The Malice of Inanimate Objects: Material Agency

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Abstract and Keywords

The concept of ‘material agency’ and the attendant concept of materiality has been widely adopted in the recent literature in archaeology and anthropology, yet its meaning has been widely misunderstood. Typical responses treat the concept as a step too far or as employed mainly for its shock value rather than for any higher intellectual purpose. This article argues that the perceived problems with the concept of material agency in archaeology and anthropology derive from similarly narrow conceptions. The article begins by outlining the semiotic view of material culture that emerged during the 1970s and 1980s, and how recent critiques of this view have prompted scholars to address notions of materiality and material agency. The article then summarizes some of the long history of the notion of material agency, in a range of disciplines from economics to anthropology. The article addresses concepts of material agency in the work of scholars from Karl Marx and Marshall McLuhan to Anthony Giddens and Alfred Gell. It then discusses differing ontologies of agency, including animism and fetishism, in which material agency plays a key role.

Keywords: material agency, concept of materiality, archaeology, anthropology, material culture, ontology, agency

That is the only way to get a kettle to boil up the river. If it sees that you are waiting for it and are anxious, it will never even sing. You have to go away and begin your meal, as if you were not going to have any tea at all. You must not even look round at it. Then you will soon hear it sputtering away, mad to be made into tea.

(p. 334) It is a good plan, too, if you are in a great hurry, to talk very loudly to each other about how you don’t need any tea, and are not going to have any. You get near the kettle, so that it can overhear you and then you shout out…Upon which the kettle boils over, and puts the stove out.

Jerome K. Jerome, Three Men in a Boat (2004 [1889]: 81)

This excerpt comes from a classic of late Victorian literature. Who has not at one time or another adopted a similar attitude towards an object, be it car, computer, or kettle? The capriciousness of things, and their propensity to break down, or misbehave, just when they are most needed makes the idea of their agency a crucial component of the comedy and tragedy of human life. Nonetheless, the very idea of imputing an ‘inanimate’ object with animacy also appears in many ways absurd, and explains this passage’s inclusion in Jerome’s classic of comedy literature. Is the concept of material agency therefore ridiculous, or do our folk propensities and real-life engagements with material culture hint at some underlying reality?

The concept of ‘material agency’, and the attendant concept of materiality, has been widely adopted in the recent literature in archaeology and anthropology, yet its meaning has been widely misunderstood. Typical responses treat the concept as a step too far (Ingold 2007a) or as employed mainly for its shock value rather than for any higher intellectual purpose (Robb 2004: 131). Accounts such as Jerome’s description of ‘the contrariness of tea-
kettles’ offer a very narrow and particular view of the material agency of objects acting with their own volition, often like cranky people or children. This chapter argues that the perceived problems with the concept of material agency in archaeology and anthropology derive from similarly narrow conceptions. We want to present a more general view of the significance of the idea of material agency for archaeology, anthropology, and related disciplines, suggesting that the absurdity of imputing agency to inanimate objects is an unhelpful product of the Western opposition between ‘objects’ and ‘subjects’. We argue, with Christopher Pinney (2005), for the need to move beyond this dichotomy.

The chapter begins by outlining the semiotic view of material culture that emerged during the 1970s and 1980s, and how recent critiques of this view have prompted scholars to address notions of materiality and material agency. We then summarize some of the long history of the notion of material agency, in a range of disciplines from economics to anthropology. The chapter addresses concepts of material agency in the work of scholars from Karl Marx and Marshall McLuhan to Anthony Giddens and Alfred Gell. It then discusses differing ontologies of agency, including animism and fetishism, in which material agency plays a key role. Beyond locating material agency within these specific ontological frameworks, we will then expand our discussion to examine the role the concept has played in science studies and actor-network theory, with particular reference to the work of Bruno Latour and Michel Callon. Having examined the way in which similar concepts have emerged across a range of disciplines, through two case studies we shall consider what consequences the notion of material agency has for contemporary archaeological and anthropological understandings of material culture.

**Meaning, Material Culture, and the Model of the Text**

Recent suggestions in archaeology and anthropology that artefacts ‘have agency’ have not been made within an academic vacuum, but rather must be understood as very much the product of, or perhaps more appropriately the response to, a particular academic climate. This climate may be described as a heavily linguistic-oriented one. It is one that came to dominate the social sciences and humanities in the last half of the twentieth century (Rorty 1967; Foucault 1972; Derrida 1978; Rabinow and Sullivan 1979). It owes much to the insights of a Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, whose posthumously published teaching notes on the linguistic sign system became highly influential across the humanities and social sciences during the 1980s (de Saussure 1959). Fundamental to de Saussure’s argument was the idea that language could serve as a model for understanding other sign systems—this opened the way for a wide variety of phenomena to eventually be demonstrated to be language-like in diverse ways. De Saussure’s model also stressed the relational rather than referential properties of language. Thus relationships—or webs of meaning—have become key: words and concepts have been understood not relative to things in the world, but rather through comparison with other words and concepts. Meaning is constructed rather than given. This led to an interest in representation, its power to shape action and thought, and the role of language and discourse in shaping subjectivity, social institutions, and politics (Seidman 1994). Language was increasingly understood less as a neutral medium for representing and understanding the world, and more as a key way through which the world is constructed. Other ‘language-like’ systems are recognized to share the same partiality.

