THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF

MATERIAL CULTURE STUDIES

Edited by

DAN HICKS
and
MARY C. BEAUDRY

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
PART I

DISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES
CHAPTER 2

THE MATERIAL-CULTURAL TURN
EVENT AND EFFECT

DAN HICKS

INTRODUCTION: EXCAVATING 'MATERIAL CULTURE'

The terms 'material culture' and 'material culture studies' emerged, one after another, during the twentieth century in the disciplines of archaeology and socio-cultural anthropology, and especially in the place of intersection between the two: anthropological archaeology. Today, 'material culture studies' is taught in most undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in archaeology and anthropology. In Britain and North America, four distinct traditions of material culture studies in archaeology and anthropology might be discerned. In the eastern United States, one tradition, associated especially with the work of Henry Glassie and his students, including Robert Saint George, Bernard Herman, and Gerald Pocius (e.g. Glassie 1975, 1999; Pocius 1991; Herman 1992, 2005; Saint George 1998), has developed from American folk life studies and cultural geography (see Saint George

I am grateful to Mary Beaudry, Victor Buchli, Jeremy Coote, Inge Daniels, Jonathan Friedman, Chris Gosden, Tim Ingold, Andy Jones, Danny Miller, Josh Pollard, Gita Wenzelhys, Sarah Whatmore, Laurie Wilkie, Chris Wingfield, and Steve Woolgar for discussions and comments that have informed the argument set out in this chapter.
two decades have seen a range of postcolonial, feminist, and historical critiques of the essentialist, static, synchronic, and normative tendencies of the 'culture concept', and its place within the discipline's colonial legacies (Clifford 1988; Abu-Lughod 1991a; Daniel 1998; Trouillot 2003). Secondly, there are the long-standing arguments over the utility of a separate category of the 'material': whether it is helpful, or even possible, to define some form of 'culture' that is not materially enacted (Olsen 2006, 2007; Ingold 2007a). Thirdly—a complement to these tendencies to reduce explanation to the human, or to the non-human—is the nature of the connection, relationship, or boundary between the two halves of this unhyphenated term—'material culture' (Miller 2007: 244; see Pinney 2005).

Or, of course, the very idea of the existence of such a fundamental boundary in the first place, apart from in certain modernist discourses that beyond their textual accounts could only ever be partially enacted, rather than fully realized (Loutre 1993a).

The purpose of this chapter, however, is to excavate the idea of 'material culture studies', rather than to bury it (cf. Miller 2003a: 37). Excavation examines the remains of the past in the present and for the present. It proceeds down from the surface, but the archaeological convention is to reverse this sequence in writing: from the past to the present. In the discussion of the history of ideas and theories, a major risk of such a chronological framework is that new ideas are narrated progressively, as paradigm shifts: imagined as gradual steps forward that have constantly improved social scientific knowledge (Darnell 1977: 492; Trigger 2006: 5-17). Noting this risk, nevertheless archaeologists and anthropologists cannot divorce the kind of histories that they write of their own disciplines from the conceptions of time that characterize their own work. As an anthropological archaeologist, my focus here is upon the taphonomic processes of residuality, durability, and sedimentation of the remains of past events. Such processes constantly shape the intellectual landscapes of archaeology and anthropology. In seeking to generate knowledge of the world we encounter these processes, just as we do any chunk of the landscapes in which we live our everyday lives, in the present as a 'palimpsest' of layered scratches (Hoskins 1955: 271). Archaeological accounts of historical processes operate by slowly working through, documenting, and making sense of the assemblage, rather than standing back and explaining the whole (Hicks and Beaudry 2006b). By undertaking such an iterative process, the chapter explores how the ideas of 'material culture' and 'material culture studies' are themselves artefacts of particular disciplinary conceptions of 'the social'. In conclusion, discussing the current reception of actor-network theory (ANT) in archaeology and anthropology, the chapter explores the limitations of the ideas of the 'actor-network' and of 'material culture' for archaeology and anthropology, especially in relation to their interdisciplinary contribution.

The process of excavation is, however, a time-consuming one. The reader will forgive, I hope, the length and the pace of this chapter. The purpose of working...
back over disciplinary histories will, I also hope, become apparent as the chapter proceeds.

... 

Virtually no historical overviews of this very recent episode in archaeological and anthropological disciplinary histories have been previously attempted (but see Buchli 2002a, 2004 and Schlereth 1998 for North America). Nevertheless, anthropological archaeology routinely explores the very recent and contemporary past, rather than waiting until 'after the dust settles' (Rathje 2001: 67; Hicks and Beaudry 2000b: 4). The chapter is written in the conviction that such excavation of recent disciplinary histories is not only possible, but is an essential first step in thinking through the contribution of archaeological and anthropological thinking about things beyond these two disciplines. My focus is explicitly upon British debates where the emergence of material culture studies from archaeological and anthropological thought has been particularly strong, and upon Cambridge-, London-, and Oxford-based researchers because of their central role in the emergence of the idea of 'material culture studies'; however, the international dimensions of the shifting debates over the study of things will be considered along the way. Like all anthropological writing, it is both a situated and a 'partial' account in the sense evoked by Marilyn Strathern (2004a): neither total, nor impartial (cf. Haraway 1988).

The main argument of the chapter relates to the distinctive form taken by the 'cultural turn' in British archaeology and social anthropology during the 1980s and 1990s. For both fields, the cultural turn was a material turn. An explicit and rhetorical use of the study of 'the solid domain of material culture' (Tilley 1990a: 35) was deployed in order to shelter research into humanistic themes such as consumption, identity, experience, and cultural heritage from the accusations of relativism or essentialism that accompanied the cultural turn during the late twentieth-century science wars between 'relativism' and 'realism'. In other words, whereas in many disciplines the cultural turn was characterized by a shift from objectivity to subjectivity, the situation was more entangled in British archaeology and anthropology, because considerable intellectual effort was focused on the idea of relationships between cultural subjects and cultural objects. The legacy of this epistemological move, which I shall call the 'Material-Cultural Turn', has in practice reinforced earlier divisions between archaeological and anthropological thinking—between the 'material' and 'cultural'. I shall argue that these distinctions derived in turn from a still earlier set of debates, which had led to the emergence of the idea of 'material culture' during the second quarter of the twentieth century. Thus, the chapter seeks to document what remains after this Material-Cultural Turn, and how these remains might be put to work today.

A longer-term perspective reveals that the contested place of material objects in the study of human cultures or societies has represented a fault-line running throughout interactions between British archaeological and anthropological thought and practice. By working back and forth across this fault-line, rather than down towards any solid bedrock, I shall argue that the idea of distinguishing between the material and the cultural, and of distinguishing relationships between them, was a distinctive artefact of modernist anthropology and archaeology. The challenges for the two disciplines today, therefore, lie neither in stretching out such dualisms, nor in seeking to overcome them, but more fundamentally in shaking off those modernist representational impulses of which the very concept of 'material culture' is an effect.

The rest of this chapter falls across five broadly chronological sections, and a concluding discussion. The first section (pp. 30–44) considers the development of the idea of 'object lessons' during the late nineteenth century, and traces the subsequent terminological shift from 'primitive art' and 'technology' to 'material culture' during the second quarter of the twentieth century in British anthropology and archaeology. It examines the relationships of this shift with the emergence of structural-functionalism and (later) the 'New' or processual archaeology. I shall argue that, counterintuitively, the idea of 'material culture' emerged at precisely the same moment as a very significant hiatus in the anthropological and, to a lesser extent, the archaeological study of objects and collections took place. Thus, the emergence of the idea of 'material culture' was not a simple shift away from the study of things. The legacies of these debates continue to shape discussion of the idea of 'material culture' today.

The second section (pp. 44–64) considers how the development of structuralist and semiotic approaches in both fields brought about a new attention upon the study of material culture. I shall argue that the emergence from the 1970s of the idea of 'material culture studies' developed especially from a desire to reconcile structuralism and semiotics. Tracing the alternative influences upon British archaeology and anthropology, this section shifts from the late nineteenth-century idea of 'object-lessons' to the new conception, derived especially from practice theory, of 'object domains'. Just as practice theory emerged from two principal thinkers—Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens—so its reception in British archaeology and anthropology was mapped out through the work of two scholars and their students: Ian Hodder at Cambridge and Daniel Miller at UCL. This body of work used the idea of 'material culture studies' to craft the cultural turn in British archaeology and anthropology as a Material-Cultural Turn.

A shorter third section (pp. 64–69) outlines the 'high period' of British material culture studies since the early 1990s, sketching the principal themes in this field during that period. It also explores alternative conceptions of disciplinarity in this period, and especially the idea of material culture studies as a kind of post-disciplinary field. The fourth section (pp. 69–79) traces the gradual undoing of the idea of 'material culture' as a fixed and coherent object of enquiry: in debates over the idea of objects as texts, various uses of phenomenology, and the idea of 'material agency'. Discussing the critique of the idea of 'materiality' by Tim Ingold, a fifth section (pp. 79–94) explores how two themes in his recent work—formation
and skill—might be reoriented in the light of recent work in historical anthropology and historical archaeology, to account for the place of the researcher in the practice of material culture studies. Central here is an understanding of both things and theories as simultaneously events and effects: rather than as passive objects, active subjects, or caught up somehow in the spectral webs of networks (Latour 2005a), meshworks (Ingold 2007c), or dialectical relations (Miller 2005a). In this light, a concluding section (pp. 94–98) takes stock of prospects for the idea of material culture studies in anthropological archaeology after the Material–Cultural Turn.

I: FROM ‘TECHNOLOGY’ TO ‘MATERIAL CULTURE’

The idea of studying technology in archaeology and anthropology crystallized during the two disciplines’ Museum Period in the last third of the nineteenth century from earlier Western colonial and antiquarian collecting practices (Sturtevant 1969: 62; Stocking 1988: 7). Between c.1865 and c.1900, when firm boundaries between the two disciplines had not yet emerged, material things—especially human ‘technology’—came to be central to attempts to order cultures across time and space in a scientific manner: in self-conscious contrast with earlier antiquarian collecting practices. However, although it has often been used with reference to nineteenth-century museum anthropology or ethnographic collecting, the term ‘material culture’—the definition of a ‘super-category of objects’ (Buchli 2002a: 3)—was not current in British archaeology and anthropology until the inter-war period of the early twentieth century. This section traces the emergence of evolutionary, diffusionist, and culture-historical models of technology, and the intellectual contexts in which gradual replacement of the term ‘technology’ with that of ‘material culture’ took place, especially as part of the critique presented by structural-functionalist and early processualist approaches between the 1920s and 1950s.

Evolutionary, diffusionist, and culture-historical studies of technology

During the mid-nineteenth century, the ‘Three Age’ system, in which the technological use of different materials (stone, bronze, iron) defined changing time periods of Old World prehistory, gave structure to the earliest integrative accounts of European prehistory (Worsaae 1849; Lubbock 1865). During the 1870s and 1880s ideas of artefact typology (the analysis of archaeological and ethnographic objects according to type) emerged. These new ideas came to be used as the basis for new progressivist schemes of technological change, most famously in Augustus Lane Fox Pitt Rivers’ account of ‘the evolution of culture’, which presented a gradualist, linear model of cultural change (Pitt Rivers 1875) in which, unlike Henry Lewis Morgan’s (1877) similar contemporary scheme of social evolution, material things were central (Figure 2.1). The application of evolutionary thinking to human technologies such as that exemplified by Pitt Rivers’ approach was paralleled by Marx’s slightly earlier suggestion about studying ‘the history of human technology’, highlighted by Tim Ingold, in Capital.

Darwin has aroused our interest in the history of natural technology, that is to say in the origin of the organs of plants and animals as productive instruments utilised for the life purposes of those creatures. Does not the history of the origin of the production of men in society, the organs which form the material basis of every kind of social organisation, deserve equal attention? Since, as Vico says, the essence of the distinction between human history and natural history is that the former is the work of man and the latter is not, would not the history of human technology be easier to write than the history of natural technology?

Marx (1990 [1867]: 392–93, footnote 2; quoted by Ingold 2000a: 362)

As a classificatory project, Pitt Rivers’ scheme was tangibly realized in the organization of his first museum collection. Opened in 1884, the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford University was originally organized by both evolutionary and typological principles (Pitt Rivers 1891), and was constructed as an extension to the University’s Museum of Natural History (Gosden and Larson 2007). The museum made a connection between human technology and Edward Tylor’s notion of ‘culture’, as set out in his book Primitive Culture (1871). Such thinking was expanded in Oxford by Henry Balfour in his study of The Evolution of Decorative Art (Balfour 1891) and in Cambridge by Alfred Cort Haddon in his Evolution in Art (1898), for both of whom the idea of the development of artefact sequences or ‘series’ over time, rather than a rigid theory of evolutionary change as we might understand it today, was important (Morphy and Perkins 2006a: 5).

The publication in 1896 of the English translation of Friedrich Ratzel’s The History of Mankind (the German edition of which had been published in 1885–1888) was an important milestone in the developing use of ethnographic and archaeological collections to study human cultures. Echoing earlier developments in geography, and then evolutionary natural history, Ratzel argued that such studies could go beyond written histories:

We can conceive a universal history of civilization, which should assume a point of view commanding the whole earth, in the sense of surveying the history of the extension of civilization throughout mankind. At no distant future, no one will write a history of the world without touching upon those peoples which have not hitherto been regarded as possessing a history because they have left no records written or graven in stone. History consists of action; and how unimportant beside this is the question of writing or not writing, how wholly immaterial, beside the facts of doing and making, is the word that describes them.

Ratzel (1896: 5)
The introduction by Tylor to Ratzel's very richly illustrated volume—containing some 1,160 illustrations—captured the confidence of this late nineteenth-century conception of the study of artefacts (Figure 2.2). Describing the richness of these illustrations, Tylor argued that they are no mere book-decorations, but a most important part of the apparatus for realising civilisation in its successive stages. They offer, in a way which no verbal description can attain to, an introduction and guide to the use of museum collections on which the Science of Man comes more and more to depend in working out the theory of human development. Works which combine the material presentation of culture with the best descriptions by observant travellers, promote the most great object of displaying mankind as related together in Nature through its very variation.

Tylor (1896: v)

Tylor contrasted biological and linguistic approaches to 'the classification of peoples' with the 'fuller though less technical treatment of the culture-side of human life': the material arts of war, subsistence, pleasure, the stages of knowledge, morals, religion, may be so brought to view that a compendium of them, as found among the ruder peoples, may serve not only as a lesson-book for the learner, but
as a reference-book for the learned' (Tylor 1896: vi). The centrality of the classification of technological objects (e.g. Haddon 1900), combined with the curator’s sense of the distinctive knowledge that can emerge from the study of material things, was captured in Tylor’s coinage of his famous phrase ‘object-lessons’;

In our time there has come to the front a special study of human life through such object-lessons as are furnished by the specimens in museums. These things used to be little more than curiosities belonging to the life of barbarous tribes, itself beginning to be recognised as curious and never suspected as being instructive. Nowadays it is better understood that they are material for the student ‘looking before and after’.

Tylor (1896: vi, my emphasis)

Tylor’s fin-de-siècle argument about ‘looking before and after’ represented a remarkably confident statement of the potential of the curation and study of objects: as not only documenting the past or understanding the present, but also envisioning the future ‘not only as interpreting the past history of mankind, but as even laying down the first stages of curves of movement which will describe and affect the courses of future opinions and institutions’ (Tylor 1896: xi).

In the study of European prehistory, the idea of ‘seriation’ (the identification of a series or sequence through typological analysis) was during the 1880s and 1890s combined with a diffusionist approach to cultural change by Oscar Montelius, based at the Museum of National Antiquities in Stockholm (Montelius 1903). Such work inspired what came to be known as ‘culture-historical archaeology’, providing very different perspectives from earlier evolutionary studies of technological change that now led to the first overall accounts of the sequence of Old World prehistory by archaeologists such as John Myres (1911) and Gordon Childe (1935). These new culture-historical accounts of the prehistoric past were, however, associated especially with the identification of particular artefactual types with particular normative ethnic or cultural groups, in order to trace their migration or diffusion through detailed typological study (Figure 2.3). They also focused upon the socially determining role of technology, for example, in Childe’s combination of Marxist notions of technology and production with a distinctive use of the idea of ‘evolution’ to underline the significance of the emergence of metallurgy in the long-term developments of European prehistory (Sherratt 1989: 179).

However, such confidence in the study of technology did not continue in British social anthropology. The early twentieth century saw the emergence of radical new forms of integrative, book-length writing in British archaeology and anthropology. These were associated with the professionalization of the disciplines as academic subjects, new models of fieldwork, and new distinctions between ethnographic and archaeological knowledge. Such distinctions were centred to a large extent on the place of the study of technology. The changing conceptions of ‘technology’ and ‘material culture’ are considered in the next section.
Social anthropology or material culture

In the early twentieth century a fundamental change in ethnographic field practices, which had over the previous two centuries shifted through ‘the voyage [to] the collection of curios [to] the field trip’ (Defeo 1982: 12), formed a new horizon in the anthropological study of artefacts. Mainstream British anthropological interests shifted from museums and objects (especially technology and ‘primitive’ art) to extended, direct contact through fieldwork with living societies, unmediated by collections (Miller 1987: 11). This change is generally described as a shift to ‘functionalist’ and gradually, from the 1940s, ‘structural-functionalist’ approaches. The focus of field activity by anthropologists such as Bronislaw Malinowski and Alfred Radcliffe-Brown became the generation of field notes, based on participant observation, rather than collections of objects for museum curation. Fieldwork was undertaken for longer periods of time, and led to the production of a new written form: the ethnographic monograph. Evolutionary schemes for studying material culture were rejected as part of what developed into a broader critique of the writing of ‘conjectural history’ of social institutions (Radcliffe-Brown 1948: 1).

This in Radcliffe-Brown’s 1922 monograph on The Andaman Islanders, ‘technology’ was simply listed in the appendix (Tilley 2006a: 2). Radcliffe-Brown did study and collect objects, but he wrote about them only as evidence of ‘racial’ and cultural history, rather than of the contemporary society encountered by the ethnographer. The presence of such appendices is instructive: since the functionalism as set out by Malinowski understood each element of culture, such as institutions or practices, to be understood as performing a function, the study of objects could still be accommodated. Increasingly, however, structural-functionalism sought to relate the functions of the phenomena encountered by the ethnographer purely to social structure. Structural-functionalist anthropology developed as a comparative sociology, on a Durkheimian model. It was integrative like the new culture-historical archaeologies, but was distinct in its frustration with the technological focus of a previous generation of museums—rather than field-based researchers. Thus, Malinowski famously complained that:

As a sociologist, I have always had a certain amount of impatience with the purely technological enthusiasm of the museum ethnologist. In a way I do not want to move one inch from my intransigent position that the study of technology alone is... scientifically sterile. At the same time, I have come to realise that technology is indispensable as a means of approach to economic and sociological activities and to what might be called native science.

Malinowski (1935: 460)

The accommodation of objects within such writing was by understanding their role in social institutions: most influentially in the study of exchange in Malinowski’s Argonauts of the Western Pacific (1922). This engendered a gradual de-materialization of social anthropology, which was closely bound up with a move away from concerns with historical process, towards the study of ‘social facts’ (e.g. Mauss 1990 [1925]). In Britain, this gradual rise of a Durkheimian model for social anthropology witnessed a change in terminology, from ‘technology’ to a new compound term: ‘material culture’. This change in the vocabulary of British anthropology between the 1920s and 1940s was very little discussed at the time.

The shift from ‘technology’ to ‘material culture’ was a desirable one for both museum- and fieldwork-focused anthropologists. On the one hand, for social anthropologists working in a structural-functionalist mode the idea of museum-based anthropology as studying ‘material culture’ allowed a separation off of collections, as a legacy of earlier times, from the emerging modern field of British social anthropology. In this respect, the terminological shift from ‘technology’ to ‘material culture’ was comparable with a broader shift in modes of ‘objectivity’ identified by Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison (1992, 2007), from the ‘mechanical objectivity’ of the late nineteenth century to the ‘trained judgement’ of the twentieth century. Such a move distinguished a modernist social anthropology from earlier technological determinism, such as that found in one of the earliest volumes to use the term ‘material culture’: Leonard Hobhouse, Gerald Wheeler, and Morris Ginsberg’s combination of evolutionary and early functionalist approaches with statistical analysis to examine The Material Culture and Social Institutions of the Simpler Peoples, which focused on how ‘material culture, the control of man over nature in the arts of life’ might ‘roughly, but no more than roughly, reflect the general level of intellectual attainment’ in the society in question (Hobhouse et al. 1913: 6; Pecknall 1965: 1331).

On the other hand, the new term ‘material culture’ was equally attractive to museum-based anthropologists wishing to underline that their collections were more than simply assemblages of objects—the legacy of a previous intellectual tradition—and to revive Tylor’s conception of culture in order to do so. In this view, it provided a curatorial refuge from that other compound term of the period, ‘structural-functionalism’. Thus, J. H. Hutton writing in 1944 on the theme of ‘The Place of Material Culture in the Study of Anthropology’ expressed his ‘dissent most emphatically from the functionalist point of view that the study of “material culture” is of value only, or even primarily, as an approach to the study of economic and social activity’ (Hutton 1944: 3). As Mike Rowlands has put it, the idea of material culture came to represent a place of retreat for museum anthropology during the mid-twentieth century:

Material culture in an anthropological context is scarcely ever about artefacts per se. The term connotes instead the ambivalent feelings that anthropologists have had towards their evolutionist and diffusionist origins and towards museum studies, reflecting also their concern that the subjects, in an age of specialization, should still aspire to be a totalizing and integrative approach to the study of man. The term is therefore metaphorical rather than sub-disciplinary and survived as a conceptual category to allow certain kinds of study
to be practised that would not fit any of the canons established during the hegemony of British social anthropology in the inter-war years.

Rowlands (1983: 15)

The creation of the new category of ‘material culture’ was thus closely bound up with the emergence of British social anthropology, which increasingly comprehended object-based research as ‘clearly subordinated to sociology’, and defined itself as fundamentally distinct from archaeology (Stocking 2001: 187, 192–193). British anthropology was concerned with difference in the contemporary world across space (between Western and non-Western situations), rather than with change over time (Rowlands 2004: 474). In a shift often lamented by the increasingly peripheral voices of museum anthropologists (Sturtevant 1969; Reynolds 1983; see Stocking 1988: 9), British social anthropology sought to move its subject matter entirely past objects, to people.

New archaeology and material culture

The implications for archaeology of this shift away from objects in structural-functionalist social anthropology were at first felt less sharply in Britain than in North America. But in the United States similar ideas of lifting the archaeology out of purely descriptive and antiquarian accounts of the past came to be developed by two key thinkers: Walter Taylor (in the 1940s) and Lewis Binford (from the 1960s). Both Taylor and Binford presented critiques of culture-historical archaeology as privileging the study of typology above that of human behaviour in the past, in which new approaches to the study of archaeological material culture were set out. The work of these two archaeologists formed an important context for the reception of structural-functionalism, especially in relation to its implications for the study of ‘material culture’, in British archaeology during the 1950s and 1960s.

Walter Taylor’s A Study of Archaeology (1948), was based on a Ph.D. written at Harvard between 1938 and 1942. It was strongly influenced by the emerging cultural-eccological models of Clyde Kluckhohn and Julian Steward, and especially by Talcott Parsons’ (1937) vision of structural-functionalism sociology as a science of human action. Taylor presented a ‘conjunctive approach’, which foregrounded archaeological methods to argue that archaeological research leads not to ‘reconstructions’ but active, scientific ‘constructions’ of the past (Taylor 1948: 35–36): it had

as its primary goal the elucidation of cultural conjunctives, the associations and relationships, the ‘affinities’, within the manifestation under investigation. It aims at drawing the completest possible picture of past human life in terms of human and geographic environment. It is chiefly interested in the relation of item to item, trait to trait, complex to complex... within the culture-unit represented and only subsequently in the taxonomic relation of these phenomena to similar ones outside of it.

Taylor (1948: 95–96; original emphasis)

The distinctive identity of archaeology as a discipline was a crucial element of Taylor’s argument: ‘Archaeology is neither history or anthropology. As an autonomous discipline it consists of a method and a set of specialized techniques for the gathering or “production” of cultural information’ (Taylor 1948: 44). Thus, Taylor criticized Alfred Kistler’s study of archaeological objects in his study of The Artifacts of Pecos (1932):

there is neither any provenience given for the vast majority of artifacts, nor any consistent correlation of these specimens with the ceramic periods. The description of the artefacts seems to be for its own sake and for the sake of comparative study on a purely descriptive level with similar artefacts from other sites. It may well be asked whether the meaning of the artefacts for the culture of Pecos is thought to lie in their form and classification of form, or whether it lies in their relations to one another and to the broad cultural and natural environment of Pecos.

Taylor (1948: 48)

While Taylor’s study concluded with a lengthy ‘Outline of Procedures for the Conjunctive Approach’, which argued that ‘an archaeological find is only as good as the notes upon it’ (Taylor 1948: 75), the outspoken attacks in A Study of Archaeology upon many of the most senior figures in American archaeology at the time severely limited its impact for a generation (Leone 1972): a fact later of considerable regret to Taylor himself (Taylor 1972; Maca et al. 2010).

During the 1960s Lewis Binford developed the line of thought begun by Taylor into a more direct critique of culture-historical archaeology. Binford’s work inspired the development of ‘processual’ or ‘New’ archaeology during the 1970s. But where Taylor had argued for a strong archaeological disciplinarity, Binford’s commitment (which he shared with Taylor) to a focus on behaviour rather than typology led him instead to define ‘Archaeology as Anthropology’, repeating Gordon Willey and Philip Phillips’ contention that ‘archaeology is anthropology or it is nothing’ (Willey and Phillips 1958: 3; Binford 1962: 217), and extending Leslie White’s neo-cultural evolutionary argument that ‘culture is the extra-somatic means of adaptation for the human organism’ to view ‘material culture’ as an ‘extra-somatic means of adaptation’ (White 1959: 8; Binford 1962: 217–218).

Binford distinguished between ‘three major functional sub-classes of material culture’: technic (‘those artifacts having their primary functional context in coping directly with the physical environment’), socio-technic (‘the extra-somatic means of articulating individuals one with another into cohesive groups capable of efficiently maintaining themselves and of manipulating the technology’, such as ‘a king’s crown’), and ideotechnic (‘items which signify and symbolize the ideological rationalizations for the social system and further provide the symbolic milieu in which
individuals are enculturated, such as 'figures of deities' (Binford 1962: 217, 219–220). He argued that such distinctions would allow archaeologists to develop distinctive theoretical perspectives on the significance of certain material items in social life, and to distinguish alternative methods for the study of past environmental adaptation, social relations, and ideas or beliefs through material culture.

We should not equate 'material culture' with technology. Similarly we should not seek explanations for observed differences and similarities in 'material culture' within a single interpretative frame of reference. It has often been suggested that we cannot dig up a social system or ideology. Granted we cannot excavate a kinship terminology or a philosophy, but we can and do excavate the material items which functioned together with these more behavioral elements within the appropriate cultural sub-systems. The formal structure of artifact assemblages together with the between element contextual relationships should and do present a systematic and understandable picture of the total extinct cultural system.

Binford (1962: 218–219)

Thus, Binford argued that archaeological material culture should be understood as evidence of human behaviour and adaptation, operating in different cultural registers from the practical to the social to the ideational, rather than more general reflections of particular culture-historical traits (Figure 2.4). He developed this positivist view through the use of ethnographic analogy and a method of making general statements about the systematic relationships between human behaviour and material culture, which he termed 'middle range theory' (Binford 1983). In his classic critique of culture-historical archaeology, Binford argued that an analysis of the stone tools associated with the Middle-Upper Palaeolithic transition in Europe, in which François Bordes suggested that difference in tools represented could be understood as different traditions that he labelled 'Mousterian,' 'Acheulian,' etc., should instead be understood as the evidence of different behavioural adaptations rather than different cultural groups (Binford 1973; Bordes 1973). The materialism of the New Archaeology drew from the contrasting ecological perspectives of Julian Steward and the technological focus of Leslie White: both of which tended, under the banner of neo-evolutionism, towards a materialist determinism for social structure (Trigger 1984: 279).

In Britain, a similar direction to that of the Americanist New Archaeology had begun to be explored by Grahame Clark at Cambridge. Clark’s transitional approach, which has been described as 'functional-processual' (Trigger 2006), made use of ’systems’ approaches and an emphasis upon ecological adaptation in the reconstruction of past societies, as set out in his Archaeology and Society (1939). However, the reception of structural-functionalist social anthropology among British archaeologists did not lead in the same way to the development of the positivist scientific models that came to characterize the Americanist processual archaeology. This was for two principal reasons: contemporary debates in British social anthropology about historical change, and the early response to Walter Taylor’s arguments from the perspectives of British culture-historical archaeology.

In British social anthropology, the shift in the structural-functionalist anthropology away from interests in change over time, which had accompanied its shift from earlier evolutionary and diffusionist approaches, came to be critiqued. A seminal contribution to this critique was Evans-Pritchard’s Marrett Lecture of 1959, which described the anthropology of Malinowski and (by implication) Radcliffe-Brown as characterized by an ‘insistence that a society can be understood satisfactorily without reference to its past’ (Evans-Pritchard 1959: 129). Evans-Pritchard suggested that social anthropologists write ‘cross-sections of history, integrative descriptive accounts of primitive peoples at a moment of time; arguing that anthropology should be located within the humanities rather than the sciences (Evans-Pritchard 1959: 122, 123–124).
Meanwhile, in archaeology the transatlantic reception of Walter Taylor's arguments was framed by Christopher Hawkes' paper 'Archaeological method and theory: a view from the Old World', written during a stay in the United States in 1953. Hawkes addressed Taylor's claim that if archaeology limits itself to a mere external chronicling of material culture traits, it will be stopping short of its proper anthropological objective, and will be simply compiling statistics when it ought to be revealing culture' (Hawkes 1954: 165). Focusing upon the study of a period for which documentary sources are not available (later European prehistory), Hawkes described the archaeological process of inductive reasoning, 'from comparison and analysis of observed phenomena to the human activity that once produced them'. Such reasoning, Hawkes argued, involved four levels of increasingly difficult 'inferences': from understanding the 'techniques' producing such phenomena (the most straightforward) to information about 'subsistence-economics', 'social/political institutions', and finally 'religious institutions and spiritual life'. Moving from inference to narrative, Hawkes echoed Evans-Pritchard in his criticism of the ahistorical approach of structural-functionalism as 'scientifically indefensible', but also argued for the importance of acknowledging human movements and diffusion in the past (Hawkes 1954: 165). These last themes had been important for the culture-historical archaeology of Childe and others (Hawkes 1954: 161–165), but shaped Graham Clark's later use of scientific dating techniques to generate new accounts of World Prehistory (Clark 1961).

Hawkes' model of archaeological inference from material remains to technological, economic, political and then ideational dimensions of past societies was criticized by the 'contextual archaeology' of the 1980s as grounded on an a priori distinction between technological and symbolic objects (see below). But for our present purposes it is sufficient to note that Hawkes' reception of Taylor's arguments led him to two positions. First, he foregrounded archaeological methodology, and especially its engagement with the material remains of the past, as a central problem: a position quite possibly inspired by his early professional experiences as Assistant, and then Assistant Keeper, at the British Museum (1928–1946). Secondly, Hawkes retained earlier geographical and historical interests that contrasted with synchronic structural-functionalist approaches: echoing Evans-Pritchard in his criticism of the ahistorical approach of structural-functionalism (Hawkes 1954: 165).

While at Oxford the arguments of Hawkes (from archaeology) and Evans-Pritchard (from social anthropology) both resisted the model of social structure presented by structural-functionalism, at Cambridge from the late 1960s the Binfordian model of the New Archaeology was taken up and reworked by David Clarke. In contrast with Binford's approach, Clarke's Analytical Archaeology (1968) strongly restated Taylor's commitment to archaeology as a discipline distinct from both history and social anthropology. Clarke developed an account of how archaeological knowledge develops from archaeological methods as applied to archaeological materials. Central to his model was a concern about a division of disciplinary labour between the material practices of fieldwork or lab-based research and the scholarly writing of integrative accounts of the past.

There is currently a tendency to take the term prehistorian as meaning 'a writer of history covering periods without written records', with the implication that the 'prehistorian' is an armchair synthesizer of the analytical work of the 'archaeologist'. Here the term archaeologist is warped to mean the unintelligent 'excavator' or the narrow-minded 'specialist'—the term prehistorian thus acquiring a rosy luster of dilettantish value at the expense of the devalued archaeologist. The danger of historical narrative as a vehicle for archaeological results is that it pleases by virtue of its smooth coverage and apparent finality, whilst the data on which it is based are never comprehensive... Archaeological data are not historical data and consequently archaeology is not history. The view taken in this work is that archaeology is archaeology (with apologies to Gertrude Stein).

Clarke (1968: 11)

In presenting a vision of archaeology as 'a discipline in its own right'—concerned with the recovery, systematic description and study of material culture in the past (1968: 12)—Clarke sought to move forward the line of enquiry begun by Taylor by calling not only for a shift from the 'common sense' description of material culture to a disciplinary 'self-consciousness', but further to the development of a distinctive body of archaeological theory that would shift the field from a 'self-consciousness' of materials and methods to 'critical self-consciousness'. Clarke (1973) described this process as archaeology's 'loss of innocence'. With reference to the radical revisions of prehistoric chronologies that resulted from the scientific use of radiocarbon dating (Renfrew 1973a), Clarke argued for the contingency of archaeological knowledge upon materially-situated scientific practice, suggesting that 'a new environment develops new materials and new methods with new consequences, which demand new philosophies, new solutions and new perspectives' (Clarke 1973: 8–9). The continuing significance of these arguments for archaeological conceptions of material culture and fieldwork will be seen towards the end of this chapter.

***

This section has traced the layered sequence through which the sociological model of British anthropology that emerged during the early twentieth century led to a shift in terminology from 'technology' through the invention of the idea of 'material culture'. This change was a central part of a division of disciplinary labour (and disciplinary influence) between the museum and the collection on one hand, and the field site and the ethnographic monograph on the other. Thus, the idea of 'material culture' emerged at precisely the moment in anthropology's history in which a particular focus upon social structure as the object of ethnographic enquiry 'effectively banned artifact study to the comparative isolation of the anthropological museum and relegated its practitioners to a peripheral position within the discipline' (van Beek 1989: 91). However, the influence of these sociological approaches upon archaeology
II: The Material-Cultural Turn: from 'object-lessons' to 'object domains'

In the discussion of excavated sequences, archaeologists commonly group series of layers, cuts, and fills into a broader chronological sequence of 'phases'. The second phase that we can identify in this excavation of 'material culture studies' begins with the strong influence upon social anthropology, from the 1960s, of two new, inter-related bodies of thought. The first of these was the application of structuralist analysis, developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss from Saussurean linguistics (De Saussure 1919 [1966]), to the study of social structure (Leach 1961; Lévi-Strauss 1963). The second was a focus upon interpretation and the study of meaning and social practice, developed especially by Clifford Geertz (1973), which represented the development of a Parsonian, and ultimately Weberian, hermeneutic model for social science, but also paralleled by new Durkheimian accounts of the anthropology of ritual performance and 'symbolic action' (Turner 1970: 159; see Turner 1967). The focus in both the structuralist and interpretive anthropologies on themes such as ritual practice, symbolism, and myth provided space for a gradual refocusing of anthropological research interests upon objects. As will become clear, however, this focus on objects was concerned quite specifically with the identification and comparative study of abstract schemes of form, style, and design, and with the relationships of such phenomena with meaning and use in practice.

The publication in 1963 of the English translation of the first volume of Lévi-Strauss' *Structural Anthropology* was a watershed for anthropologists studying material culture. Lévi-Strauss presented analyses of the underlying 'grammars' of artefact designs, as part of a more general account of the structures that he understood as lying behind all manifestations of culture: from ritual masks to kinship proscriptions (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1982). For example, in his study of 'Split Representation in the Art of Asia and America', Lévi-Strauss applied approaches from structuralist linguistics to ethnographic objects in order to develop new kinds of comparative studies of 'primitive art' (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 245). In doing so, he built upon the sociological study of Primitive Classification that had been established by Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss at the start of the twentieth century (Durkheim and Mauss 1905 [1963]). The reception of French structuralism work alongside American interpretive anthropology in British anthropology inspired a range of structuralist and semiotic anthropological studies of style and form in artworks and the built environment (e.g. Munn 1975; Humphrey 1974), and the beginnings of studies of material culture as a kind of communicative system, analogous to, but not reducible to, language (Rowlands 2004: 475-476). This was also developed in New Archaeology through Martin Wobst's idea of 'stylistic behaviour' concerned with 'information exchange' (Wobst 1977).

It was in this context that British archaeology and anthropology witnessed a second major shift in the study of material things, which culminated during the 1980s as what I want to call the 'Material-Cultural Turn'. Where the various responses to the sociological model of structural-functionalism had been united in a terminological shift from 'technology' to 'material culture', the responses to structuralist and interpretive approaches led to the emergence of the idea of 'material culture studies'. The idea of material culture studies emerged from the desire to bring the structural and the meaningful together in a single analysis in archaeology and anthropology. For this reason, it can be understood to be closely associated with the reception of the 'practice theories' of Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens in archaeology and anthropology. However, French structural Marxism, American historical archaeology and 'modern material culture studies', and the 'ethnoarchaeology' that developed in American New Archaeology also represented important influences.

**Structural Marxism and 'vulgar materialism' approaches**

The first attempts to reconcile grand narratives of structuralism with the more fine-grained account of interpretive and symbolic anthropology developed through the
the intrinsic properties of artefacts, through for instance the use of geophysical techniques, has simply underlined the need for systematic social interpretation. The more patterns archaeologists discern in their data, the more questions will be forced upon their attention.

Rowlands and Gledhill (1976: 25)

Here, the idea of a ‘relation between archaeology and anthropology’ mapped directly on to a conviction in ‘the linkage of the material culture record to the socio-cultural system’ (Rowlands and Gledhill 1976: 23, 26). In this view, just as archaeology and anthropology were complementary rather than distinct disciplines, so the idea of relationships between artefacts and social structure represented a central research question (Rowlands and Gledhill 1976: 37).

**Historical archaeology and ‘modern material culture studies’**

As with the development of the New Archaeology in the 1960s, in the 1970s transatlantic exchanges were critical in the development of archaeological material culture studies. The reception of structuralism in American historical archaeology, especially in James Deetz’s discussion in his *Invitation to Archaeology* (1967) of the ‘analysis of form’, was based on the idea of the ‘mental template’:

Artefacts are man-made objects: they are also fossilized ideas … [T]he making of a proper form of an object exists in the mind of the maker, and when this idea is expressed in tangible form in raw material, an artifact results … [T]he form of an artifact is a close approximation of this template.

Deetz (1967: 45)

Deetz sought, for example in his discussion of the making of a Chumash basket, to combine the structuralist analysis of artefacts with the study of long-term change: a focus on the making of artefact forms as influenced by tradition, but also other factors such as ‘technology, function, innovation’, and the importance of the idea of context in the study of material culture (Deetz 1967: 47, 67–74).

The new term ‘material culture studies’ came to be used to define a set of research practices rather than just the object of enquiry defined by the term ‘material culture’. During the late 1970s, this new term emerged from American historical archaeology through the idea of ‘modern material culture studies’ (but see Fenton 1974), and a more general interest in ‘the importance of material things’ in historical archaeology (Ferguson 1977). This American literature was significant for British archaeology and anthropology because of how two of its characteristics were refracted into debates over the relationships between archaeology and anthropology at Cambridge during the 1970s.

First, the term ‘modern material culture studies’ was used to describe the archaeological study of the contemporary Western world, whether as part of...
ethnoarchaeology (South 1979: 114), or more commonly to describe projects such as William Rathje's 'garbology', which undertook an archaeology of the contemporary world—"the archaeology of us" (Gould and Schiffer 1981), which in Rathje's case involved the excavation of contemporary landfills in order to learn about the environmental dimensions of modern life (Rathje 1979). While such approaches were often characterized by the scientific field approaches of the New Archaeology, they also included a range of alternative interpretive or 'behavioural' views (Ascher 1974a, 1974b; Schiffer 1976).

Secondly, work such as Rathje's and Gould's extended perspectives from a new wave of interpretive Americanist historical archaeology, in particular, as developed by James Deetz (1977) in the study of early modern America, which had during the previous decade developed anthropological approaches to material culture studies that contrasted with the use of the term 'material culture' in folksong studies, decorative arts traditions, and historical archaeology in the United States (Quiñby 1976). Defining 'archaeology as a social science', Deetz (1972) crucially used the study of material culture as a way of reconciling structuralist and semiotic approaches in anthropology. Deetz's definition of material culture, set out in his studies Invitation to Archaeology (1967) and In Small Things Forgotten: an archaeology of early American life (1977), was famously broad:

Material culture is usually considered to be roughly synonymous with artifacts, the vast universe of objects used by mankind to cope with the physical world, to facilitate social intercourse, and to benefit our state of mind. A somewhat broader definition of material culture is useful in emphasizing how profoundly our world is the product of our thoughts, as that sector of our physical environment that we modify through culturally determined behavior. This definition includes all artifacts, from the simplest, such as a common pin, to the most complex, such as an interplanetary space vehicle. But the physical environment includes more than what most definitions of material culture recognize. We can also consider cuts of meat as material culture, since there are many ways to dress an animal; likewise, snowy fields and even the horse that pulls the plow, since scientific breeding of livestock involves the conscious modification of an animal's form according to culturally derived ideals. Our body itself is part of our physical environment, so that such things as parades, dancing, and all aspects of kinetics—human motion—fit within our definition. Nor is the definition limited only to matter in the solid state. Fountains are liquid examples, as are lily ponds, and material that is partly gas includes hot air balloons and neon signs. I have suggested in Invitation to Archaeology that even language is part of material culture, a prime example of it in its gaseous state. Words, after all, are air masses shaped by the speech apparatus according to culturally acquired rules.

