* their cultural significance, objects may nonetheless be important vehicles of transformative pressure on, or provide openings to new possibilities for, systems of meaning and of pragmatic action. To see this requires attention to the sheer materiality of things in two respects. First, in what I call *bundling*, material things always combine an indefinite number of physical properties and qualities, whose particular juxtapositions may be mere happenstance. In any given practical or interpretative context, only some of these properties are relevant and come into play. But other properties persist, available for promotion as circumstances change. Consider, for instance, the highly venerated ancestor tablets that were once preserved in households across rural China. That they

were often made of wood was not in itself significant until the Cultural Revolution fostered a contemptuous recategorization, and they were disposed of as cooking fuel. This story involves the second aspect of materiality, the inherent vulnerability of even the most meaningful things to brute causality. This tiny example illustrates a pervasive feature of things, artefactual or otherwise, that these two aspects of materiality play a crucial – but not deterministic – role in mediating human histories.

All four of the classic approaches discussed above take objects to be of interest in so far as they offer insight into (human) subjects. They therefore tend to give privileged attention to the artefacts of human production, among material things. Moreover, artefacts may be privileged for epistemological reasons as well. Following Giambattista Vico, it has been common to argue that knowledge in the human sciences derives from the maker's special insight into the thing made. Conversely, in so far as objects are uninterpretable or have not yet been rendered meaningful, they would seem to lie beyond our scope – irrelevant, perhaps even unknowable.

The opacity or ineffability of things prior to interpretation may lead, depending on one's ontological inclinations, to the sceptical assumption that objects cannot in any meaningful way be said to exist independent of experience and interpretation, or, at least, that this existence must be bracketed, in the sense proposed by some phenomenologists. Opposing this position are various forms of philosophical *realism*, the postulate that a world exists independent of – and perhaps beyond the ultimate reach of – any knowledge we may have of it. Both sceptic and realist may well agree that experience cannot, in principle, give humans direct, unmediated contact with the world of objects. But the realist may argue that we are nonetheless justified in positing the existence of objects, perhaps much as Kant required the noumenal in his analysis of phenomena. According to the creator of semiotics, Charles Sanders Peirce, for instance, we make suppositions about objects by means of abductions from experience. Abduction is the logical process of postulating that which must, or is most likely to be, the case such that what we actually *do* perceive has the character that it does. Abductions have neither the evidential security of induction, nor the logical necessity of deduction, but nonetheless form an important bridge between subjective experience and its objective sources.

The relevance of this foray into ontology for the social scientist is this: only by positing the existence of objects independent of human

experiences, interpretations and actions can we allow, analytically, the possibility of unforeseen consequences. Otherwise, one risks reducing the world of things to their actually or previously existing meanings for humans, foreclosing as yet unrealized future possibilities or reducing those possibilities to human invention alone. Certainly I have no wish to deny the importance of the anti-positivist insights that led social thought to stress the processual and meaningful character of objects. But these insights have their limits too. To place too much weight on interpretation risks reducing our understanding to the retrospective glance. The idea of a realism grounded in abduction should help the analyst of material culture recognize that, by virtue of bundling, things always contain properties in excess of those which have been interpreted and made use of under any given circumstance. Material things thus retain an unpredictable range of latent possibilities. They do not *only* express past acts, intentions and interpretations. They also invite unexpected responses. Subjects do not just realize themselves through objects, as if the fully-fledged subject were already latent, a chrysalis simply awaiting the moment at which it will unfold. To the extent that objects *are* autonomous of human projects, they may allow subjects to make real discoveries about themselves. They form the grounds for subsequent modes of action whose limits, if any, are in principle unknowable. They also, of course, can resist human projects and interpretations, remaining opaque and even oppressive, a point made in the chapters by Bender, Buchli and Blier. The various ways in which material things can be oppressive, although perhaps somewhat underdeveloped in the classic social theories, are elaborated in a variety of contexts, such as the Frankfurt School critique of technological modernity, Jean Paul Sartre's earlier, more phenomenological, work, and, of course, the long tradition of religious reformers' attacks on materialism.

It is in this light that we can return to the question of subjects and objects. The classic social theories usefully draw our attention to the ways in which material things, as objects of human actions and experiences, mediate the realization of human subjects. Material things index the human productive activity that went into them, they materialize social and cosmological structures that would otherwise elude direct experience, they foster the development of the person's sense of separateness from a world that resists its desires and the self-motivated agency that acts on that

resisting world, they serve as stable anchors and instigations for memory, feelings and concepts. In all these cases, the sheer materiality of objects, their formal properties and phenomenological qualities, tend to be of somewhat secondary importance, as media for significations, for instance, or as evidence of something recalcitrant outside the person. But if we stress as well the reality of the object and its contribution to as yet unrealized further possibilities, we can expand our analysis

beyond human products. Moreover, our analysis becomes not only more historically attuned, *of necessity*, but also may lead us to be more attentive to the full range of qualities that are, as it were, *bundled* into a single thing. At this point, the concept of *causality* seems finally and, despite the philosophical conundrums it poses, unavoidably to return to the social analysis even of meanings.

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