The ‘linguistic turn’ fundamentally affected anthropological and archaeological thinking about material culture. In archaeology, it led to an interest in meaning and, in particular, the representational qualities of material culture. The proposition that ‘material culture is like a text’ (Hodder 1986: 126) became a battle cry that rallied archaeologist Ian Hodder and many of the Cambridge group of students of the late 1970s and early 1980s to develop an entirely new, language-inspired theoretical paradigm for archaeology which came to be known as ‘post-processual archaeology’ (Hodder 1982a, 1982b, 1985; Miller and Tilley 1984; Shanks and Tilley 1 (p. 336) 987b). It argued that material culture needed to be understood as ‘meaningful’ and ‘symbolic’ (Hodder 1992: 12, 14–15). The textual character of things is clearly highlighted in the concept of ‘contextual archaeology’. Hodder defines a context as the ‘totality of the relevant environment’ of an artefact (Hodder 1992: 14). The concept is developed by Hodder, as he emphasizes the fact that the Latin derivation of context is contextere, meaning to weave, join together, and connect (Hodder 1986: 122); from this Hodder develops the idea that in order to understand the meaning of artefacts, a contextual approach is required that involves placing artefacts ‘with their texts, con-text’ (Hodder 1986: 128). Adopting Paul Ricoeur’s (1981) point that human action is best understood in relation to text as opposed to language (Hodder 1986: 155; Moore 1990), he argues that the meaning of archaeological contexts are to be interpreted by examining relations of similarity and difference in the material record.
This new movement was highly critical of the then dominant archaeological models for understanding material culture, which it derided as ‘functionalist’, ‘adaptive’, and ‘scientistic’ (Hodder 1992: 1–7). It critiqued previous attempts to link material culture to social aspects of society, asserting that they portrayed material culture as passive and simply reflective of social realities. Material culture, the proponents of the new movement asserted, needed rather to be recognized as active in constituting those very realities (Hodder 1982b, 1986, 1992; Shanks and Tilley 1987b; Tilley 1989). It was argued that material culture was a symbolic medium for social practice that was used at times habitually to reproduce social and symbolic structures, and at other times strategically to challenge them. Thus, Hodder studied the domestic material culture of the Ilchamus tribe of Kenya, and argued that women decorated calabashes in order to draw attention to their own important roles in child-rearing and looking after milk (a symbolically important resource) and to challenge their status within a patriarchal society (Hodder 1986). Material culture was strategically used by the Ilchamus during the course of social practice, and did not simply and passively reflect social realities.

Post-processual approaches to material culture have subsequently come to dominate British and some European archaeological traditions and to be increasingly influential in the United States and world-wide. European socio-cultural anthropology, largely through a separate developmental trajectory, also came to take an interest in objects, and their meanings and active employment in human societies (Appadurai 1986a; Lemonnier 1992; Miller 1995a, 1998c; Pfaffenberger 1988, 1992), especially under the rubric of ‘material culture studies’.

Increasingly, however, such work has come in for heavy critique as it has been recognized that such approaches often reinforce the distinctions of ideal and material, and of subject and object, that they claim to break down, and in many ways portray material culture in as passive a way as ever. The focus on the representational and meaningful properties of material culture, while a positive and fruitful development in many ways, has also led to an ‘etherealisation’ (p. 337) (Jackson 1996) of material culture. Things have been robbed of their solidarity, their physicality, and their ability to change our lives. Instead, they have often become mere consequences of our thoughts, actions, and beliefs. They have become things—and things more surface than solid at that—to which our concepts can be attached. Archaeologist Paul Graves-Brown has used the apt analogy of the stage to refer to this view: ‘it is as if the material world were merely a stage set in which the props could be made to assume any value chosen by the actors’ (Graves-Brown 2000a: 3). Bjørnar Olsen has undertaken even stronger critique, and called specifically for attention to material agency: ‘[W]e need to relearn to ascribe...agency...to many more agents than the human subject, as well as to ballast epistemology—ontology—with a new and unknown actor; the silent thing’ (Olsen 2003: 88). A range of archaeologists and anthropologists has begun to call for changes in how we conceive of material culture (see Schiffer 1999; Graves-Brown 2000a; Ingold 2000a; Boivin 2004b; Knappett 2005; Jones 2007; Boivin 2008). Many call for a new emphasis on ‘materiality’, which in many (but not all) formulations means a focus on the physical properties of things and their role in determining the impacts of material objects and environments on society. These calls to focus upon the material dimension of artefacts have emerged as archaeologists and anthropologists attempt to readress the fundamental dichotony that exists in the term ‘material culture’.

Material Agency in Historical Perspective

The view that things have power over humans and their lives is not of course new. Humans have not been unaware of the transformational properties of the things they make and use and, indeed, such beliefs are, and likely long have been, central to many traditional cosmologies. Thirty years ago political scientist Langdon Winner (1977) traced some of the history of notions of material agency in Western culture and academics. He focused on technology in particular, noting that the theme of technology as both out of control and dangerous has a long history in Western culture. Literary creations, such as Mary Shelley’s nineteenth-century Frankenstein, offer a classic example of such perspectives, illustrating the pervasive notion that human-made machines could develop autonomy and wreak havoc on society. Later in the nineteenth century, the anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan (1877) developed such folk ideas about technology into a general model of society in which technological changes were viewed as the force behind social progress. His writings were subsequently drawn upon by one of the most notable commentators on the relationship between technology and society, Karl Marx.