Deetz (1977: 24-25)

Deetz's work combined structuralist and semiotic analyses of this very wide range of 'material culture' in order to gain a sense of the 'world views' of people in the past through the apparently inconsequential modern fragments studied by historical archaeology. It sought to introduce a historical dimension into structuralist analyses by studying changing world views over time. This interpretive approach bore some resemblance to the *Annales* historians' study of French material culture in relation to *mentalités*, and was directly inspired by Deetz's colleague Henry Glassie's (1975) structuralist study of vernacular buildings in Virginia in relation to the emergence of the 'Georgian Order' as a historically situated structuring principle for late eighteenth-century material culture. But Deetz also used part-fictional interpretive tableaux to evoke a kind of Geertzian 'thick description' of the material dimensions of human life in relation to significance and meaning (Geertz 1973). This similarity possibly derived from the common training received by Deetz and Geertz at Harvard during the mid-1950s, where the influence of Talcott Parsons was still strongly felt, along with more recent influences, such as Dell Hymes' nascent socio-linguistics (Hymes 1964). In the influence upon British archaeology and anthropology of Geertz's approach to interpretive anthropology, and of Deetz's combination of structuralism with a focus on historical change, their shared commitment to understanding 'human behavior [as] . . . symbolic action' (Geertz 1973: 10; my emphasis) laid the foundations for the later reception of practice theory (discussed below).

The emergence of material culture studies:

Cambridge and UCL

It was in this intellectual context that the Material-Cultural Turn in British archaeology and anthropology emerged during the late 1970s and early 1980s at the two centres for the development of British material culture studies in the 1980s: the Department of Archaeology at Cambridge and the Department of Anthropology at University College London (UCL). The arguments of both structural Marxism and Deetzian historical archaeology/modern material culture studies, which were united by a desire to reintegrate in a single analysis of structuralist and interpretive anthropology, the material and meaningful aspects of social life—"to connect people and things" (Deetz 1967: 138)—were received in different ways in these two departments. In London they dovetailed with an emergent body of thinking about 'material culture studies' that developed at UCL through the work and teaching of Peter Ucko and Darryll Forde (e.g. Ucko 1969; see Rowlands 1983: 16; Buchli 2002a: 11). Especially important here was the development of teaching on material culture and 'primitive art' by Peter Ucko after his appointment in 1962 (Layton et al. 2006: 1-3), the influence of British symbolic-structuralist anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966; Douglas and Isherwood 1979), and the influence of Anthony Forge at the London School of Economics. The desire among this group to combine structuralist and semiotic approaches was exemplified by Forge's discussion of the study of 'Primitive Art and Society' (Forge 1973a, 1973b). Forge drew upon approaches in American archaeology to the study of 'icons' and the 'grammar' of classes of objects or
The Material-Cultural Turn: Ethnoarchaeology

The idea of 'ethnoarchaeology'—the comparative archaeological study of contemporary human societies to inform the archaeological explanation of the past—emerged during the 1970s from the desire in Binfordian New Archaeology to develop testable correlations between material remains and human behavior (Binford 1978; Gould 1978; Kramer 1979; but see the earlier arguments of Ascher 1961, 1962). Developing the idea of 'the archaeology of a contemporary community' (Ascher 1968) as a kind of 'living archaeology' (Gould 1980), ethnoarchaeology contributed to the development of a principal theme of New Archaeology: the challenges of relating patterns in the material record to patterns of human behavior in the past, read through the alternative cultural and natural processes that lead to the formation of the archaeological record (Schiffer 1972). Such 'archaeologically oriented ethnographic work,' focused on the material dimensions of human actions, from the manufacture and use of objects to their being discarded, was used to contribute to the New Archaeology's aim of generating universal models for 'material correlates' of human behavior (Lane 2006: 404).

In the early 1980s, two contributions to the Cambridge University Press series 'New Studies in Archaeology' by Ian Hodder (1982a) and Daniel Miller (1985), laid the foundations for the Material-Cultural Turn in British archaeology and anthropology. This work combined the idea of ethnoarchaeology from New Archaeology in the United States with structuralist approaches to the interpretation of symbols and categories. The choice of ethnoarchaeology—a processual subdiscipline par excellence—as a place from which to develop a critique of the New Archaeology, was as David van Reybrouck has observed, at first glance a strange one (van Reybrouck 2000: 40). However, the field provided an opportunity for archaeologists to seek to link structuralist studies of material culture with interpretive ethnographic accounts of living populations: developing case studies that explored further Hodder's early critiques, in his reorientation of David Clarke's model of 'spatial archaeology,' of 'simple correlations between material culture and society' (Hodder 1978a; cf. 1978b). In this respect, the British ethnoarchaeology of the early 1980s was closer to the sociological idea of 'ethnomethodology' (Garfinkel 1967) than it was to processual ethnoarchaeology.

In Symbols in Action: ethnarchaeological studies of material culture Ian Hodder (1982a) described the results of fieldwork that focused on the relationships between ethnic identity and stylistic variations in the design of items of material culture. His fieldwork was conducted among a range of groups in various locations in eastern Africa: in Kenya (among Tugen, Pokot, and Njemps groups in the Baringo district, and among Samburu agriculturalists and Doroobo hunter-gatherers on the Lerothi Plateau); western Zambia (in the Lozi kingdom); and in two Nuba communities in central Sudan. Discussing decorative symbolism in a wide range of objects from carved calabash milk containers to stools, spears, and cooking pots.
development of 'symbolic and structural archaeology' into the 'contextual archaeology' that was to radicalize British archaeological engagements with material culture (discussed below).

In contrast, Daniel Miller's ethnoarchaeological study of ceramics in a rural village in the Malwa region of central India, Artefacts as Categories, was focused not on the identification of meaning and human identity in material culture, but on the more cognitive idea of 'categorization', and how it related to social practice. But like Hodder, Miller (1985: 5) sought to work between structuralist and semiotic approaches, moving beyond their tendency towards an 'extreme reduction' of 'social structure and cultural forms' to abstract classificatory schemes. For this reason, Miller's use of ethnoarchaeology was based on the argument that 'material culture sets reflect the organizational principles of human categorization processes, and that it is through the understanding of such processes that we may best be able to interpret changes in material culture sets over time' (Miller 1982a: 17).

In his account of fieldwork in a rural village, Miller (1985: 197) argued that the study of 'artefact variability' across technological and cultural categories could reveal how social competition between castes was expressed through ceramics. By treating 'material objects [as] a concrete lasting form of human categorisation', he sought to connect structure with material practice, to 'link language with parole and provide explanations in a "realist" mould, since categorization processes mediate and organise the social construction of reality' (Miller 1982a: 17, 23). In doing so, Artefacts as Categories was a transitional work that started to move beyond the normative behavioural studies of artefact style that had characterized the New Archaeology (e.g. Wiessner 1984; see Boast 1996). By undertaking 'the micro-analysis of the material world... in conjunction with archaeology', Miller (1985: 205) focused not on meaning and symbols, but instead began to use social theory to extend the scope of what Colin Renfrew (1973b) had, a decade earlier, termed 'social archaeology'.

However, a certain frustration not only with the aims of processual ethnoarchaeology, but also with archaeology's methods for studying material culture more generally, emerged in Miller's study. The focus was not on artefacts per se, but on 'artefacts as categories', and on the identification of 'a pottery code' the structure of which could be related to 'the various structural positions held by individuals in society' (Miller 1985: 201–202). In an editorial decision that recalled Radcliffe-Brown's treatment of technology in his study of The Andaman Islanders (see p. 36 above), a 'Detailed Description of Pottery Manufacture' was provided as an appendix (Miller 1985: 207–232; Figure 2.6). In a reversal of Hawkes' hierarchical metaphor, the attraction of ethnoarchaeology had been that 'it was usually impossible to ignore the social basis of material culture' (Miller 1987: 112; my emphasis). Accordingly, Miller's subsequent contributions to archaeological theory related to the uses of social theory, and especially the potential of critical theory to reveal ideology and power (Miller and Tilley 1984; Miller 1989), rather than further studies of ceramic manufacture.
The suggestion by Hodder and Miller that ethnoarchaeology was particularly well-positioned to combine structuralist and symbolic approaches through a ‘materialist’ focus was shared elsewhere in the field, especially in African archaeology (Schmidt 1983). But British archaeology and social anthropology both shifted away from ethnoarchaeology from the mid-1980s (van Reybrouck 2000). Ian Hodder came to suggest that ethnoarchaeology should ‘disappear, to be replaced by or integrated with the anthropology of material culture and social change’ (1986: 101). Nevertheless, the influence of ethnoarchaeology was fundamental to the emergence of contextual archaeology, offering a field (both human and material) from which to critique the focus in processual archaeology upon methodology. This led to a long-standing debate over theory and practice in British archaeology (Hodder 1992), and to an active turning away from archaeological methods in the anthropological material culture studies conducted by those trained in archaeology (but see Hodder 1999). Distancing himself explicitly from the perspectives of David Clarke, Miller expressed discomfort with what he saw as the fetishizing of the archaeological object:

The long-term influence of this early 1980s British ethnoarchaeological work relates also, however, to the different directions in which contextual archaeology and anthropological material culture studies developed thereafter. One factor here is the significance of area studies. Richard Fardon has highlighted the dependence of the shift from structural-functionalism to structuralism in British social anthropology upon the hegemonic shift from regional schools of ethnography in eastern Africa, to India and South-east Asia (Fardon 1990; see discussions in Dresch 1992; Hicks 2003: 325). It is notable that this geographical distinction was precisely reproduced between the ethnoarchaeological studies of Hodder and Miller respectively. As Hodder developed contextual and interpretive archaeology and Miller combined structuralism and practice theory in anthropological material culture studies from the late 1980s, a parallel distinction emerged in their alternative approaches to the relationships between the social and the material. Although, both fields moved strongly away from the idea of ethnoarchaeology, the subsequent replacement of the field of enquiry with prehistoric archaeology on the one hand and modern consumption on the other allowed the distinction between these two visions of material culture studies (one apparently archaeological, one avowedly anthropological) to persist.

The Material-Cultural Turn: Contextual archaeology

The development of a body of new thinking in British archaeology, which came to be known as ‘contextual archaeology’, and later ‘post-processual archaeology’ (due to its critique of the New or processual archaeology of Binford and others), took place from about 1978 in Cambridge, principally through the work of Ian Hodder and his students. The publication of the proceedings of a conference at Cambridge, held in April 1980, on the theme of ‘Symbolism and Structuralism in Archaeology’ (Hodder 1982b) was a landmark in the emergence of this critique (Hodder et al. 2007). The diverse contributions to the volume were united in aiming to move beyond what they identified as a persistent functionalist approach in the New Archaeology towards society and culture, including material culture (Hodder 1982c: 2). As David van Reybrouck has argued, during the mid-1980s very much of the thinking that came to characterize British contextual archaeology developed
through applying 'an archaeological approach to the present', in Western (and, specifically, British) as well as non-Western field locations (Figure 2.7):


van Reybrouck (2000: 40)

Such 'contextual ethnoarchaeology' provided the impetus for a shift that Ian Hodder described as a more general disciplinary move beyond archaeology’s ‘loss of innocence’ (Clarke 1973) ‘towards a mature archaeology’ (Hodder 1981), which he set out in his book Reading the Past (Hodder 1986). The definition of material culture as ‘meaningfully constituted’ (Hodder 1986: 4), rather than passively reflective of behaviour, was the central argument of contextual archaeology. This emergence of material culture studies at the core of archaeological debates can be understood as a response to an explicit challenge set for archaeology by structuralist anthropologist Edmund Leach in a series of papers during the 1970s (Leach 1973, 1977, 1978). In 1973, Leach’s concluding remarks for The Explanation of Culture Change: Models in Archaeology (Renfrew 1973c) had called for archaeology to embrace structuralism, and thus to move beyond what Leach had defined as a residual functionalism in the New Archaeology:

Do not misunderstand me. Functionalism is ‘old hat’ in social anthropology; it is ‘new hat’ in archaeology. . . [T]he paradigm which is currently in high fashion among the social anthropologists, namely that of structuralism, has not yet caught up with the archaeologists at all. Don’t worry, it will! But meanwhile interdisciplinary communication is rather difficult.

(Leach 1973: 762)

In Leach’s view, a shift to structuralism in archaeology would involve a new set of approaches to material culture, since ‘functionalist proto-man is a tool-maker whereas structuralist proto-man is a user of language’ (Leach 1973: 762):

Am I making my point? Ideas are more important than things. . . . archaeologists need to appreciate that the material objects revealed by their excavations are not ‘things in themselves’, nor are they just artifacts—things made by man—they are representations of ideas.

(Leach 1973: 107)

Leach’s challenge for archaeology was for the field to reconcile structuralist and symbolic approaches to material culture. In undertaking the task set by Leach—critiquing the New Archaeology as retaining many of the characteristics of functionalism (Leach 1973), and seeking to accommodate both structuralist and symbolic approaches (Leach 1977)—contextual archaeology came to use a wide range of theoretical arguments. It aimed to ‘supercede[e],’ while simultaneously integrating, ‘structuralism,’ in studies undertaken by archaeologists that were ‘not concerned with the abstract principles of mind, as they would be if literal structuralists,’ but were ‘concerned with context, meaning and particular historical circumstances, as well as with the generative principles which unify particular cultures;’ with ‘particular structures but within their historical, i.e. material, context’ (Leone 1982: 179). Thus, Ian Hodder’s key statement of the aims and approaches of a contextual archaeology, Reading the Past, identified ‘four general issues of post-processual archaeology’ which were expressed in terms of bilateral relationships (Hodder 1986: 188). These relationships were between ‘norm and individual’ (and an interest in individual agency rather than behaviour); ‘process and structure’ (a focus on historical change rather than static models); ‘ideal and material’ (and a critique of Hawkes’ model of inference as a ‘ladder of inference’ that distinguished between the ideational and technological dimensions of the material remains of the past); and ‘subject and object’ (a focus on the cultural meaning rather than the social function of objects, and the idea that ‘both material items and their deposition are actively involved in social relations’). (Hodder 1982a: 6).

Hodder addressed these relationships through an archaeological process that was defined as ‘interpretation—an idea read through R. G. Collingwood (1946)—rather than ‘explanation’ (Renfrew 1973a) or a positivist philosophy of science (which
Hodder associated with Binford 1983). Hodder argued that interpreting material culture was analogous to reading texts, and distinct from straightforwardly 'reading off' from evidence through middle range theory. The contextual focus on material culture as text was, Hodder argued, distinct from a conventional structuralist focus on language (Hodder 1989). Thus, while contextual archaeology moved strongly away from the idea of ethnoarchaeology, it retained a strong sense of the contemporary nature of archaeological practice: interpreting what remains of the past in the present, working in a different sense from ethnoarchaeology on 'the present past' (Hodder 1982a).

Contextual archaeology's critique of the ahistorical character of the New Archaeology (Hodder 1991b: 12) did not extend to its own reception of structuralism, despite the static nature of structuralist models (Ucko 1995: 14). Instead, contextual archaeology sought to accommodate historical change—clearly so necessary for any meaningful study of the past—through the use of the work of Pierre Bourdieu. The English translation of Bourdieu's Outline of a Theory of Practice had been published in 1977, and called for 'a debate in archaeology concerning structuralism... and its various critiques' (1982a: 229). Bourdieu's theory of practice attempted to reconcile structuralist and phenomenological perspectives, and was grounded in the idea of the habitus. Bourdieu's term habitus referred to human dispositions gained through living in the material environment, which he understood as central to the reproduction of social structures. This work led Hodder to his definition of the inadequacy of structuralism as a failure to accommodate agency and meaning—'to develop an adequate theory of practice' (Hodder 1982a: 8)—rather than only a failure to accommodate historical change. Hodder's use of Bourdieu provided one solution to a perceived inability 'of both functionalism and structuralism... to explain particular historical contexts and the meaningful actions of individuals constructing social change within those contexts' (Hodder 1982a: 8–9). Historical process was thus accommodated, and 'long-term change' read through Annales historians ideas of 'the structures of everyday life' (Braudel 1981), in terms of a changing of contexts, which both shaped and resulted from practice itself (Hodder 1987b).

Accordingly, the first book-length study that applied the principles of contextual archaeology, Ian Hodder's account of The Domestication of Europe (1990), set out a series of changing structures in Neolithic Europe, which he termed domus, agrios, and foris. This approach directly echoed (but did not cite) Bourdieu's conceptions habitus and unconscious doxa (Bourdieu 1977), and explored relationships between cultural and natural material environments. This focus on practice (as generating changing social contexts and new material culture), theories of long-term change, and the analogy of archaeological interpretation with the reading of texts, allowed the contextual archaeology to work with both symbolic and structuralist approaches—but also allowed the persistence of the structuralist analysis of particular artefacts and sites within an overarching chronological narrative, most vividly through the dualistic model of domus and agrios (Figure 2.8).

**Fig. 2.8 Ian Hodder's model of 'Associations of the domus and agrios in [Neolithic] SE Europe' (from Hodder 1990: 66, figure 3.5).**

The Material-Cultural Turn: the anthropology of mass consumption

A third trajectory of thought within the Material-Cultural Turn, which emerged from ethnoarchaeology and the 'symbolic and structural archaeology' of early 1980s Cambridge, was Daniel Miller's conception of 'material culture studies' as a social anthropology of consumption. This focus on consumption was an active inversion of the focus upon production in structural Marxist anthropology, and a complement to the focus on exchange in economic anthropology. It was centred on a Hegelian notion of self-creation. Miller's work in contextual archaeology (1982a, 1982b, 1982c, 1984) and ethnoarchaeology (1985) was now extended into the study of material things in the contemporary West, and was characterized by a gradual, but
The argument of Material Culture and Mass Consumption, the idea that the material aspects of a culture and its mass production, are essential to understanding the cultural identity of a society. This idea is developed through a discussion of the role of objects and materials in the formation of cultural identity. The book also explores the relationship between mass consumption and the production of cultural artifacts, showing how the mass production of goods can influence the way people perceive and interact with their cultural heritage.

Miller's work is based on the idea that material culture is a key element in the formation of cultural identity, and that mass consumption is a significant factor in the production and reproduction of cultural artifacts. The book explores the relationship between mass consumption and the production of cultural artifacts, showing how the mass production of goods can influence the way people perceive and interact with their cultural heritage.

Miller's work is based on the idea that material culture is a key element in the formation of cultural identity, and that mass consumption is a significant factor in the production and reproduction of cultural artifacts. The book explores the relationship between mass consumption and the production of cultural artifacts, showing how the mass production of goods can influence the way people perceive and interact with their cultural heritage.
were sometimes hard to grasp (Mulderi 1989). *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* made three arguments that were central to British social anthropology’s Material-Cultural Turn.

First was Miller’s idea of ‘the humility of things’: the recognition of the influence of apparently banal everyday items, those things ‘usually regarded as trivial’, upon social life (Miller 1987: 5). Directly echoing James Deetz’s evocation of ‘small things forgotten’ a decade earlier, Miller argued that such objects mediate social relations silently, in a kind of ‘ordering of the unconscious world’ (Deetz 1977; Miller 1987: 99). The reception of *Artifacts as Categories* in social anthropology had seen some criticism of a lack of ethnographic detail, and concerns over the idea of an archaeological focus on the modern world as simply obsessed with irrelevant detail (Moeran 1987). But Miller’s earlier discussions of the ‘trivial nature of pottery’ (Miller 1985: 204) led him to use an archaeological metaphor—to excavate certain areas of investigation formerly branded as ‘trivial’ or ‘inauthentic’ (Miller 1987: 38)—to explain the distinct challenges and potentials of the study of ‘objects in everyday interaction’, especially when compared with the study of language (Miller 1987: 98).

Secondly, there was the idea of context in the study of material culture. Here Miller’s arguments were developed directly from contextual archaeology, but unlike the cultural focus upon ‘text’ in the work of Ian Hodder, Miller’s perspectives here were closer to Giddens than Bourdieu. Miller used Gombrich’s (1976) evocation of the ‘anonymous and modest presence’ of a picture frame (Miller 1987: 101) and Goffman’s (1974) ‘frame analysis’ to argue that processes of objectification constituted contexts: so the ‘pervasive presence’ of ‘artefacts as objects’ could be understood ‘as the context for modern life’ (Miller 1987: 85). This change in Miller’s focus from that of the contextual ethnography might be compared with a longer-term shift in anthropological thinking about museum objects: ‘from categorical thinking to relational thinking’ (Godden and Larson 2007: 242). In this respect, Miller’s approach was much closer to the long-standing focus since structural-functionalism upon the analysis of social relations, rather than types and categories in their own right.

Thirdly, there was the extension of anthropological studies of objects from pre-industrial and non-Western situations into the world of modern industrial capitalism. During the 1960s and 1970s, debates in economic anthropology had been dominated by discussion of the differences between Western and non-Western economies. Arguments over the applicability of Western conceptions of economics to non-Western or pre-capitalist societies had raised distinction between ‘formalist’ and ‘substantivist’ economies, in which material goods were understood to be ‘dismembered’ from, or ‘embedded’ in, social structure respectively (Polanyi et al. 1957; see Wilk and Cligett 2007: 3–15). These debates used a long-standing distinction in economic anthropology between ‘gifts’ and ‘commodities’, which had underpinned Marcel Mauss’s comparative study of *The Gift* (Mauss 1990 [1922]), and which was grounded in an account of the modern world as engendering a schism between society and economy, *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. In contrast, Miller’s (1987: 17) use of anthropological perspectives to study the modern world was based on the idea that consumption could ‘produce an inalienable culture’: in other words modern consumers were constantly transforming commodities into things that they used in their own social lives, and were thus breaking down any firm distinctions between gifts and commodities.

Here, in contrast with conventional Leftist accounts of the rise of capitalism as alienating, and their focus on production, Daniel Miller’s decision ‘to investigate, and to assess the consequences of the enormous increase in industrial production over the last century’ (1987: 1) led him to highlight the productive nature of consumption, as it were. Critiques of capitalism, he argued, should not lead to ‘a critique of mass industrial culture per se, since this has had the effect of stifling any positive advocacy of a potential popular alternative which remains within the context of industrial culture’ (Miller 1987: 176). Thus, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* made an important contribution to conceptions of the modern that did not use grand narratives of disenchantment (via Weber) or alienation (via Marx).

*Material Culture and Mass Consumption*’s call for a new social anthropology of consumption contributed to a general rise in consumption studies in sociology, geography, history, and cultural studies during the late 1980s and early 1990s (McKendrick et al. 1983; Minz 1985; Campbell 1987; Brewer and Porter 1993). In his edited volume *Acheivoclogy Consumption* (Miller 1995a), Miller presented his perspectives as shifting away from the study of the category of ‘material culture’, which links anthropology ‘with archaeological concerns’, towards a new category of consumption studies. He argued that this development represented a ‘transformation of anthropology’ because it extended anthropological ideas into the modern world, as an ‘authentic’ object of study (1995b: 263, 268).

Miller’s suggestion that the extension of anthropological perspectives into the modern world was radically new was overstated. The ethnography of early 1980s Britain had represented the extension of two long-standing traditions of ‘auto-anthropology’. One was the folklife studies that developed, especially in museums, during the 1980s (Jackson 1985), at precisely the same time as the emergence of new studies of technology described at the start of this chapter, which continued throughout the first half of the twentieth century. The other was a subsequent post-war ‘sociological rediscovery of British society from the 1950s, much of which was made by people trained in social anthropology’ (Hawthorn 1972), and which built to some degree upon the establishment in 1937 of ‘Mass Observation’ as a kind of anthropolo-
In the structural Marxist anthropology of the 1970s, Maurice Godelier's (1973) critique of empiricism was grounded in a commitment to a historical perspective that used a common set of ethnographic approaches to non-Western and to Western situations, and the different forms that 'production' might take. Meanwhile, despite the continuing use of the gift/commodity distinction in some Marxist anthropology (Gregory 1982), anthropological studies of exchange increasingly questioned the firm distinction between gifts and commodities (Strathern 1988; Gell 1992a). As will be seen below, this work led to the questioning of the a priori differences between subjects and objects in social anthropological research.

However, the focus of anthropological material culture studies as it developed after *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, especially through the radical shift away from archaeological approaches, came to be upon 'ideas about what people do with objects, essentially as a theory of culture rather than material culture' (Rowlands 2004: 47). This focus on the meaningful use of material things in social relationships, rather than upon their detailed empirical examination, was characterized by a latent structuralism that anthropological material culture studies shared with the contextual archaeology. This Material-Cultural Turn framed the development of the ‘high period’ of British material culture studies during the 1990s.

### III: The ‘high period’ of material culture studies

The third phase of the archaeological sequence identified here is one of rapid and self-confident construction, built on foundations laid in earlier periods: the ‘high period’ of ‘material culture’ studies in British archaeology and anthropology. With the publication of *Interpreting Archaeology*, finding meaning in the past in 1995 (based on a conference held at Cambridge in 1993) and the launch of the Journal of Material Culture, edited from UCL in 1996, the ideas that had emerged in the Material-Cultural Turn were put into practice (Hodder et al. 1995a; Miller and Tilley 1996). Both interpretive archaeology and material culture studies witnessed the emergence of book-length studies: works by Ian Hodder (1990), Julian Thomas (1991a) and John Barrett (1994) in archaeology; and in anthropology Daniel Miller's (1994, 1997, 1998a) studies in Trinidad and North London and a growing number of contributions to the 'Materializing Culture' series published by Berg since 1998. By understanding objects as ‘cultural forms’ (Miller 1987: 110), this work built upon the identification of the different contextual uses of material culture in social life that had been highlighted by the contributions to Arjun Appadurai's seminal collection *The Social Life of Things* (Appadurai 1986a; Kopytoff 1986).

The use of detailed case studies in these works, based on ethnographic and archaeological fieldwork, contrasted with older concerns with style and design that derived from the study of objects in isolation from their social uses (Conley 2006: 356–359). However, the exchanges between archaeology and anthropology in ethnography that led of a common adoption of elements of practice theory and the bringing together of structuralist and semiotic approaches, gave way during the early 1990s to a radical difference between anthropological and archaeological material culture studies in Britain.

Having shifted away from the New Archaeology’s concerns with method, and disillusioned with the results of ethnoarchaeology, British archaeologists and anthropologists who identified themselves as working on ‘material culture studies’ came to define their field by its object of enquiry: ‘material culture’. However, their fieldwork was conducted in different spheres: the material dimensions of the contemporary world on the one side, and the remains of the prehistoric past on the other. A model of radical alterity emerged in archaeological discussions of ‘theory and practice’ (Hodder 1992): in the definition of archaeology as a kind of distanced interpretation. For example, the extension of interpretive archaeology into the modern period was understood as requiring the making of the familiar unfamiliar, to allow interpretation to take place (Tarlow and West 1998). Meanwhile anthropological material culture studies worked in the opposite direction: bringing ethnographic methods developed for the study of non-Western societies to bear upon the modern Western world: problematizing any general distinction between the modern and the premodern/non-Western, but dispensing with earlier discussions of method; using anthropology to work with the shock of the mundane.

During the 1990s, British post-processual archaeology developed a series of new studies informed by the idea that ‘material culture is actively involved in the social world’ (Shanks and Tilley 1987a: 116–117). Michael Shanks and Chris Tilley sought to shift back and forth between ‘cultural’ and ‘social’ approaches. In their 1987 study *Social Theory and Archaeology*, the chapter about ‘material culture’ asked two basic questions about objects: ‘First, how do we interpret material culture; what meaning, if any, does it possess? Secondly, how does material culture pattern or relate to the social?’ (Shanks and Tilley 1987a: 79).

The idea of interpretation was used to define archaeology as a process of revealing the implication of material culture in human meaning and social relations. Thus, the title of the introduction to *Interpreting Archaeology* was ‘Archaeology and the interpretation of material culture: a report on the state of the discipline’ (Hodder et al. 1995a: 1). The empirical focus was, however, almost exclusively upon the study of prehistory, especially Neolithic and Bronze Age Europe (and especially Britain). The rural locations of the sites and landscapes studied were just like the periods of time that were focused upon: as far away as possible from the modern world, and thus from the material studied by anthropological material culture studies. The purpose of interpretive archaeology was thus to ‘attend to difference’ (Shanks and Hodder 1995: 9). On those occasions on which
the modern period was studied by post-processual archaeologists (e.g. Johnson 1996), no connections with socio-cultural anthropology were made.

In British anthropology, the effect of associating the movement of anthropological perspectives into the modern western world with a simultaneous movement away from archaeological perspectives was an isolation of the study of modern material culture from the potential archaeological contribution to the study of the modern period and the contemporary world (Hicks and Beaudry 2006); despite the influence of James Deetz’s historical archaeology upon the development of British anthropological material culture studies (Miller 1983: 96, 1987: 140–141). The concerns with the empiricism or fetishism of archaeology were, however, concerns quite specifically with the New Archaeology, which had dominated both ethnarchaeology and Americanist modern material culture studies in the early 1980s. Despite the archaeological training of those who developed anthropological material culture studies (Miller 1980; Tilley 1984), the twin directions that led from the Material-Cultural Turn—post-processual/interpretative archaeology and the anthropology of consumption—were parallel, rather than overlapping. This meant that the potential for exchanges between archaeological and anthropological perspectives in the study of the material dimensions of the modern world were hardly explored (Cochran and Beaudry 2006).

The significance of practice theory for both fields remained considerable. But the anthropological material culture studies played Giddens to interpretive archaeology’s Bourdieu: echoing Giddens’ critique of the ‘underestimation of cultural activity’ in interpretive sociology and ethnomethodology (Giddens 1976a: 155; see Giddens 1976b). This distinction between cultural and social models of practice theory formed the basis of John Barrett’s critique of Ian Hodder’s conception of contextual archaeology from a structuration perspective:

Archaeologists do not enter into a dialogue with the people they study, but our obligations to those people do remain. Can we really claim to be able to understand how they saw their world? This seems both dubious and unnecessary. Instead we can learn something, through the surviving evidence, of how their knowledge was gained in the routine practices by which they lived their lives.

Barrett (1987a: 472)

Barrett (1987b) called for a shift from a focus on archaeological material culture as text to the idea of ‘fields of discourse’. He argued for a distinctive archaeological reorientation of the nature of ‘structure’ in Giddens’ model of agency and structure, which more adequately accounted for ‘material conditions’;

Giddens has stated that ‘structure exists only as memory traces’ meaning, I take it, that action draws initially upon, and is guided in anticipation by, the subject’s memory of previous experience. Important although this point is, an equal, if not greater, emphasis must be placed upon the particular material conditions within which social practices are situated.

Barrett (1987b: 8)

Meanwhile Bourdieu’s focus on the lived domestic environment, most famously explored in his 1975 structuralist study of the Algerian Kabyle house, which described the lived environment as structured by a series of binary oppositions experienced through domestic life (Bourdieu 1990), was significant in the particular range of field sites or ‘artefactual domains’ (Miller 1998b: 10) chosen for the new anthropological material culture studies. The domestic home was pre-eminent among these (Miller 1988, 2000b, 2006a: 248–249, 2008a), as ‘the context in which most other material culture is used, placed and understood’ (Buchli 2002b: 207; cf. Humphrey 1988). Alongside the home, anthropological material culture studies in this period focused especially upon supermarkets (Miller 1998c; Miller et al. 1998), domestic gardens, catalogue shopping (Clarke 1998), party selling, car boot sales, private cars, and clothing as well as the consumption of heritage at museums and historic sites (Rowlands 1998). In a related body of work, the anthropological study of artworks was increasingly understood as focusing on ‘visual culture’ (Pinney 2006: 131), building on studies such as Howard Morphy’s engagement with Yolngu (Australian aboriginal) art, which used ethnography to examine the social contexts in which artworks were created, used, and understood: an approach that he argued could highlight the ambiguity consciously brought about through non-representational art forms (Morphy 1991; cf. Layton 1991: 1).

The attraction of material culture studies to such themes has been criticized as providing uncritical accounts of ‘Western’ teenagers, home-makers and shoppers, in which anthropologists operate ‘like flaneurs or tourists . . . not in the world, but’ only gazing out at it, while readers find themselves ‘drifting through a symbolic forest or watching an exhibition of signs and messages’ (Löfgren 1997: 102–103). Tim Ingold (2007b: 316) has argued that these choices of field sites, and especially the ‘twins obsession with museums and department stores’, limited material culture studies to places in which things are ordered in quite specific ways: where ‘we confront things as objects’. This, however, was precisely the point that these works were making: that anthropology can examine contemporary processes of objectification, the social processes through which people come to define and understand things as objects. The narrative here usually concerned the enrolment of commodities into social relationships most clearly stated in Miller’s (1998c) ‘theory of shopping’ in which the idea of ‘sacrifice’ was seen as a creative rather than a destructive process. Here, Miller followed Alfred Gell’s observation that

Very recognizable forms of consumption . . . may mislead us into making the false equation ‘consumption equals destruction’ because on these occasions meat, liquor and other valued substances are made to vanish. But consumption as a general phenomenon really has nothing to do with the destruction of goods and wealth but their reincorporation into the social system that produced them in some other guise.

Gell (1986: 112)

Miller’s work on shopping also involved a collaboration between anthropology and cultural geography in a study of the Brent Cross shopping centre in North London
to identify 'the investment in social relationships that takes place during the apparently mundane work of shopping' (Miller et al. 1998: 23). In such views, the consumer's decision to purchase one item of grocery rather than another could represent evidence of quite intimate social relationships: 'making love in supermarkets' by transforming the can of soup, purchased to be shared at home, into part of a loving relationship (Miller 1996b, 1998c), viewing consumption as a 'technology of love' (Miller 2006a: 350), and studying the anthropology of 'thrift' in which 'the desire to save money arise principally out of the moral imperative which dominates ordinary shopping, where the shopper stands for the interests of family and household' (Miller 2003: 362).

Similarly, global processes involving apparently homogenized cultures of commodities were shown to involve quite distinctive local enactments: as with Daniel Miller's identification of Coca-Cola as 'a black sweet drink made in Trinidad' (Miller 1998a). This focus on the place that mass-produced commodities can play in particular social relations facilitated, Miller argued, a 'transformation of anthropology' in that it broke down 'an explicit, or even implicit, culture concept as a definitional premise of anthropology' (Miller 1995b: 264) through an awareness of the active role of material culture in social life (cf. Lucas 2002a: 121–122). These were powerful and important arguments that moved away from an ethnographical conception of society as purified of everyday things. However, as is explored in the next section, more recently this breaking down of the culture concept has spilled over into the material culture concept itself.

IV: THE UNFOLDING OF MATERIAL CULTURE STUDIES

The process of excavation often identifies moments of recurrence and similarity in the ways in which particular landscapes have been inhabited and reconfigured in different periods. In this sequence of disciplinary thinking and practice from the 1970s to the 1990s, we might suggest that the fin-de-siècle optimism over the study of 'object domains' during the 'high period' of material culture studies echoed the confidence of Tylor's arguments about 'object lessons' a century before. This time, however, it sought to fulfill the long-standing modernist ambition of British anthropology to become a comparative sociology. This was precisely the ambition that had replaced the museum collection with ethnographic participant observation as the subject of enquiry 80 years previously. Material culture studies' model of objectivism—for example, in the aspiration for 'a theory of consumption' (Miller 1987: 178–217)—involved a critique of the culture concept 'as a definitional premise of anthropology' (Miller 1995b: 265): focusing instead upon vernacular practices in which people enrolled objects in social relations. Gradually, however, the responses to calls for a focus upon material culture as 'the least understood of all the central phenomena of the modern age' (Miller 1987: 217) started to reveal the programme of material culture studies as itself an artefact of modernist thought (sensi Arden 1985). Central here has been the emergence of the strangely abstract, dematerialized quality of many material culture studies, in which things appear to disappear into spectral fields of social relations or meanings, and the complexities of materials and their change over time are not accounted for. While material culture studies had turned away from archaeology, and had been isolated from historical anthropology, it was in these fields that the narratives told by material culture studies started to unfold.

Humanism and positionality

The lasting successes of the 'high period' of material culture studies lay for anthropology in the acknowledgement of the potential significance of objects in human social relations, especially those objects that appear banal or inconsequential: providing a sense of the unspoken things that constitute the everyday dimensions of social life that became important in sociology through the work of writers such as Michel de Certeau (1984; cf. Hignmore 2002). Such an approach placed the everyday—or 'the blindingly obvious'—at the centre of the analysis (Miller and Woodward 2007: 337–339). For archaeology, these successes involved new contributions to a long-standing humanistic perspective in archaeology: the desire to get past things to people that had been expressed throughout the second half of the twentieth century, even, for example, in the words of Mortimer Wheeler (1954: 1): 'The archaeologist is digging up not things but people... In a simple direct sense, archaeology is a science that must be lived, must be seasoned with humanity'. Dead archaeology is the driest stuff that blows.'

The Material-Cultural Turn problematized the study of the socio-cultural and the material in isolation from each other. Its solution was to document how they were 'related', so as 'to transcend subject-object dualities' (Miller and Tilley 1996: 7) created by the modern world. Material culture studies documented, to use the standard parlance, 'relational' processes (Miller 2007: 25); that is, it was concerned with the relationships between objects and people. The physical form of things was thus reduced to a distinctive kind of conduit for social relations, which were the proper object of enquiry.

An analysis of an artefact must begin with its most obvious characteristic, which is that it exists as a physically concrete form independent of any individual's mental image of it. This factor may provide the key to understanding its power and significance in cultural construction. The importance of this physicality of the artefact derives from its ability thereby
to act as a bridge, not only between the mental and physical worlds, but also, more unexpectedly, between consciousness and the unconscious. 

Miller (1987: 99)

The heuristic distinction between materials and culture implied by the use of the term ‘material culture’ was justified through the idea of objectification (Miller 1987): the argument that under the conditions of capitalism and/or modernity, distinctions between objects and people are made. In this view, ‘capitalism splits culture and person apart into commodities separated from their intrinsic person-making capacities, and the illusion of pure humanism outside of materiality’ (Miller 2000: 17). Similarly, Julian Thomas argued that archaeology needed actively to reconnect across a Newtonian ‘separation between the human and non-human worlds, culture and nature [which has] provided the principal basis for ordering collections of material things’ (Thomas 2004: 26). In practice, a focus on relatedness or ‘relationality’ sought to avoid what was understood as a long-standing tendency, identified especially in archaeology and museum studies, to become ‘obsessed with objects as such… treating them as having an independent behaviour in a manner which separated them from any social context and which amounted to a genuine fetishism of the artefact’ (Miller 1987: 111–112; cf. Miller 1990).

But a further problem—that of the distinctions between the researcher as subject and the object of enquiry—has called into question the sure-footedness of material culture studies as a modernist, representational project, working with the remnants of comparative sociology, and applied structuralism. A gradual unfolding of the idea of ‘material culture studies’ took place. The humanism of the Material-Cultural Turn—anthropology’s ‘translating objects into people’ (Miller 1985: ix) or archaeology’s ‘fleshing out in cultural terms of the basic data’ (Deetz 1967: 118)—came to form the basis for critiques of normative conceptions of human identity, especially in relation to gender (Gilchrist 1994), sexuality (Voss 2008a), ethnicity (Jones 1997), life-course (Gilchrist 2004), and the slow development of third-wave feminist perspectives in archaeology (Gilchrist 1999). The political engagement of feminist and gender archaeology, and of movements such as the World Archaeological Congress (Ucko 1987) and developments in indigenous archaeology, African-American historical archaeology and museum anthropology, meant that in interpretive archaeology issues of the positionality of the researcher studying material culture were interrogated. At first this was worked out through the ideas of ‘critical reflexivity’ or ‘self-reflexive archaeology’ (Shanks and Tilley 1992: 62; Hodder 1997), but increasingly it has developed into critiques of the way in which the Material-Cultural Turn in both archaeology and anthropology sought to stand upon that non-existent hyphen in ‘material culture studies’, so as to document traffic between two different domains, the material and the socio-cultural, while remaining detached from them both.

The risk was ever-present that detailed ethnographies of consumption (e.g. Miller 1994) or large-scale studies of the use of material culture over the long term (Hodder 1990) would give way to the uncritical presentation of appropriate case studies in what Max Gluckman would have called the ‘apt illustration’ of particular models of social relations (Gluckman 1962: 7). This is what George Marcus has identified as a tendency to allow social theory to ‘stand in for the macro-social’, with which ‘micro-cultural analysis’ might then be related (Marcus 2000: 17), as if these two scales of analysis operated in different worlds. Material culture studies narrated objects in particular ways. In social anthropology, the employment often involved the appropriation of modern, apparently ‘alienable’ goods through consumption to transform them into ‘inalienable’ items, for instance through household DIY (Miller 1988). In archaeology, the story usually involved the identification of artefact patterning as evidence of human social relations and ‘traditions of practice’ in which, it was asserted, a meaningful material world played a significant role, through ‘ritual practice’ for example (Thomas 1991a: 80–84, 187). Clearly in both cases, the focus upon human practices in relation to the material world was a long way from the identification of normative cultures or cultural behaviours reflected in artefacts. But what was at stake here was the uses to which social theory and linguistic analogy are put in archaeology and anthropology. Through a residual structuralism, the richness and complexity of the knowledge that derives from fieldwork was often reduced to the illustration of particular models of ‘the material constitution of social relations’ (Miller and Tilley 1998: 5; see Pinney 2005): looking from an impossible vantage-point between materials and culture, erasing any trace of standpoint (which includes not only the researcher, but the complex human and material practices that all fieldwork involves). Knowledge of material culture appeared to emerge from somewhere outside of the ethnographic situation.

