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The cultural life of objects

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Introduction

What do people do with objects? And what do objects do to people? This chapter explores the dialectic between processes of objectification (how things become objects) and subjectification (how people become subjects) by rethinking typical assumptions about the passivity of the former and the agency of the latter. The chapter is divided into four parts, slowly building an argument about the weaker and stronger versions of the interrelation between objects and subjects. The first section explores both classic and recent approaches to how objects are imbued with special significance, as well as contemporary scholarship on attachment and affordances. Then we explore what objects allow us to do, the kinds of subjects they encourage us to be, and the kinds of activities they block or enable. Do they collaborate? Are they unruly or docile? The chapter concludes by offering some reflections about what this means for the study of meaning-making in particular and of culture at large.

Meaning in objects

A central line of inquiry within cultural sociology has been to analyze the long-term purchase of particular objects by establishing a one-to-one set equivalence between objects, individuals, and/or collectives, in which objects mean only one thing and there is a taken-for-granted link between meaning and emotion. One tradition, for instance, emphasizes the role of cultural structures, focusing on the collective effervescence produced by rituals that aim to produce fusion and catharsis between the object qua totem and the collective.

This tradition can be traced back to Emile Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1965) and has been continued and refined by subsequent scholars. Victor Turner (1967), for example, theorized concepts like social drama and "breach," in which change is an odd occurrence and continuity is achieved through rituals that restore the previous order. Mary Douglas (1966) looked at the role of objects in establishing binary boundaries, especially the assignation of "dirt" to those objects that do not fit neatly into the prevailing social order. Randall Collins's (2004) "interaction ritual chain" theory points to the highly contextualized ways in which an object becomes emotionally resonant with a collective. The work of Jeffrey

Alexander (2008) reveals the productive character of the distinction between sacred and profane and the totemic role played by objects in producing “iconic consciousness,” which in turn become vehicles for social action. Pierre Bourdieu (1984) explored how stable the meanings of objects are by emphasizing the role of homologies and dispositions in guaranteeing that objects (a) have only one available set of instructions and uses, (b) are closely related to particular positions in the social structure, and (c) serve as boundaries that create distinctions between competing groups (see also Lamont 1992). More recently Genevieve Zubrzycki (2011) has coined the idea of “national sensorium” to call attention to the multiplicity of media and sites – including soundtracks, advertising, food, and film – that concretize and bring to life relatively abstract and often emotion-laden ideas about the link between self and nation.

In an early departure from this tradition, Paul Willis (1978) proposed to study what cultural materials actually afford rather than assuming that meaning is arbitrarily attributed to them. Via the study of hippies and motor-bikers, he scrutinizes how objects lend themselves to expressing masculinity, authenticity, and spirituality. Willis shows how a group cannot just choose a random cultural item, and neither can a cultural item attach itself to just any group. Although the meanings are culturally constructed, the construction nevertheless derives from the “objective” given possibilities of the cultural items themselves.

Willis’s early departure from Durkheimian and structuralist approaches opens up a new line of sociological inquiry. If objects offer more than a one-to-one physical replica of “culture,” that is, if they are more than mere passive recipients of cultural schemes, then the relationship between sign and things is never purely arbitrary or self-evident since the object shapes the kind of relationship that can take place (Daston 2004). Our task then is to explore the particular kind of cultural work that objects perform in allowing (or disallowing) these relations of signification, and how, in so doing, they subtend or disrupt the kind of subjects we imagine ourselves to be.

What happens when the other is an object?

Thanks to object-centered sociologies we know that objects play a key role in shaping identity, social action, and subjectivity. We know, for example, that objects perform an important type of cultural work in what Molotch (2003) refers to as the “lashing-up” of cultural meaning, personal identities, and things. We also know that objects help human agents work toward particular states of being by providing patterns to which bodies can unconsciously latch onto (DeNora 2000, 2003), and that they are central in the long-term process of taste construction, where the actual material object (a musical piece, a pair of jeans, a soccer t-shirt) is both a result and a key co-producer of its own generation of meaning (Hennion 2007; Hennion and Fauquet 2001; Hennion and Gomart 1999).