Marx’s views on the role of technology have been much debated. His historical materialist model can be seen as an argument for the pivotal role of technology in social change. Arguing against the philosophical and
political idealism of his time (Winner 1977: 77; W. H. Shaw 1979: 172), Marx asserted that the material conditions of life and their production through human activity were defining features of human life. Productive activity gave form to experience, and created what Marx referred to as a definitive ‘mode of life’ (Marx and Engels 1977: 42). This view of human beings, life, and activity gave shape to Marx’s understanding of how material production—particularly technological production—shapes social, political, and ideological life (Winner 1977: 78). In The Critique of Political Economy, Marx stated his general historical principle that ‘the mode of production of material life determines the general character of the social, political and spiritual processes of life’ (Marx 1964: 51).

Subsequently, he divided the mode of production into the forces of production and the relations of production. Marx saw productive forces, understood as human labour power together with the means of production (instruments or technology plus raw materials), as critical in shaping the economic structure of society, and hence the nature of society more generally. Thus, a change in the productive forces would bring about a change in society:

Social relations are closely bound up with productive forces. In acquiring new productive forces men change their mode of production; and in changing their mode of production, in changing the way of earning their living, they change all their social relations. The hand-mill gives you the society with the feudal lord; the steam mill, society with the industrial capitalist.

Marx (1979: 109)

Socio-cultural anthropologists like Julian Steward and Leslie White subsequently drew inspiration from the ideas of both Morgan and Marx to argue for social evolutionary models of society in which material environments and technologies played a significant role in shaping society. The 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s saw a florescence of technology- and ecology-oriented studies in both anthropology and other disciplines (Boivin 2008). For example, the early cultural theorist Marshall McLuhan’s work on technology argued that ‘the medium is the message’ (1964: 1). McLuhan thus sought to emphasize the pivotal role that technological media play in shaping understanding and social relationships—the idea that the medium in which a message is sent is more important than its content. Accordingly, and in a characteristic style, McLuhan asserted that ‘[i]n terms of the way the machine altered our relations to one another and to ourselves, it mattered not in the least whether it turned out cornflakes or Cadillacs’ (1964: 7–8). McLuhan’s Canadian colleague Harold Innis was similarly interested in the transformative effect of communicative media. He argued that particular media favoured the growth of specific kinds of interests and institutions at the expense of others (Innis 1950, 1951). In this view certain types of media, for example, fostered the growth of empires, encouraged a concern with expansion, and favoured the emergence of secular political authority.

(p. 339) By the end of the 1970s, however, such perspectives started to come under attack, with many calling attention to their often strongly deterministic character. Critiques against determinism, combined with the pull of the linguistic turn, led many scholars in the social sciences and humanities to abandon materialist approaches in favour of idealist models.

Socio-cultural anthropologists interested in the influence of the environment upon human society developed schools of symbolic ecology, historical ecology, and political ecology (Biersack 1999). These drew attention to the social and cultural construction of landscapes and the role of the power relations in structuring human usage of the environment, among other issues. Across the social sciences, Marxists, meanwhile, have since the 1970s been anxious to avoid the ‘spectre of technological determinism’ (W. H. Shaw 1979: 155), and to demonstrate that Marx was not, as has often been suggested, a technological determinist (MacKenzie 1984; Bimber 1990). The idea that the base (the economy or technology) should determine the superstructure is often dismissed as ‘vulgar Marxism’, and many Marxists argue for more interaction between base and superstructure, or indeed the relative autonomy of the superstructure. Meanwhile, studies of technology in fields such as history and anthropology have focused on the ways in which technology and technological practices are socially embedded. These studies stress the important place of social and cultural values in technological narratives, and place agency firmly with human beings: ‘[A]gency…is deeply embedded in the larger social structure and culture—so deeply, indeed, as to divest technology of its presumed power as an independent agent initiating change’ (Marx and Smith 1994: xiv).

In seeking to demonstrate the interpenetration of technology with social forms and systems of meaning, many anthropologists approached technology as socially constructed (Pfaffenberger 1988: 244). In such social
constructionist studies, technology was not understood as an independent variable but, in the words of socio-cultural anthropologist Bryan Paffenberger, as ‘humanised nature’: ‘To say that technology is humanised nature is to insist that it is a fundamentally social phenomenon: it is a social construction of the nature around us and within us, and once achieved, it expresses an embedded social vision’ (Paffenberger 1988: 244). This interest in the adoption, use, and transformation of technology as structured by socio-cultural variables was also visible in archaeology. Thus, Heather Lechtman and Bill Sillar examined the various social and cultural factors that led some pre-Columbian technologies to be widely adopted in the Andes, while others, such as metal-working (which had a substantial impact in European and Near Eastern prehistoric societies) remained rather peripheral (Lechtman 1984; Sillar 1996). Sillar emphasized the philosophical aspects of technology, which not only imbue techniques with culturally specific meanings, but also influence what people will consider an ‘appropriate’ technology to apply to a particular problem.