Hermeneutic phenomenology

One solution to this problem of standpoint and positionality has been the distinctive kind of hermeneutic phenomenology developed in archaeological and anthropological material culture studies. Such approaches have sought to locate the lived, bodily experience of the world at the centre of the interpretation of the material world, and to relocate the focus of material culture studies upon concrete human experience. Chris Tilley and Julian Thomas have, since the early 1990s, led the way in this field, through studies of the monumental landscapes of British and Scandanavian Neolithic and Bronze Age. Using ideas from Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Lefebvre, Thomas (1993, 1996, 2000a, 2000b, 2006) and Tilley (1994, 1996, 2006b) have tried to account for the bodily, meaningful, thoughtful, and reflective encounters between humans and the non-human world.
Tilley has sought to build upon the literary and linguistic analogy of material culture studies that lay at the heart of the contextual archaeology, and which he explored through studies such as Reading Material Culture (1990a), Material Culture and Text (1991), and Material Culture and Metaphor (1999), and his definition of interpretive archaeology as a kind of 'poetics of the past' (1993). He has continued to explore the idea that emerged in the 1970s of material culture studies as analogous, but not reducible, to the study of language: the idea that 'artefacts perform active metaphorical work in the world in a manner that words cannot' (Tilley 2002: 25). In contrast to the use of abstract models that New Archaeology's conception of 'spatial archaeology' had borrowed from 1960s New Geography (Clarke 1977), Tilley has developed 'a phenomenological perspective linked to a concept of materiality' (Tilley 2007a: 19) that seeks to account for the embodied experience of landscapes as material culture:

From a phenomenological perspective landscape is 'platial' rather than 'spatial'. It is not something defined by space as an abstract container but by the places that constitute it and make it what it is. Landscape thus sits in places, is a reflective 'gathering' and set of relations between those places, background and foreground, figure and frame, here and there, near and far. Landscape is thus always both objective physical place and a subjective cognitive image of that place.

Tilley (2000b: 20)

For Thomas, the significance of phenomenological approaches lies in their ability to move beyond modern distinctions between nature and culture in archaeology (Thomas 1996: 3). By studying barrows, cairns, megalithic tombs, and other sites and monuments from British prehistory, this branch of material culture studies has been 'concerned with the human encounter, experience and understanding of worldly things, and with how these happenings come to be possible' (Thomas 2006: 43).

In practice, however, it is very difficult to comprehend what these accounts have added to our understanding of the prehistoric past or contemporary heritage landscapes. The two-way encounter between the human body and the landscape, focused on interpretation and the representation of meaning, has retained much of what Tilley (1982: 26) described as the 'dialectical structuralism' of contextual archaeology. Too often, hermeneutic phenomenology has descended into a hyper-interpretative romanticism, most vividly in the study of the Bronze Age landscape of Leskernick in Cornwall, which combined photo-essays with fragments of diary entries, snatches of conversation, poetry writing, and the creation of 'archaeological artworks' (Bender et al. 2007; see Hicks 2005)

Despite privileging of human experience and cognition these texts have been oddly de-materialized, reflective accounts of the world, resorting to the human body as a stable point of reference in precisely the same way as the idea of 'material culture' has been used: to stand impossibly between alternative domains in order to represent the world. Human bodies, of course, are just as diverse as material things: and the principal critiques of phenomenological perspectives have come from feminist studies of embodiment (see Crossland this volume, Chapter 16). The positionality and perspective of the researcher remains an unresolved problem because the purpose of archaeology and anthropology remains defined in hermeneutic phenomenology as interpreting and representing the socio-cultural dimensions of the material world. But in the politics of archaeology and anthropology, objects are not straightforwardly involved in social relations or contested meanings: the actions of the researcher or curator, working within particular disciplinary, institutional, or historical circumstances or accidents, are always involved (Hodder 2004). The same, of course, is true for vernacular practice as for academic practice. Here two broader problems with British archaeological and anthropological material culture studies are made clear: a disregard for the significance of method, and a strong presentism, even in relation to the prehistoric past.

Meanwhile, more successful alternatives to the definition of the purpose of material culture studies as representing meaning or social relations have developed, which have been central to the process of unfolding, especially in relation to discussions of materiality and material agency, as the next section shows.

Meaning, materiality, and material agency

The shift beyond contextual and interpretive archaeology has increasingly led to a reconsideration of the limitations of the analogy of things with texts, which had allowed for the persistence of the structuralist definition of material culture studies as a complementary field of enquiry to the study of language. The textual metaphor in contextual archaeology, and the focus on human meaning as the ultimate object of enquiry in interpretive archaeology, built on a long-standing sense that the material evidence of the past was for British prehistory an equivalent of a historical text (Lucas 2000a: 11), which could be used to generate accounts of the human past. The idea of the landscape as a text had in the mid-twentieth century been associated especially with the explicitly counter-modern model of ‘local history’ developed by writers, such as W. G. Hoskins (1955) in his idea of the English landscape as a vulnerable ‘palimpsest’ wrought through centuries of human life (Hicks 2008b). The romanticism of these approaches, grounded in a sense of the past as radically different from the present, informed many British models of ‘interpretive archaeology’, particularly that of hermeneutic phenomenology (Hodder 2004).

The textual analogy, and the idea of archaeology following a broader interdisciplinary ‘linguistic turn’ (Thomas 1991b: 9), led to an increasing dematerialization as
contextual archaeology developed into interpretive archaeology. Such approaches were informed by particular bodies of literary theory (Tilley 1990a), the logic of which was that 'there is nothing outside the text' (Thomas 1990: 19), since 'space is like a page on which human action writes' (Thomas 1990a: 9) and the study of material culture involved the same critical awareness as any kind of reading (Hodder 1986). In such work, material culture studies became, as Evans-Pritchard wrote of functionalist anthropology, 'little more than a literary device' (1950: 120).

But a number of archaeologists have argued that the physical form of things, and in particular their durability, presents particular problems for the textual analogy: paralleling the observation from cultural geography that 'objects do far more than represent' (Thrift 2007: 239). These arguments have often been developed in terms of a shift from the study of 'material culture' to that of 'materiality'—a word that attempts to move away from the idea of a separation between different material and cultural domains, and to accommodate the material form of things.

As Ian Hodder argued two decades ago, 'perhaps because material culture is often more practical and less immediately concerned with abstract meaning, the meanings it does have are often non-discursive' (1991b: 73). Victor Buchli took this argument forward in his suggestion that 'the trouble with text in contextual archaeology lay in the constituted and evocative physicality of material culture' (1995: 191). Buchli's argument was paralleled by Webb Keane's (1997) discussion of semiotics, representation, and material culture in relation to Indonesian ethnography, which demonstrated how any account of meaning must account for the refractive nature of things. This growing awareness of the importance of 'the very physicality of objects' (Rowlands 2004: 478), has led to an increased interest in the physical properties and effects of materials.

For some, this has inspired the use of Peircean semiotics to highlight the contingency of how certain objects come to hold certain meanings (see discussion by Jones 2009: 95–96), an idea that develops earlier recognitions of the 'resistance' of material culture to being freighted with meaning (Shanks and Tilley 1989: 5). This moves beyond the observation that the passing of an object between different 'regimes of value' means that meanings are contingent upon social contexts (Appadurai 1986b), by suggesting that certain physical or functional properties of objects also define how they are understood, and how they operate in social life (see Gell 1996b). Equally, however, such arguments highlight how such properties of things might be understood as non-discursive: falling outside of a focus on 'reading' material culture, and beyond the limits of a purely 'interpretive' archaeology, concerned only with 'finding meaning in the past' (Hodder et al. 1995b) or the idea that material culture represents a form of metaphor (Tilley 1999).

More radically, others have pointed to the many materials in the world that require archaeological and anthropological attention, but which are not just those things that 'matter' to humans that are highlighted by mainstream material culture studies (e.g. Miller 2001a) or a reflexive interpretive archaeology (e.g. Hodder 1999). Things can matter, we might suggest, even when people do not say that they matter. The human significance of meaningful 'material culture' is, of course, a crucial element of accounting for the material world: but the physicality of things calls into question the idea of 'material culture' as an excessively anthropocentric definition of the field of enquiry: delimited by those moments in which things are meaningful or filled with cultural significance. At the same time, the idea of materiality risks slipping into the idea of kind of universal quality of material-ness that becomes even more abstract than the idea of material culture (Ingold 2007a).

Approaches to what material things do, rather than just what they mean or how they are 'entangled' in social relationships (Thomas 1991) require a more adequate account of the role of the material dimensions of the world in social life than, for example, a Foucauldian notion of the 'material constraint' of architecture would provide (Foucault 1977b: 67; Foucault and Rabinow 1984). The effects of things clearly require us to move beyond imagining social life as worked out in an isomorphic world of stuff. The efficacy of things relates to material durability, as explored above, but also to the effects of residuality (Lucas 2006; Miller 2001a: 109–112; Olivier 2001), decay (Kächler 2002b; DeSilvey 2005), destruction (Collard and Mansfeld 2003), rarity (Pels 1998), fragmentation (Chapman 2004a), and the situations in which the enchantment or dazzling effects of the material world lead to 'stoppages' (Gosden 2006: 450; Gell 1992b; cf. Coote 1992; Saunders 1999) or particular engagements of the human senses (Jones and MacGregor 2002; Edwards et al. 2006) and the affective charge of things. Daniel Miller (2001a: 119–120) has expressed similar effects through the terms of 'possession'—how ownership of objects can also lead to the 'possession' of humans by objects in social situations that exist within 'networks of agents that include both animate and inanimate forms.' Following Miller we could term such effects 'the consequences of materiality' (Miller 2002a: 3): foregrounding 'a concern with how the material world is manifest and the transformative processes that shape the material world' (Buchli 2004: 183).

The awareness of the limitations of the textual analogy that developed from a new attention to the physicality of things might at first glance appear to be in keeping with Giddens' critique of hermeneutics, as expressed in archaeology by the papers by John Barrett (1987a, 1987b) discussed above. This would lead us back to a consideration of the relationships between 'structure' and 'agency', which has stood for so long in the background of the dialectical model of 'material culture studies'. But deeper questioning of the idea of material culture has emerged from a loose body of thought that has sought to combine elements of the hermeneutic phenomenology described above with perspectives from Bruno Latour's conception of ANT, as it has emerged since the early 1990s after social constructivism (Latour 2000a; see Law this volume, Chapter 6).
These arguments have typically begun with the assertion that material culture studies have somehow ‘forgotten’ about things: ‘moved away from things’ materiality and subsumed themselves to hegemonic antimaterial and social constructivist theories’ (Olsen 2003: 88). Several writers, especially from an archaeological perspective, have called for a new focusing upon things, asserting that the discipline of anthropology represents ‘the discipline of things par excellence’ (Olsen 2003: 89).

Most recently such arguments have taken place under the banner of a ‘symmetrical archaeology’, a term inspired by Bruno Latour’s early accounts of ANT (Olsen 2007; Witmore 2007; Webnoor and Witmore 2008; see Latour 1993a). They have also, however, led to Daniel Miller and others responding to the work of ANT by replacing the term ‘material culture’ with ‘materiality’ (Miller 2005a), and to Tim Ingold arguing for a focus upon ‘materials’ rather than some generalized essence of ‘materiality’ (Ingold 2007b).

The significance of ANT for material culture studies lies mainly in its theory of agency, which it suggests—in an extension of this concept beyond the human actors that we would encounter in structuration theory for example—is a property of ‘non-humans’ as well as humans. This is a different argument from the more light-touch ethnographic sense of the use of objects in human social relations, and it involves a questioning of conventional Durkheimian models of the social (as excessively anthropocentric). Latour has famously suggested that the most important part of the name ‘ANT’ is the hyphen between the ‘actor’ and the ‘network’ (Latour 1993a). In its reception of ANT, the unhyphenated field of material culture studies has been pressed, therefore, to examine quite what it might mean when it refers to the existence of ‘relations’ between the material and cultural worlds: since ANT seems to some to be effectively ‘re-inventing the very subject of anthropological material culture studies’ (Miller 2005b: 3), through an ‘extension’ of approaches to objectification that arise out of dialectical theory (Miller 2001a: 119, 2005c: 12). But for ANT, relations are not simply bilateral: they are much more far-ranging networks that emerge through the actions of both humans and non-humans.

The reception of ANT thinking was slow in anthropological material culture studies (Miller 2005a; but see Boast 1996; Miller 2002), but aspects of it were clearly directly developed (although never cited) in Alfred Gell’s (1998) study Art and Agency: an anthropological theory, perhaps read through the arguments of Marilyn Strathern (1996) and Robin Boast (1996). Gell (1992b) developed an argument about the social use, rather than the aesthetic content, of artworks as distinctive items of ‘technology’, the powers of which served to ‘enchant’. He likened his approach to the ‘methodological atheism’ adopted by sociologists studying religion (Berger 1967: 100); in the same way, anthropologists studying artworks required a ‘methodological philistinism’ (Gell 1992b), focused on the work that artworks do in social life, rather than what they mean. In an account of the use of artworks by social actors (‘art as a system of action’; Gell 1998: 6), Gell argued that artworks, and by extension other items of material culture, could be used to extend or distribute human social agency; a model that also drew from Periean ideas of ‘abduction’ and Strathernian ideas of ‘distributed personhood’ (Strathern 1988; Jones 2003: 95–97). This shift in emphasis from what artworks mean to what they do move a Latourian sense of the powers of things together with an anthropological account of social relations in a tradition that drew from Mauss’ study of the gift (Kitchler 2003: 59 see Mauss 1990 [1935]). Unlike ANT, Gell’s argument did not extend agency to non-humans, but instead suggested that objects could be deployed by social actors as secondary agents: ‘indexes’ of human agency.

While Gell’s argument has been critiqued from a number of perspectives (Layton 2003; Leach 2007; Morphy 2009), the influence of his book and of ANT has combined in archaeology with the extension of the discussion of the idea of ‘agency’ as it is theorized in practice theory (e.g. Dobres and Robb 2003a) away from ‘a human-centred view of agents and artefacts’ through the idea of ‘material agency’ (Knappett and Malafouris 2008a: ix). Using the more radical extension of agency beyond humans presented by Latour, and presenting a critique of archaeo-
logical uses of practice theory as failing to acknowledge the influence of material things, this work argues that ‘no distinctions between human and non-human entities can be sustained in terms of agency’ (Knappett and Malafouris 2008b: xii; cf. Knappett 2003). In a similar approach, Nicole Boivin (2008) has built on the discussions of the physicality of things outlined above to combine the shift away from the textual analogy of contextual archaeology towards a full-blown model of ‘material agency’.

The idea of material agency has been criticized by anthropologist Tim Ingold, as part of his concerns about the ideas of material culture and ‘materiality’. In the ‘materiality debate’ between Ingold and Miller (Ingold 2007a, 2007b, 2007d; D. Miller 2007), Ingold has built on his earlier complaints that the very idea of material culture studies relied upon ‘the Cartesian ontology . . . that divorces the activity of the mind from that of the body in the world’ (2000a: 165): In the extensive archaeological and anthropological literature on material culture… [the emphasis is almost entirely upon issues of meaning and form—that is, on culture as opposed to materiality. Understood as a realm of discourse, meaning and value inhabiting the collective consciousness, culture is conceived to hover above the material world but not to permeate it.

Ingold (2000a: 165)

Ingold has argued that the idea of ‘materiality’ (e.g. Miller 2005a) has tried to do in one word what material culture did in two—to express relationships between two different worlds or domains, the social world and the object world—while material agency simply reorients these anthropocentric relationships. Ingold’s alternative to models of material agency is to see ‘things in life’ rather than ‘life in things’, to avoid anthropological archaeology ‘turning to stone’ by understanding material culture in purely abstract, sociological, or material terms (Ingold 2005: 122).
Ingold (2007b, 2007d) argues that the ideas of ‘materiality’ and ‘objectness’ only emerge as a question or a problem from an academic practice that
in its isolation of the object, necessarily ruptures the flows of materials by which it came into being. It is as though the world came ready-made, already propagated out of the curries, mixtures and transformations of materials through which it was formed. To follow the materials, by contrast, is to enter a world-in-formation. In this work, things do not appear, in the first instance, as bounded objects, set over against their surroundings, but rather as specific confluences of materials that, for a moment at least, have mixed and melded together into recognisable forms.

Ingold (2007b: 314–315)

Ingold’s alternative, however, is another account of networks and relations, which he calls a ‘meshwork of interwoven substances’ (2007c: 35). Ingold’s approach, which we might call, for lack of a better term, ‘meshwork studies’, maintains the integrity of those elements that interact across this ‘meshwork’ through his resistance to the idea of ‘hybridity’, since such a concept presupposes the existence of two distinct forms prior to mixing, or hybridization (2008: 211). Ingold’s critique of the uses of ANT in material culture studies is grounded in his concept of ‘meshwork’, which inspires an alternative and contrapuntal acronym—the web-wearing SPIDER ('Skilled Practice Involves Developmentally Embodied Responsiveness').

Ingold’s focus is not upon social relations that constitute a network of humans and non-humans, but upon what he calls ‘the lives along which [humans, animals and others] live and conduct [their] perception and action in the world’ (Ingold 2008: 231; see Ingold 2007c). Ingold’s interest is in phenomena such as ‘skill’ rather than ‘agency’ is required, since to ‘attribute agency to objects that do not grow or develop that consequently develop no skill and whose movement is not therefore coupled to their perception, is ludicrous’ (2008: 215).

Meanwhile, the direction in which archaeologists such as Jones, Boivin, Knappett, and Fowler are leading is to do more than (or, perhaps better, less than) arguing that objects can count as subjects, or to illustrate how material things can be involved in the ‘distribution of personhood’. Rather it leads towards doing more than simply continuing the impulse in modernist anthropology now to relate across, now to refuse distinctions between the ‘material’ and the socio-cultural. After all, why is ‘agency’ a problem at all? Because what is meant is social agency: the Giddensian counterpart to structure. Agency only emerges as a problem to be solved if we hold on to a particular model of society in which, in the terms of dialectical material culture studies, the question of locating the human actions that generate, and are shaped by, social structure is significant. Like the textual analogy, the debate about agency remain too often solidly anthropocentric: Alfred Gell’s Art and Agency moved from the meaningful to the social, but retained humans as the proper object of enquiry for anthropology. One alternative might be to turn completely away from the idea of material culture studies, since as Tim Ingold asks, ‘Are there contexts that are not social, or worlds that are not material?’ (2007c: 32). Or to turn from anthropology itself, which we might suggest should properly study only humans. Questions about ‘meaning’ and agency have persisted because of the assumption that the alternative is simply incoherence. Daniel Miller once gave the example of a gas cloud that emerges ‘as an unpredicted by-product of a technological process’. For Miller, this was not merely an artefact and therefore of little concern to social anthropology or social archaeology, despite being a ‘product of human labour’ (1987: 112–113). The logic here is a belief that ‘objects are made of social ties’ (Latour 2005a: 248–249).

How then to account for the much messier and fragmented materials with which archaeologists routinely work? But while ‘anthropology’ and ‘material culture studies’, like ‘archaeology’, are awkward terms, there is no need to dispense with them because of what they are called, since what they actually do is far more nuanced. We might suggest that together archaeology and anthropology accommodated the majorities of the world, which is, as John Law puts it, neither coherent nor incoherent, but ‘indefinite or noncoherent’ (2004: 14). Archaeology’s slow, descriptive techniques attend precisely to such otherwise unspoken fragments. Research practices in archaeology and anthropology routinely do more (or less) than focus upon accounting for human understanding; ‘the understanding of the meaningful relationship between persons and things’ (Tilley 2002a: 18–19). This is especially true when things are analysed over time, rather than in the ethnographic present. Theorizing agency and meaning provides solutions only to the sociological and literary problems of representing the world: documenting ‘relations’ between different domains. Two complementary approaches, which involve moving beyond the representation approaches that characterized the Material-Cultural Turn, its critique by Ingold, and conventional accounts of ANT, are explored in the next section. Central here is the observation that archaeology and anthropology enact, rather than purely represent, the world.

V: Things as events, things as effects

While writing this chapter, I shared a draft with a number of archaeologists and anthropologists involved in current debates over the idea of material culture. The comments of one colleague were especially informative:

This chapter portraits the history of material culture studies as an elaborate academic game in which renowned contestants play off their positions vis-à-vis one another. The reader, offered a spectator’s seat in the back row, is afforded the dubious privilege of listening in on the contest, as words like structuralism, semiotics, practice theory and agency get batted around. The game is punctuated by ‘Turns’; after each of which the words get reshuffled (sometimes with prefixes such as ‘neo’ and ‘post’ attached) and play starts all over again.
From time to time, the players refer to a mysterious planet called 'the material world,' which all claim to have visited at one time or another. But if they have any knowledge of this world, they take care not to reveal it to uninitiated spectators, lest by doing so they would expose the game as the charade it really is.

Tim Ingold pers. comm. (23 March 2009)

The aim of this excavation has been to reimagine George Marcus' vision of an itinerant ethnography of 'complex objects of study' in the practice of disciplinary historiography: to 'follow the metaphor' (Marcus 1995: 95, 108-109). But the archaeological trench can never map fully onto past realities, whole cultures of thought (Canolea 2007: 18). As Tim Ingold rightly observes, the sequence that is revealed is one of a constant reshuffling and re-articulation of the boundaries or connections between the 'material' and the 'cultural' or the 'social' (cf. Ingold 2000a). This reshuffling began (with the invention of the term 'material culture') in precisely the period in which the Durkheimian idea of anthropology as comparative sociology emerged in the 'structural-functionalism' approaches of Radcliffe-Brown and others. 'The material', thus, became a problem because of a particular model of 'the social'. And the term 'material culture', as opposed to the 'social' in social anthropology, represented a useful compromise. Then, since the mid-1980s the most recent layers of this sequence are characterized by another critique of the distinction between the 'material' and the 'cultural' that is implied by the idea of material culture, most commonly using practice theory to reconcile semiotic analysis with structuralism. While the idea of a distinction between the material and the human has often been criticized as a modern Western imposition, beyond which anthropology must seek to move, the rhetoric of counter-modernism has in practice been a central characteristic of modernist thinking, especially in narratives of loss or erasure seen for example in the conservation movement, rather than an alternative to it (Hicks 2008a: pace Thomas 2004). In long-term perspective, modernist anthropology has traced and re-traced the idea of reconciling the material with the socio-cultural as its central question.

Ingold's arguments raise serious concerns about the place of material culture in social anthropology. But, informed to a large extent by a hermeneutic phenomenology similar to that outlined above, meshwork theory too often simply repeats the familiar complaints about the segregation of the social/cultural from the natural/material. The practical distinction between ANT and SPIDER is obscure, especially since both distinguish between theory and practice, ethnography and anthropology, positionality, and knowledge (pace Ingold 2007a). This distancing effect, between scholar and object, is reinforced by the fact that without exception Ingold's case studies remain as far away as possible from the contemporary world: leading to the strange situation where modern or non-modern objects, like cell phones or woven baskets, have themselves gained a kind of rhetorical power in the 'materaility debate' between Ingold and Miller. Unlike the wide range of ethnographic fieldwork that has been carried out by those working in material culture studies, Ingold's arguments have been developed theoretically, in isolation from fieldwork. In doing so, they reproduce precisely the tendency to seek to explain the world by holding it at a sufficient distance, despite the pressing logic of his arguments to move away from such approaches.

In this section, I want to use two of Ingold's principal ideas—formation and skill—as ways of thinking about how archaeologists and anthropologists have started to focus upon objects (including objects of enquiry) as emergent through time, and as the effects of enactment, rather than bound up in webs of representation and meaningful social action. Through this discussion, I want to consider what the critique of material culture studies, from the perspective of meshwork studies but also from more general concerns about the reduction of things to meanings, or to the social, might mean in practice for archaeologists and anthropologists who continue to see value in the field that has come to be known as material culture studies (however flawed that term might be).

Formation and material histories: things as events

One central element of Ingold's contributions to debates about 'materaility' is his call for anthropologists to understand things in formation (Ingold 2007c). The sociological processes through which things are formed as objects were, of course, a central element of the Material-Cultural Turn (Miller 1987). A counterpoint to this discussion of objectification was provided a year after Miller's study by Marilyn Strathern's book The Gender of the Gift (1988), which was concerned with the production of subjects specifically, upon ideas of 'personhood' in the classic 'gift societies' of Melanesia. Strathern argued that through exchange and the creation of analogies between different objects in 'inter-artefactual domains', human subjects and objects were not in this ethnographic situation understood as distinct. The exchange of objects led two simultaneous processes: the 'distribution' of personhood, and a change in the ontological status of humans as 'individuals' rather than 'individuals'. This argument has more general implications not just for how we comprehend personhood but also, as Donna Haraway would have it, 'what counts as an object' (Haraway 1988: 288); and, of course, what counts as a subject. At stake here is much more than the social construction of identities, or the contextual construction of meaning, but the contingent permeabilities of boundaries between humans and non-humans; how subjects and objects emerge. One way of addressing this is to understand things as events.

The representational impulse in material culture studies has resulted from efforts to fix the meaning or social use of objects in particular moments in time. This is an old complaint about ethnographic and archaeological museums, but is also one
that can be extended to mainstream material culture studies, which have been characterized by a deep-rooted ethnographic presentism, usually justified through a belief of the exceptionalism of the contemporary material world. It is also a characteristic of the strong tendency in interpretive archaeological thinking to ascribe particular social functions to objects, and to privilege moments at which social relations or particular meanings can be identified.

The idea of ‘life histories’ in archaeology and anthropology is significant here. Conventional interpretive archaeologies that focus on change over time (e.g. Hodder 1990) are more accurately described as ‘agency histories’ or ‘meaningful histories’ rather than ‘life histories’: since life, as Tim Ingold (2000a) reminds us, involves much more than simply humans and their concerns. Life also, of course, involves constant change and flux. This includes not only social change, or the shift in the meaning of an object but the ‘transformation of substance’: through decay, fragmentation, residuality, etc. (Pollard 2004). As we have seen, it is conventional for material culture studies to focus only on those moments when things (even banal, everyday things such as soup cans or sherds of pottery) become important for humans: involved in social relationships, or charged with meaning. Sometimes, the field accounts for material restriction and restraint (e.g. Foucault 1977a). More recently, as we have seen, in some studies it posits the existence of ‘material agency’ (Knappett and Malafouris 2008b). These ideas, however, do not allow for what we might call ‘the humility of change’: the kind of apparently obscure and inconsequential changes in the fill of a pit, or the slitting-up of a ditch, which archaeologists spend large periods of time documenting. Life histories of things at any scale, however, routinely accommodate what we might term material histories, rather than purely social histories.

This disciplinary excavation has reminded us of how the rise of contextual archaeology coincided with a range of parallel interests in the ‘social life of things’ in social anthropology. In the 1980s the renewed study of exchange, and especially the publication of a new English translation of Marcel Mauss’s comparative study of gift exchange in 1990, brought new life to debates in economic anthropology. This atmosphere was captured in Arjun Appadurai’s influential edited collection The Social Life of Things: commodities in cultural perspective, which examined how anthropological perspectives could be used to study the ways in which objects move between social contexts, gaining new meanings through successive recontextualizations (Appadurai 1986a). Igor Kopytoff’s idea of the ‘cultural biography of objects’ set out in that volume has been influential in both archaeology and anthropology (Hoskins 1998; Gosden and Marshall 1999). But, the idea of studying things through the idiom of life histories has a much more complex life history of its own, which stretches back to Haddon’s evolutionary idea of ‘the life histories of designs’ (Haddon 1895). One particularly influential use of the idea of the life histories of things was developed in the New Archaeology in Michael Schiffer’s account of the idea of tracing an artefact’s ‘life history’ from production, through use, to deposition, in order to comprehend the formation of the archaeological record (Schiffer 1972). Like many other archaeological methods, from landscape survey to excavation recording, if you were to place your finger at any point on Schiffer’s drawing of this sequence (reproduced by Harrison this volume, chapter 23, Figure 23.1), it would be difficult uniformly to assign meaning or involvement in social agency: and yet the thing would be ‘doing’ something. Passing from one form to another as it decayed, or simply lying below the ground or on the surface of a ploughed field. Tracing such life histories is always the product of the slow and painstaking putting of archaeological methods into practice, for apparently inconsequential materials. As Appadurai argued, the idea of ‘the social lives of things’ requires a degree of ‘methodological fetishism’.

Even if our own approach to things is conditioned necessarily by the view that things have no meanings apart from those that human transactions, attributions and motivations endow them with, the anthropological problem is that this formal truth does not illuminate the concrete, historical circulation of things. For that we have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories. It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things. Thus, even though from a doctrinal point of view human actors encode things with meaning, from a methodological point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context. No social analysis of things (whether the analyst is an economist, an art historian, or an anthropologist) can avoid a minimum level of what might be called methodological fetishism. This methodological fetishism, returning our attention to the things themselves, is in part a corrective to the tendency to excessively socialize transactions in things, a tendency we owe to Mauss.

Appadurai (1986b: 5).

The discussion above might encourage us to extend Appadurai’s argument to suggest that it is not only ‘human and social contexts’ that are visible by tracing things-in-motion. This argument about objects’ life histories would have implications for ethnographic, as well as archaeological, fieldwork. The reduction of objects’ life histories to their enrolment in the lives of humans must clearly be questioned (Schiffer 1972, Gosden 2006). Human and material lives are routinely intertwined. In many archaeological and ethnographic studies, the intertwined nature of human and material life—whether through the extension of life courses through mementos (Hallam and Hockey 2001), the role of things in human memory (Jones 2007) the intimacy of ownership and ‘possession’ of things that persist over time (Miller 2001b)—have been a central contribution of archaeological and anthropological material culture studies.

In these cases, things themselves can come to constitute contexts, which are by no means purely human or social contexts. The work of museum ethnographers
such as Nicholas Thomas and Amiria Henare in extending material culture studies into historical anthropology has been particularly important here (N. Thomas 1999, 2000; Henare 2005a, 2005b; cf. Haas 1996; Colchester 2003). Such work builds on Marilyn Strathern’s (1990) seminal study of ‘artefacts of history’, in which the material enactment of history was foregrounded. In practice, this means that historical anthropology cannot understand artefacts as the illustrations of social history, from which they are separated. Both objectification and subjectification require work; such processes must be made to happen and maintained. In this sense, things are always events—more or less visible depending on the constant changes in the human and non-human world. Thomas’ study of the changing uses of indigenous and introduced textiles in the history of the conversion to Christianity in nineteenth-century Polynesia is of significance here. Tracing the adoption of the Tahitian practice of wearing barkcloth ponchos (tiputa) more widely in Polynesia, he suggests that artefacts of this kind ‘were much more than mere markers of identity’. Instead, he demonstrates ‘how adapted and introduced types of cloth perhaps worked as a technology that made religious change, that is, conversion to Christianity, visible as a feature of people’s behaviour and domestic life’ (N. Thomas 1999: 6). By focusing on the effects of the physical properties of tiputa—which allowed for parts of the body to be covered—Thomas suggests that in such situations, ‘the interpretative strategy of regarding things essentially as expressions of cultural, subcultural, religious, or political identities, depends on too static and literal an approach to their meanings’ (N. Thomas 1999: 16). Thus, the Polynesian ponchos to some extent ‘made’ contexts themselves, rather than simply being received within particular socio-cultural (human) contexts. The implications for the writing of colonial history are significant, since alternatives to conventional social or cultural histories of colonial histories are made possible through a kind of material history: This way of seeing things perhaps also helps us move beyond the long-standing dilemma of historical anthropology in Oceania, which has lurched between emphasis on continuity and discontinuity, between affirmation of the enduring resilience of local cultures, and critique of the effects of colonial history. Artefacts such as tiputa are neither inventions of tradition nor wholly unprecedented forms. They are at once implicated in the material history of Polynesian societies and departures from that history…More often than we have acknowledged, the indigenous peoples of the region have been concerned not to ‘contextualise’ things, but to use things to change contexts.

N. Thomas (1999: 18–19)

Thomas hints at how things can contribute to the formation of contexts, as well as simply fitting into contexts in which they can be used or understood, that this formation is contingent, and that this contingency includes the physical affordances of things and even the materials they are made from. As Chris Pinney has argued, this leads a long way away from the understanding of things as infinitely malleable for human ends (Pinney 2003: 268).

These developments in historical anthropology are taken a step further by new developments in British archaeology (see discussions by Pollard 2001, 2004). In historical archaeology, for example, ‘material histories’ involve not simply understanding the changing social uses or meanings of artefacts, but also those aspects of the life histories of things, buildings, or landscapes that are more accurately described as non-coherent, rather than socially significant or culturally meaningful (Hicks 2003, 2005, 2007a, 2007b; Hicks and Beaudry 2006a; Hicks and McAtackney 2007; cf. Shanks 1998; Holter 2002; Holter and Williams 2006). The very idea of historical archaeology becomes meaningless if it is not grounded in the sense that so much happens that is unspoken and undocumented, but that is far from insignificant and that leaves material traces. But more than that, ideas and discourses are revealed from an archaeological perspective to require material enactment: to be fitted, usually quite awkwardly, into the world.

The point can be made by returning to the idea of capitalist processes of objectification (Miller 1987). The justification for setting up research between the ‘material’ and the ‘cultural’ was that large-scale forces (modernity, capitalism, etc.) create subjects and objects, and so anthropology should study the processes through which this takes place. But the implication of Bruno Latour’s contention that We Have Never Been Modern (Latour 1993a) is that modernity was an idea that was never totally and coherently enacted. For the archaeologist, for instance studying the decaying concrete and steel of modernist architecture (Buchli 1990), theories of objectification serve to overdetermine the power of the modern, of capitalism, etc. (cf. Buchli and Lucas 2001a, 2001b; Hicks 2008a). Thus, one of the principal contributions of the archaeology of the modern period, as it has emerged since the early 1980s, has been to demonstrate that there was no sudden or fundamental transformation of the material world at any point in the emergence of the modern. Any model of radical difference between the premodern and the modern, and between anthropological and archaeological studies of material culture, is thus unhelpful (Hicks and Beaudry 2006b). Instead, a distinctive kind of historiography, which relates to material change, is involved (Hicks 2003, 2008b). Such material histories do not deny or critique social histories. They are perhaps best understood as ‘less-than-social’ histories. We could equally call them material culture studies.

Historical archaeology and historical anthropology have often studied situations in which particular understandings of a distinction between persons and objects have been held, most clearly perhaps in the treatment of people as objects in the archaeology of slavery (e.g. Kopytoff 1986). But at its best the contribution is considerably more nuanced: describing how such ideas are worked out in particular places and particular lives, rather than illustrating social history (Wilkie 2003). And it is from the intimate depictions of human and material situations in the archaeology of the recent past that the most effective alternatives to sociological studies of material culture informed by practice theory have
emerged (Buchli 1999; 2002c): undertaking, as the strongest contributions in material culture studies do, a kind of ‘archaeology of modern life’ (Weatherill 1989: 439).

Taken together, recent research in historical anthropology and historical and prehistoric archaeology suggests that the longstanding concern with overcoming overarching dualisms between subjects and objects has derived to a considerable extent from the synchronic nature of British material culture studies: both in the ethnographic present, and in the tendency in interpretive archaeology to privilege particular moments of social agency or meaning. Human and material lives are not ontologically different: they exist in the same world. They might, however, operate at a variety of paces. Imagine screwing a manual camera to a tripod in a dimly lit room. The longer the exposure, the more will be visible in the photograph. But equally, the more blurred human actions will be, as walls and windows stand out, unmoving. It is not, of course, that buildings are not undergoing constant change. Rather, they are moving at a different pace: all buildings will fall down eventually. Moreover, the pace of change in materials is contingent upon not only their maintenance by humans—for a building, repointing a wall, or keeping a roof intact—but also upon the materials involved. Constructions out of timber decay faster than stone. As I have argued with Audrey Horning in relation to the archaeology of buildings, such perspectives require a distribution of analysis across time that parallels the distribution of intentionality, thought, or agency over time that appeared in study of the Maori meeting house in the final chapter of Alfred Gell’s study Art and Agency (Gell 1998: 231–258; Hicks and Horning 2006). Unravelling the arguments about artworks and social agency set out in the earlier chapters of his book, Gell considered how particular material forms emerge from traditions of practice. The logic of this argument is to suggest that a diachronic approach, which understands things as involved (as well as humans) in the making of time and of contexts, must allow that ‘material culture has a dangerous potentiality that it has never acquired in social theory’ (N. Thomas 1999: 7). But it also means that we must allow for the time spent in the camera exposure: which implicates the researcher within the event, rather than being distanced from it, as I shall explore in the next section.

Skill and disciplinarity: things as effects

Having made this argument about things as events in what would usually be understood as the object of enquiry—the archaeological site, or the Maori meeting hut studied by the ethnographer—I now want to use Tim Ingold’s arguments about skilled practice to extend precisely the same argument to theories. Theories, we might suggest, emerge in precisely the same manner as things. Things and theories are not simply events, however; they are also effects. This suggestion requires us to move anthropological interests in practice beyond human and material practices as an object of enquiry, to incorporate our own material practices as researchers. It requires more than a purely reflexive awareness of fixed and timeless positionality, since positions emerge as events in precisely the same manner as things. The conceptual and practical tools for going beyond reflexivity already exist within material culture studies, and might be freed up by the unfolding of the idea of material culture studies to include the academic subject, as well as the academic object (and thus to move beyond the ‘science wars’ of the 1980s between subject-ivity and object-ivity, relativism and realism). In this section, I want to suggest that an understanding of things (and theories) as events can be complemented by an understanding of things (and theories) as the effects of material practice. This line of enquiry is inspired especially by current thinking in historical archaeology. Here, the extension of archaeological research into the recent past and the contemporary world means that archaeology can no longer be defined by its object. Where archaeology used to be a discipline that examined particular key sites or objects, the ‘canon’ of archaeological material is broken down by the extension of the field into the twentieth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries: there is simply too much for any such definition to have coherence (Hicks 2005). Either archaeology is no longer a useful idea, or we must look at archaeological practices—how archaeology enacts things—to understand what archaeology is. This raises much broader issues of the aspiration of material culture studies to be a post-disciplinary field. Before discussing interdisciplinarity, however, I want to make the case for understanding things and theories as effects, as well as events. So how to account for things as events? There is a strong line of enquiry in material culture studies that relates to the skilled use of things. This runs from Marcel Mauss’ (1973) account of ‘techniques of the body’, through Leroi-Gourhan’s (1993) account of claviers opératoires (operational sequences) and his classification of techniques and gestures ‘derived from the kinds of action on materials which they employ’ (Lemonnier 1986: 150), to Pierre Lemonnier’s vision of an anthropology of technology, moving away from ‘the study of lifeless objects’ (1986: 147). Attention to ‘the peeling of sweet potatoes, the washing of children, or the sharpening of stone axe’, to ‘the observation and the transcription of operational sequences, in particular, is an indispensable part of any fieldwork. Not to do so is to treat objects as hardly less isolated and lifeless as those in a museum’ (Lemonnier 1986: 181). We might locate aspects of Bruno Latour’s thinking in this tradition (e.g. Latour 2000b), and certainly Tim Ingold’s focus on the idea of ‘skill’, which is so central to his ideas of meshwork and weaving (Ingold 2000a: 289–293) and his distinction between ‘building’ and ‘dwelling’. By extending such ideas to field practice, as Ingold (1993) did to some degree in his examination of ‘the temporality of the landscape’, we might underline the performative and situated dimensions of our understanding of the contemporary world, and of how we enact the past in the present (cf. Strathern 1990).
One of the distinctive characteristics of interpretive archaeology, especially as it was developed by Ian Hodder, was a self-awareness of archaeology as a contemporary practice, in which field methods should be thought through (Shanks and McGuire 1996; Hodder 1999). For the archaeologist, however, the contemporary must be an event, emergent, and contingent (Buchli and Lucas 2001b). In American cultural anthropology, the reflexive awareness of ethnographic monographs as written texts (Marcus and Cushman 1982) was summarized in the influential collection *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986). In contrast, the publication in the same year of *Reading the Past* described the reverse process: a passive reading from the material record, rather than the practices of writing from fieldwork (Hodder 1986). However, in the 1990s, an increasing desire to think through the processes of uniting ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ (Hodder 1999) came to generate a distinctive alternative from the turning away from method and fieldwork that characterized some other approaches in interpretive archaeology, such as Julian Thomas’ argument that discussions of methods were of limited significance because ‘New Archaeology was methodology’ and a scepticism that knowledge might emerge quite precisely from method rather than the abstractions of interpretation (Thomas 2000c: 3). While much of this discussion related to the idea of ‘reflexivity’ which often simply reinforced the interpretive concept of a distance between scholar and object (Hicks 2005), a new body of writing about archaeological practice emerged (Edgeworth 1990, 2003, 2006a; Lucas 2001a; Yarrow 2003, 2008), especially in relation to the situated and iterative processes through which archaeological knowledge comes about (Hicks 2005). The distinction here with conventional models of social science is clear: where structuration theory suggested that ‘all social actors ... are social theorists’, a focus on field practice involves awareness of ‘the specificity of techniques, as far as “knowledge” is concerned’ is crucial (Giddens 1984: 335; Strathern 1987: 30).