This object-centered scholarship helps us see that the process of subjectification is not one-way, with subjects willfully imposing or co-opting objects to construct their identities, but rather a process that is more like a dance or choreography in which the object and the self co-produce each other through a delicate equilibrium of bodies, techniques, mediators, and situations. The exploration of this engagement of people with objects leads us to look at the role that objects play in how we present ourselves and craft our particular “moral careers.” One of the practices in which this becomes evident are the accounts and claims about the self-actions that have in the literature been derided as inflated versions of culture. Objects often work as “plot devices” (Winchester forthcoming) that make possible particular accounts of the self, and thus prompt agents to perform the cultural work of negotiating and accommodating narratives, attachments and self-identification to what the object affords, as well as to the work of sustaining these bonds as objects change (Benzecry 2011). One central example of this approach is the work of anthropologist

Sherry Turkle on intimacy and evocative devices (2007, 2008). Turkle writes about how objects connect us to the world, their capacity to serve as sieve, bridge, and boundary between self and external reality, and their use in our own self-cultivation. Her work brings back into the conversation two lines of inquiry that have fallen by the wayside in cultural sociology: first, the psychoanalytic approach of scholars such as Jacques Lacan, Sigmund Freud, and D.W. Winnicott, which theorized “objects” as a place for potential identifications as well as a key part of the process of subject development; second is Marx’s work on commodity fetishism and what it says about our relationship to sensuous materials, which, under certain conditions, can assume life-like qualities.

Turkle focused her interest in Freud on the concept of the uncanny, but this prompts the question of how artifacts that are familiar to us become strange in the first place. Historical sociologist George Steinmetz (2008) mobilizes the Freudian distinction between melancholia and nostalgia to analyze the contrasting responses of white people in Detroit and Namibia, respectively, in making sense of the ruins of a more powerful past. Ruins work as evocative objects, and the memory regimes they invoke must take into account historical context, he argues. Detroit inhabitants engaged nostalgically with the industrial rubble of the automotive industry, whereas white Namibians oriented toward the leftovers of the German colonial past with melancholy, both acknowledging the end of the colonial relationship while longing for its restoration.

More recently, one of us (Claudio) reappropriated the Lacanian concept of partial object, or “object *a*,” in order to explore how soccer and opera amateurs who have been attached to a cultural object for a long time seek out another object that will produce a similar emotional resonance (Benzecry 2015). I use the idea of partial object to explain how amateurs forge a connection to a second, similar object that, lashed together with the self, include some (but not all) of the technologies and practices of the self enabled by the “original” cultural object.

Although the Freudian concept of fetishism alludes to a substitution and the fixation of an object with the traces of a repressed history, Marx’s classic discussion of the fetishism of commodities opens up another avenue of inquiry about the relationship between material and social life. Thanks to it we are able to think of two interrelated questions, one about the temporal arc under which objects are awoken or brought to life, and a second one that wonders under what conditions human laborers are made oblivious to recognizing their own work as inscribed in those objects. For Marx, it is as commodities – which deprive workers of seeing themselves in what they have made – that things come alive and adopt an extraordinary life of their own, as “if it were to begin dancing of its own free will” (Marx 1976:164).

The paradoxically alienated and detached version of the relationship between objects and subjects was elaborated in the realm of consumption by Simmel (1968), who argued that objects were able to sublimate and absorb the spiritual life of individuals, imprisoning life and rendering it unable to adapt to changing developments. Simmel saw a world in which object scarcity was not the problem but rather the hypertrophic production of constant novelty; he considered this the principle malaise of modern life (“the tragedy of culture”) – a view revived by the British school of material culture studies (Hicks and Beaudry 2010) and, more particularly, by anthropologist Daniel Miller (1987, 2012). The authors in this tradition have pursued an object-centered analysis of consumption and waste which seeks to reveal how owning, keeping, and discarding objects have become increasingly central practices in the accelerated cycle of production and consumption through which contemporary identities are formed (Gabrys, Hawkins, and Michael 2013; Gregson 2007; Miller 2001). The literature on museums also demonstrates how these practices of keeping, ridding, and letting go of objects have played a fundamental role in the cultural work required to build collective identities and narratives (Macdonald 2006).

But the role that objects play is not restricted to providing material props through which we construct and display our individual and collective identities. They also play a much deeper

role by shaping how we think, judge, and imagine. As recent developments in cognitive science argue, seemingly “internal” cognitive operations, like remembering, judging, or calculation should not be seen as a set of disembodied and internal operations taking place inside the mind but should be seen, instead, as a set of relations and operations embedded in the material world (Clark and Chalmers 1998; Hutchins 1995). Objects, in this sense, do not belong to some sort of “outside” but are actually *one* of the mediums through which cognitive operations are made possible in the specific way they do – much like an abacus is not simply an “external means” to represent mathematical operations, but the very medium through which a specific way of thinking mathematically becomes possible.