But as we have seen, many now argue that the pendulum has swung too far in the other direction. In particular, critics of technologically deterministic readings of (p. 340) Marx have been taken to task for producing readings of Marx that while less contentious and more palatable are also less accurate and less interesting (W. H. Shaw 1979; Winner 1986). Philosopher William Shaw, for example, has argued that

to concede, for instance, that the notion of a determining factor in history is incoherent and then to argue that Marx must have meant something else in view is to kill Marx with kindness. Marx was surely concerned to say more than simply that technological factors ought not to be ignored by historians, or that everything is related to everything.

W. H. Shaw (1979: 155–156)

Langdon Winner (1977) has argued against whitewashing Marx, and stressed the need for social scientists to continue to grapple with material culture and technology on their own terms, instead of subsuming them into social frameworks of analysis. Winner and others acknowledge the insights of social constructivist approaches, but decry the way they have drawn scholars away from any interest in or examination of material agency.

Examining Agency

But if material artefacts can ‘have’ agency, then how, if at all, is such agency different from that of humans? Socio-cultural anthropologist Alfred Gell explored this issue in his final work, Art and Agency: an anthropological theory (1998), in which he focused in particular on the relationships between social agency and art objects. Gell boldly argued that art objects should be considered as the ‘indexes’ of social agency. In taking this line, Gell was in many ways following a venerable tradition in anthropology, one that treats things as in some senses person-like, by positioning material objects in the web of social relations normally associated with the person. Such an approach originated with the classic analysis of the gift by Marcel Mauss (1954). This Maussian approach is also evident in the work of anthropologists such as Marilyn Strathern and Roy Wagner, and in particular their work on ‘distributed personhood’ (Gell 1998: 96–153) in Melanesia (Strathern 1988; Wagner 1991).

Art and Agency was specifically concerned to move the anthropology of art beyond a narrow focus on symbolism and meaning. Gell emphasized that art should be seen as part of a system of action ‘intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it’ (1998: 6). The effects of objects such as artworks, he argued, needed to be accommodated in any discussion of social agency. At points, he generalized this argument to suggest that many other objects, whether a gun, a car, or even a doll, could ‘act’ as a social agent (Gell 1998: 17–19). However, for Gell art objects and artefacts were not ‘primary’ but rather, as he (p. 341) described them, ‘secondary’ agents (Gell 1998: 20–21). In other words, objects can act only as the media of human social agency, which could be distributed through them. For Gell, the facts of intention and will were critical to the definition of real agency, and since material objects obviously lack such characteristics, they were automatically exempted from the status of real agents. Indeed Gell’s discussion of the agency of artefacts makes it clear that he actually saw objects as mere passive media for the distribution of human-derived agency. His approach is ‘preoccupied with the practical mediatory role of art objects in the social process’ (1998: 6, our emphasis). While Gell’s concerns in Art and Agency were of a particular sort, to which his notion of agency was well suited, nevertheless this materialist sympathizer (Gell 1995, 1996a, 1999) shied away from the notion that things themselves could have agency. We shall take up the question of the distribution of agency and the notion of ‘secondary agency’ below when we
examine the contribution of science studies to the debate.

In considering what kind of agency things might have, it is perhaps useful to go back to one of the key discussions of human social agency: Anthony Giddens' formulation of agency and structure under his rubric ‘structuration’. The aim of Giddens' sociological model was to overcome the discrepancy between a functionalist approach to society rooted in objectivism on the one hand, and a structuralist account of mind rooted in the pre-eminence of society and subjectivism on the other. Structuration accordingly attempted to provide a coherent approach to society that simultaneously took account of its functional and material conditions alongside its subjective elements. Through structuration, Giddens aimed to overcome the antinomy between the material world and the social world. The following statement, propounded in the early pages of one of his most influential works *The Constitution of Society*, is critical to both our understanding of agency, and material agency: ‘In and through their activities agents reproduce the conditions that make these activities possible’ (Giddens 1984: 2).

In this view, since the material conditions that enable action are reproduced through subjective social actions, these conditions are then inextricably bound up with the ability to act. Agency can only take place within the framework of material conditions, within the framework of material agencies. Moreover, as Giddens goes on to state, the reflexive monitoring of action by social agents (Giddens 1984: 5) means that those material conditions are much more than a framework: they are also shaped by human action.

Giddens (1984: 174) understood these material conditions as a ‘material constraint’, arguing that the material world both enables action and acts as a constraint to bodily action. In many senses, here he echoed previous Marxist approaches to the material world (Rowlands 2005). Here we part company with Giddens. We believe he is correct to stress the close relationship between the bodily action of social agents and the physical conditions within which they act. We believe, however, that an approach that promotes the view that people and things exist in a dialectical relationship of mutual self-construction and mutual dependency (which Giddens called structuration, but see also Miller 1987, 2005a: 9) simply serves to re-cast the opposition between subject and object afresh. An acceptance of the concept of agency requires an acceptance of the concept of material agency. One cannot be treated as self-evident, while the other is treated as absurd or bizarre (pace Robb 2004). Such a position simply re-enacts the distinction between animate human subjects that exercise agency and inert material objects that are acted upon, a position that no amount of arguments for ‘primary agency’ exercised by humans and ‘secondary agency’ exercised by things (Gell 1998; Gosden 2001; Robb 2004) can hope to overcome.