Such perspectives have not been applied to anthropological material culture studies, despite the important acknowledgement that ‘anthropology, which grew up in cousinship with archaeology, takes to the analysis of the minutiae of practice in a manner akin to that of an excavation’ (Miller and Woodward 2007: 337), and the call from archaeologists working on the ‘contemporary past’ for a kind of ‘critical empiricism’ (Buchli and Lucas 2001a: 14; Buchli 2002b: 16). Indeed the Manchester School’s arguments about the particular perspectives provided by extended case method and situational analysis were not important to anthropology’s Material-Cultural Turn. But just as in archaeology, the potential in the anthropology of things for a foregrounding of the empirical work of fieldwork to bring about, in practice rather than in theory, a collapsing of object and subject, is directly related to avoiding the choice between ‘objectivity’ and ‘subjectivity’, which the Material-Cultural Turn was trying to do from the outset. As Tom Yarrow has recently argued, ‘whilst archaeologists frequently assert and demonstrate the objectivity of the artefacts and contexts they unearth as distinct from their own subjective interpretations, the work required to achieve this distinction is not reducible to the distinction itself’ (Yarrow 2008: 135-136).

In this conception, fieldwork is not usefully understood as purely ‘relational’, but as constituted by moments of permeability between fieldworker, place, things, and people. Field sciences, such as archaeology, anthropology, geography, and science and technology studies (STS), enact knowledge. We cannot, therefore, fail to theorize methodology (Henare et al. 2007a: 27). That is why Mary and I wanted to gather these four particular disciplines together in the present volume about studying things. This implication of the fieldworker in the emergence of the material studied, and the definition of material culture studies as a series of practices for enacting knowledge about things, requires an extension of that argument, from material culture studies, about the humility of things to the potential of the apparently banal to the apparently tedious work of post-exca- vation or museum ethnography. After all, ‘knowing’ as Chris Gosden and Frances Larson have recently argued, ‘takes time and effort and people and things’ (2007: 239). Rather than reflexivity, an awareness of the emergent situatedness of knowledge can achieve what Marilyn Strathern has described as ‘a certain brand of empiricism, making the data so presented apparently outrun the theoretical effort to comprehend it’ (1990: 199).

The difference from previous conceptions of material culture studies is critical: a foregrounding of disciplinarity, rather than undertaking an anthropology of this object or that. Such a move is close to what Annemarie Mol has termed a shift from ‘ethnography’ to ‘praxigraphy’—in which the practices of the fieldworker are implicated too, since ‘praxigraphic stories have composite objects’ (2001a: 156). Where the cultural turn across the social sciences is in so many places ‘still dominated by tired constructivist themes’ (Thrift 2000: 2), and since the Material-Cultural Turn in British archaeology and anthropology too often used objects to argue that its research was not, to borrow Judith Butler’s phrase, ‘merely cultural’ (Butler 1998), the challenge lies in collapsing the gap between anthropological archaeology’s acknowledgement of ‘the humility of objects’ and Donna Haraway’s conception of knowledge practices as acts of ‘modest witnessing’ (Miller 1987: 85-86; Haraway 1997: 24-25).

If we understand things as events and effects, rather than fixed and solid, then ‘material culture’ has unfolded to the point that material culture studies can no longer be defined by its object. The ‘materiality debate’ sketched above demonstrates that the idea that material culture might represent ‘the concrete counterpoint to the abstractions of culture’ (Yarrow 2008: 122) is long behind us. Along with it, however, any unifying model of networks and relations between bounded entities is also lost. The material effects highlighted above demonstrate how permeabilities, as well as just relations, constitute the emergence of the world as assemblage. And they indicate that the Durkheimian conception of social agency, revived in material culture studies through
practice theory in order to reconcile the structural and the semiotic, is no longer adequate: simply extending it to objects will not do (see Gell 1998). Life, both human and non-human, as it is encountered in archaeology and anthropology involves not relations between fixed entities, but life as the ongoing flow of permeabilities, and the emergence of worlds. These issues have been addressed in material culture studies in examinations of immateriality (Buchli 2004: 187–191), if the consumption of apparently intangible media such as the internet (Miller and Slater 2000) or radio (Taczik 1998) and to some extent in Miller’s account of ‘virtualism’ (Carrier and Miller 1998; D. Miller 2000). But there are ontological rather than purely epistemological ramifications of the unfolding of material culture as a coherent object of enquiry: as fieldworkers we do not mediate between two ontological domains.

The implications for material culture studies’ ambitions to create a kind of post-disciplinary field are profound. Since the 1970s, many have observed that the study of material culture might unite ‘archaeologists with certain kinds of cultural anthropologists’ (Appadurai 1986a: 5). However, despite the regular inclusion of literature surveys in the relatively high number of many closely argued, programmatic statements of what ‘material culture studies’ might represent or aspire to be (e.g. Miller 1982, 1987, 1994, 2005a; Miller and Tilley 1996), the 1990s was rarely characterized by genuine collaboration and exchange between British anthropology and archaeology. Where collaboration did occur, as in Chris Tilley’s idea of An Ethnography of the Neolithic (1996), they were restricted to a particular vision of archaeology: as distant as possible from the present, and as method-less phenomenology rather than employing archaeological techniques. Similarly, in North America the development by Mike Schiffer of a ‘behavioural archaeology’, using the techniques of New Archaeology to study modern material culture such as radios and cars, has had little impact on socio-cultural anthropology. The diversity of methods involved in what Appadurai termed, as we saw above, the ‘methodological fetishism’ required to write life histories of things has rarely been considered. Instead, material culture studies developed in Britain as a self-consciously post-disciplinary field. Unlike in interpretive archaeology, there has been virtually no interest in discussions of field practice, apart from in the eclecticism of hermeneutic phenomenology sketched above. Thus, in the first editorial for the Journal of Material Culture Daniel Miller and Chris Tilley argued that:

The study of material culture may be most broadly defined as the investigation of the relationship between people and things irrespective of time and space. The perspective adopted may be global or local, concerned with the past or the present, or the mediation between the two . . . [T]he potential range of contemporary disciplines involved in some way or other in studying material culture is effectively as wide as the human and cultural sciences themselves.

Miller and Tilley (1996: 5)

Material culture studies in this period witnessed regular expressions of ‘the advantages of being undisciplined’ and celebrations of an ‘eclecticism [which would in the past] have been frowned upon as diluting and undisciplined’ (Miller and Tilley 1996: 12; Atfield 2000: 1). At the same time, the potential of the field becoming a discipline in its own right became a concern: there was a sense of the ‘many disadvantages and constraints imposed by trying to claim disciplinary status’ led to calls for ‘remaining undisciplined and pursuing a field of study without respect to prior claims of disciplinary antecedents’ (Miller 1995b: 4; Tilley 2000b: 12–13). As Peter Van Dommelen observed in a study of contributions to the Journal of Material Culture, ‘the lack of a “home base” for material culture studies’ was also ‘a point repeatedly made and frequently emphasized’ (2000: 496).

With a division of disciplinary labour between the prehistoric and the modern world, a relational conception of the potential connections between archaeology and anthropology, and between materials and culture, which had characterized the debates in structural Marxist anthropology two decades earlier, was effectively reinforced. This relational model of interdisciplinary exchanges had been part of a call for collaboration between archaeology and anthropology.

Although disciplinary specialization is a necessary response to the complexity of knowledge, the institutionalization of disciplines in a pedagogic context naturally leads their members to be over-conscious of the uniqueness of their subject-matter and the rigidity of their techniques to elucidate and critically examine their objects of analysis, which become too often badges of corporate identity. This tends to obscure the fact that at a higher and more abstract level it may be more pertinent to be involved in a unifying dialogue so as to share equally in the resolution of theoretical problems and to avoid a reaction to what is perceived to be a one-sided theoretical indebtedness to other disciplines.

Rowlands and Gledhill (1976: 37)

This position was in contrast with the continued strength in contextual archaeology of David Clarke’s vision of the distinctiveness of archaeological perspectives.

Archaeology is neither ‘historical’ nor ‘anthropological’. It is not even science or art. Archaeology’s increasing maturity allows it to claim an independence with distinctive qualities to contribute.

Hodder (1986: x)

In this context, the suggestion in 1998 by Chris Tilley, one of the few archaeologists working in both traditions of interpretive archaeology and anthropological material culture studies, that a loss of ‘disciplinary isolation’ had led to the end of archaeology as a coherent discipline at all, is informative (cf. Hicks 2003):

there could be nothing distinctive about archaeological theory when it went beyond a concern with appropriate methodologies for excavation, fieldwork and conceptualization of factors affecting the physical survival of archaeological evidence . . . The irony [in Clarke’s work] is that the death of archaeology could only result from the conceit of distinctiveness . . . How could an archaeological theory of society or human action be produced that would
not simultaneously be a social and anthropological theory? ... A loss of innocence is dependent on the end of disciplinary isolation and, in this sense, archaeology no longer continues to exist.

Tilley (1998: 690–692)

This is the editorial direction of the recent Sage Handbook of Material Culture (Tilley et al. 2006). It builds within social anthropology on earlier complaints about the idea of disciplinarity in archaeology:

Why is teaching so much bound up with promoting disciplinary allegiance and asserting distinctiveness? Why are courses in archaeological institutions labelled as being archaeological theory, rather than social theory? Why should archaeologists think they can learn more from each other in their conferences, seminars, workshops, lectures and publications rather than by talking with outsiders (so-called inter-disciplinary interactions being the exception rather than the norm)? Is this anything much more than a kind of ancestor- and hero-worship ... and part of a struggle for resources between competing disciplines in universities with artificial boundaries? Leaving to one side the politics and pragmatism inevitably required for the disciplinary survival of archaeology, is it any longer intellectually necessary, or sufficient, for us to be disciplined?

Tilley (1998: 692, original emphasis)

This post-disciplinary conception of material culture studies led to very little consideration of disciplinary histories, allegiances, and intellectual debts, creating the impression that material culture studies is now, as it were, independently re-invented by the same theoretical discussions that earlier have tended to regard them as irrevelant. The picture created in this way is essentially historical, in that it reconstitutes the study of the artifact in its new domain as apparently separated from its historical roots.

van Beek (1989: 95)

It is this gap in self-awareness of disciplinary historiography that this chapter has been working to plug. Archaeological and anthropological research requires methods, (like fieldwork) in which objects of enquiry emerge as effects rather than prior entities in any straightforward manner. The contingencies of these events must therefore be accounted for. And such contingencies include disciplinary traditions as well as methods: the questions that we ask of things, from which objects emerge. An awareness of disciplinary histories must therefore be a central concern. As we have seen, material culture studies were the principal element of 'postmodern anthropology' (Rowlands 2004: 474) and archaeology in Britain, but they retained very many of the elements of structuralism. The few attempts to build post-structuralist archaeologies in Britain (Baker and Thomas 1990; Bapty and Yates 1990) comprised second-hand reviews of the literature of other fields rather than genuine contributions to archaeological thinking (Shanks 1990), while the anthropology of consumption actively distanced itself from the perceived 'nihilism' of post-structuralist thinking (Miller 1987: 165, 176). The Material-Cultural Turn thus operated by 'placing the object squarely in the centre of culture theory' (van Beek 1989: 94), forming part of a broader process in which post-processual archaeology sought a kind of 'compression' of structuralist and post-structuralist approaches (Olson 2006: 86).

While material culture studies was forged in British archaeology and anthropology as a kind of post-disciplinary field, in the 'materiality debate' this approach to disciplinarity has become more complex. For example, in his response to Tim Ingold's critique of the idea of 'materiality', Daniel Miller has underlined diversity by suggesting that the idea of 'a fixed object like a genre called “material-culture studies” is unsustainable' (Miller 2007: 24), but has at the same time suggested that a distinctive contribution of material culture studies is ethnographic:

[W]e are not philosophers ... Instead we are anthropologists constantly engaged in ethnography ... Most of those working in material-culture studies, including almost everyone I work with at UCL, come from a tradition more aligned with the ethnographic study of practice—that is, the actual use of materials by people—but above all study of the way the specific character of people emerges from their interaction with the material world through practice ... [O]ur profession demands an encounter with the world as we find it, My heart is in contemporary ethnography, and I do not feel the need to apologize for a material culture that has changed in recent decades largely because today it is, while a few decades ago it manifestly was not, central to this contemporary ethnography. Miller (2007: 24–27)

This perspective contrasted markedly with earlier contentions that 'material culture studies is not constituted by ethnography, but remains eclectic in its methods' (Miller 1998b: 19).

Miller’s new argument inspires two responses. The first is that when material culture studies was defined by its object, a false division between past and present, formed especially after the abandonment of ethnarchaeology, bounded off archaeology from anthropology. British archaeology has throughout the majority of literature in British material culture studies been understood in relation to prehistory rather than the archaeology of historical periods or the contemporary world (e.g. Miller 1987: 124–125). This has restricted the contributions from archaeology and anthropology to what is perceived as a current interdisciplinary ‘return to things’ in social scientific research (Witmore 2007: 559), and are characterized by a pressing desire to make a contribution from the perspective of material culture studies, or from archaeology to broader debates.

But secondly, the particular ways in which interdisciplinarity was envisaged in material culture studies might be reoriented. As Andrew Barry, Georgiana Born, and Gisa Wexman have argued, working across disciplines need not lead to a loss of coherence, but can allow a form of ‘interdisciplinary autonomy’ to emerge (Barry et al. 2008), which can ‘attend to the specificity of interdisciplinary fields, their genealogies and multiplicity’ (Barry et al. 2008: 42). The Material-Cultural Turn associated ‘disciplines’ with constraint (perhaps even, subconsciously, with punishment, since Foucault 1977a). But as Marilyn Stratton has argued, ‘disciplinary awareness—that is, a sense of the regional and
intellectual histories within which our research is conducted, and upon the putting of particular methods into practice—is a crucial element in achieving clarity in the contingency of the knowledge that we create upon materially-situated practices' (Strathern 2004b: 5). Moreover, these situations emerge through practice.

The tendency to define archaeology and anthropological material culture studies by its objects led to a particular conception of post-disciplinarity (e.g. Fahlander and Oestgård 2004). Rather than the distinctions between archaeology and anthropology as defined by their objects of enquiry—the science of things or the science of people—a sensitivity to field practice (rather than just the use of practice theory) could allow new kinds of cross-disciplinary work in ‘material culture studies’ to develop. In this sense, the field of material culture studies holds in its hands the toolkits required to move beyond not only the representational impulse in the Material-Cultural Turn, but that in ANT as well, which too often in its interdisciplinarity operates as an abstract theory distanced from the world just like the Durkheimian model of the social, and like structuralism. Insofar as ANT represents a third major interdisciplinarity contribution from anthropology, this time involving the accommodation of ‘non-Humans’, its transdisciplinary reception as a new representational model could be reoriented from the perspective of material culture studies.

CONCLUSIONS: FROM THE HUMILITY OF THINGS TO MODEST WITNESSEING

The social sciences become devoted to the study of all phenomena that stand for what we now call society, social relations, or indeed simply the subject. By whichever name, these are the terms that describe the contents of the coffin we are about to bury. 

Miller (2005a: 36)

It is conventional in British field archaeology, after the layers are drawn and recorded, recording sheets completed, artefacts gathered, bagged, and labelled, and the stratigraphic sequence constructed, to sit on the side of the evaluation trench with a cup of tea, to light a cigarette and, staring at the spoil heap, think the foregoing process through for a final time before filling the hole back in. A similar process seems appropriate after this exercise in disciplinary excavation: a counterpoint to Daniel Miller’s ‘rites of burial’ for ‘the twin terms society and social relations’ (Miller 2005a: 37). The excavation has, after all, encountered only fragments of ‘culture’, of ‘materials’, and of any clear set of relationships between them. But archaeology is different from grave digging, and this evaluative trench is not a grave for material culture studies, but a glimpse of its stratigraphy.

The archaeological process yields not just fragments of abraded and residual ceramic sherds, but mud on the boots and dirt under the fingernails. It is generally conducted outside, and so involves experience of the wind, rain, or heat. It is itinerant, in that the site must be chosen, arrived at, and time spent there. It is iterative in that it involves the repeated application of a particular bundle of methods and, in Britain at least, a distinctive range of tools (pointing trowels, coal shovels, marker pens, manual cameras, biros, ring-binders, permacraze, hazard tape, hard hats, masking tape, zip lock bags, large plywood boards, pH pencils, line levels, high visibility jackets, string, etc.). In other words, the practice of archaeology reminds us of something that is more generally true of field sciences such as anthropology, geography, STS, and archaeology: that we enact knowledge of the world, rather than straightforwardly represent it. These enactments are just like the enactment of anything. At their best, these fields collapse any division between this enactment—the status of the knowledge that emerges from them as event and effect—and the humans and materials studied. But this requires a leaving behind of the representational impulses that continue to characterize the diverse work of Miller, Ingold, and Latour. No new grand theory of material culture is required: instead, a more modest acknowledgement of how our knowledge is formed through material practices, which are always historically contingent.

It is not the purpose of this chapter to critique the assertion that ‘material culture studies may be claimed to be in the vanguard of creative theory and debate in the social sciences today’ (Tilley 2006: 5). But the coherence of the field defined according to its object is hard to perceive today: given the questioning of ideas of cultures, materials, and especially of the relationships between the two, which have emerged from material culture studies itself (cf. D. Miller 2007: 24). This, I believe, is the point that Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell are trying to make in their rather abstract answer to the pressing contemporary question: “What would an artefact-oriented anthropology look like if it were not about material culture?” (Henare et al. 2007: 1).

In his discussion of Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) study Distinction, Daniel Miller once argued that while it represented ‘surely the most significant contribution to the study of consumption made by any anthropologist’ to date, its principal weaknesses related to the methodology employed (which involved the sociological use of a questionnaire rather than ethnographic participant observation) and the failure to situate mass consumption ‘as an historical phenomenon’ (Miller 1987: 154–55). Re-reading these lines, it is difficult, especially from the vantage point offered by the side of this trench on which I am sitting, to comprehend the discomfort in anthropology’s Material-Cultural Turn with issues of historical contingency and research practice since that time.

The possibility of material culture studies lies not in method, but rather in an acknowledgement of the nature of culture... We as academics can strive for understanding and empathy
through the study of what people do with objects, because that is the way that the people that we study create a world of practice.

Miller (1998: 12)

At the same time, the very idea of 'interpretive archaeology' presented the material and the past as distant: in different worlds from the contemporary researcher. The 'soft focus' that such imagined distance creates has led to the false impression that the dirt on my hands is somehow ontologically different from my hands themselves. We do not need to return to Mary Douglas (1966) to realize that such perspectives are the legacies of structuralism (and are concerned with a kind of epistemological purity).

Such views limit practice to those whom we observe. They distance the researcher as subject from the object of enquiry (even when that object is defined as processes of objectification). They conceive of the fieldworker as a 'participant observer', on the model of structural-functionalism and its particular Durkheimian view of the social, rather than as what folklorist John Messenger (1989) once called an 'observant participant'. This holds back the potential, which I take to be the central contribution of archaeology and anthropology to the social sciences' impact on material things, of the description and discussion of how alternative ontologies emerge, in a contingent manner, as particular sites and situations are enacted (Hicks and McAtackney 2007): whether in everyday life, or in academic research. The implications of such a view is to allow the metaphysics to emerge from the material as it is studied: a position that demands a theoretical eclecticism, but also a clarity about the nature of disciplinary and material positionality.

In 1985 geographer Nigel Thrift concluded his assessment of Giddens' model of practice theory, after the publication of The Constitution of Society (Giddens 1984), by imagining the next book that he would have liked to see Giddens write:

one for which The Constitution of Society would serve as a prolegomenon. It would consist of the development of structuration 'theory' in the arena of a particular place in a particular historical period of time, showing structuration in process, contextualising in context. The book would have to show how structuration 'theory' can act as a basis for challenging existing interpretations of historical events. It would therefore show whether structuration 'theory' was viable. Of course, this may sound like a plea for Giddens to do some 'empirical work'. But it seems to me that, more than most other social theories, that is the import of structuration theory. After all, it is not possible to expose the importance of context and then ignore it. At some point conceptual savages must hit particular places or disappear back into the thin air of high theory.

Thrift (1985: 61)

Giddens never wrote that book. However, this precise task was, we might suggest, taken up with considerable energy in the 'high period' of British material culture studies. Material culture studies, as an interdisciplinary project defined by a common object of enquiry, emerged from particular efforts to solve a series of quite specific disciplinary problems in anthropology and archaeology. It came to be an effect of those problems: which led to fieldwork both in modern shopping centres and in Neolithic monumental landscapes. With the unfolding of that object, as both event and effect, we can no longer simply to resort to using practice theory to reconcile structuralism and semiotics, through case study after anthropological case study. By understanding itself as theory rather than effect, the Material-Cultural Turn has simply made the transition, as Edwin Ardener (1985) explained all modernist theories must do, from 'life' to 'genre'.

What the development of practice theory in material culture studies has shown, however, is that the dialectical model of agency and structure, and the literary model of langue and parole, have allowed a further distinction between subjects and objects to be reinforced: the difference between researchers and their materials. I must underline that I understand this to be the central contribution of the 'field sciences' of archaeology, anthropology, geography, and STS. We are united in having distinctive ways of putting methods into practice in order to enact the world. That is how we make knowledge: things emerge from our practices in precisely the same way they do through the vernacular practices of humans, or lives of things, that we study. As Daniel Miller has recently argued in his account of material culture on a south London street, material culture studies lead away from a Durkheimian model of social anthropology (Miller 2008: 282–297). But they also lead away from the latent structuralism in mainstream dialectical and 'relational' models of our strangely unhyphenated term, 'material culture', and more generally from modernist definition of academic practice as distanced representation. This shift, which we could describe as from epistemology to ontology (Henare et al. 2007a), is a reminder that an archaeologist gets dirt under the fingernails. That dirt and my fingers exist, after all, in the same world; the traces of practice until the fingers are scrubbed.

So just like anything, the Material-Cultural Turn was both an event and an effect. As all archaeological material culture studies reveal, we build the future with the remains of the past, often the very recent past. Where, then, is the idea of 'material culture studies' left? I have tried to offer some provisional answers. The argument takes unfolding of the idea of 'material culture' in precisely the opposite direction from the phenomenological critique, which seeks to avoid 'a tendency to ontologise the status of material evidence' by comprehending 'culture as a practice' (J. S. Thomas 2007: 11), towards acknowledging the contingency of our knowledge of the world upon situated material practices that derive from distinctive disciplinary methods and traditions, rather than representing a particular brand of social theory. As an anthropological archaeologist, I know that I have distinctive ways of talking, listening, photographing, drawing, excavating, curating, etc. I put these into practice in certain landscapes, with certain artefacts, in particular museums and other institutional contexts, in particular human and political situations. That is how, as an archaeologist, with colleagues and
collaborators I make knowledge of the world: in precisely the same manner in which any thing is formed. Archaeology is 'a way of doing' rather than just 'a way of thinking' (Edgeworth 2006b: xii). The same can be said of anthropology. In this sense, methodology and disciplinariness can be emancipatory, rather than restricting: allowing a kind of shifting, always messy positionality to emerge around which the idea of material culture studies can cohere. Aware that, while we are stuck with an awkward phrase, the idea of 'material culture studies' can highlight how both things and theories are always both events and effects: collapsing the idea of the 'humility of things' to encompass our own practices of witnessing, which must always be modest and provisional as they work from particular situations (both human and non-human). That sense of emergent positionality is precisely the contribution that studying things, whether small or large, in the first place can make.

CHAPTER 3

MATERIAL GEOGRAPHIES

IAN COOK
DIVYA P. TOLIA-KELLY

INTRODUCTION

Geographers’ engagements with materiality over the past decade have become the topic of widespread and sometimes heated debate. A steady trickle of articles has appeared critiquing the 'dematerialization' (Philo 2000) and advocating the 'rematerialization' (Jackson 2000) of social and cultural geography, and claims have been made that wider 'materialist returns' are under way across the discipline (Whatmore 2000). Chris Philo’s concerns about 'dematerialization' emerged through his reflections on the impact of geography’s 'cultural turn' in the early 1990s. Too much of the work produced in its wake was too 'cultural', too 'immaterial', and too bound up in signs, symbols, texts, and discourses. It wasn’t that he disliked this work, rather that its popularity had meant that too little attention was being paid to 'more “thingy”, hump-into-able, stubbornly there-in-the-world kinds of “matter” (the material) with which earlier geographers tended to be more familiar' (Philo 2000: 33). In a similar vein, Peter Jackson (2000) expressed

This chapter has benefited from a number of readings, and we would like to thank the following for their comments on earlier drafts: Anjana Ford, Dan Hicks, Melanie Jackson, Barbara Bender, Jude Hill, Nicola Thomas, David Harvey, and Exeter University’s Historical-Cultural Geography Research Group en masse.
his concern about a cultural geography too concerned with textual, cultural studies type work. He argued that research needed to be ‘more firmly grounded’ or, as he preferred to put it, ‘re-materialized’ through a renewed emphasis on material culture (Jackson 2009: 9). Philo and Jackson discussed a number of long-standing material traditions in human geography. They referred both to studies relying on ‘real world’ data whose ‘reality’ the cultural turn had brought into question (Philo 2000) and, more specifically, to the discipline’s material culture tradition based on ‘Sauarian studies of landscape evolution or Kniffen’s careful charting of the transformation of natural objects into regionally distinctive groupings of cultural artefacts and vernacular building styles’ (Jackson 2009: 9–10; Grang 2005). Both also highlighted ongoing material work, including studies of the ‘fleshy’ geographies of human bodies, actor networks, and human/non-human relations; material cultural geographies of consumption, cyberspace, and globalization; and the inhabitation of building spaces. Despite this talk of ‘its’ de- and re-materialization, it is important to emphasize that there never has been, nor is there now, a coherent approach to materiality in geography. Rather, as Sarah Whatmore argues, contemporary material geographies comprise a ‘rich variety of analytical impulses, philosophical resources and political projects’ that are ‘a product of repetition turning seemingly familiar matters over and over, like the pebbles on a beach’ (2000: 681).

Putting together a review of these geographies is therefore a difficult task. Others have struggled because ‘materiality’ is a term whose ‘plasticity … can elide different and even incompatible ontological commitments’ (Bakker and Bridge 2006: 6) and because ‘geographers tend to use the material and immaterial as a shorthand for tensions between empirical and theoretical, applied and academic, concrete and abstract, reality and representation, quantitative and qualitative, objective and subjective, political economy and cultural studies, and so on’ (Lees 2002: 102). We suspected that we might struggle, too, after exchanging the outlines of our ‘material geographies’ undergraduate modules, which had virtually nothing in common. This was perhaps because arguments about ‘materiality’ have become central to a disparate variety of geographical studies, including those that have attempted to (1) articulate ‘culture’ and ‘economy’, and ‘postcolonialism’ and ‘global capitalism’ (Cook and Harrison 2003: 298); (2) focus on the ‘material realities and lived experience of oppression and injustice’ (Pain and Bailey 2004: 320); (3) examine the ‘material capacities of objects’ as ‘active mediator[s] of social relations’ (Hoskins 2007: 437, 453); (4) think through ‘the specificities of what matter does to bodies and the ways in which bodies materialize’ (Coles 2007: 361); (5) reclaim ‘the material’ through the ‘more sensuous “doing” of research exploring “bodies, performances and practices”’ (Pain and Bailey 2004: 322); (6) re-animate the missing ‘matter’ of landscape … [as] co-fabricated between more-than-human bodies and a lively earth’ (Whatmore 2006: 605); and (7) examine ‘new viruses, climatic change, volcanoes, earthquakes and tsunamis’ to remind us that ‘humans are not the only actors on the planet’ (Rose and Brook 2008: viii).

Attempts have been made to lend coherence to this work through identifying ‘its’ commitments to practice, affect, ‘more-than-human modes of enquiry’ and the politics of know ledge (Whatmore 2006: 604), and ‘its’ inadequate theorization of ‘the material’ as an ‘unmediated, static, physicality’ and/or an ‘inextensive social structure that over-determines “the cultural”’ (Kearnes 2005; Anderson and Tolia-Kelly 2004: 670; Anderson and Wylie 2005). Attempts have also been made to extend its remit to reassemble geography—often divided neatly down the middle into the ‘physical’ and the ‘human’—into a more materially interconnected discipline (see Harrison et al. 2004a, 2004b, 2006). So, where do we start?

In the introduction to his edited collection on Materiality, anthropologist Daniel Miller (2005a) discusses how ethnographers constantly encounter the contradictory, juxtaposed, and incommensurable in their work. Cultural geographer Sarah Whatmore points out how new theorizations of materiality have often been provoked by ‘public controversies … in which the practices of social, as well as natural, scientists have been caught up’ (2006: 601). And archaeologist Duncan Garrow and sociologist Elizabeth Shove argue that getting scholars of materiality to analyze the same artefacts—in their case an unfinished stone axe and a toothbrush—‘can be an intriguing, surprising and intellectually rewarding task’ (2007: 131). So, we thought that an event, encounter, or controversy might help us to better organize and think through our appreciations of material geographies.

Just before we began to work on this chapter, a cargo ship called the MSC Napoli ran aground off a stretch of coastline in south-west England and some of its containers washed up on local beaches (Figure 3.1). This quickly turned into an international controversy partly because of environmental consequences of the oil spill that followed, but mainly because thousands of people rushed to the beach and helped themselves to the contents of the containers. The unexpected, controversial and incommensurable elements reported in the media, we thought, seemed somehow to mirror geographers’ disparate engagements with materiality. So we decided to work with this ‘Napoli event’. Turning academic practice on its head, we wondered how this example could help us to understand this literature.

The Napoli was a 62,000-tonne container ship on its way from the English port of Felixstowe via Antwerp, Le Havre, and Las Palmas to Cape Town. On board were 26 crew and 2,394 forty-foot containers. Half of the containers were to be unloaded in South Africa. Inside them was a strange assortment of cargoes from motorbikes to flip-flops (Table 3.1). The Napoli was due to dock in Cape Town on 29 January 2007. But on 18 January it was caught up in a violent storm in the English Channel, its hull was breached and it had to be abandoned. It subsequently developed severe structural failure as it was being towed east through continuing storms for repairs. So on 20 January it was beached along the south-west coast in the sheltered waters of Lyme Bay to prevent it breaking up at sea, causing an environmental catastrophe (BBC News 2007a).
According to newspaper reports, for centuries Lyme Bay has been 'a place where mariners know you go for refuge when there is a storm' (Sidmouth Herald 2007a, 2007b). Its shallow, sandy waters are ideal beaching grounds as they can keep a stricken ship intact. Soon, however, a 200-tonne, 5-mile long oil slick from the wreck was threatening rare marine species. Reports emerged of the slick causing the deaths of three dolphins and over 1,000 seabirds that were unable to fly, dive for food, or float properly because they were covered in oil, or poisoned because they had ingested it (Sidmouth Herald 2007c; Morris 2007). The Napoli event began to gain international media coverage, albeit only after the stormy seas caused the ship to list by 35 degrees and to lose 103 containers overboard, 50 of which washed up on the beach of a tiny village called Branscombe. Initially, local people helped themselves to their contents. But, after reports of people wheeling away brand new BMW motorbikes reached the national media, thousands more joined them as far away as Belgium in what became a 'big self-service party' (Kazim 2007). The legality of this mass ‘salvage’, ‘beachcombing’, ‘treasure-hunting’, ‘scavenging’, or ‘looting’ quickly became an issue. Goods removed from the beach, it transpired, were required by law to be reported to the official Receiver of the Wreck. Perhaps the most widely reported story in the international press ran as follows:

Anita Bokdal, 60, and husband Jan, 58, run a landscaping business near native Stockholm and a winery in South Africa and were shipping personal belongings to South Africa on MSC Napoli ‘to make it feel like home’. Instead, she watched in horror as her container was broken open and paintings, embroideries, a Rosenthal tea set and carpets were removed. . . . Mrs Bokdal appealed to anyone who took two embroidered pictures made by her father-in-law to return them as they have great sentimental value. 'There was also a hand-made copper table, like a tray, which came from Jan’s grandmother.'

Sidmouth Herald (2007c); see also CNN 2007; ABC 2007; Malan 2007

In the weeks and months that followed, the containers remaining on board were removed, while others washed up on the beach during fresh storms. A large-scale clean-up operation was mounted, and a salvage company was hired to break the Napoli into pieces, to be towed to a shipyard in Belfast, Northern Ireland, for ‘recycling’ (Exmouth Journal 2007a; Exmouth Herald 2007). Alongside, and bound up in these events, a ‘Napoli story’ took shape, was told and retold. The unfolding event had been documented by a local history group called the Branscombe Project, headed by retired heritage anthropologist Barbara Bender. In October 2007, they staged a Napoli exhibition in Branscombe’s Village Hall (Express and Echo 2007; Joint 2007; Roberts 2008). And, a month later, the Napoli event was the basis of an installation by artist Melanie Jackson in an exhibition called Human Cargo: The Transatlantic Slave Trade, its Abolition and Contemporary Legacies in Plymouth and Devon, in the City Museum and Art Gallery of the nearby port city, Plymouth (Human Cargo 2007a).

---

**Table 3.1** Cargo washed ashore at Branscombe, Devon after the shipwreck of the MSC Napoli, January 2007.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item Description</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17 motorcycles marked 'BMW'</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steering wheels</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4x4 vehicles (mark unknown)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhaust pipes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sun visors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A tractor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A toy tractor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Several hundred oak casks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3,000 African language bibles marked 'Tibhaza Etzingweze'</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An oil painting picturing a Mediterranean villa with 2 large cypress trees to the left</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunglasses</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leather jackets</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dog food marked 'Science Plan'</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cat food marked 'Science Plan'</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Iraq 50 dinar note</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large bales of woollen thread</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camera film marked 'Fuji'</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeans</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Napkins</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baby food</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bottles of vodka</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organophosphate weedkillers and pesticides</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methyl bromide</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beauty cream marked 'L'Oreal Revitalift'</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beauty cream marked 'L'Oreal Men Expert Revitalift'</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shampoo marked 'Pantene Pro V'</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A refrigeration unit</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chocolate biscuits marked 'Tina' and 'Dance'</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypodermic syringes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morphine</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dolls</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doll's houses</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rolls of carpet</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used office supplies (including a swivel chair)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Games marked 'Nintendo X Box'</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training shoes marked 'Reebok'</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training shoes marked 'Nike'</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A china tea set</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family photographs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Battery acid</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flip flops</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Ogden cigarette cards featuring pigeons</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For us, the Napoli event and its aftermath illustrate some of the complexities of the work that we should be covering here. The Napoli's multiple materialities became the subject of widespread attention, excitement, debate, concern, and manipulation. Others may recognize other material geographies in this event but for us, it both showcases and questions work in three principal areas: landscape, commodity, and creative geographies. Below, then, we first discuss issues raised by this wreck disgorging its cargo in this place. We look at Lyme Bay in general and Branscombe beach in particular as landscapes where, in cultural geographical terms, the lives of people living there are intrinsically linked to the shape and heritage of this site. Secondly, we discuss issues raised by commodities on their way to South Africa being washed up on, and ‘scavenged’ from, this beach. We look at stories of ruptures in the traffic in things (Jackson 1999) and the insights they provide about the relations between people, places, and commodities. Thirdly, we look at issues raised by the Branscombe Project and Melanie Jackson who creatively engaged with the Napoli event and story, well after the ‘scavenging’ had ended and the beaches had been cleaned. Here, we look at ways in which materials can be worked with to appreciate and express events in ways that words alone cannot convey. And, finally, we conclude by offering our thoughts on what writing such an event-based review has taught us about the material geographical work (not) featured in this chapter.

**Landscape**

The site of the Napoli disaster contributed much to the reasons why it held the front pages and press interest for well over 12 months. The heritage identity of this stretch of coastline was pivotal to the stories told. The despoiling of a national treasure—a heritage landscape—drew attention and evoked emotionally charged reactions. Just as pivotal was the fact that commercial actions had resulted in the beaching of a ship here. Lyme Bay is part of a 95-mile stretch of Devon and Dorset coastline known as the Jurassic Coast. This ‘beautiful wild landscape’ (Kazim 2007), historically renowned by fossil hunters and ‘made famous by Thomas Hardy is DEAD Man’s Bay in his fictional Wessex’ (Roberts 2008) is a UNESCO World Heritage Site (Jurassic Coast nd; UNESCO nd). UNESCO had recognized the ‘natural heritage’ of this coastline, whose exposures provide ‘an almost continuous sequence of Triassic, Jurassic, and Cretaceous rock formations spanning the Mesozoic Era and document approximately 185 million years of Earth history’ (UNESCO nd). The Jurassic Coast website boasts that its footpath ‘offers the walker stunning views, with a bird’s eye view of many coastal features... the drama of sheer cliff faces... the strangely eroded rock formations and above all... the geology’ (Jurassic Coast nd). The beaching of a stricken cargo vessel on this stretch of coastline confronted established constructions of its official, ‘natural’ heritage, with a more rauous, popular, ‘cultural’ heritage in which ‘salvage has always been part of life on this rugged Devon coast’ (Savill 2007a).

Newspapers reported that only seven of the containers that initially washed on to the beach broke open on their own. The rest were ‘smashed open’ as ‘gangs descended, scattering the containers’ contents across the pebble beach’ (Morris 2007), ‘litter[ing] the World Heritage Site’ (Sidmouth Herald 2007d) and allegedly increasing the wreck’s ‘damage to the environment by 800%’ (Morris 2007) (Figure 3.2). This turned Branscombe residents’ ‘whole world... upside down’ (Exmouth Journal 2007). Many ‘scavengers’ reported getting caught up in the excitement of this ‘free-for-all’. One recalled, ‘We don’t make a habit of doing things like this’ (Sidmouth Herald 2007c), while another said, ‘I took a jelly shoe and [some] photos, and saw people taking personal things away, it was horrifying’ (Sidmouth Herald 2007e). The local coastguard office described this behaviour as ‘crazed greed’ (Morris 2007). Local journalists likened those who took things from the beach to ‘a plague of locusts sweeping through the village’ or ‘culturists picking over the entrails of Branscombe’ (Sidmouth Herald 2007f). Anita Bokald said that the people who took her possessions had behaved ‘like a lot of savages’ (BBC News 2007b), and a local man described what he had witnessed as ‘human nature at its worst’ (Roberts 2008). In the future, local politicians argued, one aspect of this landscape’s ‘heritage’ needed to be protected from the other. As one put it, ‘This is a World Heritage site. We don’t want every sinking ship brought in here’ (Sturcke and Morris 2007).

![Fig. 3.2 Thousands of people arrive on Branscombe beach to search through the containers (photo: Leon Neal/AFP/Getty Images).](image-url)
These kinds of claims and discourses bring to light the types of practices that are acceptable and unacceptable from citizens in particular places. Notions of who or what is appropriate where resonate throughout these responses to the materials washed up on Branscombe beach, the reflections on the economies and flows of stuff and capital, and the moral geographies of landscape, nature, and folk that make up local society and culture. According to cultural geographer Doreen Massey (2006), landscapes—although touchable and seemingly permanent—should be appreciated as 'liquid', as in constant formation and flow. Here, she argues, 'a landscape, these hills, are the (temporary) product of a meeting up of trajectories out of which mobile uncertainty a future is—has to be—negotiated' (Massey 2006: 48). This is how geographers are now tending to interrogate matter in place and space as mobile, and converging at points of encounter. The American cultural geographer Carl Sauer (1956 [1925]) treated the morphology of landscape as evidence of the material lives, material cultures, social rhythms, and cultural heritage of the people who had lived upon it. For cultural theorist Stuart Hall this view of heritage 'becomes the material embodiment of the spirit of nation, a collective representation of the British version of tradition, a concept pivotal to the lexicon of [national] virtues' (1999: 4). The material of land, soil, and nature can become woven into the national identity and history of Britain. Yet, as historical geographers such as David Harvey (2003) have argued, we can learn a great deal more about national identities through critically examining the heritage of people, unravelling the seemingly benign and 'natural' embeddedness of its values, and questioning the ways in which 'heritage' can politically exclude others from the national story (see also Johnson 2000).

Understandings of the physical materialities of landscapes have served as blurry subtexts to mythologies materializing national identity via notions of bounded senses of belonging, of a "natural" flora, fauna species, architecture, peoples, languages, and races (Tolia-Kelly 2007). Physical bodies, cells, blood groups, and DNA, for example, have become the material tools for evidencing 'proper' national citizens, in the case of 'proper women' (Colls 2004) or a 'British race' (Holloway 2003, 2004, 2005; Nash 2005) belonging to a national landscape (Young 2007). The collision between the material bodies of 'other' cultures and of a native 'national' culture have been shown to be present in modern-day tourism. Here the biology of the tourist or plant species re-emerges as significant in questions of whether they are accepted, belong, and can engage (Johnson 2004; Saldanha 2007). The materialities of race, of the racialized body, and the racialized cultures of that body have been seen as concretized through exclusion from certain landscapes, especially those of the countryside (Agymen and Neal 2006), the national cultures of landscape (Daniels 1993) and Englishness (Matless 1998; Darby 2000). Landscapes are nationalized, and the nation naturalized (Kaufmann 1998; Jazeel 2005).

As part of this push to understand the heritage of heritage, geographers and others have argued that it is part of a nation's economy as much as it is of its history. Thus Stuart Hall (1999) argues that who is catered for, which transport routes are funded, and what facilities are provided shape and re-shape access to the landscape, but also perpetuate questions of whose heritage is reproduced. Heritage landscapes can therefore be seen as encountered both through branding and through embodied experience. Stories of a past that can be unlocked through walking, fossil hunting, imagining, and gazing, and recreated through embodied encounters with it, have evolved in relation to films, toys, and the currency of dinosaurs in their natural world, 185 million years ago. In this respect, the popular success of Steven Spielberg's Jurassic Park film in the 1990s and the naming of the Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site were not unrelated (Rocksborough-Smith 2001). Physical nature and landscape can serve as a site for textual practice, upon and through which narratives are written, where the texture, nature, forms and feel of the landscape become tools for the narrator as opposed to being felt, experienced, or encountered before or beyond narrative. Here, narratives of 'heritage' site and 'Jurassic' time combine to form an alternative 'real', a narration that abstracts the material space of this stretch of Devon and Dorset coastline to serve a discourse of the gigantic (Stewart 1995), its scale of excess and enormity making it more than the sum of its parts.