What are objects good for?

One of the key contributions of the study of objects in recent years has been to take seriously the fact that objects are not optional, but constitute obligatory passage points humans have to contend with in order to pursue their projects (Latour 1991). Objects are indispensable equipment for living (Luhmann 2000), which provide the particular kind of social glue (see Henderson 1999) that makes possible the taken-for-granted routines and tacit rules supporting the social bonds that hold us together (see Serres 1995). From this perspective, the attempt to create any analytical separation between “the social” (or “the cultural”), and the “the material” is pointless. As Latour famously put it, we are rarely, if ever, confronted with a pure “human interaction,” since our lives always take place in situations that take the form of “H-NH-H-NH-NH-NH-H-H-H-H-NH (where H stands for a human-like actant and NH for a non-human)” (Latour 1991:110).

This line of thought has been foundational to the field of science and technology studies (STS), which has endeavored to show how objects should be seen as *sui generis* social agents, what Callon called “actants” (1984), endowed with a *sui generis* kind of social agency. Through a variety of empirical case studies, scholars have shown “the mangle of practice” (Pickering 1995) through which the social world is continually being co-produced (Jasanoff 2004) in the process of trying to “enroll” objects into our life projects and how they, in turn, resist these attempts and end up translating and changing plans and social relations (Latour 1999).

A parallel train of thought has emerged over the last decades in the field of cultural anthropology. Of particular importance here is the work of the late Alfred Gell in the anthropology of art. Building on the work of Charles Peirce and Marilyn Strathern, Gell (1998) developed a new anthropological approach to art in which objects are not seen as encoding the world symbolically but as social agents endowed with social efficacy, capable of acting upon other social agents in their vicinity. For this reason, Gell argues, art objects should be seen as “systems of actions” that participate in the creation of the network of social relations in which they are themselves embedded (1998).

The built environment offers another arena of research for exploring the nature of the social bond, and the role played by material infrastructure in creating silent linkages between action, choices, and judgments (Domínguez Rubio and Fogué 2015). Some scholars have studied how urban planning and architecture effectively hardwire moral and cultural categories into the built environment (Graham and MacFarlane 2015; Joyce 2003). Others focus on the role of the built environment in articulating different forms of participation and exclusion in the body politic (Marres and Lezaun 2011), while others analyze how contemporary processes of meaning-making or truth-making are mediated by the particular affordances offered by different media infrastructures and platforms (Gillespie, Boczkowski, and Foot 2014; Parks and Starosielski 2015). Chandra Mukerji (2009, 2012) has advanced this line of work in cultural sociology by

showing how built environments such as the Canal du Midi or the Gardens of Versailles made possible different forms of cultural imagination.

Taken together, these approaches serve to show that “cultural” narratives and categories are not simply negotiated through beliefs, cognitive schemas, or bodily dispositions but are also silently negotiated through streets, buildings, walls, and media technologies. Such research is gaining a whole new salience as our lives become increasingly mediated through technologies and built environments designed to “make sense” of us, by registering and categorizing our actions, making inferences about future behaviors, and acting pre-emptively upon them (Greenfield 2013). Consider how we are nudged to buy certain products rather than others from the carefully designed aisles of the supermarket to casinos (Schüll 2012), how we are conditioned to make moral judgments or live healthier lives (Thaler and Sunstein 2008), or presented with data encouraging us to quantify, measure, and evaluate ourselves (Neff and Nafus 2016).

Repairing and maintaining “culture”

In the previous sections, we discussed those traditions that detail how objects provide the conditions for certain interpretations, social relations, and imaginaries. One of the limitations of these traditions is that they tend to start with a premise of the world as comprising objects already integrated or stabilized, with only isolated moments of destabilization in need of redress. This premise obscures the inherent tension between stasis and change that characterizes our relationship with objects and the work of stabilization and restabilization that is constantly required to keep these objects alive.