**Animism and Fetishism: Material Agency and Ontology**

In considering alternative ways in which the agency of material things, apart from the constraints upon human social action described by Giddens, might be understood, it is useful to turn to the various broader modes of ‘nature–culture’ relationships that have been described by anthropologists. Eduardo Viveiros De Castro distinguishes among three modes of the objectification of nature that have been discussed by anthropologists: *totemism* (in which the differences among natural species are used as models for social distinctions); *animism* (in which the ‘elementary categories structuring social life’ serve to organize the relations between humans and natural species, defining a continuity between the natural and the cultural); and *naturalism* (typified by Western viewpoints that suppose an oppositional duality between nature and culture) (Viveiros De Castro 1998: 473). To this list we would add *fetishism*, which, like animism, uses social categories as an organizational template for the relations among people, presenting a continuity between the natural and the cultural. However, as we shall see, fetishism suggests a quite different ability to act, and intentionality, on the part of the natural world. In the interests of space, our discussion will focus upon animism and fetishism.

**Animism**

Ethnographic concepts of animism and fetishism are similar in many ways. Historically, both have been the subject of derogatory comment by Western observers of non-Western societies. The belief in the agency of things seen to be ‘self-evidently’ inanimate, such as trees or rocks, was considered to be a category error to which ‘primitive’ societies were especially prone (Spyer 1998; Latour 1999c; Harvey 2005).

In *Animism: respecting the living world*, comparative theologian Graham Harvey has brilliantly interrogated this perspective, arguing for a respectful revival of the concept of animism—what he calls a ‘new’ animism (Harvey...
2005: 28). Harvey engages with indigenous and environmental spiritualities in which people celebrate human relationships with significant other-than-human beings. He discusses a variety of religious cultures, including Maori, Ojibwe, Aboriginal Australian, and eco-Pagan, and highlights the diverse ways of being animist. Importantly, taking a theological standpoint on animism, he shifts the argument away from discussions of the epistemological foundations of animism and argues instead for the need to take a respectful stance on animist cultures.

Indeed, in discussing issues such as eco-Paganism and environmentalism, he suggests that a respectful and attentive awareness of the other non-human persons we share our world with in fact offers a potentially important way of addressing some of the ecological problems faced by humankind as a whole. In this, he echoes similar post-humanist concerns related to the role and treatment of companion species in human societies (see Haraway 2008). Haraway is concerned to emphasize the ‘entanglements of beings in technoculture that work through reciprocal inductions to shape companion species’ (Haraway 2008: 281). Her particular focus is dogs and cats as companion species, although other animals, such as chickens, sheep, wolves, and wombats are also discussed as components in our shared world. The arguments of Harvey and Haraway shift us from an epistemic to an ontological focus. Rather than treating animism as a peculiar world view held by specific cultures, animist relationships are held to relate to a quality of engagement between people and the natural world, an engagement that involves interaction between human and other-than-human persons.

Harvey’s arguments demonstrate that taking an animist viewpoint—treating the world as if it were composed of human beings and other-than-human beings and acting accordingly—enables us to overcome many of the inherent problems that arise from the dualisms of modernity, nature and culture, object and subject. For Harvey, rather than being a primitive concept, animism offers an important analytical step forward in re-imagining the links between people and the material and animal worlds (Harvey 2005: 195–212). Animism provides, then, a participatory framework for understanding the place of human beings in the world (by participation is meant the close engagement between humans and other-than-human beings). The participatory nature of Harvey’s analysis is something we wish to underline as we go on to consider the type of interaction between things and people known as fetishism, and the ways in which people and things interact as collectives.

(p. 344) Fetishism

As anthropologist Patricia Spyer (1998) notes, the concept of fetishism is peculiar to a particular time and place, although it is a concept with a life and history of its own (Pietz 1985, 1987). Fetishism, as a Western idea, is a hybrid concept that emerged from colonial relations on the Gold Coast of Africa in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The word feitiço (and the later derivation fettiso) was coined by Portuguese and Dutch merchant-adventurers to describe both a class of objects and an attitude towards them (Pietz 1985, 1987). Whereas animism posits a life force that may occasionally be materialized, for fetishists life force is always materialized. Fetishes are generally materialized as free-standing wooden figurines or as wooden or metal amulets worn around the neck. Fetishes may take many material forms, in fact, almost anything could pass as a fetish object: trees, rocks, bones, animals. The important point, however, is that fetishism was an idea, an idea produced by the interaction between West Africans and Europeans to describe the spiritual relationship of West Africans with the inanimate world. The term ‘fetish’ and the concept associated with it are not indigenous, but were coined to describe an indigenous relationship with objects that Europeans found peculiar or bizarre (cf. Pels this volume, Chapter 27).

For Europeans, fetishism was felt to describe a confusion of the religious and the economic, a denial of the proper boundaries between things, between animate subjects and inanimate objects (Spery 1998: 2). In this sense the fetish, and the concept of fetishism (the belief in the fetish), were treated in a derogatory fashion. How is it reasonable, or possible even, to treat material objects as social actors in the same sense as people? Fetishism offered a violation of the naturalism of European cosmologies in which things and people were categorically distinct.

As noted above, there is an important relationship between animism and fetishism; however, there is also an important distinction between the terms. Anthropologist Peter Pels (1998: 94) is quite clear in distinguishing fetishism from animism. Whereas animist belief proposes that spirit resides in matter, fetishism posits an assumption of the spirit of matter: objects have spirit and are able to act of their own volition to attract or repel people. Thus, fetishes concentrate or localize human experience and belief in the power of objects:
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The fetish is always a meaningful fixation of a singular event; it is above all a ‘historical’ object, the enduring form and force of a singular event. This object is ‘territorialized’ in material space (an earthly matrix), whether in the form of a geographical locality, a marked site on the surface of the human body, or a medium of inscription or configuration defined by some portable or wearable thing.