But what of those writers who argue that matter is always fluid, in the process of becoming, and cannot be experienced as a known material? Political theorist Jane Bennett (2001) for example, urges us to consider the animateness, liveliness, and enchantment in people's encounters with landscapes and other things. The call to engage with memories of other times and spaces embedded within the experience of these encounters as landscapes and other things refract, emanate, and, sometimes, 'magically' transport us to other sites has recently been taken up by a number of British cultural geographers (see Tilia-Kelly 2004a, 2004b; Hill 2007). For example, John Wylie (2005: 256), walking along this very coast path sets out a phenomenology of landscape experience that 'aims to spotlight tones, texts and topographies from which distinctive articulations of self and landscape [can] arise'. Here, the coastal pathway is inhabited by the silent traveller who is aware of his/her embodied encounters between feet and path, meteorology and emotion. As well as immediate phenomena, then, our engagements with land and materials are shaped ontologically, through various knowledge, memories, histories, and discourses that come before such encounters. For writers on material geographies, however, different elements of these encounters are privileged (e.g. Kearns 2003).

Returning to that stretch of the Devon and Dorset coastline, we can see how the wrecking of the Napoli and the 'scavenging' of its goods exposed a number of these landscape relations of memory and walking, consumption and commodity routes, and historical and modern identity. In time, this event will no doubt become a naturalized story of this landscape. Yet, throughout 2007, media stories emphasized the stark contrasts between a Jurassic Coast characterized by natural beauty and leisure and the Napoli wreck. The contents of its containers were represented as vile detritus, desecrated from the human architecture of its being. The wreck was
positioned as jarring with the sites of a heritage story. Yet, it also attracted more out of
season visitors to the area both to 'scavenge' and to see the spectacle. Along with
a number of locals, many were seen to have exhibited behaviours, attitudes, and
interests that were not welcome in this place. (Im)moral geographies took shape on
Branscombe’s beach as the containers were plundered. In media accounts, this was
contrasted to an acceptable face of local and visitor culture, motivation, and
conduct. The bands of ‘scavengers’ were deemed uncivilized and unworthy of a
Devon welcome. Calling them ‘savages’ or ‘locusts’ positioned them as ‘non-
people’, as bodies that were ‘other’, both to this landscape and to the nation (see

The Napoli wreck left Branscombe vulnerable to this kind of invasion. The way
in which these visitors valued and appropriated the washed up goods jarred with
the values of regional citizenship and ‘national civility’ that these media accounts
celebrated (see Gilroy 1991; Daniels 1993). These values often assume a state of
stable immobility (Sheller and Urry 2006), but the mobility of the Napoli, its
debris, and its ‘scavengers’ threatened them. Where matter is suddenly displaced,
suddenly ‘out of place’, it can be defiling and contaminating, disrupting to the
status quo, even if it does not change in form or aesthetics (Bickstaff and Walker
2003). Visitors’ bodies were equalized with the oil, rubbish, commodities, and
debris of the Napoli. All were material equals in the narration of the beaching as
unwelcome in, and inappropriate to, this place.

Commodities

These weren’t the only stories about people, places, and things that emerged in the
wake of the Napoli wreck. Other material geographies came to the surface as
questions were asked about where these commodities had come from, where
they were going to, where they ended up, and to whom they belonged. As well
as landscape, heritage, and citizenship, the wrecking of the Napoli was a story of
trade.

The English Channel is the busiest shipping lane in the world. Container ships pass
by this stretch of England’s coast every day. Their cargoes are often mysterious,
even for those working on board (Sekula 2003). So when one runs aground, its
containers wash up on the beach, and its various cargoes spill out, we have a
fascinating, momentary insight into world trade. What was being taken to South
Africa from these European ports? What connections, which might not ordinarily
be questioned, became known through this disaster?

All kinds of commodities, in all stages of their life histories, were washed up:
brand new motorcycles, car parts, flip-flops, empty oak wine barrels, nappies,
packets of biscuits, bibles, personal possessions, second-hand clothes, and much
more (see Table 3.1). They were for sale to the public or to other companies, or were
for distribution, exchange or (re)use in other ways. But their hidden travels
were disrupted, and this disruption affected people. For example, because of its
just-in-time production process, a South African Volkswagen factory expecting
parts being shipped on the Napoli from Germany had to slow down production for
2 weeks (SABC News 2007). Similarly, the South African vineyards expecting a
delivery of oak barrels had their wine production disrupted as they had to wait
several weeks for a new shipment (Styles 2007). And individuals, like the Bokdals,
who had shipped their possessions in one of these containers, had lost not only
unique things—like photographs, tea-sets, furniture, and embroidered pictures—but
also memories of people, relationships, and life events that they embodied.

Newspaper stories reported that many were desperate to recover their personal
possessions (see Bowesman 2007; G. Roberts 2007; Savill 2007b).

For people ‘scavenging’ that beach, however, these things had no such histories
and connections (Figure 3.3). This was a ‘treasure chest’ (Savill 2007a). The
containers and their contents had appeared unexpectedly, as if from nowhere,
and their contents were taken, given new lives, and sometimes returned
(Plymouth City Council 2007; Sidmouth Herald 2007c). Meanwhile the wrecked
Napoli, itself a massive commodity produced in South Korea and ‘consumed’
(through its use and travels) all around the world, had to be salvaged. It was to be

Fig. 3.3 A woman collects cosmetic products washed up on Branscombe beach,
Devon, January 2007.
broken up at sea and its parts towed to a Belfast shipyard for ‘recycling’ (see Sidney Herald 2007 a, 2007 b, 2007 c, 2007 d, ESXnews Journal 2007 e). This is the sort of event that brings to life, and can help to question, work that has been undertaken on the (material) geographies of commodities. These geographies are, in many ways, nothing new. Socio-cultural anthropologist Daniel Miller, for instance, recalls a school geography class in which he ‘watched well-meaning videos of smiling plantation workers followed by the arrival of cocoa by ship to Britain where it was turned into bars of chocolate’ (2003: 368). But, after lying low for a generation or more in the dusty backrooms of economic geography, the late 1990s saw these geographies making a ‘striking resurgence’ in the discipline (Jackson 1999, 2001; Bridge and Smith 2003: 257). This resurgence has involved two related areas of research. First, there are studies of the material cultural geographies of consumption (Jackson and Thrift 1993). Here, for example, ethnographic studies of the acquisition, wearing, tidying, sorting, and divestment of clothes has provided a lens through which to make wider sense of relations between emotional and embodied experiences, memories, and individual/collective identities within and between the spaces, places, and times of people’s lives (Gregson and Crewe 1997, 2003; Collins 2004, 2006; Gregson and Beale 2004; Gregson et al. 2007 f, 2007 g). Secondly, there are cultural-economic studies of commodity chains, circuits or networks, grounded in multi-sited ethnographic research and informed by the idea of the ‘social lives of things’ (Appadurai 1988; G.E. Marcus 1995; J. Jackson 1999). Here, geographers have used the movements of commodities such as cut flowers, food, and clothes to study everyday exploitations, inequalities, value-contestations and consumers’ reliance on countless unseen others around the world to enable them to live the lives they live every day (e.g. Hughes 2000; Cook et al. 2004; Cook and Harrison 2007; P. Benson and Fischer 2007; Crewe 2008).

Much of this work has drawn upon arguments that material culture studies serve as lenses through which to appreciate complex relations between wider, deeper, and more abstract processes, and, thereby, as means to critique the ‘application’ of abstract theoretical arguments (Marcus 1995; D. Miller 1998 a; Jackson 2003; Leyshon et al. 2003). Yet theoretical approaches and concepts (e.g. Marxist concepts of ‘alienation’ and ‘commodity fetishism’, post-structural understandings of the liveliness and excess of ‘matter’ and the co-agency of humans and non-humans, and the political ‘edges’ that such approaches possess) continually clash and work together through this work (see Leslie and Reimer 1999; Hartwick 2000; Jackson 2000, 2001; Bakker and Bridge 2006). The effects that different forms of academic production (e.g. theorizing, fieldwork, ‘story-telling’, dissemination, collaboration) can have on students and other publics have also been the subject of much conjecture and some experimentation as authors consider how, when, where, and if the materialities and connective aesthetics of these commodity geographies can inspire audiences, confuse them, spark them into action, overwhelm them, encourage senses of connection, responsibility and care, recognize differences already being made, and so on (see Hartwick 1998, 2000; Cook et al. 2000, 2007; Friedberg 2003; Castree 2004; Barnes 2006; Barnett and Land 2007).

While these material geographies have arguably made considerable headway within and beyond the discipline (Miller 2003; Slater and Miller 2006; Foster 2006), four principal limitations have also been pointed out. First, treating commodities as entities that have ‘biographies’ has been deemed problematic because of the impression that can be given that they are discrete, stable, bounded entities with simple, identifiable ‘origins’ and destinations, rather than entities that are more complex assemblages (Cook and Crang 1996; Cook et al. 2004; Latham and McCormack 2004). For some, a focus on consumption has been at the expense of an acknowledgement of the rules that commodities play in other aspects of (other) people’s lives, producers in particular. Yet, critics wanting to complicate the figure of the simple, linear commodity chain linking consumers and producers have added to this the lack of attention paid not only to the lives of their designers, distributors, retailers, repairers, disposers, collectors, re-sellers, thieves, counterfeiters, and others (Gregson and Crewe 1997; Crewe and Gregson 2003; Pratt 2004; Hetherington 2005), but also to the companies and other organizations that act as the ‘consumers’ of commodities (e.g. car parts and wine barrels made for factories and wineries), which are often not available on the ‘open’ market (Rusten and Bryson 2007). Secondly, critics have pointed out a tendency for researchers to study heavily advertised or fetishized ‘cultural’ or ‘discretionary’ commodities (Bridge and Smith 2003; Bakker and Bridge 2006; Goss 2006)—primarily food and/or clothing (often ‘fairly’ traded) but also furniture (Reimer and Leslie 2008), gold (Hartwick 1998), and diamonds (Le Billon 2006)—and to ignore the material geographies of ‘hidden’ and/or more ‘industrial’ commodities such as steel, oil, rubber, spark plugs, etc. (although see Hollander 2003 on sugar; Mansfield 2003 on surimi; Page 2005 on water). Thirdly, there is a tendency for researchers to study consumption by relatively wealthy people in the global North and production by relatively poor people in the global South, leaving this body of work open to accusations of Eurocentrism, of neglecting the material geographies of poorer people, and of neglecting North–North, South–South, and North–South trade (Jaffe et al. 2004; although see Miller 1998 a on Coca-Cola in Trinidad; Friedberg 2005 on French beans in Burkina Faso; Kothari and Laurie 2005 and Edensor and Kothari 2016 on ‘Western’ clothing in Bolivia and Mauritius; and Horst and Miller 2006 on mobile phones in Jamaica). Fourthly, the commodities chosen by geographers of material culture and of the ‘social life of things’ have usually been tangible, solid, stable, touchable, everyday, popular, harmless, small, human-oriented commodities. Those that are, for example, gaseous, unstable, dangerous, massive, inorganic, illegal, or not for human consumption, have tended to be neglected (although see Jacobs 2006 and Jenkins 2002 on buildings; Anderson et al. 2007, Anderson 2007, Kearns 2007, Doubleday 2007 on nanotechnology; and Gregson et al. (nd) on ships).
If we return to the beach at Branscombe, we can now ask how the commodity stories that emerged from the Napoli event echo and question what has been researched by commodity geographers. The Napoli was a container ship taking goods produced in the north for consumption in the south, and powerful stories emerged in the media about the ways in which these were, and became, involved in numerous identities, places, and relationships. First, they showed how the ‘social lives of things’ unfold both before and beyond their sites of purchase and consumption. The loss of commodities highlighted vital relationships between things and memories in the process of place making. The Bokdals, for instance, were shipping well-worn possessions, gifts, family heirlooms, and other items to their new home in South Africa in order to make it ‘feel like home’ (Sidmouth Herald 2007k). Yet most of the commodities salvaged had not yet had the chance to develop such lives and roles. Here were brand new flip-flops, nappies, bibles, motorbikes, and barrels that weren’t being sold through any official channels and weren’t part of aNeal display in a shop or dealership. They were dumped on a beach and became part of their consumers’ lives through ‘scavenging’ and via eBay or car boot sales (Bedford 2007; Kazim 2007; Savill 2007a; Williams 2007). Although work on second-hand markets is well developed (see Crewe and Gregson 2003; Hetherington 2004), and a literature on commodities taking unconventional routes between places of manufacture and sale (via the so-called ‘grey’ or ‘parallel’ market) is developing (see Kothari and Laurie 2005; Edensor and Kothari 2006; Yeung and Mok 2006), these stories suggest that commodity geographies involving spaces of questionable legal provision and consumption are missing from the current literature.

Secondly, these stories vividly reveal the limited range of commodities that geographers (and others) have tended to study. While studies of new and second-hand clothes (see Crewe and Gregson 2003; Miller and Woodward 2007), nickel (see Balzer and Ridge 2006), and container ships (see Gregson et al. nd) have been undertaken, the Napoli was carrying little else that commodity geographers have been interested in. There are no studies of ‘cultural’ or ‘discretionary’ commodities such as bibles, nappies, sunglasses, ‘L’Oreal Revitalift’ cream, or bottles of Vodka. The neglect of ‘hidden’ or ‘industrial’ commodities is starkly revealed by the Napoli event: where, for example, are the material geographical studies of exhaust pipes, battery acid, large balls of woolen thread, methyl bromide, or hypodermic syringes? The narrow range of commodities chosen for study raises additional questions about how and why certain commodities end up ‘mattering’ enough for researchers to want to study them, and what the politics and ethics of these choices might be. These issues are rarely, if ever, discussed (although see Crang and Cook 2007).

Finally, these media stories—local, national, and international—were themselves commodities with their own, quite different social lives (B. Bender, pers. comm., 2008). They not only reported but also very clearly contributed to the ways in which the Napoli event unfolded. As a result of a series of attention-grabbing news stories, Branscombe was unexpectedly put on the map. Local businesses cashed in on this: boat owners charged tourists for trips around the remains of the wreck, Branscombe’s post office sold souvenir DVDs of the Napoli drama (Malone 2008); hotels reported increased bookings (Sidmouth Herald 2007j); a local brewery produced a Napoli ale (Sidmouth Herald 2007k); another company produced a cider brandy called ‘Shipwrecked’, which had been matured in ‘salvaged’ oak barrels bound for that South African winery (Usborne 2008); and a pub in nearby Sidmouth changed its name to the ‘Swag Inn’ and the names of some of its beers to ‘pirate’ or ‘boaty’ ‘as a tribute to the media frenzy over the grounding of the MSC Napoli—with the regular pub sign replaced by one of the cargo ship’s containers lying half submerged underwater’ (Sidmouth Herald 2007m). Geographers have rarely researched multiple, mediated, and conjoined materialities like these (although see Ateljevic and Doorne 2004; Goss 2004; Latham and McCormack 2004). But materializations of the Napoli event have proliferated, gradually becoming naturalized in the Jurassic Coast’s changing landscape narrative.

Creativity

It was not only through the media that accounts of the Napoli event were put together and disseminated. There was more to this story than was, or could be, conveyed through words, photos, sound, and video. The material geographies of the event were also expressed by curators and artists working—like that brandy manufacturer—with the wreck’s materials. The Napoli was the subject of an exhibition in Branscombe village hall in October 2007 that was put together by a local history group called the Branscombe Project. Its curator, retired heritage anthropologist and village resident Barbara Bender, explained to journalists, ‘We camcorded things right from the start, it’s a view from the bottom up’ (Joint 2007). Visitors to the exhibition encountered hundreds of photos, newspaper reports, paintings, songs, and transcribed and filmed interviews with Branscombe residents. The village hall was also home to an art installation made from the wreck’s debris, to which villagers unexpectedly added debris that they had collected (Express and Echo 2007; B. Bender, pers. comm.). Other examples of debris art were also reported in the local papers (Sidmouth Herald 2007j). A month later, and 60 miles away, the Napoli became part of an art exhibition in Plymouth. Human Cargo was one of many commemorations of the bicentenary of the British government’s 1807 Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade (Bressey 2009). Melanie Jackson’s The Undeletables was installed in the museum’s Maritime Collection Gallery and consisted of a three-dimensional paper model of the Napoli wreck set on the
parquet floor and a 'flimsy panorama of etchings' or 'paper sculptures' depicting that Jurassic Coast landscape, those containers and commodities, the people 'scavenging' them, and the media reporting of that 'scavenging' all seemingly 'washed up' in a corner (Hoad 2007b; Jaya 2007). Fascinated by the extraordinary juxtaposition of goods usually hidden from view by containerization, Jackson carefully researched those that were washed up on the beach, interviewed cargo workers, and included the list of washed-up commodities (reproduced in Table 3.1) and the eyewitness accounts collected by Bender and her colleagues for the Branscombe Project (Human Cargo 2007a, 2007b; Hoad 2007) (Figures 3.4 and 3.5). Writing about the creative process, Jackson explained how this was inspired by the content and scale of media reports of the event:

Etching was the traditional means of reproduction for circulating scenes of shipwreck. The satellite TV vans and film crews incited and were as much a part of this story as the cargo and the crowd. Every identified media image of the scavengers, the cargo, the loping ship and the media itself was produced as a drypoint etching at the scale of the newspaper image or the TV screen. It was the (impossible) attempt to piece together the scene in its entirety... from fragments of reportage and TV coverage, and the transcripts of eyewitness accounts. Out of the context of the newspaper and the screen the scale of the imagery operates very differently. It is a serious attempt to reconstruct and map out a story, but it is also a playful theatre of the absurd.

M. Jackson (pers. comm., 2008)

Promotional materials emphasized The Undesirables' associations with nineteenth-century models, panoramas, and paper theatres (Human Cargo 2007a, 2007b), and the text on the gallery wall stated that it:

recall[s] Hogarth's satirical commentaries on the excesses of 18th century society, and 19th century images of shipwrecks. Installed in the South Gallery, this work connects with the maritime history of Plymouth, in particular to the adjacent painting, A Stormy Evening by Hely Smith (1865–1948). Bequeathed by a local ship owner, it depicts a cargo liner thought to be of the Castle Line, which worked routes to South Africa.

One reviewer likened The Undesirables to the 'bizarre juxtapositions of Dadaist poetry' and argued that siting it in this maritime gallery space took advantage of 'the opportunity an old museum offers for making connections between incongruous objects which, in the present context, becomes a political act that is akin to Walter Benjamin's study of the remains of the first shopping centres, the Parisian Arcades, in the 30s, which was intended to reveal the underlying economic structures and history of capitalism' (Glen 2007).

These exhibitions comprise a small but fascinating selection of the material geographical afterlives of the Napoli wreck. They tie together the arguments in this chapter's previous sections as geographies, landscapes, commodities, memories, and identities are tightly interwoven in both. However, they also point towards the third area of literature that we want to highlight: where geographers have studied,

Fig. 3.4 Melanie Jackson's The Undesirables: the MSC Napoli grounded on the gallery floor (photo: John Melville).
collaborated with, been, and/or sought to become museum curators and artists. This work is important because it shows how geographers are beginning to work with and through — rather than just write about — the materialities they are interested in. There is a long history of geographical interest in art (Cant and Morris 2006) but, as Foster and Lorimer (2007: 435–436) explain,

gographers [now] look to artists to help their research ‘outreach’ to communities; geographers have been curators of art exhibitions; artists exhibit and perform at geography conferences, as well as offer papers; university departments host artists’ residencies; artists contribute to geographers’ research projects; artists employ a spatialised vocabulary to label, describe and explain their work that geographers recognise as their own.

In the United Kingdom, for example, new crossover work has emerged from geography Ph.D. students co-funded by research councils and museums (e.g. Butler 2006, 2007; Geoghegan in press); from geographers who were previously — and continue to work as — curators and/or artists (e.g. Paglen 2006; Scalway 2006; DeSilvey 2006, 2007); from geographers and artists working together through ‘artist in residence’ schemes (e.g. Driver et al. 2003; University of Sussex 2005, Prudames 2005; Foster and Lorimer 2007); and from geographers working with artists and curators in other ways (e.g. Cook et al. 2006; Anderson et al. 2001; Griffiths 2004; Hoskins 2007; N. J. Thomas 2007; Tolia-Kelly 2007). Such work often focuses attention on the materialities of geographic and artistic/curatorial practice, and the ways in which these can differently shape, for want of a better word, to ‘capture’ and draw others into research projects.

From the limited number of examples that have made it into print, it is possible to identify three kinds of work in this vein. First, like the Napoli artwork made from the wreck’s debris, a number of geographers have collaborated with people who have much more experience of ‘working practically with materials’ to engage their audiences (Ingold 2007a: 3). Here, for instance, cartographer Edward Kinnan and ceramic artist John Williams (2007) have collaborated in a project ‘mapping’ the lived histories of the land on which their university now stands. They talk about the significance of using clay tiles as the ‘canvas’ for their maps. While Williams ‘was fascinated with clay’s innate ability to record flame patterns in the kiln, the marks of the maker, and the patina of use. Clay had memory’ (Kinnan and Williams 2007: 435); for Kinnan, ‘clay tiles were one of the earliest cartographic mediums’ and, given the focus on landscape, ‘we wanted to use a material representative of our subject in the artwork. . . . we took material from the ground and altered it’ (Kinnan and Williams 2007: 441). Physical geographers, who are often more professionally attuned to physical materials than their human geography colleagues, have also contributed their expertise to art collaborations. Take, for example, the artificial pebbles created by coastal erosion specialist Uwe Dornbusch and artist Johanna Berger. Made from clear, tinted resin so they can be easily seen, and with a

Fig. 3.5 Melanie Jackson’s The Undesirables: paper sculptures of a child, some debris, and Branscombe beach (photo: Melanie Jackson).
copper core so they can be found using a metal detector, these are used to track the movement of real pebbles along shorelines through processes of coastal erosion (see Williams et al. 2002). They are left in one location and after a specified period of time are collected from others where they have washed up. Working with Dornbush as an ‘artist in residence’, Berger made 11 new pebbles, wrapping romantic messages typed on pieces of paper around the copper cores. Placed on and followed from a French beach, it was hoped that these ‘romantic rocks’—like messages in bottles—would capture the public imagination and draw attention to coastal erosion and to academic work helping to make sense of it (University of Sussex 2005; Prudames 2005). For these collaborators, the properties of their materials, the ways in which they could be worked, and the ways in which they had a liveliness of their own, was essential for provoking imaginations and senses of appreciation.

Secondly, the way in which Jackson’s work was sited in that Plymouth gallery—and perhaps also the way in which the various elements of the Napoli exhibition were arranged in Branscombe’s village hall—echoes observations made by geographers of the ways in which artists have created ‘spaces for imagination’ through appropriate arrangements of found and crafted materials. For example, in their work with theatre group London Bubble, geographers Alison Blunt et al. (2007) describe what was added to a play about migration by its taking place in a ‘real’ domestic space. London Bubble’s My Home was performed in a house whose ‘rich material layering . . . suggested the presence of the past in ways which mirrored a central theme of the monologues: memory and the interaction of homes past and present, particularly the relationship between places left behind and current homes’ (Blunt et al. 2007: 315; cf. Tolia-Kelly 2004a, 2004b). Similarly, in his discussion of a social sculpture called Exchange Values images of invisible lives by artist Shelley Sacks, geographer Ian Cook et al. (2000) describes the way in which its component parts—banana skins, dried, cured, and stitched into panels hung around the walls of a gallery, headstones beneath each panel allowing visitors to hear recordings of the farmers who grew them talking about their lives, and tens of thousands of loose, dried, and cured skins neatly arranged in a rectangle on the floor—were arranged to have a visceral as well as thought-provoking effect on gallery visitors. Staring at those panels, looking closely at those skins, smelling those bananas, listening to those voices in their heads, then turning around to see those loose and mute skins on the floor, Sacks (quoted in Cook et al. 2000: 342) explained how she had worked with these materials to create a ‘reflective space. A space of possibility. Where connections can be seen. Felt. Thought through’. In all three examples, we argue, the properties of materials and spaces, and the ways in which they were drawn upon, (re)worked, (re)arranged, and juxtaposed to include participants’ bodies, memories, and imaginations were essential for provoking vivid more-than-textual appreciations.

Thirdly, if we contend that this chapter, like the exhibitions, is also a materialization of the Napoli event, our attention is drawn to geographer’s work on and with more traditional practices of drawing and writing. Drawing, particularly in the form of field sketching, is an important but dying art in the discipline (Cloke et al. 2004). The embodied micro-geographic materialities of drawing have, however, been recently reflected upon by Helen Scalway, an artist who has moved into geography:

Drawing, like other embodied practices, is a form of corporeal knowing. What I had not foreseen was what it would reveal. At one moment I would find my pen whisking sharply along a steel rule as I sought to re-enact the lines of a rack of metal shelves or lighting unit, the next, the pen went whisking and wandering at an entirely different speed and pressure among the tendrils of a flowery botch.

Scalway (2006: 496)

Writing has also been the subject of attention for material geographers. Caitlin DeSilvey’s (2006, 2007) curatorial/Ph.D. work on a neglected Montana homestead, which involved working with the lively but decaying materialities of found (and archived) items, is a case in point. Here she writes, for example, about an ‘over-stuffed bushel basket in the homestead’s harness shed’, which she tipped out to find ‘scrap of printed matter mixed with a mass of pits and seeds, woolly fibre and feathers, long johns and holey socks, a 1928 license plate and a few delicate mouse spines’ (DeSilvey 2006: 333). Working with these materials, DeSilvey wanted to make ‘an intervention in the homestead’s histories’ through ‘an interpretive practice willing to engage in serious play with artefacts that might otherwise be overlooked entirely’ (DeSilvey 2006: 334). She did this through writing, assembling a poem from the words visible on those scraps of paper. This, she argued, was co-authored with the writers of the original magazine articles and the mice who chewed them up to leave her with the words on those scraps of paper with which to work. These examples add to our understandings of creative processes by highlighting the ways in which the ordinary materialities and practices of academic work (see for example Ogborn 2004) are, and can be developed differently as and through, creative processes.

What we are describing here, perhaps, are parts of an emerging field of ‘creative geographies’ (Wylie in press) that combine established and innovative research practices in work that aims to reach out beyond the text and/or beyond the academy. The Branscombe exhibition and The Undesirables both worked with old and created new materializations in ways that echo geographers’ contemporary appreciations of materiality. Both also used these materializations to engage local and gallery-going publics in the significance of the Napoli event in ways that echo recent developments in participatory, public, and pedagogic geographies (see Kindon et al. 2008). In Branscombe village hall, the exhibition materialized the memories of locals, and exhibited the pieces of a heritage story for the nation. It was a means through which the geography, history, and local memories of this site
could be made, re-made, and reflected upon (Hoeschler and Alderman 2004). While the exhibition drew upon conventional practices of heritage writing and political ideology (Hewison 1987), the wrecks and its debris called for alternative hierarchies and localized conventions that could incorporate radical cultural accounts in tune with rhythms of nature, culture, and international trade. The hull was home to plural accounts that were not shackled by bounded senses of national identity linked to blood, soil, nature, and sensibilities (Schart 1995). These accounts emerged out of Bender’s combined roles as Branscombe resident, head of the Branscombe Project and heritage anthropologist, and the expertise of her fellow villagers who together created and transformed the exhibition. This was the kind of public, participatory, affective, and connective approach that has been advocated within and beyond geography as a means to undertake research projects that use more touching, multisensory, collaborative, creative practices (see Carolan 2009; Cook et al. 2007; Paterson 2009).

In Plymouth, The Undesirables aimed to reflect and/or create an experience of abhorrence that so many commodities travel around the world on container ships, whose contents are unknown even to dock workers. Jackson (Human Cargo 2007b) drew upon the Napoli event to show the sheer scale and excess of the consumption and production of goods and the ways in which it decontextualized those goods as stories of their origins and destinations became mainstream news. The Undesirables showed how these out-of-place goods become active pollutants endangering the living nature and sensuous culture of this heritage coastline. But it also reflected upon the cavernous distance between visual representation and the material extents of the event. Its social and cultural geographies were more-than-national, -knowable and -translatable, and more than here and now. In the maritime gallery as much as on Branscombe beach, the Napoli story attained the proportions of the gigantic, denuding the effectiveness of art, culture, and narrative. Jackson showed that the material geographies of the Napoli and its aftermath could not be separated from the tools at hand to recall, record, and retell them. Finally, The Undesirables exemplifies an approach to public engagement in which materials are created, worked with, arranged, and sited in order to create ‘spaces for imagination’ whose multisensory, juxtapositional aesthetic can draw visitors into collaborative sense-making processes, shaped but not determined by their material forms.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Writing, as sociologist Laurel Richardson (2000) has argued, is not simply a matter of setting down on paper what you already know. It is, rather, a method of enquiry. As she puts it, ‘I write because I want to find something out. I write in order to learn something that I did not know before I wrote it’ (Richardson 2000: 924). We therefore want to conclude by reflecting on what we have learned about material geographies by writing about them here. First, as we noted in the introduction, we have become convinced that there never has been, nor is there now, a coherent approach to materiality in geography. Although a large number of publications have responded to Philo’s and Jackson’s calls for ‘re-materialization’, an identifiable ‘material geographies’ literature has not developed in social and cultural geography, or more widely. Rather, while geographers’ long-standing interests in material culture have been revised and expanded, an attention to—and language of—‘livelihood’, ‘corporeality’, ‘affect’, ‘material capacities’, ‘animation’, ‘co-fabrication’, and ‘practice’ has emerged via a rich variety of analytical impulses, philosophical resources and political projects’ (Whatmore 2008: 601). Secondly, we have been able to make sense of some of the tensions between material geographers as being the result of key terms being used in both academic and everyday senses. Echoing Daniel Miller’s (2002) observations in anthropology, geographers preferring to develop careful and detailed theoretical appreciations of key terms before using them, have been critical of those using them in looser, more everyday ways. Philo’s, Jackson’s, and others’ use of words like ‘de-materialization’ and ‘re-materialization’ has attracted sometimes scornful critique in this sense (see Kearnes 2003; Anderson and Wylie 2009). But the geographies we have described in this chapter—with their language of ‘livelihood’, ‘corporeality’, and so on—require approaches to research that are theoretically and empirically rich, which work through abstract and empathetic appreciations of diverse topics that come into being through creative combinations of established and novel research practices, which should therefore work carefully through and with the multiple meanings of key terms. Thirdly, we have reflected on the advantages and disadvantages of using an event to help to interpret a literature.

The Napoli event did enable us to give a coherence to this chapter that the literature did not seem to possess, while also providing a vivid sense of its disparate nature. We hoped that the excess of detail provided would more easily allow missing perspectives to be read into the chapter by those with other (inter)disciplinary expertise, and that doing things this way would avoid the policing of borders and making of judgements, to instead, in the spirit of Peter Jackson’s original argument, ‘build bridges and… move discussion forward’ (2000: 9). On the minus side, doing things this way did not allow us to develop in detail geographers’ different theoretical appreciations of materiality, nor did it enable us to teach on the full range of material geographical research. Perhaps most notable by their absence are geographers’ contributions to science and society and nature and society debates (but see Whatmore and Hinchliffe this volume, Chapter 19). This oversight can be explained not only by what was and was not part of the Napoli story, but also—inevitably—by the limitations of our own
locations, understandings, interests, experiences, politics, and practices (which also explain our concentration on debates primarily in British geography and our reliance on work written in English). Finally, given on the one hand the exciting and important work emerging from collaborations between artists, curators, and geographers, and by interdisciplinary artist-and/or curator-geographers, and, on the other, the apparent importance of debates about, and appreciations of, 'materiality' across human and physical geography, we are excited by the prospect of new work on geography's materialities by physical and human and/or physical-human colleagues.

CHAPTER 4

MATERIAL CULTURE IN FOLKLIFE STUDIES

ROBERT SAINT GEORGE

The meaning of 'material culture' seems clear. According to archaeologist James Deetz, it included 'that sector of our physical environment that we modify through culturally determined behavior' (Deetz 1977: 24). Folklorist Henry H. Glassie has written numerous definitions of material culture, but his most recent one agrees with Deetz's idea of environmental modification, even as it swells to grander visions. According to Glassie, 'history and art connect in the study of material culture. Material culture reveals human intrusion into the environment. It is the way we imagine', he continues, 'a distinction between nature and culture, and then rebuild nature to our desire, shaping, reshaping, and arranging things during life' (Glassie 1999: 1). Such transformations of 'environment' (a term with as culturally striated a meaning as 'nature'), if even possible, do at least offer a way of imagining the 'material' of material culture. But its materiality—in exchange relations, as arbiters of taste, as a way of making visible the invisibility of quotidian existence—these, too, may be signalled by the second phrase in Glassie's definition: 'We live in material culture, depend upon it, take it for granted, and realize through it our grandest aspirations' (Glassie 1999: 1). The sweep of history, from mundane daily domestic regimes to the struggles of consciousness that define great art: material culture encloses them all. But how to anchor them in any social milieu demands we consider the history and methods of folklife studies.
The anthropological study of folklife has had a long series of connections with, and influences upon, the investigation of material culture. Folklife has brought to the analysis of landscapes, archaeology, and vernacular objects an integrative methodology. On the one hand, the integrative mandate may mean interpreting one set of material things in the context of other artefacts; thus, imagine that the private dwellings of a maritime community, say, in Cornwall can only make sense when integrated with the study of its boats and wharves. On the other hand, folklife emphasizes the utter contingency of any one expressive genre on social structure and local politics, as well as on such oral forms as myth, legend, or gossip. Thus one cannot explore that same community's built forms (dwellings, boats, wharves) without also exploring how fishing crews are related to kinship, or the myriad heightened speech registers fishermen employ to tell tall tales about the ones that got away.

As well as a series of interconnected methods for researching the material world, the term 'folklife' brings an intellectual genealogy to the study of material culture. The English word stands in debt to two earlier European terms: most directly, to the Swedish folkliv and then to its close but older cousin, the German volkisleben. When Don Yoder offered a history of the terms in 1963, he observed that the earliest usage of folkliv came in the title of Sven Ludvig Loven's Folklivet I Syttets hamn (The Folklife of the Jurisdictional District of Skytt) of 1847. In 1878, the term again found use in the title of a new journal on linguistic dialect and folkliv. In 1939, Sven Loven began lecturing on Svensk Folklivsforskning (Swedish Folklife Research) at the University of Lund. The German Volksleben (‘folklife’) along with Volkskunde (‘folk art’) has even earlier nineteenth-century roots; the latter term was already current by 1806 (Yoder 1963: 4310, 4412).

In the discussion that follows, key features of the folklife studies movement warrant investigation, including the ways it differed from ‘folklore’, *per se*, and the importance of regional or national archives of material folk culture that were based in universities, museums, and research institutes in Sweden, Norway, Ireland, Germany, and Switzerland. The archive idea, along with the open-air museum, was one element that was also transferred to Pennsylvania in the post-World War (WW) II years. Finally, this next section addresses the emergence of folklife studies in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland by examining the lives of Iorwerth C. Peate, Isabel Francis Grant, and Emir Estyn Evans.

**The Folklife Studies Movement**

The pioneer of American folklife studies, Don Yoder, presented a chronology of key terms in his overview in a 1963 essay of the 'The Folklife Studies Movement' (Yoder 1963). As a discussion of where the study of folklife originated, Yoder still provides the best compressed summary. In a series of arguments, he commented first on the tense relationship of folklife to the existing paradigm of folklore in Scandinavia, England, Germany, and Switzerland. For Yoder, while folklore studies were partial in their attention to such oral genres as legend, fairy tale, myth, proverb, and riddle, ‘folklife’ was more closely related to Cultural Anthropology or European Ethnology in its ‘total scholarly concentration on the folk-levels of a national or regional culture’. Thus, ‘folklife studies involves the analysis of a folk-culture in its entirety’, he observed, continuing with a clarification of the latter term: 'By folk culture is meant in this case the lower (traditional or “folk” levels) of a literate Western (European or American) society and is basically (although not entirely) rural and pre-industrial. Obviously it is the opposite of the mass-produced, mechanized, popular culture of the twentieth century’ (Yoder 1963: 43). All fields of folklore, such as studies of field systems, house forms, costume, food recipes and cookery, or music and dance, could be folded within the idea of 'folklife'. Yoder then discussed the institutional bases of folklife in European research. Besides the national academic organization, independent research institute, and university department that offered them both a home and related curricula, Yoder identified the significance of folklife archives, often located at national or regional organizations. Archives, such as those long operated at the Folklivsk Haitet in Lund, the Institutet for Folklivsgrensning in Oslo, the Irish Folklore Commission in Dublin, and the Schweizerisches Institut für Volkskunde in Basel, gathered interviews, photographs, and drawings from field research, and used these in order to develop more precise mapping for each ‘folk atlas’ or Volkskundeatlas they undertook.

As they plotted the geographic diffusion of house forms or chair types, of customs and cart-types, such atlases were themselves based on the questionnaires, field work and discussion of linguistic atlases, or maps made to show the geographic variation of dialect within standard, national languages. These cartographic projects or dialect maps had roots deep in the nineteenth century, with the very first use of maps coming with the publication of Johann Andrea Schmeller's Bayerisches Worterbuch, a four-volume survey of Bavarian dialectal variation, published in Munich between 1837 and 1837. Schmeller's lead was followed in Germany by George Wenker, a schoolteacher from Dusseldorf. Wenker, however, took advantage of his own educational connections, and sent questionnaires to every village school in north Germany; he drew upon the responses in his 1876 Sprachatlas der Deutschen Reichs. This precise mapping of dialects revealed local variation, but equally for Wenker it demonstrated the distribution of German as a language, and so could be marshalled to support the integrity of the idea of the German nation-state. Even as Sprachatlas were underway, however, fieldwork for similar Francophones projects advanced. The Swiss scholar Jules Gillieron initiated research for the Atlas Linguistique de la France between 1897 and 1901, assisted by the formidable field investigations of Edmond Edmont, who managed
to visit almost 640 villages in France and in the French-speaking parts of Italy, Belgium, and in Gilléron's native Switzerland; along the way he interviewed male inhabitants between the ages of 15 and 83, people he termed 'local intellectuals' and folk speakers. Between 1902 and 1910, Gilléron and Edmont published 83 volumes containing 1920 maps (Mitzka 1950: 14-44; Lauwers et al. 2002).

Other countries fell in line with atlasing projects at a point in time that made contextual sense to their participants. In North America efforts were led by Hans Kurath, a scholar born in Villach, Austria, but educated in the United States. In 1930, the Linguistic Atlas of the United States and Canada was established, and nine fieldworkers began area reconnaissance the following year. Kurath's Handbook of the Linguistic Geography of New England appeared in 1935 and included 734 maps in the course of its three volumes (Kurath 1939). In this instance, Kurath interviewed older residents, hoping his collection would thereby include dialect terms and pronunciations that were not being used by the region's younger people. Kurath's more general A Word Geography of the Eastern United States was published a decade later (Kurath 1949). In the United States, as in Canada, the atlas projects were both targeted and designed to help articulate regional identities undercut by the national depressions that afflicted both nations between 1930 and 1938 (Kurath 1939, 1949). In England, dialect atlas projects did not begin until 1948, when Eugene Dieth from Zurich and Harold Orton of Leeds started the Survey of English Dialects initiative in 1948 at Leeds University. It was followed four years later by Angus McIntosh's An Introduction to a Survey of Scottish Dialects, for which McIntosh sent out questionnaires through the postal system (McIntosh 1952). Then, in 1974 and modelled on Kurath's study of 1949, Harold Orton and Nathalia Wright published A Word Geography of England (Orton and Wright 1974). Unlike the American case, linked to regional identity formation in the midst of the Great Depression in the 1930s, the cartographic projects undertaken by Orton and his colleagues seem to have been tied to Great Britain's attempt at unified cultural recovery from WWII, and a means of showing those 'citizens in reconstruction' (to use David Mattes' phrase) that a shared national culture could be transcribed onto the regular squares of the Ordnance Survey. A post-war national, consumer-citizen was not just a promise but a new reality that could be mapped onto the land itself (Mattes 1998: 234-246).

Following the efforts of such Sprachatlas and Volkskundeatlas authors as Wenker and Gilléron, and such British dialectal experts as McIntosh, the staff at various folklife archives also made extensive use of questionnaires, so that a specific set of inquiries might be made across disparate communities within a region. Yoder provided one example: 'the Irish Folklife Commission has used reports on folk tales written down on their request by school children in the Gaelsach' (Yoder 1965: 49). Folklife archives were often operated by open-air folk museums, beginning with Artur Hazelius' establishment of Skansen in 1891 outside Stockholm. It was developed as a concept based upon his earlier experience, in 1873, of creating the Nordiska Museet, or Museum of Swedish Ethnology (a museum of local Swedish peasant life). Skansen provided a public institution where visitors could encounter typical barns, outbuildings, farmhouses, and structures representing rural as well as town life from different ecologies and regional economies of Sweden, each with its own ecological and regional economic base (Rehnberg 1957; Alexander 1983).

Skansen's representation of a geographic localism or regionalism exerted a formative influence in the 1920s and early 1940s on Lund folklorist Carl Wilhelm von Sydow's concept of the ökotype, a term that referred to local forms of a tale type, folksong, or proverb, with "local" defined in either geographic or cultural terms . . . on the village, state, regional, or national level (Dundes 1965: 220; Von Sydow 1977 [1948]). Skansen's long shadow also sparked Stockholm ethnologist Sigurd Erixson's abiding faith from the late 1930s through the 1950s in regional analysis in the study of buildings, food, and costume; his founding of the journal Folkliv in 1930 may have set his entire career in motion (Erixson 1937, 1945, 1955, 1999).