In considering things as simultaneously material and meaningful, we learn that matter constrains meaning and vice versa. On the one hand, this implies coming to terms with what sociologist Terry McDonnell (2016) – echoing Webb Keane (2003) and his idea of “bundling” – has recently dubbed “cultural entropy,” which describes how the intended meanings and uses we assign to objects fracture over time, giving way to new meanings. On the other hand, we also need to attend to the arguments of the “new materialisms” when they claim that we are never dealing with inert matter (Barad 2007; Bennett 2010; Coole and Frost 2010; Domínguez Rubio 2016), and that, following the old Spinozian distinction, we should never see objects as *natura naturata*, that is, as the necessary but *passive* principle of creation, but as *natura naturans*, that is, as part of the active principle shaping and structuring the world.

Taking this fact seriously invites us to think about the material world not in terms of “objects,” but in terms of the processes and conditions under which certain “things” come to be differentiated and identified as particular kinds of “objects” endowed with particular forms of meaning, value, and power. Adopting this view means accepting that we do not live in a world made of finite and discrete “objects” but in a world made of things that are always moving and changing and in which, consequently, cultural meanings, categories, and boundaries are always precariously achieved and have to be continually maintained over time

A key implication here is that “culture” *corrodes*. The things through which we construct meaning are always falling apart, wearing down, and malfunctioning and, as a result, they have to be constantly mended, repaired, retrofitted, or repurposed. Think, for example, of how those seemingly timeless monuments that enable collective narratives slowly crumble away, or how those artworks that help constitute our symbolic universes wane and perish. Or more simply, think about the wear and tear of all the mundane physical paraphernalia through which we erect the symbolic boundaries that make possible our cultural identities on a daily basis.

Interestingly, this kind of cultural work of maintenance and repair has remained largely understudied by cultural sociologists. Indeed, while we have paid plenty of attention to how

we produce cultural objects (e.g., “cultural production paradigm”) or how we interpret and consume them (e.g., “reception studies”), we have not paid much attention at all to the work devoted to repairing and maintaining them – which is actually quite strange when you think about it, since a great deal of our daily toil – and budgets! – consists, precisely, in trying to keep things legible as effective and meaningful cultural objects. This is why we are *constantly* mending and repairing stuff and, in so doing, why we are constantly engaged in the process of tweaking, changing, or stabilizing the physical fabric of meaning.

Only recently has this type of work of maintenance and repair begun to receive the attention it deserves, especially among STS scholars (e.g., Bellacasa 2011; Denis and Pontille 2014; Jackson 2014; Star and Ruhleder 1996), but also among geographers (DeSilvey and Edensor 2013), sociologists (Benzecry 2016; Dant 2010), and anthropologists (Lea and Pholeros 2010). One of the benefits of this new wave of studies is that they help us to move beyond traditional dichotomies of “working” versus “not-working” or “functioning” versus “malfunctioning” by showing how maintenance and repair are not exceptional practices emerging in those critical moments when the normal state of affairs is interrupted, but are indeed what makes any normal state of affairs possible in the first place.

Some concluding thoughts on materials and semiosis

In sociology, the study of semiosis, of how meaning is made, has been dominated over the last decades by a focus on how beliefs, values, or norms are linked to one another constituting a more or less coherent and autonomous system called “culture.” One of the main shortcomings of this approach is that it relies on an unnecessary analytical distinction between “culture” and “material,” “meaning” and “matter.” This chapter, on the contrary, shows that objects are important because they are one of the sites of culture; they are one of the places where cultural distinctions are made, negotiated, maintained, and repaired. They are not an “external” material input that has to be “factored into” a cultural scheme. They do not belong to some sort of material outside but are one of the mediums through which practices, meaning, and cognitive processes are made possible and come into being in specific ways.

Cultural sociologists have explored objects as totems (Alexander 2008; Durkheim 1965), as the site for the imprinting of competing claims (Zubrzycki 2013), as fetishes that construct boundaries between groups (Bourdieu 1984), or as highly contextual stabilizations of interaction (Collins 2004). Taking stock of what we have learned from the sociologists and other scholars interested in cultural objects, our final entreaty is to understand all of these frameworks as gradients of cases, in which even in totem-like situations there is always the potential for more than one affordance – always the potential for the correspondence between affect, individual, and object to be other than a one-to-one homology – and in which we investigate and never take for granted the work of holding those correspondences together. In his path-breaking book on materiality, *Where Stuff Comes From*, Molotch (2003:10) wrote: “objects are social relationships made durable.” The key, as we have tried to show here, is to specify when and how they are imprinted and made to last.

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