Pietz (1985: 12)

The notion of the fetish highlights some fundamental anthropological problems in dealing with objects. Anthropology and archaeology operate in a conceptual universe where objects have no independent life. If they are made to act or are (p. 345) imputed with meaning, it is assumed that this is through human intentionality; things have no meaning unless meaning is endowed upon them by human agency. But are we always detached from objects in this way? Do we act upon them in a disinterested fashion as and when we choose, or are objects attached to us and to such are they components of what makes us act? These are some of the questions we shall pursue below in our discussion of the treatment of material agency in science studies and actor-network theory, especially in the work of Bruno Latour and Michel Callon.

Lessons From Science Studies and Actor-Network Theory

The issue of attachment is central to the re-conceptualization of the relationships between things and people in science studies (Jones 2002a, 2007: 34–35; Olsen 2003). Rather than assuming that the world can be purified into distinct categories named ‘object’ and ‘subject’ (see Latour 1993a), or getting caught up in questions of intentionality in relation to object agency (Gell 1998), sociologists of science proceed from the assumption that objects and subjects, people and things are co-mingled and relationally attached (Callon 1991; Latour 1999c). Non-human things have often been assumed to be passive, and therefore possible to bracket off, but as Michel Callon and John Law assert: ‘Yes, there are differences between conversations, texts, techniques and bodies. Of course. But why should we start out by assuming that some of these have no active role to play in social dynamics?’ (1997: 166). It is therefore not the presence but rather the forms of the attachment between humans and things that requires explanation. Callon (1991: 152–153) describes the processes of social and technical networks as ‘heterogeneous’. He begins by describing the way in which people and things are constituted and define one another through their relationships. For Callon, things (whether texts, technical artefacts or abstract values or concepts, such as money or law) act as intermediaries for human action. It is the articulations between actors and their intermediaries that compose networks. Such articulations between people and things effectively ‘translate’ action and thereby co-ordinate it. These ideas form the core of what has become known as actor-network theory.

Latour (1999b, 2007) has developed Callon’s argument further, by noting the way in which people and things are effectively enfolded into one another. Sociology, Latour argues, too often defines the actions of a person as constituted in material or technical form, producing an understanding of a person’s actions and intentions as embedded in the technical artefact. In the sociological process, and more widely (p. 346) in modernist thought, the presence of the person is effectively forgotten as it is subsumed with, and ‘blackboxed’ within, the artefact. Blackboxing is here used as a description of the way in which an efficiently running machine focuses attention only on its input and output, not on its technical complexity. Technical complexity provided by the person is then hidden within the smooth working of the machine (Latour 1999b: 304). Through the process of ‘blackboxing’, the relationship between the person and thing is rendered opaque. However, the constant processes of folding together people and things in networks of activity means that action is distributed between people and things. Attempts to ascribe primary agency to people or secondary agency to things is therefore an impossibility. But to the sociologist, despite the imbrication of people and things, things and people appear distinct. Because agency cannot be directly observed in things, it is assumed to be absent.

The significance of actor-network theory to questions of material agency relates to its critique of the assumption of a pure and essential distinction between things and people, and its replacement with the recognition that people and things are forever entangled with each other. For Latour, this leads to the proposition that we live in collectives of people and things rather than in societies composed only of people (Latour 1999b: 193, 2005a), and that this has always been the case (cf. Gamble 2007). Labour's theoretical model expands the concept of material agency from an absurd notion among a philosophical mindset that assumes the world to be divided into two opposing
categories: objects and subjects, or things and people. Moreover, as we have seen, concepts of the agency of things are prevalent in the ontologies and cosmologies of the kind of non-Western or premodern peoples routinely studied by archaeologists and anthropologists, through ideas of animism, totemism, or the fetish.

The question of material agency and its relationship to human agency is also addressed by other science studies scholars, such as Karen Barad (2007). Barad’s major area of study is quantum physics, and she is particularly interested in describing the relationship between observed phenomena and observer. Barad argues that materiality is not a given entity, rather it is performed into being. In her account discursive practices are not solely human-based activities but ‘specific material (re)configurations of the world through which boundaries, properties, and meanings are differentially enacted’ (Barad 2007: 183). Therefore, matter does not have a fixed essence; instead, matter is a substance in its intra-active becoming. Matter is reconceptualized in this account; matter is not a thing, but a doing. Barad’s argument is especially important as it addresses the mutual relationship between agency and material agency, and helps us overcome the problem of intentionality. Intentionality does not simply lie on the side of the equation marked ‘human agency’, instead intentionality is a property of the relationship between people and things: ‘discursive practices and material phenomena do not stand in a relationship of externality to each other; the material and discursive are mutually implicated in the dynamics of intra-activity’ (Barad 2007: 184).

(p. 347) **The Problem with ‘Material Culture’**

How then, in practice, might we apply ideas of material agency in anthropology and archaeology, which move beyond models of constraint (Giddens) or intentionality (Gell)? Many of the epistemological concerns we have raised with the concept of material agency are neatly encapsulated in that divisive anthropological term ‘material culture’.