The final segment of Yoder's 1965 essay revealed his underlying purpose in writing: to argue that an American version of the European regional or ethnic folklife approach was both necessary and, in fact, was already under way in the activities of the Pennsylvania Folklife Society. The society had its origins in the Pennsylvania Dutch Folklore Center, formed in 1949 by Alfred Shoemaker and William Frey (faculty members at Franklin and Marshall College), and Don Yoder (then on the faculty at Muhlenberg College in Allentown). The centre was established as a research institute with its own library and folklife archive, with each modelled on the Irish Folklore Commission (founded 1935) and on the folklore archives at the Universities of Upsala (The Institute for Dialect and Folklore Research, established 1914) and Lund (Archive for Folklife, founded 1913) in Sweden (Hedblom 1961: 1; Blåsk 1990: 147). The centre, then located at Franklin and Marshall College, embarked promptly on the publication of a new journal, The Pennsylvania Dutchman, with the first issue appearing on 5 May 1949 (Figure 4.1). A sample of any issue of the journal reveals its great topical range. A 1956 issue, for example, contained articles on 'The Summer House', 'Diaper Lore', 'Witchcraft in Cow and Horse', and 'Dialect Folksay' (Pennsylvania Dutchman 1956), among others. Small wonder, then, that Yoder expressed pleasure in revealing that its subscription list had grown to over 3,500 in less than a decade (Yoder 1965: 52).

As the centre grew, however, it wanted to explore additional ethnic groups that had historically defined Pennsylvania; it wished to augment its base in Germanic cultures by including Scotch-Irish, Welsh, Quaker, and later nineteenth-century immigrant groups from eastern and central Europe that played such central roles in Allegheny coal mining and the steel mills of western Pennsylvania. With such ambitious and inclusive social and historical agendas, in 1956 the centre changed both the name of its journal to Pennsylvania Folklife, and shifted its own title to the
Pennsylvania Folklife Society. Between the late 1940s and mid 1950s, then, what began as the loosely linked interests of Shoemaker, Frey, and Yoder in Pennsylvania German speech dialect and religious sectarianism, had developed into an organization that drew upon strengths in two areas.

First, the Pennsylvania Folklife Society aimed, as reflected in its name and journal title, to build upon both European studies of *folklor or Volksleben* as a way of studying folk culture in its entirety. While Swedish museums and such figures as von Sydow and Erixon supplied the *folklor* tradition, the work of German and Swiss scholars on *Volkstunde* was of perhaps greater importance to Yoder’s Pennsylvania German field of expertise. He drew his own working definition of the subject from folklorist Richard Weiss’s monumental study *Volkstunde der Schweiz* (1946). In many respects, Weiss’s book offered a highly detailed examination of Swiss cultures, both rural and urban, ranging from hair styles, costumes, house plans, wall types, cheese production, speech patterns, among many other topics. Other than this one synthetic text, however, Weiss, along with colleague Paul Geiger, embarked in 1950 (65 years after Wenker’s Sprachatlas first appeared) on the *Atlas der schweizerische Volkstunde* (‘Atlas of Swiss Folk Arts’). Geiger passed away early in the project, in March 1952, after only two volumes of maps and one corresponding volume of *Kommumentar* had been published, but Weiss continued to supervise an additional 15 sets of maps and 13 more detailed *Kommumentar* before his own death in July 1962. Weiss’s assistants continued the work until the later 1970s, and an index to the entire atlas was finally completed in 1995 (Weiss and Geiger 1950–1979; Escher et al. 1995).

The second aspect of the new Pennsylvania Folklife Society was its commitment to the archiving of all materials collected for study and to making the results of its research available in books, journals, lectures, and other forms of public education. In August 1952, for example, the then Pennsylvania Dutch Folklore Center sponsored a week-long series of ‘Seminars on the Folk-Culture of the Pennsylvania Dutch Country’, held at Byrinden Wood—’a palatial mountain-top vacation spot’ (Anon 1952b: 2). Shoemaker, Frey, and Yoder were joined by other leading scholars on every conceivable aspect of the topic. Academic lectures on issues such as powwowing, folk cookery, and storytelling were followed by a dinner and ‘a folk tale fest’—and a talk about songs and hymnary was followed by a formal programme on ‘Pennsylvania Dutch folksongs; evening open to general public’ (Anon 1952b: 2).

A final component of the centre’s work was the establishment in 1950 of the Pennsylvania Dutch Folk Festival, held on the old Kutztown Fairgrounds. The festival was by no means the first such gathering to focus on folklife; Yoder himself noted the German *volksfesten* of the early twentieth century as one source (Yoder 1965: 330–37). While many of them had been functioning at a high level by that date, local *volksfesten* in fact had origins much earlier in the nineteenth century. Consider, for example, the Cannstatt festival, which many current tourists connect with
beer and the city of Stuttgart. The festival, however, was only taken over by that city in 1909, and before that year it had been the principal agricultural fair of Württemberg. The festival began in 1818, when King Wilhelm I of Württemberg established the fair in order to bring people from surrounding villages together to hold horse races with prize money, and in so doing help to rebuild a local economy ravaged by the Napoleonic wars. In the centre of the fairgrounds, awards were given out at a central spot marked by a large column made of fruit. Throughout the 1840s and 1850s, the number of individuals and community social clubs going to Württemberg increased dramatically; in 1841 a parade to the fairgrounds included more than 10,000 participants. In 1882, the festival moved to a bimonthly schedule. By 1921, the original 1-day fair had grown to a 5-day event (Cannstatter Volksfest 2008). The Volksfest made the Atlantic crossing to North America as a custom familiar to German immigrants who arrived in the 1860s and 1870s. Bavarians in Philadelphia started their own Bayerischer Volksfest. They first met in December 1876, and an initial forty members agreed to pay annual dues of two dollars. The next year a group of men met to write a constitution for the group, and soon thereafter, they were granted room to have annual meetings. They held their first four-day-long Sommerfest in August 1886 (Bayerischer Volksfest 2008). In 1874 a number of German clubs in New York City and adjacent parts of northern New Jersey joined forces to establish the Plattdutsche Volksfest Verein (PVV), a name that derived from members’ common origins in the Platte or flatlands in northern Germany. In August 1874, the PVV held its first Volksfest in North Bergen, New Jersey, and in 1894 acquired the parkland in Bergen on which the annual summer festival was then held (Plattdeutsche Volksfest 2008).

Thus, the German Volksfest had a double significance for the seminar programme at the Kutztown festival. Yoder made clear that it helped to anchor the Pennsylvania event in the German tradition of festivals held on old agricultural fairgrounds. And by stressing festive events using German foods (sauerkraut, roast pork, schnitzel), crafts (blacksmithing, buggy production, steam-engine power) and entertainment (singing, storytelling, hymnity), he was drawing to Kutztown members of American Volksfest groups such as those in Philadelphia and the New York—New Jersey area. So the festival provided one means to extend academic concerns to a general public seeking a total and enjoyable immersion in Pennsylvania German regional Volksleben. Immensely popular due to its use of live demonstrations, the Kutztown folk festival was drawing crowds well in excess of 100,000 by 1960. What they came to see included, in the summer of 1965, ‘Dutch-English humor’, ‘Amish documentary film’, and a ‘water-vetching demonstration’ among others (Pennsylvania Folklife 1965: 58). The proceeds from the gate alone provided vital revenue for other programmes (Yoder 1966: 52).

Even as Yoder’s 1965 essay consolidated the new field of folklife studies as a transatlantic intellectual formation, he nonetheless made two omissions. On the one hand his essay failed to offer detailed biographies of key intellectual figures as a means of showing how the distinct roles of museum curator, university professor, and archivist could be brought together within single working lives. Outside of continental Europe, the folklife approach also found zealous adherents in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. In these countries, a similar emphasis on regional approaches to material culture could be found in the 1930s. During this period, the growing strength of material culture study within folklife was due to the sustained labour of Torwerth C. Peate, Isabel Francis Grant, and E. Estyn Evans. The chronological terrain charted by these scholars begins in the 1920s and 1930s and stretches through the 1940s and 1960s; thus helping both to constitute and to symbolically reveal shifts in British society and culture in the inter-war years as well as after WWII. Perhaps in the first period, landscape and the preservation and study of old houses merged into a countryside ethos in which national interests were implicit and infrequently contested. In the years following WWII, however, regional identities within ‘Britishness’ seem to have broken free of country life ideology. As sectional politics and cultures took on greater force in the years from 1945 to 1965, they were countered by English planners eager to build new, cross-class ‘communities’, ineffable fictional settlements of consumer-citizens, living in neighbourhoods that could subsume regional affiliations as well as assuage the endless class tension of urban terrace housing (Maltese 1998: 62–78, 234–235). It may be possible to describe these broad changes, but their periodization was often not so neat. As we shall see, Peate and Grant, at least, were unflinching regionalists in the 1930s.

Three lives

The Welsh scholar Torwerth C. Peate (born in Powys in 1901) undertook during the 1930s a programme of fieldwork and historical research that led to the publication of The Welsh House: A Study in Folk Culture (Peate 1944). This careful exploration of how house plan types and interior furnishings varied across the Welsh landscape built upon his training in human geography and museum curation. Peate had studied under H. J. Fleure (1877–1969), the French human geographer who taught at University College of Wales in Aberystwyth from 1910 to 1930; Fleure advised Peate’s undergraduate work in Celtic archaeology. In 1921, Peate was appointed as Assistant Keeper in the Archaeology Department in the National Museum of Wales and learned the collection well. In 1929, he published a Guide to the Collection of Bygones, a Descriptive Account of Old-Fashioned Life in Wales. In 1932, Peate was appointed to care for the folk culture and industries in the museum, and the following year published Y Crefft yw Nghynnau, a study of traditional craftsmen and their tools (Peate 1933).
It was during research between 1936 and 1940 for The Welsh House that he also began to develop ideas for a Welsh open-air museum based on the Swedish Folk Museum at Skansen. By 1948, Peate's vision, The Welsh Folk Museum, was opened at St Fagan's on the outskirts of Cardiff. During this same period of productivity, Peate also founded The Society for Folk Life Studies, and served as the founding editor of its journal, Gwerin, first published in late 1956. In his 'Editorial Notes' for the June 1957 issue, Peate credited Cyril Fox, the third Director of the National Museum of Wales, with establishing a Department of Folk Life, which was in turn 'merged into the newly-created Welsh Folk Museum'. It is difficult to position Cyril Fox in the cultural politics of Wales in the 1950s. Along with his co-author Lord Raglan, Fox released the three-volume study of Monmouthshire Houses (Fox and Raglan 1951, 1953, 1954). Published under the joint imprint of the National Museum of Wales and the Welsh Folk Museum, the work stands as a mode of vernacular architecture study in its integration of attention to both materials and plan types, the analysis of which resulted from extensive field study between 1941 and 1948 (Fox and Raglan 1953: 10).

Both Fox and Raglan were Englishmen with an ambivalent view of immediate post-WWII politics. When doing the field research for the book, Fox was also Director of the National Museum of Wales. Raglan was a past president of a section of the British Association, a prominent member of the museum's council, and in 1950 the Chairman of the museum's Art and Archaeology Department. In a preface written for the first volume of Monmouthshire Houses, D. Dilwyn Jones, then the Director of the National Museum, stated that their book owed a singular debt to Peate: 'In Wales it has been stimulated', he observed, 'by the publication of The Welsh House.' But Jones, a Welshman himself, also noted why the Monmouth region bounded on the south by the Severn River and on the east by England, mattered. 'We want ultimately to know', he commented, 'the exact geographical boundaries in Wales and in Britain generally of particular styles and of individual craft-techniques' (Jones 1951: 3). On one hand, Jones noticed that unlike Peate's earlier study, in which his house plans are drawn with furniture in place and his photographs include living people as they used the building—Fox and Raglan included varieties of cruck joints, discussed craftsmanship without speaking to any craftsmen, and drew plans of houses as if no one lived in them. In the early 1950s, then, the representation of the Welsh landscape and its houses were linked to the emergence of Welsh nationalist political agendas and the Plaid Cymru party's maturation, from the election of Gwynfor Evans as President in 1951 to its claim of a majority of Welsh seats in Parliament in 1955. The party's emphasis on home rule served as a divisive issue within the then dominant Liberal party, which had long been seeking accommodation with English rule in Wales. The discord within the Liberal camp came from industrialists in southern Wales, who as a group chose to remain within English parliamentary control (Jones and Fowler 2008: 52–56). Monmouthshire was one area the southern Welsh capital of industry conceived of as their own territory. Thus the particular section of Wales Fox and Raglan chose to study was politically engaged in the 1950s: their choice implicitly ratified the accommodationist Liberal stance of unionist economics.

Fox, after all, was a native Hampshire man whose rise in the museum system in Wales had been nothing short of meteoric. According to a short biography written about him by Peate, Fox had been in and out of public schools in England, and schemed to become an assistant in the university museum of Cambridge. He finally earned his Ph.D. in 1921 and published his thesis as The Archaeology of the Cambrieg Region in 1923 (Fox 1923). Even as this first work was in press, however, Fox was contacted by R. E. Mortimer Wheeler, who in 1922 had been elevated from his job as Keeper of Archaeology to Director of the National Museum of Wales. Although there was heavy pressure to name a Welsh scholar to the position he had vacated, Wheeler knew through his Cambridge contacts of Fox's work, and offered the Keeper's post to him. Fox began his work in Cardiff in late 1922. In 1926, Wheeler left the museum, and Fox became Director of the museum, a position he kept until 1948. While Director he kept up his work in archaeology, and published The Personality of Britain, an archaeological survey that manages to consider Welsh materials as among those Celtic fringe societies that were consisently pushed back by invading Anglo-Saxon tribes (Fox 1932). As Director, Fox was also called upon to give advice to local museums about their collections and buildings. When he visited the museum in Wrexham in Denbighshire, he was surprised to learn that its curator 'expected us to fill the building with loans to give them a start. When he was at Cardiff in the summer', Fox continued, 'someone who showed him round said we would & had "enough Holt stuff to fill two galleries". I repudiated any intention of doing this sort of thing' (quoted in Hill and Matthews 2004: 35, emphasis in original). In another instance, he visited the Powysland Museum, located in the village where Peate was born. Here, Fox merely ticked off a number of factors that bothered him: 'No heat . . . no blinds—great extremes of temperature damaging the exhibits. Strong sunlight very bad. The roof is not watertight. . . . Interior Shabby!' The lesson that Fox drew from these failings was not merely that the museum's overseers were inadequate. Instead, he noted that 'No local museum can possibly be properly managed without a permanent paid curator. It is Unjust,' he noted emphatically, 'and lays a heavy burden on the generosity of unpaid workers, who cannot manage adequately' (quoted in Hill and Matthews 2004: 85, emphasis in original).

Fox was replaced as Director of the National Museum of Wales by D. Dilwyn Jones, the man who penned the prefaces to the three volumes of Monmouthshire Houses. In the preface to volume two, Jones thanked Peate for 'reading the proofs of this Part'. He also stated that the Fox and Raglan survey 'is related to one of the activities of the Welsh Folk Museum: the study, and re-erection at St Fagan's of old Welsh buildings' (Jones 1953: 3).

The founding collections at St Fagan's, on the outskirts of Cardiff, a 100-acre site acquired by the National Museum of Wales in 1948 for an open-air museum,
were drawn from key departmental holdings formerly part of the museum. St Fagan's had only a few buildings by 1957; according to Peate, it 'now exhibits a sixteenth-century manor house and its gardens and grounds, a sixteenth-century barn, a rural woollen factory, two farmhouses and a Nonconformist chapel. Two other farmhouses and a Caernarvonshire cottage are about to be re-erected.' With pride he listed the presence in 1957 of galleries, craft demonstrations, classrooms, and libraries. But 'the Welsh Folk Collection', Peate observed with regret, 'is in store awaiting the completion of the Exhibition Block, for which unfortunately there are no funds' (Peate 1957: 97–98). Gwerin was renamed Folk Life in 1953. Peate remained editor. His brief statement on the renaming reveals several pressing issues, each of which touched on the newly re-entitled journal as a 'clearing-house' (Peate 1963: 4) for the field of folkloristic studies. One concern was the arbitrary and counter-productive splitting during the inter-war years of archaeological research and anthropological work into different, highly segregated scholarly journals; the two fields found it difficult to address one another and share critical readers. As Peate put it, 'the literature of folkloristic research in Britain... was therefore fractionated throughout a wide range of journals' (Peate 1963: 3). A second problem was the total disruption caused by WWII of international folkloristic conferences and publication. While Erichson had founded the journal Folk-fair in the 1930s, Peate argued, 'the outbreak of war forced Dr. Erichson to limit the range of the journal principally to Scandinavian scholarship' (Peate 1963: 3). International conferences, some with UNESCO funding, helped overcome the journal's resulting parochialism and, as Peate lamented, 'this did not solve our British problem' (Peate 1963: 3). The British 'problem' was how to imagine a folkloristic scene that would effectively cut across the material cultures of Wales, Scotland, the North of Ireland, and England. The mixture of academic and museum research had become more common in 1963 than it had been in the 1930s, but at the same time it was now being used to claim regional cultural autonomy rather than advance any pan-British identity. From the 1950s to the present, the preferred use of material culture has been to insist upon the legitimacy of political strategies on local and regional levels.

The School of Scottish Studies at the University of Edinburgh began in the early 1950s. Its house journal, Scottish Studies, has always been a mixture of topics ranging from linguistic dialect to literature to folkloristics (Dalglish 2003: 23–27). The material culture of Scotland was explored and presented in a museum setting much earlier, however. On a tour of Scandinavia in the late 1920s, Isabel Frances Grant first learned of Skansen and of the corresponding open-air museum founded at Malmöhus near Lillevärd, Norway, by Anders Sandvigs in 1904. Born in Edinburgh, Grant had in 1934 written her first book on an eighteenth-century ancestor of highland origins; using surviving account books, she reconstructed the economic life of William MacKintosh. As Every-day Life on a Highland Farm made clear, he lived in a small village near Kingussie, a picturesque town at the foot of Scotland's Monadhliath mountains that would claim Grant's attention until her death at age 96 in 1983. After seeing both Skansen and Malmöhus, she realized that material artefacts came alive in a museum setting. Beginning in the early 1930s, she conceived the idea of establishing a Highland folk museum to better insure that 'the old setting of our daily life' could be 'saved' and used to educate the public about aspects of Highland existence that were fast disappearing—a romantic, eleventh-hour rescue of reified tradition' (Highland Folk Museum 2008). Rotating through the countryside in her automobile, Grant gathered a wide range of domestic artefacts: pots, old stoves, chairs, ploughs, as well as things of more transient, organic materials such as horn vessels, leather, and wood harnesses for livestock. Grant travelled to different parts of the Highlands, and thus site-visited the cultural diversity of the region rather than reducing it to any single identity for convenience. In 1935, she purchased a deconsecrated church on Iona, an island in the Inner Hebrides. She named the small museum-in-a-church Am Fasdaigh (Scottish Gaelic for 'the shelter'). In less than 5 years, the collection had outgrown the church, so Grant moved it all to another church, about 12 miles from Kingussie. In 1945 she finally secured a site in Kingussie proper, and the Highland Folk Museum officially opened on 1 June 1944, 4 years earlier than Jarvorth Peate's Welsh Folk Museum at St Fagan's.

The folkloristic approach to material culture that informed Grant's development of the Highland Folk Museum was set out in her book Highland Folk Ways (1961). The title of the work appears to draw from American scholar William Graham Sumner's influential Folkways: A Study of the Sociological Importance of Manners, Customs, Mores and Morals (1906). When she began her earliest research in the 1920s, the term 'folkways' may have seemed thematically precise and useful in its argument that folk customs (or 'ways') had at base a unifying sociological function: they held the moral fibre of groups together. By the time her book was actually being written (1959–1960), however, Grant had also been influenced by the ascendant paradigm of folkloristics, an intellectual formation that valued many functions (historical, political, economic, spiritual), and witnessed fragmentation as well as unity of purpose (hence the vagaries of 'folkloristics' and not the moral claims of 'folkways'). Indeed, as she stated at the outset of the book's first chapter, 'the study of Highland Folk Life [note the change] is not merely an account of how the people managed to live in an inhospitable northern land but how they adapted this environment to their particular social ideas' (Grant 1961: 1). For Grant, a sociological lens may have been consistent with Sumner's earlier scheme, but hers remained focused on a precise, historical investigation of clan and run-rig land tenure.

The structure of Highland Folk Ways captured the centrality of material culture to Grant's conception of 'folk life'. The book moved from a broad, geographic and archaeological account ("The Lie of the Land and Shape of Human Settlement"), followed by chapters on farm animals and arable land ("The People's Foothold"), to ever narrowing discussions of house structure and form. Her descriptions of thatching and the difficulties of roof maintenance are convincing (Figure 4.3),
and her treatment of form included numerous floor plans (although neither orientation nor scales are provided). Following house form, she included a chapter on furnishing and 'plenishing' (the latter meaning such movable as pots, dishes, or stave vessels), 'The People's Daily Round and Common Tasks', and the production and use of Highland fabrics. Perhaps the last quarter of the volume contained highly detailed chapters that appear as residual categories, seeming to fill out a sense of folklife genre: craftsmen, sea fishing and boats, communication and transport, sports and festivals. Throughout, Grant insisted that this wide array of material culture—from fields to fences, creepies to chorgan, from boats to festivals—could be integrated within the historical and ethnographic framework of folklife (Dalglish 2003: 24).

While Grant may have drawn some early inspiration from Sumner's conception of Folkways, a more immediate scholarly influence was E. Estyn Evans' Irish Folk Ways (Evans 1957). In a few respects, Evans was similar to Peate; he was a student of the human geography taught by Fleure at Aberystwyth at the same time as Peate in the mid-1920s. Evans remained a geographer throughout his long and active career. Indeed, one of Evans' earliest essays was included in the essay collection for Fleure edited by Peate (Evans 1930). Soon thereafter, Evans moved to Northern Ireland where he accepted a Lectureship in Geography at Queen's University in Belfast. Although his continuing field research in Europe was undercut by the Nazi occupation, in 1942 he published Irish Heritage: The Landscape, The People, and Their Work, a volume that introduced a new way to look at the Irish landscape that academics, citizens, and politicians alike found compelling (Evans 1942). In a land already divided, Evans argued that the history that came from material culture on the land—the people's greatest artwork—had the power to bring Catholics and Protestants together, as inhabitants of an older landscape, one that knew no sectarian distinctions. For Evans, this was one political power of archaeology; before the arrival of the first English planters in the twelfth century, there was only one Ireland. New bonds were immanent in heritage. He also argued in that book, as he did in earlier university and public lectures, that an open-air museum, again modelled on Skansen, should be established in Northern Ireland. The Ulster Folk Museum opened in 1958; Evans' earlier involvement with local government's Committee on Ulster Folklife helped bring the new journal Ulster Folklife into being in 1955; the museum commenced its publication a decade later. Evans served as one of the very first Trustees of the museum, and remained on its board until 1983 (Galloway 1990: 231–232), long after the museum had acquired its new location at Cultra, County Down, merged with the Ulster Transport Museum to form the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum in 1961, and formally reopened at the new site in 1964 (Figure 4.3).

Evans' study of Irish Folk Ways was published in 1957, as the museum was being developed to bring material culture to the centre of folklife interpretation (Evans 1957). In a structure that influenced Grant's later Highland Folk Ways, discussed

---

**Fig. 4.2** Thatched house and south-western Scottish Highlands roping techniques for thatch: (a) general view of thatched house; (b) detail of chimney in middle of roof, showing rope encircling stack; (c) fastening of thatch to square gable end; (d) Mull type house; (e) detail of chimney at end of house, showing wrapping and pegging techniques (from Grant 1961: 153).
above, Evans began the work with three chapters on the formation of the land, and then moved into sequenced discussions of the ‘thatched house’ (Figure 4.4, ‘hearth and home’, ‘pots and pans’, and ‘furniture and fittings’. Thus, Evans merged the study of human geography with that of vernacular architecture and what William Morris once called ‘the lesser arts’, or decorative arts (Morris 1973 [1878]: 11–36). Evans then moved through farmyards, kilns, gardens, the gathering of turf and additional ‘home-made things’ (Evans 1957: 100–199). Finally, Evans rounded out his discussion by addressing arenas of popular custom: ‘boats and fishing’, ‘fairs and gatherings’, ‘fixed festivals’, and concluded the book with a meditation on ‘weddings and wakes’. The result was a staggeringly detailed portrait of ordinary people at work, finding both art and pleasure in the production of their lives.

Early contributions to *Ulster Folklore* displayed the clear imprint of Evans’ keen interest in using the idea of folklife as a strategy for linking academic research to museum interpretation. Exhibition, curatorial precision, acquisition, and catalogue publication were all in Evan’s purview as the Ulster Folk Museum developed. As Fleure had been to his own training, Evans now became the mentor for a new generation of scholars, such as Alan Gailey, whose *Rural Houses of the North of Ireland* (1984) was dedicated to Evans.

Evans opened the eyes of others because his own were so critical and always searching for new connections to observe and describe. In 1959, for example, he was

Fig. 4.3 Early nineteenth-century row housing from Sandy Row, Belfast, Northern Ireland (built in 1826, later reinstalled at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, Cultra, County Down; photo: Robert Saint George).

Fig. 4.4 Irish houses with rope thatching, western seaboard: (1) Dingle, County Kerry; (2) Achill Island, County Mayo; (3) Teeling, County Donegal (from Evans 1957: 53).
the first international guest invited to lecture on folklife approaches at the Kutztown folk festival. In the short essay that Evans published concerning his visit, he complimented Alfred Shoemaker and Don Yoder for their intellectual energy. He addressed eighteenth-century Scots-Irish migrations from Ulster to Pennsylvania and the folklife traditions they contributed, even as presentations about Pennsylvania German culture dominated the festival programming (Evans 1959). Evans noted similarities between the two cultures, commenting on the forms of barns and types of ploughs, but he also marvelled at the local customs presented at the event; ‘Other topics discussed’, Evans observed, ‘were water witching or dowsing (in which I successfully participated), ballads, broadsides, superstitious beliefs and povwowing (witchcraft or sympathetic healing).’ When he turned his attention to activities under cover, the catalogue increased to include ‘a similar [open-sided] tent staged a practical demonstration of traditional farm ways: wood-fence building (one of the simpler varieties was described as an Irish fence), the use and lore of hook and scythe, flailing, horse-harnessing, grain-shockting (stoking), animal calls and so on’ (Evans 1959: 15).

Evans reserved his amazement, however, for other items of material culture:

The permanent buildings on the site housed a bewildering variety of exhibits and demonstrations. A large hall was occupied by stands displaying Pennsylvania ‘antiques’, such as redware pottery and illuminated manuscripts (tallchrut). Another hall housed craftsmen demonstrating their skills in making e.g., straw-matting, ‘cookie-cutters’ of soddered tin, hand thrown pottery, baskets, quilts, and decorated Easter eggs (using pigments, resist-dying and rush-pith wrapping—this a recent import from the Ukraine). Young members of the Plain minorities—Amish, Mennonite, and Dunkard—displayed their costumes and their characteristic products such as Swiss cheeses.

Evans (1959: 15)

Thus, Evans sensed the irony of ‘tradition’ when presented in a festival context, when the relative value of a local custom shifts under the pressure of being transformed into a commodified form, as when presentations on a cultural ‘stage’ both de-contextualize and reify the ploughs, the water-witching, or the endless offerings of krant served to tourists eager to eat their way to an assimilated authenticity. What is presented is less folklore in any nostalgic sense, but what we once integrated customs have been packaged as ‘exhibits’, endlessly reproduced as ‘demonstrations’, and put on static ‘display’; Evans (1959: 15) uses these three words in sequence. These costumes, these tin cookie-cutters, these cheeses: they were instances of what was even then known as folklorismus (English: folklorism), although Evans did not use the word in his writings. This approach engaged directly the uses Shoemaker and Yoder were making of folklife’s objects (its foods, domestic architecture, folk costume) and of its subjects (living history interpreters, storytellers, and healers at folk festivals).

FROM FOLKLIFE TO FOLKLORISM

When culture and its associated forms are put on view, questions arise concerning the relative authenticity of what visitors encounter. This section addresses the origins of the folklorismus (‘folklorism’) concept, and how it marked an addition to the ways in which material culture could be examined within the folklife studies approach.

In 1962 German folklorist Hans Moser penned the first critical assessment of folklorism, separating it from such terms as folklore and folkloristics (which in Germany had been associated with antiquarian collectors since the 1890s) and ‘applied folkloristics’—and from its close cousin ‘applied Volkskunde’. Applied Volkskunde had been established in German-speaking countries by the early twentieth century, and in its repeated invocation by regional and national groups working to legitimize heimat, found occasional use in support of the Third Reich. Indeed, as historian Karl Ritt has demonstrated in his discussion of the use made of the ‘culture region’ concept by the German archaeologist and geographer Franz Petri, he argues that Petri developed a method for determining the ‘Germanness’ of such territories as Belgium and parts of northern France. Although Petri never intended his work to be used for political ends, his claims about the cultural origins of Belgium and northern France provided a justification for the Third Reich to annex those areas (Ritt 2001: 246–249). National Socialist writers such as Otto Schmidt, who in 1937 wrote Volkskunde als politische Waffe (Volkskunde (Folk Art as a Political Tool) or Max Hildebrandt Boehm, whose Volkskunde (Folk Art) was published during the same year, drew on the name of the university discipline, Volkskunde, in order to support their Nordic-Germanic racist ideology and their faith in establishing a thousand-year Volk (Kamensk, 1972: 223–226). Moreover, not just reading lists fell under the Third Reich’s agenda. Smaller festival occasions felt its imprint as well; at Cannstatt, for example, during the 1935 celebration a swastika adorned the capital of the decorative fruit column that had long stood at the symbolic centre of the event (Cannstatt Volksfest 2008: 2).

As a result of the Third Reich’s appropriation and outright invention of a new Volkskunde to its own ends—including Hitler’s introduction of the 1934 commodi-

-ty-wonder, the Volkswagon—later German scholars distanced themselves from the term, but were uncertain what might stand in its place. Hans Moser preferred folklorism. Although the precise meaning of his new word remained ambiguous, he argued its significance:

It is a term of great breadth which draws on two strands: the increased cultural leveling which leads to a growing interest in things ‘folk’ and the practice of satisfying, strengthening, or awakening this interest. Through various tactics, the audience is offered an impressive mixture of genuine and falsified materials from folk culture, particularly in cultural enclaves where life still seems to breathe originality, strength, and colour.

According to Regim Bendix (1988: 6), Moser specified three particular forms of folklorism in his 1962 essay:

1. Performance of traditionally and functionally determined elements of folk culture outside that culture's local or class community.
2. Playful imitation of folk motifs in another social stratum.
3. The purposeful invention and creation of 'folk-like' elements outside any traditions.

Moser's understanding of folklorism thus drew obliquely on recent political uses of Volkskunde but used the term as well in order to represent all types of second-order folklorist experiences from museum installations to mass-mediated shows of 'traditional' peoples. Still, looking over these three points it is possible to consider how dramatically many aspects of material culture and folkloric studies would be redefined by Moser's way of reconceiving the newly estranged role of 'tradition' in human experience. Or as sociologist Hermann Bausinger (1990: 126–127) summarized it in 1965:

The concept of folklorism was introduced to folkloristic discussion primarily by Hans Moser. Never strictly defined, the concept indicates not so much clearly circumscribed attributes as a certain process: the process of a folk culture experienced at second hand. The concept addresses the widespread fact that folklore—in the widest sense, not limited to oral tradition—appears in contexts to which it originally did not belong.

Of course, Moser's new frame of reference mattered precisely because he proved a keen observer of those ways in which both academics and museum curators—those material culture and folkloric specialists so valued by Yoder—bore some responsibility for the analytical viewpoint that members of folk communities could provide about the origins and changing social lives of their own traditions (Bendix 1988: 6).

In 1978, the Hungarian folklorist Vilmos Voigt provided an updated survey of the intellectual history of the folklorism concept. On the one hand, he broadened the international emergence of the term itself, noting its appearance in Belgium in 1921, in Italy in 1961, and in the literatures of Greece, Russia, and Hungary itself (Voigt 1980: 421–422, 424). On the other hand, Voigt suggested that folklorism may be considered as opposed (and in many instances linked) to the process of 'folklorisation'. In the latter instance, materials from outside the small social group are moved into legitimate artistic communication near the 'innermost life' of the people. In the former case, folklore moves in the direction of cultural display, a move toward essentialized significance. Voigt's paper was published in a collection of essays edited by the English folklorist Venetia J. Newall. In order to clarify Voigt's use of the term folklorism, Newall added this explanatory editorial comment:

Folklorism may be used for commercial, patriotic, romantic propagandistic, and genuinely artistic purposes. It is a growing, world-wide phenomenon and is not unique to our time.

Examples of folklorism, and they are legion, would include: television displays of 'picturesque' folklore; the conscious wearing of national dress—for instance, at political demonstrations; the use of folk melodies by composers like Chopin, Vaughan Williams, and Barlow; the use of ethnic ornamentation in architecture; folklore and myth in the work of T.S. Eliot, Thomas Mann, Bertold Brecht, and James Joyce; the 'ethnic' souvenir industry; intellectuals who decorate their homes with examples of folk art, and so on.

Newall, in Voigt (1980: 421ff) 

Each of these phrases I have used—cultural display, essentialized significance—comes from a consideration of folklorism, and points toward the unfamiliar domain of a 'poetics of commodities', a term I have employed to reference objects of material culture when they are in a 'commodity situation' (Appadurai 1986: 13–14) and when the particular strategies of indirect meaning they assume—metaphor, implication, contingency—are salient markers of that commodity's poetic qualities (Saint George 1998: 331). The ways in which such a position maps on to existing approaches to folkloric studies is discussed in the section that follows.

Poetics of Commodities

The idea of folklorism, underlying the socio-political dimensions of the definitions of folk tradition, has informed the development of folkloric studies during the past 30 years. Former students of Don Yoder have played an important role, especially Henry H. Glassie, Gerald L. Pocius, and John D. Dorst. Glassie's many, diverse writings honour and extend the folkloric paradigm as outlined by Yoder. Yoder was the director of Glassie's doctoral dissertation at the University of Pennsylvania, which was published as Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States (Glassie 1969). This study used maps in order to define both areal diffusion and regional patterns of material folk culture east of the Mississippi River. Using everything from barns and house types to settin' chairs and slingshots, Glassie argued that the influence of the Chesapeake or Tidewater region on the material culture of the inland southern region had previously been overlooked and warranted great scholarly attention (Glassie 1969: 343, 88–89). In undertaking a critical mapping exercise, one that had a direct antecedent in the comparable mapping of linguistic dialect (Glassie 1969: 348; Kniffen 1986 [1955]: 19, 21 [Fig. 31]), he was perhaps responding to Don Yoder's wistful observation that 'the linguistic atlas technique has been applied to America by Hans Kurath, although so far the Volkskundatlas, while it has spread to Switzerland, Holland, and Scandinavia, has no progeny in the United States' (Yoder 1967: 491n19).
In the mid-1970s Glassie published two further significant studies. *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia: a structural analysis of historic artifacts* was based on a close examination of about a dozen houses in Louisa and Goochland counties in Virginia. The book made one important cultural argument: that a ‘revolution’ in house design—and in the social life of the family behind its changing facades—happened before, and thus was a precondition of, the American revolution against British imperial control (Glassie 1975: 185–187). The book cast a long shadow for its methodological rigour. Glassie himself, looking back several years later, stated that *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia* was ‘an application of structural method to artefacts designed to display the utility of material culture and structuralism for writing history’ (Glassie 1982: 728n1). It also could be considered as an extended essay on the efficacy and limitations of the linguistic analogy for material culture study. The impact of the book was immediate. It awakened some historians from their insensitivity to material culture, and, when combined with another essay he published in 1977, it provided historical archaeologists with a model of establishing artefact competence and situated social performance (Glassie 1977; Johnson 1993: 33–38). The study stimulated debate and was criticized both for its avoidance of written records, and for the apparent invisibility of Glassie among the homeowners of Middle Virginia. Indeed, one reviewer went so far as to suggest that Glassie worked on the particular houses he did because they were deserted, and thus presented no social demands as he conceptually dismantled them for his own needs. Local residents, had Glassie made himself known to them, could have led him to other houses, including ones that might have challenged or confirmed his findings (McDaniel 1978: 853).

Around the same time, Glassie published his first sustained engagement with field ethnography in Northern Ireland, *All Silver and No Brass: an Irish Christmas mumming* (Glassie 1976). The story is an exploration of how elderly people in the district of Ballymenone, in the Parish of Cleenish, south-east of Enniskillen in County Fermanagh, remembered their own experiences of playing a part in a mumming team, hosting their raucous entry and entertainment, and then using the combined monies they ‘begged’ to put on a ball or public dance during the Christmas season (Glassie 1976). Glassie continued to interview elderly residents of the district, publishing the results in *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: culture and history of an Ulster community* (1982), a work he introduced as ‘an ethnography strong enough to cause disquiet in my world’ (Glassie 1982: 13). It could also be described as an attempt to present an integrated cross-section of the expressive genres of a single community, especially in its commitment to fusing the study of narrative legends to material culture and the layout of local landscape. His close attention to material things—fields, the rooting or ‘winning’ of hay, fences, streets, barns, houses (Figure 4.5), or kitchen dressers—culminated in his analysis of the serving of tea, with its symbolic diffusion inward to metaphorically invoke communion.

---

Fig. 4.5 Irish house with axial alignment of house and service structures added at right, Inishowen Peninsula, County Donegal, c.1800–1920 (photo: Robert Saint George).

After his sustained work in Fermanagh, Glassie turned his attention to the production and marketing of crafts—from rugs to pottery to metalware, from things for the mosque to things for the home—in contemporary Istanbul. He began, too, to examine these productions as artefacts at once art and commodity in a competitive economy. To survive in business one needs to become a master of skill and simultaneously master the marketplace; the context of exchange is a constituent element of all things made by human hands (Glassie 1993). From Istanbul, Glassie’s pursuit of comparative craftmanship took him to Dhaka, where he concentrated on the ways in which artefacts both humble and exalted were connected by mass production and by artistic obligation. Pots fresh from the kiln were stacked in dizzying towers for sale; mass-producedickshaws or tri-wheeled cycles were almost encrusted with painted designs, as if the attractiveness of any particular taxi were dependent on the sweepstakes of its painted virtuosity (Glassie 1997; Glassie and Mahmud 2000). These latter works, especially, marked a change in Glassie’s scholarly method. Instead of seeing the tradition of folklife studies as informing his work, he initiated a new kind of material ethnography. This new ethnographic agenda, borrowing perhaps from the cross-cultural study of aesthetics developed by his friend Robert Plant Armstrong during the 1970s (Armstrong 1971), placed a heightened emphasis on the cross-cultural vitality and virtuosity of craftsmanship (in pottery, metal-working, and painted ornament).
that appeared wherever he looked. In *Material Culture* (1999) he drew upon
decades of previous fieldwork to offer a chapter on ‘The Potter’s Art’ that works
comparatively and develops a sequence distilled from earlier publications on
Bangladesh, Turkey, and America, and then includes a new meditation on the
pottery made by Norio Agawa in Japan (Glassie 1999: 198–222). The value of these
investigations emerges in the final paragraph of the book: ‘Examined closely,
analyzed formally on the grounds of compassion’, Glassie maintains, and ‘then
manipulated into comparative array’, material culture breaks open to reveal the
complexity of time, its simultaneous urges to progress, revitalization, and stability
(Glassie 1999: 353, emphasis added). It is the comparative juxtaposition that makes
possible the productive, shattering moment of material culture.

Gerald L. Pocius’ ethnographic study, *A Place to Belong: community order and
everyday space in Calvert, Newfoundland* (1991), used a folklore approach to
combine the results of historical and ethnographic research into a single work. As
Pocius continued to work on households in Calvert, he increasingly documented
how technology coexisted with tradition, most strikingly in his discussion of the
provision of small, traditional Newfoundland houses with satellite dishes to better
pick up mainland television broadcasts, even though such devices remain ‘subsequent
to the continued use of spaces’ and ‘maintaining constant and continued social
contact is paramount’ (Pocius 1991: 285–287, fig. 155). People in Newfoundland
did not commonly defy the neat dichotomies of outsiders (Figure 4.6), of planners from Toronto, or of tourists from the mainland and from the United
States. Neither ‘traditionalists’ nor enthusiasts of an outright consumer culture, individuals in Calvert, Pocius showed, lived not only between such imagined poles:
their sharing of space and attitudes to commodities challenged social scientific

John D. Dorst’s *The Written Suburb: an American site, an ethnographic dilemma*
(1989) explored the relationships between folklore and consumption in suburban
Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania. Dorst focused attention on a series of linked
phenomena in which material culture and local history map on to nostalgia and
commerce. Local collector Chris Sanderson assembled a small museum in his
house, and constructed an alternate temporality from the abstract order of his
classification technique. Only miles from a Revolutionary War battle ground (with
its own reductionist interpretation), the radical reshaping of history at Chadds
Ford Days, the annual local festival (folklorism in the extreme) drew upon legend
folklore, and the town’s own cultivation of Andrew Wyeth—who-is-now-a-God
mythology. Considering that Dorst was trained in folklore and folk life, his choice
of doing an ethnographic study of landscape and material life in deep suburbia
was unusual at the time, when postmodernism endowed many projects with an
appreciable irony. His study revealed clearly the ways in which doing a field study of
folklorism proved an ‘ethnographic dilemma’, to be sure. According to Dorst ‘the
culture of advanced consumer capitalism... consists largely in the processes of

Fig. 4.6 A 1970s bungalow at Plate Cove, Newfoundland, Canada. Constructed
in 1978, this house retains a direct and informal entry through the side kitchen door
via a small set of steps and platform called locally the ‘bridge’, but combines this
traditional element with a formal plan of a catalogue-ordered bungalow, the font
door of which is never used (photo: Robert Saint George).

self-inscription, indigenous self-documentation and endlessly reflexive simulation’
(Dorst 1989: 2). Thus, the constant production of self-referential ‘texts’ (in an
expansive sense) marks the suburb of Chadds Ford as a tourist site and as a
'postmodern' place (a text-driven and simulacra-obsessed zone); 'what makes the
contemporary suburb a privileged Site of postmodernity', Dorst observes, 'is the
way it foregrounds in everyday life the perverseness of the commodity form, of
the simulacrum, of spectacle and an economy of sign exchange' (Dorst 1989: 3). But
that carries a still darker message. 'The suburb', Dorst asserts, 'is the emblem in
social life not of some cultural core with an identifiable content, but of the
decentered condition of postmodernity in general' (Dorst 1989: 3). As these
comments suggest, Dorst’s ethnographic dilemmas came in part from the suburb and its
cultural qualities. At the same time, however, Dorst found the suburb fascinating
precisely because no amount of training in folk life studies under Yoder had
prepared him for it. The older model of 'folk culture' had a 'cultural core', the
specific small town or rural area with a deep history packed into its fields, fences,
and houses. But the suburban scene that confronted Dorst presented questions on
every front: What if the 'community' chosen for an ethnographic study was neither
old nor rural and had a built landscape in part developed by speculative builders during the past decade? Yet, the 'suburban way of life' is a commonplace in the Western world, surrounding every city. With the exception of Dorst’s book, we have no equally subtle ethnographic work on the material culture and folklife of these commuter enclaves.