Like material agency, ‘material culture’ sutures two opposing ends of the epistemological pole, i.e. the material and the cultural. These two terms, rather than being perfectly combined, sit somewhat uncomfortably side by side. Anthropologist Tim Ingold (2000a: 340) points out that there is a sense in which the ‘culture’ in material culture studies ‘is conceived to hover over the material world but not to permeate it’. Meanings then attach to things and impose themselves or are laid upon things, but are presumed to be distinct from things (Henare et al. 2007a: 3). The rise of British anthropological material culture studies, as it emerged from archaeology in the 1980s, tends to perpetuate these distinctions. For example, in his analysis of the significance of Coca-Cola within Trinidadian practices of consumption, Danny Miller discusses Coke as a meta-symbol (Miller 1998a). In discussing the significance of this sweet black drink among African communities in Trinidad, he opposes the consumption of this drink to a comparable sweet red drink traditionally consumed by Indian Trinidadians. The two drinks are discussed as objectifications used to create projects of value for ethnic communities (Miller 1998a). Miller’s account gives a detailed picture of the symbolic uses of these drinks, but gives us little flavour of the material properties of the drinks and their sensual appreciation by Trinidadians. A similar approach to material culture is adopted by Chris Tilley in his analysis of Wala canoes in Malekula, Vanuatu (Tilley 1999: 102–132). Tilley employs the concept of material metaphor to discuss the significance of canoes, however—as with Miller’s case-study discussed above—the emphasis is placed upon the metaphorical (read symbolic) significance of canoes, rather than their material components; while the materials used to build canoes are discussed, it is the symbolic potential of these materials that is emphasized. Arguably, these approaches are immanent in Danny Miller’s early account of objectification in *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (Miller 1987), a text we take to be foundational to the prevailing UCL School of Material Culture.

As anthropologists Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell observe, the task of this modernist vision of anthropology is the elucidation of social or cultural contexts, as these are used to make sense of social life. An important outcome of this is that the social system becomes the object of knowledge, and ‘things’ merely serve to illustrate the social system (Henare et al. 2007a: 3). Similar problems with the study of artefacts affect archaeological thinking. This is especially true of recent British traditions of interpretative archaeology (Tilley 1993; Thomas 2000d), which likewise assume a distinction between object and subject, material and culture, person and things, which must be overcome by the analyst. This thinking derives from the particular reception of structuralist, post-structuralist, and hermeneutic thinking in archaeology (Olsen 1990, 2006). One recent example of such an approach might be found in Chris Tilley’s *Materiality of Stone* (2004). Here, a nuanced evaluation of the phenomenological experience of encountering megaliths, monuments, and rock art in a variety of European
contexts is overlaid with a hermeneutic approach that is focused on meaning. For example, the analysis of the differing qualities of the limestone used to construct the megalithic monuments of Neolithic temples is understood according to the symbolic potentials of these different materials; honeycombed rock formations are therefore symbolically related to honey. In a further symbolic transformation, honey is related to ochre (Tilley 2004: 140–141). Despite the attempt to overcome the nature/culture distinctions that post-processual archaeology recognized as problematic, the adoption of these twin approaches to material and ideas renders the opposition intact.

At the other end of the philosophical spectrum, the focus upon ‘material engagement’ in those traditions of archaeology influenced by cognitive science often similarly serves to re-enact the distinction between things and people, mind and body, material and cultural, as the concept of engagement still requires there to be two opposing terms to be engaged (Renfrew 2004, 2007; Ingold 2007a; Jones 2007). The presence of these distinctions in contemporary archaeology has been recognized by Julian Thomas (2004) in his analysis of the modernist conditions of archaeology. Thomas argues that despite the prevailing problems with these distinctions, they were also historically a necessary condition for the formation of archaeology as an object of study: ‘As part of the structure of modern thought, archaeology seeks clarity, objectivity, and a reduction to law-like or mathematical terms. It demands precision, unambiguous resolution, universality and the transcendence of local conditions. All of this is achieved by declaring the world to be object-like and free of meaning’ (Thomas 2004: 247). Thomas’ response is to call for the reinserterion of questions of ethics, rhetoric and social relations into a meaningful world, and for the integration of meaning with materiality. It is to this issue that we will now turn.

Some recent approaches within socio-cultural anthropology have shifted away from the dualistic and dialectical approaches encapsulated in anthropological material culture studies (e.g. Miller 2005a) and post-processual archaeology, to explore an approach that gives methodological attentiveness to things: utilizing things as heuristic devices to expose the outlines of disparate ontologies (Wastell 2007; Henare et al. 2007a). Such thinking eschews the presumed divisions between objects and subjects and allows the distinctive relationships between people and things to emerge from fieldwork rather than preceding it (Wastell 2007: 68). While being committed to a methodological approach that places the thing at centre stage (p. 349) rather than using things as an illustrative device for social relations or cultural practices, Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell propose a shift away from epistemological concerns to ontological statements. Rather than perceiving ethnographic informants’ statements about their beliefs in the material world as simply world views (in the classic cultural relativist sense), they conceive of them as enunciations of different ontological worlds or natures (Henare et al. 2007a: 10). One outcome of such a re-conceptualization of things as heuristics is the realization that there may be no useful methodological distinction between concepts and things. Henare et al. (2007a) propose a form of radical constructivism, informed by the work of Giles Deleuze, grounded in a shift away from ontological distinction between ‘discourse’ and ‘reality’. For such anthropologists, concepts can be understood to bring about things, because concepts and things are one and the same (Henare et al. 2007a: 13). This can lead to ‘an artefact-oriented anthropology…[that is] not about material culture’ (Henare et al. 2007a: 1).