While Dorst’s project reminds us that conditions of late consumer capitalism and the auto-ethnographic and reflexive sign-work it engenders are defining features of the deep suburban landscape, field anthropologists are discovering similar semiotics at work in a variety of west European locales. As the intellectual centre of an updated, commodity-poetics approach to folklife must necessarily shift, it is not surprising that contemporary cultural anthropologists interested in the production and marketing of representations would find in folklife a new and vital ethnographic subject. The work of cultural anthropologist Andrea Klimt stands out in this recent body of ethnographic field studies of folklorism, or of the effect of commodity poetics on European ethnology. In a recent essay she co-authored with Joao Leal, Klimt pauses to consider the ethnographic interest in folklore studies, how ‘folk culture’—or ethnology or volkskunde—became, in the last decades of the 20th century, a major object of reflexive interrogation in contemporary anthropological research (Klimt and Leal 2005: 5). Her interest concentrates on the ‘thematization of folk culture in diverse national traditions of European (and Western) anthropology’, and, in particular, ‘in the political aspects of the appropriation of folklore, stressing its contemporary uses by cultural activists and policy makers, and by nationalist, regionalist and ethnic movements’ (Klimt and Leal 2005: 5–6). While the different refractions of folk culture throughout the Lusophone world is the nominal topic of inquiry, the various pragmatic uses of folklorism connect their communities in Lisbon, Cape Verde, Brazil, and New Jersey, to Klimt’s own previous work on Portuguese transnational migrants in Hamburg, Germany (Klimt 1989, 2000). Along the way, Klimt and Leal cite familiar figures: Hermann Bausinger, Regina Bendix, and through them both Hans Moser, as well as William Wilson’s examination of folklore and nationalism in Finland (Wilson 1976).

**Conclusions: winds of change**

The study of material culture in folklife studies has undergone a remarkable shift since the early twentieth century. What began as a unified and total method for exploring the tightly integrated expressive genres of a single folk culture—usually regional or ethnic—has developed into a field focused on the historical and ethnographic study of the roles that material things and geographic places have played in regional, nationalist, and transnational political movements. When Don Yoder surveyed the international state of the field in 1963 and used it to organize and empower Swedish, Swiss, Scottish, Welsh, Northern Irish, German, and Pennsylvania German traditions of material culture, museums, archives, and research institutes, he was in fact already adopting the pragmatics of folkloristic discourse for particular institutional ends and in local ethnic and regional politics. Even when one accounts for the rise of folklorism in Germany and in such other places as Belgium and Italy, it has never totally eclipsed the reality of those poetics to which it was so effectively moored. After all, even Yoder has long been fascinated by the ‘kitchification’ of tradition. Since the 1960s, at least, he has patiently amassed a collection of Pennsylvania Dutch decorative placemats, napkins embossed with horse and buggy designs, and gaudy Dutch matchbooks. Any scholar interested in traditions will appreciate how such traditions can become valuable; but folkloristic studies represents a distinctive kind of investment in the culture futures market. Consider this: along with his earlier studies of Pennsylvania spirituals and folk-songs (Yoder et al. 1951; Yoder 1961), Yoder has also co-authored a study on the commercialization of the hex sign or barn star (Yoder and Graves 1986), written a foreword for a study of a West Virginia tattoo artist (Yoder 1981), and finished a recent independent study of Groundhog day, full of astute comments on its growth from a small regional occurrence to its present, highly mediated national significance (Yoder 2003).

When he first outlined the heuristic promise of the folkloristic studies approach over 40 years ago and effectively pushed it to include material culture as a central concern of method and such related issues as collection, interpretation, and conservation, Don Yoder caused the winds of intellectual change to shift. In part because of his example, and in part because of the work of many other scholars working in his slipstream, those winds are blowing still.
CHAPTER 5

MATERIAL HISTORIES

ANN BROWER STAHL

INTRODUCTION

If human life worlds are made as much of matter as ideas—consisting of 'bundles' or 'gatherings' of people, things, and thoughts (Latour 1993a, 2004a; Ingold 2000a, 2000b; Keane 2003; Meskell 2005a)—then the study of history should be significantly enhanced by incorporating material evidence. Historical archaeologists have laboured to make this point since the 1960s, at the same time as they have struggled to move beyond James Deetz's tongue-in-cheek definition of historical archaeology as 'the most expensive way in the world to learn something we already know' (Deetz 1991: 1). Deetz's quip reflected the priority that standard history placed on words over objects, a priority that assumed a more general ontological privileging of the mental over the material. Objects, in this view, reflected ideas impressed upon the world. Words—written or oral—were seen to provide a more direct conduit to the past than material remains (artefacts, buildings, landscapes), which were perceived as sources to be consulted when these more reliable sources ran cold. For example, Marc Bloch, a founder of the French 'Annales school' argued the particular value of material sources in the study of invisible or under-represented groups in European society (commoners and peasants, Bloch 1935), a view that also informed American historical archaeology's focus on marginalized populations (e.g. Singleton 1985; Ferguson 1992; see Hall and Silliman 2006; Hicks and Beaudry 2006a). In other world areas, the availability of documentary evidence marked a boundary between 'prehistory' and 'history' that allowed the past of non-literate colonized peoples to be investigated separately from that of the literate colonizers with whom they interacted (Lightfoot 1995; Reid and Lane 2004; Wilkie 2005). But recent theoretical retoolings in the social sciences have questioned this prioritization of language (Bourdieu 1977; Latour 1993a; Finney 2005) and underscored the significance of 'materiality' (Miller 2005a; cf. Ingold 2007a, 2007b), suggesting that we are fashioned as much by our material worlds as we fashion them (Finney 2005). In this view, objects and people transform one another (Ingold 2000b, 2007a: 13). Contexts are produced through things that condition practices that actively fashion continuities and discontinuities with the past (Strathern 1990; N. Thomas 1999). If material configurations 'matter' in the operation of social life (Miller 1998b), it follows that our historical understandings will be enriched by taking into consideration relationships between humans and materials into account. It is these relationships that are a focus of what are here termed 'material histories'.

The idea of 'material histories' explored in this chapter has a dual sense (cf. Trouillot 1995: 2, 29). First, it underscores the ways in which material culture was bound up in how history as socio-historical process was lived, thus revealing how its study can provide insights into past practices and practices. Second, it reminds us that historical accounts—our insights into socio-historical processes—are material (i.e. germane or pertinent) to the present, thus underscoring the need to consider how these accounts are shaped by and simultaneously shape contemporary perceptions and practices (Hall 2001). Although there is value in studying the material histories of wide ranging contexts, this chapter focuses particularly on the value of material sources for deepening and extending our understanding of the effects of historical global connections on daily life as argued by a number of archaeologists, historical anthropologists, and historians (Thomas 1991; Comaroff and Comaroff 1997; Ulrich 2001; Lyons and Papapodiou 2002; Lawrence 2003; Silliman 2005; Lightfoot 2006; Brook 2007; Ogundiran and Falola 2007). Although Marxist perspectives have inspired some of the authors drawn on in this chapter, the material histories explored here should not be confused with historical materialism or a materialist conception of history that privileges production and economy.

Whereas scholars today increasingly value material things as sources of historical insight (Brumfield 2003), producing material histories that bring into view the bundling of people, things, and ideas past and present requires changes in academic practice (Joyce and Lopiparo 2005) if we are to produce more than simply histories of materials. Accordingly, this chapter begins by clarifying the distinction between 'material histories' and 'histories of materials', and explores analytical strategies that have proved valuable in generating material histories. Case studies from Africa are used to exemplify these strategies and to explore how studies
of world history are enriched by the study of material culture. Building especially
upon the insights of historical anthropologists such as Sidney Mintz (1985), Igor
Kopytoff (1986), and Ann Stoler (2001), this chapter examines how material
flows—circulations of people and objects—offer a productive and powerful path-
way for analysing the mutually determining connections between an inter-
connected ‘West’ and ‘the rest’ (Hall 1996) with implications for how we
apprehend contemporary world processes (Stoler 2006a, 2006b).

MATERIAL MOMENTS AND HISTORIES

One afternoon in the late 1990s Krista Feichtinger, an undergraduate who was
inventorying bottle glass from archaeological excavations at the nineteenth-/early
twentieth-century site of Makala Kataa in west-central Ghana, poked her head
through my office door. She had been painstakingly piecing together fragments of
glass recovered from archaeological deposits associated with a domestic structure
and had reconstructed portions of an embossed jar bearing the letters:

V
CHE[partial S]
NEW Y[partial K]

Krista was excited, and wondered aloud what the jar might have contained. Her
imagination was captured by the fact that, working in an archaeology lab in upstate
New York, she was piecing together a bottle that had originated in New York, but
had been recovered from a village site in West Africa. Here was a material
moment—one in which an artefact and its context brought into view historical
connections between industrial America and rural Africa. Krista later identified
the object as a 1908 container used by the Chesebrough Company of New York for
retail sale of Vaseline. This petroleum jelly product was first distilled by Robert
Chesebrough who, on an 1859 visit to the oil fields of Titusville, Pennsylvania,
observed men in the oil fields using the ‘rod wax’ that built up on their drilling rig
as an ointment to treat wounds. By 1870, Chesebrough was marketing a distillate
inspired by rod wax from his Brooklyn factory under the registered trademark
Vaseline in a manufacturing process for which he received a US Patent in 1872
(Vaseline 2008). Sold as a protective skin ointment and first aid remedy, it had
become a household product in the United States by the final decades of the
nineteenth century. Among all the objects recovered from Makala Kataa, the
reconstructed jar conjured the changing social and political-economic fields of
early twentieth-century Banda villagers, implying as it did a ramifying web of
productive relations, merchant connections, and consumer tastes, desires, and
practices. In this sense, it prompted a material moment in the present at the
same time as it evoked a material moment in the past, one in which a village
consumer experimented with a novel product that bore superficial resemblance to
locally available emollients (e.g. shea butter). Assuming the bottle arrived with its
contents intact, it may have been put to familiar uses, for example as a substitute
for local body rubs in a practice that simultaneously produced continuities (a
familiar practice) and discontinuities (a novel product) with the past, perhaps with
unanticipated consequences. The jar thus prompted material moments both past
and present that informed on broader socio-historical processes of production,
exchange, and consumption.

The Vaseline jar fragments are a quintessential example of what James Deetz
(1977: 4) famously referred to as ‘historical archaeology’s focus upon “small things
forgotten’’. Deetz borrowed this term from a seventeenth-century appraiser’s entry
to refer to objects that may have been overlooked in an estate inventory despite
their value. Deetz argued that such ‘small things’—whether gravestones, ceramics,
tools, or house facades—‘carry messages from their makers and users’ (Deetz 1977:
4), and that it is the job of the historical archaeologist to decode those messages as
an aid to better understand the human past.

Deetz’s vision of historical archaeology inspired considerable work in the closing
decades of the twentieth century at the same time as it became the focus of critique.
For some, studies such as In Small Things Forgotten provided insights into everyday
life that could augment historical studies in new ways, enabling archaeology to
serve as more than simply a tool for verification or a material footnote to the rich
documentary record of American history. Inspired by Henry Glassie’s (1975)
structuralist interpretation of how changes in vernacular architecture reflected
changes in the eighteenth-century world view, Deetz offered compelling evidence
of shifts in early American material culture ranging from head stones to table
settings that expressed a new emphasis on balance, symmetry, and individuation in
artefacts. In this formulation, historical archaeology augmented history by delin-
eating how everyday material worlds were reconfigured with a shift to a Georgian
world view.

Inspiring as Deetz’s perspectives were, they were circumscribed by the notion
that material culture is ‘not culture but its product’ and, therefore, reflects ‘how
profoundly our world is the product of our thoughts’ (Deetz 1977: 24). Glassie
(1999: 41–42) succinctly captured this approach when he observed that ‘material
culture is culture made material; it is the inner wit at work in the world… the
study of material culture uses objects to approach human thought and action. . . .
Artifacts set the mind in the body, the body in the world.’

For Deetz and Glassie, then, the study of material culture provides access to the
workings of the mind, enabling them to witness a history of mentalities through a
history of materials. Yet in practice, the insights derived from such an approach in
historical archaeology appeared thin in relation to the ‘thick’ detail of textually based historical accounts.

The ontological premise that underwrote this approach to historical archaeology restricted the development of ‘material histories’. Material culture was understood to reflect culture, and culture was imagined as an ethereal phenomenon that preceded its material existence (Pinney 2005: 257; cf. Latour 1993a; Ingold 2000b: 53). The archaeologist’s fragments—such as the remains of bottles, beads, metal objects, or animal bones—represented a glass through which to view past culture clearly. The implication was that archaeology provided only a history of material culture; a narrative of how objects and material settings were transformed through changes initiated in the social or ideational realm.

An alternative ontological premise refuses to assign priority to mind and mental processes, but instead considers the bodily engagement with material worlds in which humans are constantly enmeshed as equally productive of cultural process (Latour 1993a; Ingold 2000a, 2007a). In this view it is important to consider how objects affect people, attending, for example, to how durable material culture shapes childhood socialization (Gosden 2005: 195–197), and more fundamentally how our immersion in a world of diverse materials generates and regenerates social worlds (Ingold 2007a: 4–9). By recognizing the central role of material practice in cultural process, historical studies can simultaneously engage phenomena that we analytically parse as landscapes, objects, bodies, and minds, in a manner similar to Pierre Bourdieu’s idea of the habitus (Bourdieu 1977; see Gosden 1994: 11; Meskell 2005a: 3). From this perspective the material things that have so often been treated as ancillary to historical studies are instead viewed as sources of insight into the practices through which culture was—and is—actively produced.

Such an approach enhances the significance of Deetz’s ‘small things’. Though our understandings of past cultural processes will always be partial, a focus on material practices helps us to move beyond histories of material to produce material histories of past life worlds that can in turn help us to apprehend the relational processes that condition contemporary life worlds. As such, material histories contribute to a broader ‘emerging attempt to take the material world seriously in terms of how it affects human relations’ (Gosden 2005: 196). Moreover, material histories have proved particularly effective in investigating the connections among societies formerly perceived as ‘in’ or ‘outside’ of history—in other words, between literate peoples who were perceived to have ‘history’ and we therefore proper objects of historical investigation and non-literate peoples who supposedly did not (Wolf 1982). The circulation of ‘small things’ brings the connections among so-called ‘historic’ and ‘prehistoric’ societies into view, enriching our apprehension of the relational processes through which the modern world emerged.

---

**STUDYING MATERIAL PRACTICES: BIOGRAPHY, DEPOSITION, AND GENEALOGY**

Three complementary analytical approaches in archaeology and anthropology have proved significant in helping us to develop insights into material histories: biographical approaches to material culture inspired by the view that things both have and shape social lives; studies of deposition that provide important contextual insights into material practice; and genealogical perspectives on the replication and transformation of practices over time.

Biographical approaches to material practices draw our attention to the varied associations of objects as they circulate within and between contexts across a range of spatial scales (Schiffer 1972, 1976; Appadurai 1988b; Kopytoff 1986; Thomas 1991; Walker and Schiffer 2006). Objects are altered and may be put to varying uses through the course of their life history, with varied effects on who use them. An object’s life history can affect how people interact with it, classically illustrated by the fame acquired by specific shell armbands and necklaces as they circulated through the Trobriand kula exchange cycle (Leach and Leach 1985). Biographical approaches study the multiple phases of an object’s life history by analysing commonalities and differences in the forms and associations of specific object classes and the ‘paths and diversions’ that characterize their circulations (Appadurai 1988b: 16–20). Interest has focused particularly on how objects produced in one cultural context are recontextualized as they are put to use in another (Kopytoff 1986: 67; see also Thomas 1991; Sahlin 1994). While biographical approaches have enhanced our appreciation of the active role of objects in shaping human experience, they do not in and of themselves overcome the tendency to privilege mind over embodied action if objects are seen primarily as carriers of meanings (e.g. Kopytoff 1986: 67; Gosden and Marshall 1990). But these approaches hold considerable promise for helping us to move beyond a view of objects as sources of either continuity or discontinuity by recognizing that objects simultaneously mobilize familiarity, and therefore connections with past practice, at the same time as they present novelty and transform contexts. The complex ways in which object biographies are transformed through this process is illustrated by Nicholas Thomas’ (1999) exploration of Samoan adoption of Tahitian-style bark cloth capes in a period of Christian conversion. These capes reconfigured bodily practices of exposure and display in ways understood by Christian missionaries in relation to decency but which Thomas (1999: 18) suggests Christian Samoans understood as productive of forms of power consistent with previous practice. The objects were thus recontextualized at the same time as they reconfigured the context in which Christian Samoans operated. To date, biographical approaches have privileged consumption over production (Ingold 2007a: 9; though cf. Schiffer
time, referred to as a 'direct historical approach' when sites can be historically linked to living populations (for a methodological discussion, see Stahl 2001: 19–40).

In combination, a focus on object biographies, depositional practices, and their genealogies can yield rich insights into the contextually specific forms of 'bundling' through which worlds were woven (Ingold 2000b). The empirically rich and contextually attuned material histories that result from these analytical approaches provide robust insight into the processes through which cultural continuities and change—past and present—are forged.

**Material Histories of Global Entanglements**

The study of material histories is refiguring our understanding of a wide range of time periods in many world areas (e.g., J. S. Thomas 1995; Gosden 2005; Paulukat 2008; Pollard 2008); however, the remainder of this chapter focuses on the material histories of global entanglements associated with the emergence of a 'modern world system' over the last five centuries (Wallenstein 1974). This provides a particularly rich—if complex—site for exploring dynamic processes of 'bundling' in relation to changing political economic conditions. Until recently this process has been understood primarily through an economic lens (stressing either progress or dependency), but today we appreciate the extent to which it involved a relational discourse of self and other, 'us' and 'them' (Hall 1996) in a mutually constitutive process of nation- and empire-building (Stoler and Cooper 1997: 21; see also Wolf 1982; Thomas 1995; Cohn 1996). Whereas earlier literature highlighted the discursive dimension of this process, exploring the imagery and terminology through which social distinctions were produced (e.g., Said 1978; Mudimbe 1988, 1994), recent literature underscores the importance of material practices (e.g., Steiner 1994). These ranged in form and scale from the officially sanctioned and public to the quotidian and intimate. Europeans and 'others' were mutually constituted at international expositions and world fairs that showcased technological progress by juxtaposing artefacts drawn from both metropole and colony (Brekenridge 1983; Rydell 1993; McGowan 2005). England's 1851 Crystal Palace Exhibition was experienced by thronging crowds who arrived on newly completed rail lines linking provinces to the capital as a 'precipice in time' (Stocking 1987: 1–6) where past and future were on display. The material lesson inscribed by exhibits of non-industrial and industrial technologies was that, although all humans perhaps shared capacity for innovation, not all had progressed to the same level. Social distinction was also produced more intimately
(Stoler 2006a) through foodways, practices of home furnishing (Chattopadhyay 2002), and dress (Callaway 1992) among other mundane activities (see Comaroff and Comaroff 1997). Whereas material practices such as nineteenth-century British colonial preoccupations with dressing for dinner in the bush (Callaway 1992) reproduced social distinctions between colonizer and colonized, a key insight that has emerged from studies of domestic practice in colonial contexts in a variety of world areas is that distinctions upheld in public discourse were often blurred by domestic material practice. For example, archaeological remains from eighteenth-century contexts in Cape Town, South Africa reveal that masters and slaves consumed the same low-quality food resources (Hall 1993:188) at the same time as practices of dress blurred officially sanctioned social distinctions in eighteenth-century Louisiana (Loren 2001).

A general insight to emerge from studies of material histories is that circulations of goods and people reframed processes of identification, as for example when consumers embraced goods to distinguish themselves from their neighbours (Pestholld 2004; 761). While examples highlighted in this paper are drawn from case studies that analyse the emergence of the modern world system, other studies demonstrate the value of material histories in apprehending these processes in other contexts as well, as for example in reference to ancient Rome (Woolf 1997, 1998) or Iron Age Europe (Dietler 1999a, 1999b). The circulations of people that accompanied the emergence of a modern world system—missionaries, colonists, colonial officials, merchants, social outcasts, indentured and enslaved labourers—contributed to new material practices of inclusion and exclusion (Stoler 1989).

Importantly, these circulations of goods and people were not confined to the metropolitan-colony flows that are so often the focus of analytical attention in historical studies of imports and exports. As detailed in examples below, personnel, ideas, and objects circulated from one colony to another (Gupta 2001:46). At the same time goods crossed the national and imperial boundaries that often circumscribe our analytical units. Following these circulations provides an analytical pathway for overcoming the ‘archived grooves’ (Stoler 2001:863) of conventional histories that presume the boundaries of future nations.

A key insight that has emerged from studies that follow the biographies of objects as they cross cultural boundaries is that goods are not stable entities, fixed by their production and retaining essential qualities wherever they were traded; rather, indigenous peoples were selectively interested in specific goods which they put to their own uses (Sahlins 1994). As anthropologist Nicholas Thomas noted:

To say that black bottles were given does not tell us what was received. This is so partly because the uses to which things were put were not inscribed in them by their metropolitan producers, and partly because gifts and commodities could be variously recontextualized as commodities or gifts, as unique articles for display, as artifacts of history, or as a new category of prestige valuable, the manipulation of which sustained the construction of political inequalities.

But as Thomas [N. Thomas 1999:18] later observed, recontextualization should not be understood as a conservative strategy that merely assimilates the unfamiliar to the familiar; rather, he underscored the 'doubleness' of objects in that they 'mobilised certain precedents, certain prior values' at the same time as they 'possessed novelty and distinctiveness'. In this sense, new goods remade the contexts of human actors and thereby condition their subsequent performances (Strathern 1990; see also Pinney 2000). Equally as important, recontextualization is a reciprocal process: just as goods from the metropole were recontextualized by non-metropolitan consumers, so too were goods from the colonies recontextualized by metropolitan consumers (Thomas 1999:125–148).

Many anthropologists have approached the recontextualization of material goods as primarily a question of meaning and linguistic signification. Inspired by this view, expressed for example by Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood in their classic study of 'the world of goods' as 'good for thinking' and 'shoring up conceptual categories' (Douglas and Isherwood 1979:61, 66), concern has focused on how objects are endowed with new meanings as they cross cultural boundaries (McCracken 1988; Howes 1996a). But approaches centred upon 'the meanings of things' (Hodder 1982) are increasingly challenged, both theoretically and methodologically (Stahl 2003; see Strathern 1990).

One problem is that Sausserian-inspired semiotic approaches privilege language and mind as sites of meaning-making, assuming an ontological priority of language over bodily practice, an assumption that is today widely questioned by scholars who emphasize the role of embodied practice and practical knowledge in cultural production (Lefebvre 1991; Jackson 1995; Stoler 1997; Bloch 1998:32–33). Secondly, a scholarly preoccupation with meaning privileges a reflective and retrospective form of inquiry that obscures the practical domain of human action (Giddens 1979:28, 53; Bloch 1995; Jackson 1996:42). In other words, it misconstrues the way scholars approach the world (through reflective contemplation) for the way in which humans engage in practical social action (Bourdieu 1977:1–8, 1998:127–140). Thirdly, meanings vary in time, space, and in relation to social parameters such as gender, class, or status. Thus social actors and analysts (e.g. anthropologists and historians) alike are confronted by polysemia (Barthes 1967a; Riggins 1994). These challenges are compounded when we work in contexts where material remains from archaeological contexts are our primary source of insight into past life worlds. Careful attention to context can provide insight into meaningful relations among objects (e.g. Hodder 1991:143–146), but the attribution of specific meanings generally relies on the illustrative use of analogical models that merely project a select meaning from the present into the past (Stahl 2002:83).
More promisingly, the analytical strategies outlined above—biographical, depositional, and genealogical approaches—help us to develop robust insights into how objects were recontextualized as they moved across cultural contexts and to their effects on subsequent cultural practice. Insights into what constituted familiar practice can be discerned from temporally seriated studies of genealogically linked contexts (Stahl 2002). These material configurations can help us to discern what appear to be ‘customary paths’ (Appadurai 1986: 29) and material patterns that suggest diversions from them. In an approach that combined biographical and genealogical analyses of European Iron Age contexts, Dietler (1990a, 1998) discerned variation in the way that Roman drinking paraphernalia were adopted by Iron Age societies in relation to their previous practices. Contextual analyses of depositional practice can provide insight into whether new objects were the focus of novel practices or were incorporated in ways that suggest they substituted for familiar ones. In short, these strategies enable us to move beyond meaning-centred approaches to infer sequences of action (Joyce and Lopiparo 2005: 369) from artefacts, contexts, and depositional practices that provide the evidential basis for inferring compositional processes—the ‘bundle’ or ‘gathering’ that comprise culture-making in specific locales and temporal contexts. When viewed genealogically (Gosden 2005; Palem and All 2005), objects permit us to discern diversions from and continuities with previous practice (Stahl 2002), and thereby gain insight into the trajectories of culture-making practices as they unfolded in relation to global entanglements that reshaped the object worlds of recent centuries.

I turn now to explore how the analytical approaches described above and detailed elsewhere in this volume can help us to develop material histories of African global entanglements.

### Material Histories of West African Global Entanglements

West Africa’s long history of global connections extends from at least the first millennium AD when Saharan trade forged intercontinental links between sub-Saharan West Africa and the Mediterranean world. These networks were transformed after the fifteenth century by the emergence of Atlantic connections that profoundly altered West Africa’s political economic landscapes. Goods and people circulated widely through processes that refuged life in areas linked by the triangular trade that moved finished goods from Europe to Africa, the enslaved from Africa to the western hemisphere, and agricultural commodities from there to Europe. Through the course of the Atlantic trade, Europeans imported a variety of goods to West Africa, which were selectively adopted by West African peoples and put to both familiar and novel purposes. Formal colonization occurred late—in many areas not until the end of the nineteenth century—but resulted nonetheless in transformations of daily practices wrought by colonial policies. Recent archaeological research demonstrates the value of material sources in studying the processes through which West Africans negotiated the changing landscape of these global entanglements. This work exemplifies the analytical strategies outlined above and has resulted in material histories that enrich our appreciation of West African cultural dynamics in an era in which profound changes were accompanied by equally important continuities in material practice.

Akín Ogundiran’s (2002) study of how cowries were recontextualized in Yorubaland through the course of Atlantic trade exemplifies the analytical value of biographical and genealogical perspectives in developing material histories of West African global entanglements. During the early modern period, Europeans imported vast quantities of cowrie shells (Cypraea moneta) from the Indian Ocean to West Africa where they served as a form of currency in the context of the Atlantic slave trade (Hogendorn and Johnson 1986; Mitchell 2005: 318). Whereas attention has long focused on their use as a monetary instrument, Ogundiran analysed how cowries were used, and therefore valued, in relation to external practice and how these uses simultaneously built upon and transformed ritual practice and the materiality of social distinction. Whereas beads of various kinds had long circulated in West Africa and operated as objects of political capital in Yorubaland from the late first millennium AD, cowries were rare before the sixteenth century and used primarily in divination and proprietary practice. With increased circulation in the context of Atlantic trade, cowries were put to novel purposes. Informed by Igor Kopytoff’s (1986) biographical approach to material culture, Ogundiran explored the relationship between novel and extant practices by comparatively analysing the contexts and associations of beads and cowries to generate insight into their respective social valuation. He demonstrates how extant practices of social distinction involving beads provided a context for the reception of cowries, at the same time as their expanding circulation opened the way for transformations in ritual practice and wealth accumulation. The proliferating use of cowries in commoner shrines where elites used beads underscores the extent to which ‘cowries became the value register for harnessing the spiritual and temporal powers of successful men and women after the sixteenth century’ (Ogundiran 2002: 448).

Through the course of the Atlantic era, cowrie accumulation was democratized as cowries became more available to a wider array of people. At the same time, cowries became a powerful ritual mediator between temporal and spiritual forces, an insight that derives from ‘following the archaeological trail of cowries’ function in ritual contexts’ (Ogundiran 2002: 454).

By ‘following the object’ over time within a specific geographical context, Ogundiran convincingly illuminates the way that cowries were ‘bundled’ in relation to
deities and shrines and were associated with practices to ensure personal well-being. By focusing his study upon material things, he reveals both the dynamism of ritual practice and how novelty emerged from previous practice in a context of political economic transformation (Figure 5.1). In light of recent historical and anthropological literature that underscores the mediating role of ritual in West African negotiations of the predatory landscapes produced by the Atlantic slave trade (Brown 1996; Buun 1999; Ferme 2001: 37; Shaw 2002; Lovejoy and Richardson 2003: 105-106; Parker 2004, 2006), biographical and genealogical approaches attuned to the dynamics of shrines and ritual practice (Bell 1992) provide a promising avenue for investigating the dynamics of Atlantic era societies (Stahl 2008a), as illustrated by recent research in Ghana. Specifically, by illuminating the material practices through which people negotiated the changing circumstances of their daily lives, object-focused histories enrich our understanding of the processes through which the modern world system emerged.

The Banda area of west central Ghana has been the focus of long-term research on the effects of global entanglements on daily life (Stahl 2004). Archaeological excavations at a series of adjacent sites have sampled different moments in Bandana’s complex history of inter-regional connections, beginning with sites abandoned early in the period of formal colonial rule in the late nineteenth century, extending through the period of the Atlantic trade when Banda was subject to the expansionist state of Asante during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and into the period when Saharan connections gave way to early Atlantic trade between the fourteenth and mid-seventeenth centuries (Stahl 2007). A comparative analysis of depositional practice informed by biographical and genealogical approaches illuminates the dynamics of shrines and sacrificial practices in relation to these shifting inter-regional entanglements (Stahl 2008a).

Contemporary ritual practice in the Banda area includes the deposition of objects—many drawn from mundane contexts—in shrine bundles that are secreted in ceramic vessels drawn from the repertoire of mundane pottery (Cruz 2003: 147, 165, 184) (Figure 5.2). These shrines are the focal point for animal sacrifice—typically of domestic animals whose blood is disgorged on or near the shrines—but their meat is consumed elsewhere with socially valued body parts (e.g. hind limbs) the prerogative of particular elders or chiefs. Thus, the flow of sacrificed animals is one among a number of practices that produces social hierarchy (Stahl 2008a: 169-170).

Archaeological evidence suggests continuity of this practice from nineteenth-century contexts in which we have documented bundles of objects linked to production (iron hoes), locally produced ornaments (iron bangles) and imported objects (glass beads) in shrine compositions. But this practice is discontinuous with sixteenth- to seventeenth-century contexts of an earlier Atlantic exchange in which, to date, we have no evidence for ceramic shrine bundles. Rather, ritualized practice appears to have centred on configurations of animal bones (dogs, pythons) and grinding stones (Stahl 2008a: 180-181) (Figure 5.3). These ritualized clusters of dog mandibles in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century contexts prompted an investigation of spatial patterning among dog bones more generally. An analytical strategy of ‘following the bones’ through the varied depositional contexts from which dog bone parts were recovered provided insight into the biography of sacrificed animals (Stahl 2008a: 177-180), providing in turn insight into the materiality of social relations in this period. Mandibles of sacrificed dogs were bundled with other objects and incorporated into formalized shrines. Teeth were drilled and likely used as ornaments. Lower limb and cranial elements were deposited as part of generalized refuse on the site, while body and upper limb elements were more likely to be deposited in pits, in one instance in association with disarticulated human remains. The absence of upper limb limbs in archaeological context is not entirely accounted for by density mediated survivorship of bone, and their absence resonates with the common ethnographic practice of reserving upper limb limbs for chiefs or specific elders, underscoring the ways in which the flow of body parts produces social distinctions. Notably, our evidence suggests that the practice of dog sacrifice dropped from the practical repertoire of later settlements at which ceramic shrine bundles are documented while it

![Fig. 5.1 Imported beads acquired through Atlantic connections play a central role in ritual practice in the Banda area, Ghana. Curated by elder women and stored in large calabashes, they are used in female rites of passage. The manacles pictured here are also used in contemporary ritual practice (photo: Alex Caton 1995).](image)
Fig. 5.2 A household shrine in the Banda area, Ghana. A variety of objects are incorporated into bundles secreted within ceramic vessels that are a focal point 'or offerings. This shrine remains active despite 'abandonment' of the associated dwelling (photo: Ann Stahl 1986).

Fig. 5.3 A household shrine incorporating grinding stones, Sameed, Tongo-Tengzug, Ghana (photo: Tim Insoll; from Insoll 2006, figure 3).

persisted at others, suggesting multiple communities of practice and underscoring the complexity of material histories (Stahl 2008a: 185).

Whereas the above described examples illustrate the value of genealogical approaches for investigating the dynamics of ritualization, they hold promise in studying a wide array of practices, relating to craft production, subsistence, or settlement, in relation to the exigencies of the Atlantic and internal slave trades (Stahl 2008b). For example, de Barros (2001) has explored the effects of refuging on technological practice in the Bassar region of northern Togo. Under pressure of slaving, Bassar people were forced to retreat to refuge zones where their access to ceramic trade wares was diminished. De Barros argues that the disruption of trade by unrelenting slave raiding prompted experimentation, as potters pioneered new clay sources and worked out new fabric recipes. In another example, variable approaches to forming and shaping pottery among potters in southern Mali led Barbara Frank (1993) to suggest that the distinctive technological style of Kadiole potters—masked though it was by commonalities of vessel shape and decoration—was a legacy of their enslaved origins. She bases this insight on the conservatism of embodied practice in which habitual ways of moulding pots (e.g. through coiling or drawing and pulling) linked to motor habits acquired through a learning or apprenticeship process have been shown to be more resistant to change than other aspects of ceramic style (Gosselin 2000). Frank argues that these Kadiole women, 'forced by circumstance to lose their social identity, chose to keep their
skills as potters and to continue making pottery in the distinctive way their mothers taught them’ (Frank 1993: 396).

In light of historical evidence that enslaved craft specialists were often put to work producing goods for their masters, Frank’s approach holds promise for investigating the effects of incorporating slaves on an array of technological practices. Comparative genealogical study of operational sequences and technological styles (Gosselin 1998, 2000) may help us to discern instances in which captives maintained distinctive approaches to craft production despite superficial accommodation to the stylistic requirements of their masters.

Ogundiran’s (2002) study of cowrie shells, discussed above, demonstrates the analytical power of following objects in contexts of consumption, while Frank’s (1993) underscores the value of paying careful attention to practices of production. But expanding the lens of this strategy highlights the relational quality of production and consumption. Taking Mintz’s (1985) lead, extending the scope and scale of a biographical approach enhances our appreciation of how metropolitan production and non-metropolitan consumption conditioned one another. Following objects from their sources through contexts of consumption can help us to surmount the ‘archived grooves’ against which Stoler (2002: 865) warns. This is amply illustrated by studies that consider how consumption in the colonized regions conditioned metropolitan production.

Whereas the power of the ‘core’ to determine the path of the ‘periphery’ was assumed by earlier world systems theorists (see Ortner 1984 for a discussion), material histories of global entanglements underscore how consumer preferences in areas considered marginal to the emergence of global economies shaped metropolitan production (Inikori 2002). Traders ignorant of African tastes in textiles, beads, and metal products found themselves burdened with unsaleable goods and quickly adjusted their inventories (Richardson 1973; Steiner 1985; Alpern 1995). But only recently are we coming to appreciate the effects of these preferences on European production (e.g., Inikori 2002), Steiner (1985), for example, explored how the aesthetic and practical demands of West African consumers shaped nineteenth-century textile production in Manchester and Rouen. Similarly, Roberts (1996) demonstrated how West African demand fueled early nineteenth-century French industrialization of cloth production in Pondicherry, India. Here, so-called guine cloth was produced specifically for sale in Senegal where it was crucial to French efforts to extract Senegalese gum (from the southern margins of the Sahara), which was in turn crucial to the success of metropolitan textile printing in Europe. In East Africa the temporally and spatially varied demands of consumers forced traders and ultimately manufacturers to supply goods that were ‘calibrated for the market’ (Prestholdt 2004: 763). Nineteenth-century American merchants and manufacturers struggled to produce brass wire to conform to the width, coil, and weight desired by East Africans. Consumer preferences in beads were particularly specific, as were those for cloth, benefiting manufacturing concerns whose products were desired and creating a crisis for others (Prestholdt 2004: 769–773). At the same time, African preferences were reconfigured through a ‘dialectic that reshaped extra-African locales at the same time that foreign interests, ideas, and strategies were transforming East Africa’ (Prestholdt 2004: 780). In a contemporary example, Sylvanus adopts a biographical approach to the circulation of wax-print textiles and explores their shifting role in negotiations of African ‘authenticity’ both within and outside Africa today (Sylvanus 2007: 202). She explores the processes through which textiles manufactured first by Europeans and more recently by Chinese manufacturers for the African market, become African through localized consumption practices in parallel fashion to the way that imported Chinese porcelain became central to the perception of ‘Englishness’ from the eighteenth century. Once localized, wax prints in turn shape Western perceptions of ‘Africaness’ and circulate in Europe and North America as quintessential African products.

We understand less about how early modern metropolitan tastes and practices were reconstituted through these material entanglements. Though we know something of the uses to which imports, such as ivory, ostrich feathers, or furs, and commodities such as sugar, coffee, and tobacco were put, we have much to learn about the processes through which these commodities were recontextualized in the metropole and how, through their consumption, they were bound up in novel ‘bundlings’ that conditioned metropolitan life. Mintz’s (1985) exemplary study of the changing uses of sugar—as a medicinal and spice, as a luxury commodity, and later a staple that stretched the meagre resources of industrial workers—provides a model for the questions to be posed and the insights to be developed for other commodities. For example, it is apparent that consumption of ivory objects such as toilet sets, billiard balls, and pianos was intimately linked to the production of social distinction and gentility in the metropole (Burbank 1984). But we lack detailed contextual studies that explore the effects of ivory circulations on practices and configurations of daily life in the metropole. As in Mintz’s study of sugar, the growing metropolitan demand for products such as ivory should, of necessity, draw our attention yet again to the practices and implications of production in the ‘peripheries’ from which these products originated (see Stahl and Stahl 2004 for a discussion of how ivory production and consumption in Ghana may have been reconfigured in relation to metropolitan demand). But considerable research is required if we are to gain a detailed understanding of these material historical practices in metropolitan contexts (see Weatherill 1996 for a promising example).

As Mintz’s (1985) masterful study of sugar demonstrated, following objects from contexts of production to consumption can bring into focus cross-wise linkages, for example, between colonies (e.g. French colonies in India and Africa; Roberts 1996: 168) or between regions belonging to separate colonial spheres (see also Pels 1997: 175). Prestholdt’s (2004) analysis of the close ties between the interests of manufacturers and merchants in Salem, Massachusetts and East African traders
and consumers underscores how the circulations of goods and people forged connections that diverged from the imperial ‘grooves’ that often structure academic inquiry. His discussion of how Bombay manufacturers succeeded in cultivating nineteenth-century East African markets at the same time as Indian textile production was being undermined by English colonial policy similarly underscores how, by following material circulations, we deepen our understanding of the complex and profoundly relational quality of global entanglements. Importantly, this sort of material history informs on practices that diverged from the vertically encompassing rhetoric and practices of colonial rule, thereby deepening our understanding of the reach of colonial governmentalities (Scott 1995) and how people experienced the colonial state (cf. Ferguson and Gupta 2002).

Recent studies in the historical anthropology of colonialism have emphasized the relational processes through which technologies of state-craft and domination emerged (Stoler 1989; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 1997; Thomas 1994; Cohn 1996; Cooper and Stoler 1997; Dirk 2001). For example, practices of enumeration (e.g. census taking), surveillance (e.g. policing), hygiene (e.g. regulating sexual practice), and state ritual in the metropole were shaped by emergent practices in the colonies, which were in turn conditioned by debates over these practices in the metropole. Colonial forms of governmentalities (Foucault 1991; Scott 1995; Pels 1997) were pervasive, extending into the most intimate spheres of domestic life. Documentary sources have proved valuable in investigating the links between discourses regarding domesticity and good governance in the European metropole and the colonies. Chakrabarty (1994), for example, explored how notions of domesticity in Britain were conditioned by debates over domesticity in British India. But by exploring the material practices, such as the furnishing and physical configurations of British Indian households (Chattopadhyay 2002; see also Comaroff and Comaroff 1997), we deepen our understanding of how material practices of domesticity in colonial contexts—practices of ‘bundling’ that materially distinguished colonial citizenry—simultaneously conditioned metropolitan practice. As Chattopadhyay (2001) notes, retiring colonial officials returned to Britain with furnishings acquired during their period of service in India. These transnational material cultural flows contributed to what Breckenridge (1989: 956) termed the *Victorian ecumene* that mutually constituted ‘other’ and ‘us’. Metropolitan consumers envisioned distant colonies through the lens of their material products at the same time as these products were put to novel uses in the metropole. The preferences of colonial consumers (e.g. their taste in cloth) refigured metropolitan production and in turn metropolitan consumer preference. As such, systematic material histories of these circulations promise to yield rich insights into the relational production of metropoles and colonies.

Genealogically attuned material histories can provide valuable insight into the relationship between colonial policy and practice. It is widely recognized that colonial governmentalities involved efforts to materially ‘discipline’ colonial subjects (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997; Stoler and Cooper 1997). For example, nineteenth-century British discourses on village life both at home and abroad were simultaneously shaped by a nostalgia for rural life in industrializing Britain and a concern to reconfigure village life in the colonies (Dewey 1972; Berman 1988). Under an encompassing rubric of ‘sanitation’, wide-ranging reform policies shaped by British conceptualizations of order and accessibility (N. Thomas 1990: 158–166; Stahl 2001: 196–207) were pursued in both the ‘urban jungles’ of home and in the colonies (Dewey 1972: 235–244; also N. Thomas 1990: 157, 160; Comaroff and Comaroff 1997: 281). Consistent with broader British concerns with ‘improvement’ (Tarlow 2007; Hicks 2008), Gold Coast colonial officials pursued a village planning policy from the late nineteenth century in which villagers were ‘encouraged’ to establish new villages laid out on a grid pattern, with specially defined locations for burying the dead, disposing of refuse, and so on (Stahl 2001: 103–105; see also N. Thomas 1990: 164–166). British colonial administrators idealized a particular form of house and compound arrangement, with implications for the material configuration of domestic living. Though villagers differentially resisted, adapted, or accepted these colonial governmental initiatives, ‘the outcome was the modern “traditional” domain, which is as much a product of colonial history as the . . . [modern domain] to which it has become opposed’ (N. Thomas 1990: 151–152). There is considerable potential for archaeological investigation of these processes, to assess first the degree to which policies of village planning were put into practice, and to investigate in specific geographical and temporal contexts the effects on material, culture-making practices.

Genealogical studies of village layout, refuse disposal, and depositional practices provide a means to investigate the differential effects of these policies in relation to practice in both metropolitan and non-metropolitan contexts. Extending beyond the rather shallow histories of formal colonial engagement associated with the production of documentary sources, deeper genealogies of settlement practices promise to inform on the effects of predation and warfare on village configuration in Africa. Though the topic has not been systematically studied, available sources underscore the varied ways in which threats of predation conditioned settlement practices of West African peoples. Under threat of warfare and slavery from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, dispersed settlements gave way to nucleated villages in some areas (Mendonsa 2001: 39–44; Hawthorne 2003: 158), some of which were associated with fortress-like walls (Baum 1999: 53; Hawthorne 1999: 107; Habbell 2001: 31–32; Swane poel 2006: 273–276). Others responded to these threats by building expedient structures that could be easily abandoned (Gueye 2003: 54–56). Importantly, these insights draw attention to the dynamic material practices that disappear from view when we assume a stability of village life over time (cf. Berman 1988).

Banda Research Project investigations demonstrate the value of a direct historical approach in which successively earlier sites linked through commonalities in
material culture provide genealogical insight into settlement practices (Stahl 2002: 207–214). Following the imposition of colonial rule in 1896, the British pursued a relatively aggressive policy of ‘village planning’ in the Gold Coast hinterlands (e.g. Boyle 1988: 20–33), with the result that most contemporary Banda villages were established in the period c. 1906–1932. Features of these ‘new’ settlements appear consistent with the bureaucratic directives of British colonialism, in that villages were laid out on a grid pattern and houses consist of compounds with limited exterior access and rooms opening on to an interior kitchen courtyard. Walls were durable, of coursed earth (‘muu’) construction. The impression that British directives materially reconfigured Banda village life is strengthened—at least at first glance—by archaeological evidence from sites adjacent to the ‘new’ settlements that were abandoned in the process of village relocation. The houses at these late nineteenth-century sites are quite different in both layout and construction. Instead of the compounds valued by British officials, houses consisted of single or at most double room structures of wattle-and-daub construction. But a deeper genealogy of Banda settlement practice complicates the notion that the British successfully imposed their view of an ideal colonial settlement on Banda peoples. Archaeological investigations corroborate oral historical evidence that late nineteenth-century occupations at sites such as Makha Kattu were reoccupations of sites abandoned in the face of political economic upheaval earlier in that century, associated in part with the British abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade (Stahl 2001: 148–214). Warfare and intensified internal slavery ensued after 1867, as captives diverted from the external trade were used to produce and transport agricultural commodities that became the focus of global exchange (Grier 1981; Lovejoy 1983; Hauger 2000). The effects reverberated throughout the interior with significant implications for the character of daily life.

In Banda, the relatively long-lived settlements of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century were abandoned under pressure of warfare and not reoccupied until late in the nineteenth century, on the eve of British colonization. The small, ephemeral construction later nineteenth-century houses appear anomalous by comparison with early nineteenth-century building practices, an impression that is strengthened by what we know of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century practices documented at nearby sites. Before the nineteenth-century dislocations, Banda peoples constructed durable, coursed-earth houses comprised of adjoining rooms in an L-shaped configuration that suggests accretionary construction centered on an open kitchen courtyard. Viewed in the context of a longer time scale, the ‘new’ twentieth-century village looks neither totally new nor anomalous (Stahl 2001: 219–221). Though the grid layout of the village appears as a new element, continuity in the practices of construction and house layout underscore the complexity of material practice in a context of shifting political economic entanglements (Stahl 2001).

**Conclusions: Material Histories in the Present**

The empirically rich case studies highlighted above demonstrate the value of pursuing archaeological variants of what Geisheire (2001: 34–36) terms an ‘extended case method.’ Comparative analysis of the material practices of daily life (of food ways, dwelling, dress, production, and consumption) in temporally seriated contexts that cross the so-called contact/pre-contact or historic/prehistoric divides provide powerful insights into the material negotiations of colonization (Lightfoot 1995; Stahl 2001; Stillman 2005). But stand-alone culturally specific histories are insufficient for apprehending the saliency of global connections (Chakrabarty 2000: 43; Tsing 2005: 1–5). Rather, we need to enhance our ‘extended case studies’ with genealogical and biographical perspectives that follow circulations of people and objects if we are to appreciate how colonies and metropoles were relatedly produced through practices of production, consumption, and governmentality. To achieve this requires that we overcome disciplinary and geographic ‘grooves’ and instead develop co-ordinated research efforts to better apprehend how life worlds—past and present—were mutually reconfigured through global entanglements.

Material moments like the piecing together of the shattered Vaseline jar bring into view circulations that reshaped practices of production and consumption in the context of changing global entanglements. Analytically, we encourage us to look beyond the ‘archived grooves’ (Stoler 2002: 863) that highlight circulations within imperial boundaries (e.g. Constantine 1986) and draw attention to ones that transgressed those boundaries (Stoler 2002: 143). They bring into view the sinewy connections that linked the nineteenth-century life worlds of oil-field workers in Titusville, Pennsylvania and those of Banda villagers whose worlds were simultaneously transformed by their interaction. Apprehending their mutual constitution is enhanced by ‘reciprocal comparisons’ that explore how findings from ‘non-Western’ histories might illuminate ‘Western’ histories (Austin 2002; 3, 18). The material histories produced from such moments problematize what Fabian (1985) termed a ‘denial of coevalness’—that obscurate fiction that has long sustained a notion that Africa remains, or remained until recently, aside or apart from the modern world (Achebe 1978; Vaughan 2006; cf. Mitchell 2003). Sustained by forms of historicism that pressure ‘first in Europe, then elsewhere’ it is a fiction that made possible ‘completely internalist histories of Europe in which Europe was described as the site of the first occurrence of capitalism, modernity, or Enlightenment’ (Chakrabarty 2000: 7). In light of the reconfigured assumptions about materiality outlined above, material histories of global entanglements provide a platform for apprehending the profoundly reciprocal, entwined, and mutually
entangled quality of our life worlds that appear separate for their distinctive qualities. Contemplate the irony captured by our humble Vaseline jar: that an early twentieth-century Banda villager perhaps experimented with Vaseline as a substitute for the familiar and locally available shea butter that she used to protect her skin against the ravages of the dry season harmattan winds, while shea nuts are one of the only locally available resources that her children’s children can today sell for export to be used for shea butter-based cosmetics that are becoming routine components of Western beauty routines (Sylvanus 2007: 203). Material histories bring these processes into view in ways that standard historiographies do not. That these processes are ongoing is abundantly clear (Stoler 2000b), and it is in this regard that these histories are profoundly material to our worlds today.

CHAPTER 6

THE MATERIALS OF STS

JOHN LAW

INTRODUCTION

Whatever resists trials is real.

The verb ‘resist’ is not a privileged word. I use it to represent the whole collection of verbs and adjectives, tools and instruments, which together define the ways of being real. We could equally well say ‘curdle’, ‘fold’, ‘obscure’, ‘sharpen’, ‘slide’. There are dozens of alternatives.

(Latour 1988b: 138–159)

Matter matters. But how does this happen? This is the issue I explore in this chapter: how science, technology, and society (STS) imagines that matter matters.

Bruno Latour’s words above point to the shape of the argument. In STS, materiality is usually understood as relational effect. Something becomes material because it makes a difference, because somehow or other it is detectable. It depends, then, on a relation between that which is detected and that which does the detecting. Matter that does not make a difference does not matter. It is not matter since there is no relation. No relation of difference and detection. No relation at all.

Inevitably, there are complications. First, if matter is not given, then neither are relations. They too have to be done. For STS, materiality cannot be prised apart from the enactment of relations or, more generally, the practices that do these relations. This leads STS to make a particular methodological proposal: to
understand mattering of the material, you need to go and look at practices, and to see how they do whatever reals that those practices are doing, relationally. (Reals because different realities are being enacted in different practices.) And, a vitally important codex: you don’t take any thing for granted.

This leads to a second complication. I’ve just said: ‘you don’t take any thing for granted.’ This is because relations and the matters that they do may shift in shape. The implication is that if we assume too much about their form we may not be able to detect the character of that shape-shifting, and so will miss the ways in which reals get materialized. But there are two further issues here.

First, in practice, we always and necessarily take all sorts of things for granted. Indeed, more strongly, what we take for granted is mostly invisible, below the waterline. This is a general and inescapable predication. There is nothing to be done except to be aware of it. Secondly, we may want to say that practices are more or less patterned. If we say this then it follows that materials are also more or less patterned: for instance, culturally. They keep on being re-done.

Can we talk, then, of relative stability? Can we talk of relatively stable relations and relatively stable materials? STS researchers are divided on this question. Some say yes, that indeed matters and their practices are relatively stable. This means that modes of mattering extend through time and space. Others are more sceptical. In this second view mattering gets done and redone in ways that shift unpredictably.

The jury is out, and it is most unlikely that a verdict will be returned in the foreseeable future. The division of STS over this issue is my point of departure for this chapter. In exploring the materials of STS, I start with patterned practices and relative stability and show how STS imagines these. Here the story takes two forms—humanist and material semiotic. Then I move to talk about instabilities in practice, and consider the shape-shifting that might be implied in mobile mattering, and the politics that are implied in that mattering. Through my primary aim is to lay out the various STS approaches, I attend in particular to that of material semiotics and in particular to the possibilities and challenges opened up by the move to ontology implied in this approach.

**Social construction**

Imagine a material technology, perhaps one of those explored in STS. It might be an electricity generating plant (Hughes 1971, 1979), a bicycle (Bijker 1995), an electric vehicle (Callon 1980), a print technology (Cockburn 1983, 1990), a missile guidance system (MacKenzie 1990), or a sailing ship (Law 1986a). (For further reading on the study of material technologies in STS, see the edited collections by Bijker et al. 1987; Bijker and Law 1992; MacKenzie and Wajcman 1999.) Then ask, Why does this technology take the form that it does? Common sense suggests an answer. Its form reflects its environment, together with the task for which it is intended. So, the shape of a sailing ship reflects the winds and the sea, the raw materials from which it is built, its environment. It reflects its social environment too—for instance, the skills available in the culture. And then, again socially, it reflects the task for which it is built. Cargo-carrying, fighting, or conspicuous consumption—the reason for which it is constructed—is reflected in the built artefact or assemblage. Note that environment and task overlap. Vessels that need to sail close to the shore—or close to the wind—are shaped in one way, Those that don’t, in another. And both task and environment may change too. Wood becomes scarcer, and steam power gets invented, so the sailing ship gets consigned to history, and is replaced by the steam packet.

The discipline of STS works through case studies. Some of these describe the social shaping of technologies. How did the bicycle come to take the form that it now does? The answer is that it was shaped by economic and social interests, the cultural skills available, and, of course, by the laws of momentum. STS scholar Wiebe Bijker (1995) tells us that the penny-farthing was an excellent bicycle for young men who wanted to display their masculinity, but it wasn’t very stable. That, of course, was precisely the point: in the culture of the time in western Europe, stability and virtuoso displays of masculinity were taken to be mutually exclusive. At the same time, this meant that it wasn’t suitable for anyone else—and especially for women, constrained in the Victorian period by particular and gendered ideas about modesty. More culture. The regular safety bike with smaller wheels of the same size was much more stable and much more ‘suitable’ (especially in the version without the crossbar). It therefore had a much larger potential buying public, and was much more profitable. The consequence was that it replaced the penny-farthing. Here’s the argument: the bike was shaped (and shaped quite literally) by a combination of economic and social interests and cultural capacities—not to forget the laws of momentum.

This is the social shaping of technology at work. Materials—technologies—are moulded by the intersection of natural and social factors. They are shaped. There isn’t much difference between this and what is often called the social construction of technology. Both phrases are current in STS. If there is a distinction, perhaps it is this. To talk of social shaping draws our attention to the larger factors (economic conditions, cultural assumptions) that pattern materials. By contrast, to talk of social construction differentially draws our attention to the people doing the patterned, the act of creating and building, and their uses of culture. But the difference is a nuance and in practice in STS, the terms are used more or less interchangeably.

There is a large body of excellent STS work on the social shaping or the social construction of technologies. It tells us a great deal about particular kinds of materials, and the forms that they take. It is a basic resource in any study of
material culture. But its explanatory form runs us into the second complication that I mentioned above. This approach, the idea of the social construction of technology (often known by the acronym SCOT) is certainly relational, but it also makes strong assumptions about the overall shape or pattern taken by those relations. I’ll mention three. First, it makes assumptions about people, endowing them with special and creative powers: for instance, the ability to acquire culturally transmitted skills, to design, and to use tools. Secondly, it assumes that the natural world is pretty much a given: that, for instance, the laws of momentum are unlikely to change. And thirdly, it assumes that the social world has a particular, somewhat stable, albeit possibly ultimately revisable, shape too. Ideas about safety, modesty, and the economic interests of bicycle manufacturers, these provide a third part of the explanatory backcloth for the form taken by materials. In SCOT, it is the relations between the three that give shape to the matter at hand: whether the safety bicycle or the sailing ship.

These assumptions reflect a common understanding of the character of proper social science explanation. In part, this is a commitment to theoretical humanism. It is assumed that people are special because they are active agents. They are taken, for instance, to be language users, or they are endowed, as I noted above, with the capacity to use tools and acquire and deploy cultural skills. Probably they count as moral beings too, and appropriately exercise ethical and political judgements. At the same time, as I also mentioned, it is taken for granted that the natural world is relatively stable, and that, at least for the purposes of understanding the shaping of materials, so too is the social and cultural context. This is a metaphysics that generates a particular and highly productive understanding of materiality. In practice, in this way of thinking, the material world acquires its significance in relation to human activity and human purposes or needs. It may do so in the form of an environmental resource where materiality is treated as some kind of standing reserve. Alternatively, materials may be understood as objects that have been given a shape like a tool, something that is of functional use such as a penny-farthing or a safety bicycle, or perhaps to be appreciated aesthetically such as an art object.

Materials, then, express, _inter alia_, sets of cultural practices and prejudices. If we stick with the safety bicycle, these have, for instance, to do with metallurgy and metal working, the organization of labour, and the proper role of women in society. This is material culture at work in the vision offered by SCOT. It is embedded in patterns of working and living, and in the objects that are implicated in such patterns.

Much of STS works this way, but parts do not. ‘Material semiotics’—a blanket term that I use in this chapter to cover a range of approaches from so-called actor-network theory (ANT) (Callon 1986a; Law 1992; Latour 1999b), through parts of feminist technoscience studies (Haraway 1989, 1991a, 1991b; Banac 1999), to work in governmentality influenced by the work of Michel Foucault (Barry 2001)—takes none of these categories for granted. In principle in these non-humanist approaches, everything—people, the natural world, and social and cultural context—are all shaped in relations. So, what happens to materiality if we think this way?

---

**The Laboratory According to the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge**

Imagine a laboratory, perhaps one of those that have been studied by STS. It might be an historically important laboratory from the English seventeenth century (Shapin and Schaffer 1985), or SLAC (Trawick 1988), the Stanford Linear Accelerator, the Salk Laboratory in San Diego (Latour and Woolgar 1986), CERN near Geneva (Kneer-Cetina 1999), or a small laboratory in a provincial British university (Law 1988c). Here is a core question for STS: Why and how do the ideas created in such laboratories take the form that they do?

There are different answers to this question. But if you track and trace the day-to-day work in a scientific laboratory you find a lot of practical work. People are handling objects, instruments, animals, cell lines, and detectors. That’s what an experiment is: a whole set of bits and pieces assembled together. You find a series of instruments, from rulers, through scanning electron microscopes, to PCR machines and neutrino detectors. There are lots of texts and inscriptions too. A scientist’s desk is covered with notes, papers, books, reports, graphs, photographs, and arrays of figures, electronic or otherwise. And then there is talk. There is gossip, of course, but also science talk, though the two may be impossible to disentangle. So, there are rumours about new experimental results, guesses about what a rival laboratory is up to, and reports of seminar presentations.

STS grew up in debate with philosophers. While epistemologists usually argue that scientific method is philosophically special (though they disagree about how), STS ethnographers and sociologically inclined historians of science are more impressed by the messy mundanity of laboratories. In the STS way of thinking, laboratory work (or science practice in general) often looks more like cookery than cognition. Or it looks like industry, since some of it is being done in warehouse-sized buildings or tunnels in the ground filled with fancy machinery. Then again, for STS the conduct of science is also a matter of more or less large-scale organization—both experimental and social (assuming that it is possible to separate the two in the first place). So what should be made of this?

The sociology of scientific knowledge (SSK), in an approach that owes much to the writing of historian of science, Thomas Kuhn (1970), influential argues that the ideas generated in laboratories reflect the interaction between the natural,
social, and cultural environments on the one hand, and the task of solving scientific and technical problems on the other (e.g., Collins 1975; Barnes 1977). It argues that in the laboratory work is messy, practical, and materially heterogeneous. In this way of thinking knowledge may be theoretical, but it is also embodied in skills and ways of seeing, and in the relations between people, machines, and experimental objects. It is shaped or constructed by human beings that deploy cultural and material tools to solve puzzles. Their solutions thus reflect their creativity, those tools, and a relatively stable natural, social, and cultural environment. The argument is similar to that of SCOT—though SSK preceded SCOT, and is much more controversial since it undermines the epistemological version of the scientific method.

THE LABORATORY ACCORDING TO MATERIAL SEMIOTICS

Material semiotics attends to much the same messy laboratory realities. It starts, like SSK, with a story about the assembly of heterogeneous materials. Then it notes, again like SSK, that this is often, indeed perhaps usually, a process beset by uncertainty. In most labs and most of the time, at the experimental cutting edge entropy is constantly threatening. Experiments don’t work. The signal to noise ratio is too low, a vital input isn’t available, the software has crashed, or the experimental rats are anomalous. Then it says (and again this is close to SSK) that laboratory science is all about ordering (in) an uncertain environment. It is about lining materials up for long enough to get them to hold in a particular way. It is about creating assemblages that will hold sufficiently well to allow an experiment to take place. But at this point it starts to part company from SSK.

First, and absolutely crucially for any understanding of materiality, it argues that scientific experimenting is about lining heterogeneous components up for long enough to enact materials that can be detected, inscribed, and transcribed. No e that: to enact materials. This claim of radical relationality represents a substantial break from both SSK and common sense. To repeat, it is being argued that whatever emerges from an experiment is an effect of the relations that are assembled and held together in it. Natural, social, and human materials and realities, all of these are understood as effects rather than causes. This means that there are no essential or foundational differences between such realities. The differences that there are (and these are often deep) are taken to be consequences, not causes. It also means that they cannot be treated as explanatory resources. The natural, the social, and the human do not explain anything. Rather, it is they that are in need of explanation (Latour 2005: 11ff).

The STS laboratory ethnographers arrived at this radical position by looking at the messy laboratory practices that generate representations through more or less post-structuralist lenses. What they found is that at the start of a complex and cutting edge experiment, representations, realities, and contexts are usually almost indistinguishable (see Latour and Woolgar 1986; Law 2004). Talk is likely to combine ideas about natural realities, or hints from data sources, with gossip about the reliability of the experimental set-up, the sources of materials, or training of the technicians or the track record of the scientists doing the work. Here methodological concerns, ideas about the natural world and assessments of the social are freely mixed up in the network of relations. The plausibility of a possible empirical result may be inextricably linked to the reputation of a laboratory. Different versions of the real with very short lives are being circulated.

Most putative versions of natural reality never make it past this stage of visibly messy heterogeneity. A few, however, start to become more robust. Doubts about the context in which they were generated, worries about noise in the detectors, or the reliability and integrity of the scientists involved, start to disappear. More data appear because the experimental rig holds together. Then data resonate with a theoretical hunch, or rumours about findings coming from another laboratory. And as this goes on and the network of relations reconfigures itself, particular representations of the real start to lose their qualifications. And if the process goes all the way, then those representations of reality are purified of all their qualifications. They come to stand for the messy and heterogeneous social-cum-natural-cum-organizational-cum-methodological process out of which they emerged with all the built-in qualifications and doubts. The relations are reconfigured so they come to stand, instead, for a reality that by virtue of this process, has become a feature of the natural world. But only afterwards. Only at the end of the process.

So material semiotics counter-intuitively assumes that laboratory realities do not exist outside the relations that produce them. But this leads to a second point, for as Mol (2002) has shown, it also distances itself from SSK by insisting that realities and knowledges are not made but done. Thus in SSK it is usually said that knowledge is ‘constructed’. The SSK assumption, perhaps more often tacit than explicit, is that once construction has taken place, ‘closure’ is achieved and something scientific has been made that achieves a status somewhat like that of the bicycle (see Collins 1975). Once the bits and pieces have been successfully assembled and bolted together, it is taken to have a form and, everything else being equal, it will continue to hold that form. But material semiotics does not share this assumption. Instead it assumes that knowledge and realities are being continuously enacted or performed. This talk of performance does not lead us to Goffman (1971), for he assumes that people are resourceful actors on a stage with more or less fixed
props. Instead it takes us to the kind of non-humanist and post-structuralist world imagined by Michel Foucault or Judith Butler in which human subjects are being enacted and given form in relational practices just as much as anything else (e.g. Foucault 1977a; Butler 1990). And if the practices stop? Then so do the realities they are performing. For realities only exist in the practices that materialize them. Which leads to a third important consequence. If the realities materialized by science are practice-dependent, then it also follows that they cannot be universal. This means that science and its realities govern, but only in very specific practices and locations (Latom and Woolgar 1986; Latour 1988a, 1988b; Law and Mol 2001). And this means in turn that it becomes important to ask geographical questions about where the practices materializing realities are located, how they link together, and how materializations circulate—if indeed they do.

All of this is counter-intuitive and controversial, but it is also STS’s most distinctive general insight into the character of materiality. And it is what Latour was pointing to in the epigram with which I started this chapter. In saying that the object is to explore ‘the whole collection of verbs and adjectives, tools and instruments, which together define the ways of being real,’ he is pointing to the relational character of materialization, and the way in which this is embedded in practices. In short, in its material semiotic versions, STS is precisely about the processes of realizing or mattering. And it is telling us that such processes of realizing or mattering do not simply apply at the cutting edge of science—or indeed in the context of technological innovation. Rather it is suggesting that they are ubiquitous. Materializing, inseparable from practices as it is, is being done everywhere.

If this basic insight is correct then it has profound implications for locations and topics that are far removed from experimental science.

**Patterning**

Now we reach a location of debate within material semiotics. This has to do with the patterning of practices. For unless we want to say that practices and the realities that they materialize are utterly idiosyncratic, then we need to attend to how—and the extent to which—those patterns repeat themselves. And even if we ignore sociological theories of practice (on the grounds that they are socially reductionist and therefore don’t consider how it is that the social is being redrawn along with all the other forms of the real), material semiotics has generated at least four different ways of thinking about such patterning (Callon and Latour 1981; Latour 2005a).

First, it has been argued that once practices with specific patterns become established they tend to reproduce themselves and spread. Philosopher and historian of science Ian Hacking catches what is at stake here in the title of his article on ‘the self-vindicating of the laboratory sciences’ (Hacking 1990). His assumption is that the different practices in the laboratory sciences are so interlinked and mutually dependent that practices and realities at one site are likely to be picked up and incorporated in experimental practice at other sites. In the abstract alternative realities and forms of experimental practice are perfectly conceivable, but in practice they are unlikely. Analogous arguments about what one might think of as the path dependency of scientific practice and its materializations are explored by sociologist of science Andrew Pickering (1993, 1995). Particular versions of the real, particular experimental practices, and particular theories and findings emerge from periodic moments of upheaval in the natural sciences, and then they tend, at least for a time, to become stable. It isn’t worthwhile—and probably not possible—to articulate alternative sets of practices.

Secondly, and only somewhat differently, it has been argued that practices may be extended but only with considerable effort. So, for instance, Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, while arguing like Pickering that it is too expensive, literally and metaphorically, to undermine the interrelated scientific and instrumental practices of materialization, also explore how particular realities and representations may move from site to site in specific material forms that don’t get distorted, but rather hold their shape (Latour calls these ‘immutable mobiles’). Immutable mobiles may include texts, for instance in the guise of scientific papers or reports, and people such as scientists and technicians who may have particular skills. They also, and possibly in the long run most importantly, include instruments, devices, and technologies that also hold their structure as they are shipped from one location to another. The suggestion is that these get embedded in, and tend to have patterning effects on, other sites of practice (see Latour and Woolgar 1986; Pickering 1995). Indeed, Latour has argued that ‘technology is society made durable’ (Latour 1991). But the argument is a bit trickier—or at least it cannot be applied mechanically. Immutable mobiles may get distorted or lost along the way, and whether they will work, or work in the way that was originally intended when they arrive at their destination, is always an open question. For the argument about immutable mobiles to work, the new site of practice has to reflect the pattern of relations. So, for instance, as Latour shows, to Pasteurize France it was first necessary to reshape French farms as mini-laboratories. It was only then that the vaccines took the proper material form of protecting cattle from disease (Latour 1988a).

The notion of the network is a crucial metaphor in this second version of relational mattering. Scientific practices, and the realities that they enact, only exist within specific sites and networks of relations, and, crucially, it takes a lot of effort to organize these. Latour catches what is at stake when he writes:
We say that the laws of Newton may be found in Gabon and that this is quite remarkable since that is a long way from England. But I have seen Lepelti camemberts in the supermarkets of California. This is also quite remarkable, since Liseux is a long way from Los Angeles. Either there are two miracles that have to be admired together in the same way, or there are none.

Latour (1988b: 227)

The miracle is the creation of networks that carry camemberts or the laws of Newton without melting or otherwise distorting their relational structure.

A third way of thinking about shared patterning attends to styles of materialization rather than to specific objects. So, for instance, it is well known that in his writing (surely interpretable as a particular version of material semiotics!) Michel Foucault is preoccupied with the character of epochal epistemes. In particular, he is interested in the way in which what he calls the modern episteme percolated in and through the practices of the social, starting in the late eighteenth century. However, what is the modern episteme? One answer is that it is a particular strategy, often and perhaps usually implicit, that orders the materially heterogeneous relations of the social to generate particular and distinctive patterns of subjectivities and objectivities. Foucault’s interest in the processes of decompositions, recompositions, normalization, and self-monitoring that enact modern subjectivities is well known. However, the modern episteme can also be seen as a strategy that tends to generate specific versions of materiality. For, like subjects, objects may also be decomposed, recomposed, and normalized. The rationalization of the subjectivities implied in military drill is only possible if the devices caught up in these practices are also rationalized and standardized. In the absence of a standardized weapon—or industrial machinery—drilling human beings to turn them into docile subjects makes little sense. Perhaps, indeed, it is not even possible. This, then, is a strategy or a style that tends to pattern matter. It is a mode of mattering. And it may be that rationalization is not the only style of materialization enacted in the modern episteme. Another that might fit with Foucault’s account would be the technologies of surveillance that precede and accompany reflexive self-monitoring. And yet another might be the materializations appropriate to the pleasures embedded in the modern self.

Foucault cannot be claimed for STS, but his work is important because it suggests the possible importance of styles in the relational or ontological patterning of practices. Unsurprisingly, some material-semiotic authors have followed his lead. In particular, however, they have suggested that multiple styles or modes of mattering may be practised alongside—or in interaction with—one another (see, for instance, Latour and Venn 2002 on regimes of enunciation, and Boltanski and Thévenot 2006 on uèzes or commonwealths). To take one example, my own work on the ordering processes in a large scientific laboratory argued that managers, management systems, meetings, technologies, and texts all performed a series of different but recurrent patterns or styles (Law 1994). One of these was ‘administrative’. It

enacted rational-legal versions of due process in a Weberian mode. This pattern could be found in the laboratory accounting system, in paperwork, such as agendas and minutes, and in versions of management subjectivity that emphasized the importance of rule following. But there was another quite different ‘entrepreneurial’ mode of ordering. This was carried in a new management accounting system, in publicity materials, and in the organizational insistence on personal responsibility and delivery. The relations between these were contingent. Sometimes they clashed, and on other occasions, they dovetailed together. Both, for instance, were materialized in the design of large-scale scientific instruments that needed to enact both the health and safety regulations (a version of administrative patterning) and the needs of possible customers (which reflected a version of entrepreneurial patterning). In these instruments, then, mattering was being done in at least two modes simultaneously—and there was no longer a single ordering episteme, but instead there were several interacting with one another.

But there is a fourth way of thinking of the relations between practices. Instead of looking for common patterns, it is also possible to look for differences and disjunctions. Perhaps Law’s emphasis on different modes of ordering or matters starts to do this. But the argument can be made much more emphatically.

**Ontological difference**

Imagine a set of practices, perhaps one of those that have been studied by STS. They might have to do with an aircraft (Law 2002), or Alzheimer’s disease (Moser 2008), or, say, lower limb atherosclerosis (Mol 2002). In this last instance, to take an example, a textbook on atherosclerosis may tell us that changes in the blood, perhaps associated with diet and lack of exercise, lead to disease in the form of atherosclerotic plaques. Then it may tell us that this builds up on the interior walls of blood vessels. If this plaque builds up beyond a certain level then it begins to restrict the flow of blood through the vessel to the extremities of the body—for instance, to the calves and feet. The result is pain on walking because the muscles need more oxygen than they are getting if they are exercised.

Pause for a moment. Lower limb atherosclerosis is a nasty and not uncommon condition. But is it one thing or is it many? The textbook says that it is a single condition. But what happens if we attend to practice rather than to theory? The answer turns out to be surprising. This is because what we discover is a high degree of variability: mattering is being done in a large number of different ways. So, for instance, in the doctor’s surgery the patient’s presenting symptom for the lower limb atherosclerosis is likely to be pain on walking. This is called claudication. In
the radiography department the condition appears in the form of an angiogram—that is, as an X-ray that is taken to reveal the position and size of the blood vessels after a radio-opaque dye has been injected into the patient’s circulatory system. In an angiogram the narrowing in the patterns that appear on the plate are taken to show stenoses in the blood vessels. In the ultrasound department, the disease appears as an inscription that is assumed to represent the speed of the blood flow. Here the idea is that blood passes more quickly through the diseased and, therefore, constricted parts of a vessel. Blood flow is measured with a device that emits an ultrasound signal and is moved over the gel-filled skin of the patient following the line of the suspect vessel. The frequency of the signal reflected back into the probe indicates the speed at which the blood is flowing. And then, on the operating table, with the leg opened up and the vessel revealed in a surgical intervention, the disease appears in the form of a thick white paste that may be scraped from the vessel’s interior.

So here is the paradox. If we attend strictly to practice, then lower limb atherosclerosis is being materialized in four or five quite different ways, even though everyone also assumes they are dealing with a single body. The issue comes to a head in the practice of the case conference where the professionals meet to decide what to do about a particular patient. Sometimes everything fits together. The different materializations and their practices are successfully co-ordinated to form a consistent whole. Sometimes, then, the textbook account works. But often this is not the case. Perhaps the Doppler investigation doesn’t fit with the angiography, or the patient doesn’t present claudication even though the angiogram shows precious little blood flow to the leg. This is a major practical problem for healthcare professionals, but is also crucial if we want to understand the character of mattering in practice. The conclusion is that if we consistently attend to practice and how materials are done, then mattering is multiple. Mol (2002) indexes this by talking, oxymoronically, of ‘the body multiple’.

ONTOMETRY, COMPLEXITY, AND POLITICS

What happens if we take this argument seriously? The first consequence is that mattering becomes complex. A second is that we need to try to find new ways of thinking that complexity. Here the question becomes: How do the multiple realities hold together? But a third is that it opens a new space for what might be called an ontological politics.

Mol explores the relations between practices and materializations empirically. Sometimes practices are consistent (the nicely running medical case conference about a patient, the character of her condition, and its treatment, where everything fits together). Sometimes they contradict one another (the case conference with contraindications). Sometimes practices and their realities are separate from one another (epidemiology indicates that physiotherapy may be effective in treating lower limb atherosclerosis, but this reality does not appear at the case conference). Sometimes realities that don’t cohere too well are added together in a form of syncretism (a single score to test a disease is derived from quite different components). Sometimes one practice is included in another (clinical diagnosis indirectly includes epidemiological realities because medical practitioners look for likely conditions, but epidemiological realities conversely include practitioners’ clinical observations). But if mattering is empirically complex, then this also suggests a novel way of thinking about politics. Thus if third-wave feminism told us that biology is not destiny, then material semiotics is now telling us that reality is not destiny. This is because if we consistently attend to practices, then we start to discover alternative forms of materialization. And if we discover alternative forms of materialization, then it is not surprising that some may be better than others from one point of view or another. And it is this that is the space of an ontological politics. The promise of such a politics is being hidden in a widespread assumption of ontological consistency. Most of the time, in theory, the differences between practices are being effaced—which means that matter is being made singular. It is being turned into destiny by sleight of hand. And the textbook is just one example.

So what is the scope of an ontological politics? How might this be done? There can be no general rules. If the general strategy is to bust ontological monoply, or the appearance of such a monopoly, there are many plausible tactics.

One is to introduce subversive tropes that bend material-semiotic matterings in novel ways. Technoscience writer Donna Haraway works in this way when she mobilizes the radical, anti-racist, feminist trope of the cyborg to interfere with its militaristic and masculinist predecessor project (Haraway 1995a). More recently, she does something similar by re-imagining human–animal relations in her notion of ‘companion species’—those species such as dogs that have grown up with humans, interact with the latter, but are nevertheless at the same time always also Other (Haraway 2003, 2008).

Postcolonial STS theorist Helen Verran works, somewhat differently, to soften and multiply reality-enacting practices in her work on encounters between white Australians and Aborigines (Verran 1998; cf. Verran 2001). What is at issue here are the materializations of land in a context of legal disputes about its ownership and use. Is land a fixed reality in a Euclidean space–time box (which is how white people tend to experience and enact it in their practices)? Or is it rather something that is done, and done again, and then done again, within practices and rituals (which would be closer to aboriginal experience)? Verran intervenes to try to undo what she thinks of as the ‘hardening of the categories’ in white practices and its imagination. Land, she suggests, is being done in legal practices just as much as in
Aboriginal rituals. As a part of this she explores the multiple enactments that are taken for granted in Aboriginal cosmology, which treats the world as a continuing performative expression of practice (cf. Law 2004).

A second strategy is to discover multiplicity within practices that appear to be producing ontological monopoly. This is the tactic adopted by Mol in her work on lower limb atherosclerosis. She might have mounted arguments against the domination of biomedicine and the patriarchal character of the medical profession. No doubt, many such complaints would be justified. But what she actually did was to generate differences and so potential tensions between the practices of different professionals and the materialities that they enact. This is an ontological politics because it makes it possible to propose, for instance, that in particular circumstances, the realities enacted in walking therapy may be better than those of surgery (Mol 1999).

A third related tactic is to discover practices that are materializing alternative but marginalized realities. So, for instance, biomedical enactments of Alzheimer’s disease are common and powerful. But there are also alternative non-biomedical enactments of dementia. STS scholar Ingemann Moser describes the Marte Meo method, which is a technique that analyses patterns of interactions between carers and patients to detect and enact otherwise unrecognized competences in the latter. Moser writes that: ‘[Alzheimer’s] is object and relation, and the object is made in and through relations. When the nurses work on the relations of Alzheimer’s, they also transform the object. For instance, if they slow down verbal communications and interaction, the person with dementia may be able to act and participate competently’ (Moser 2008: 104).

These are practices that materialize dementia quite differently. Moser is showing that biomedical Alzheimer’s is not destiny. There are plausible alternatives that matter too.

A fourth option is to attend more carefully to the character of circulation—and to what it is that circulates. How seriously, for instance, should we take Latour’s suggestion that technoscientific mattering is co-ordinated in the circulation of immutable mobiles (Latour 1987: 227ff)? That practices are tightly aligned when objects that hold their shape circulate from site to site? The answer is: not necessarily seriously at all. For instance, Marianne de Laet and Annemarie Mol (2000) describe an object that changes its shape as it moves: a water pump that is widely distributed in Zimbabwe. Manufactured in Harare, it is found in many villages. It is mechanically simple and contextually undemanding since it needs a borehole and a concrete platform that are supposedly created by the village collective—but not much else. And the pump itself is flexible, so that when it breaks down it is usually repaired with whatever comes to hand—tree branches or pieces of worn-out tyres. And sometimes it isn’t a collective that looks after the pump, but just a few families. Even its manufacturer is agreeably surprised by its degree of flexibility.

The lesson is this. Rather than being immutable, the pump is better understood as a mutable mobile, a fluid object. It is being materialized in subtly and not so subtly different practices in different locations. And this has a knock-on political consequence, because what we might think of as the ‘watering of Zimbabwe’ is quite unlike the ‘Pasteurization of France’ described by Latour. Pasteur set up a rigid network that turned every farm into a laboratory, and located the Institut Pasteur as the central node, the obligatory point of passage. The manufacturer in Harare produces the pump, but once this is done, it drops out of the picture. The fluid materializations of the pump in practice also mean that the centre no longer matters—or, better, that it isn’t a centre at all. Explorations of the fluidity of the pump point to the possibility that modes of materialization may be understood topologically as expressions of different spatial systems with different versions of what is to count as a stable object (see Law and Mol 2001; Law and Singleton 2003).

Conclusions

In this chapter I have explored how STS imagines materials by considering two major story lines. Both take it for granted that objects are relational effects.

The first, SCOT, whose intellectual origins and inspiration are historical and sociological, explores the cultural, social, and human shaping of materiality. It explains why materials take the form that they do by drawing on assumptions about the relative stability of the social, economic, and natural environments on the one hand, and the creative character of human action on the other. Its dominant metaphors talk of construction and the making of materials.

The second, material semiotics, which draws on post-structuralism and post-humanism, treats everything—materials, but also culture, social arrangements, and human subjectivities—as the relationally variable effects of practices. Its metaphors emphasize the enactment and doing of materials or objects. Using verbs rather than nouns, and exploring how it is that processes work, it talks more of mattering or materializing, than of matter or materiality. Since different practices materialize in different ways, its understanding of materiality is complex. How do materials hold together, if they do? This is its analytical and empirical question.

If these two approaches differ analytically, they also differ politically. SCOT identifies social agendas, for instance to do with gender, class, or ethnicity, which are built into or shape materials. It has often been effectively used in the service of social critique. Material semiotics may also explore how social agendas are enacted in practices, but it is distinctive for its sensitivity to the political potential of multiplicity. Its ontological politics talks up and explores different matterings, or
modes of mattering. This is a politically performative intervention since it erodes the monopolistic assumption that reality is destiny. It is doubly performative when it is deployed to interfere in particular locations and practices to strengthen or weaken specific materializations or forms of reality.

What we learn in all this work is that in a dozen subtle ways, mattering is simultaneously about the real, what there is in the world, and about the good and the bad, about values and politics. It is sometimes possible and temporarily desirable to tease these apart and talk, for instance, of matters of fact on the one hand, and matters of concern on the other. But they can only be held apart for so long and in particular and specific relations. Again, there can be no general rule. However, such is the complexity and the multiplicity of mattering that located interventions may hold most analytical and political promise. For Helen Verran the questions are: How to go on together? How to go on well? The answers, always enacted anew, will depend on time and place and practice.

PART II

MATERIAL PRACTICES