This argument echoes some recent developments within archaeology. The pressing need for an artefact-centred approach that draws together the scientific (positivist) and interpretative (constructivist) strands of archaeology is increasingly recognized. Jones’ (2002b) analysis of the Late Neolithic settlement of Barnhouse, Orkney, for example, has used an ostensibly ‘biographical’ approach to trace the production, circulation, and deposition of Late Neolithic Grooved Ware. Grooved Ware vessels of differing categories were produced from different materials in different parts of the settlement at Barnhouse. These materials were related to significant places in the Neolithic landscape. The differing categories of vessels were used differently, and were finally deposited at specific locations within the settlement and at significant locations in the wider landscape, such as the Stones of Stenness and the Quanterness passage grave. Such an approach entailed the use of scientific techniques, including thin‐section petrology and gas chromatography alongside interpretative frameworks; by taking an artefact-centred approach the archaeological artefacts in effect become agents in the process of enfolding together disparate strands of archaeological practice.

In a similar sense Boivin (2000, 2004c, 2008) has argued for a mode of analysis that combines a materialist science with the ethnographic awareness of concept. In Boivin’s ethnoarchaeological analysis of domestic architecture in rural Rajasthan, India, she has considered the symbolic and material dimensions of the various soils used in the construction and maintenance of houses, and their role in both creating and expressing the temporal cycles of humans and houses. She has analysed these both ethnographically and using the methods of
archaeological science. In rural Rajasthan, most houses are traditionally made of mud. These mud-built houses are ephemeral structures that must be constantly maintained through repeated rebuilding and replastering. The ephemeral and malleable nature of houses means that these structures are very fluid, rooms often being added or removed to suit the needs of the developing family. Houses then are highly dynamic entities that manifest various annual, biological, and household group temporalities. This is then further culturally elaborated by coinciding major annual and lifecycle rituals in which attention is drawn to the link between people, houses, and the use of special materials, such as certain soils. Boivin analyses the interleaving of people, houses, and time through the use of specific materials and practices.

These two studies attempt to treat artefacts and materials as both substance and concept, as analysis attends to the way in which materials combine various conceptual realms: the scientific and the interpretative. These examples focus especially on material agency and disciplinary practice, and specifically on the role a materials-based archaeological science may play in addressing the significance of materiality. How does the analysis of material agency affect broader archaeological interpretations?

To discuss this we would like to draw, finally, on the work of archaeologist Lesley McFadyen (2007a). McFadyen is concerned to analyse the constructional histories of Neolithic long barrows in southern England. Her analyses of the sites of Ascoth-under-Wychwood (Oxfordshire) and Beckampton Road (Wiltshire) have demonstrated how important it is to consider the material and structural qualities of the architecture in the practice of building. She has demonstrated that barrows were built ‘on the hoof’ as it were. The bayed stone and timber architecture of these monuments needed to be propped up during the construction process. McFadyen argues that the material nature of these construction practices engendered particular socialities of participation. ‘Practices, previously seen as less tangible, actually created junctions between bodies/animals/plants/material culture that were memorable, and these remembered events, as concrete memories, embedded themselves in the way in which people understood themselves in relation to others’ (McFadyen 2007a: 29). Here we have a very clear example of the way in which an attentiveness to the properties of materials in ‘material agency’ offers a completely fresh perspective on a subject traditionally treated as self-evident. The material qualities of things, and their involvement in social practices, entrain particular modes of being.

Conclusions

We conclude with the recognition that the concept of material agency not only forces us to think about materiality, but also promotes a rethink of the concept of society (Latour 2005a). ‘Material agency’ is not then an anachronistic concept to be taken lightly, an absurdity, or a step too far in postmodernist theory. Instead, it is a fundamental concept that allows us to focus upon the way in which people and things are mutually related. Indeed, we would go so far as to suggest that we should rethink the concept of agency, rather than material agency. If we consider the perspective of science studies scholar Karen Barad (2007), the mutual relationship between human agency and material agency is critical. Causality does not lie with human agents; rather, in a performative context the subject is not the site of a stable existence prior to the field that it negotiates. Instead it is the reiterative quality of performance that produces agency and causality: agency is a matter of intra-acting, an enactment, it is not possessed by something or someone. Agency cannot be designated as an attribute of either subjects or objects, as neither subjects nor objects pre-exist as fixed entities (Barad 2007: 214).

Focusing our analyses upon material agency enables us to see that the canonical philosophical terms ‘subject’ and ‘object’ are rendered problematic when we start to look in detail at the way in which things and people are combined or attached; agency then becomes a diffuse and performative concept, and objects too are participants in courses of action (Latour 2005a: 70). Agency is not then simply a subject-centred ability to act, but instead defines the way in which courses of action are mediated and articulated over time, whether that action is physically carried out by people or by things. As Latour notes (2005a: 46) actors (be they things or people) do not stand alone, rather an ‘actor is what is made to act by many others’, an actant. Such a perspective enables us to dissolve the pure distinction between agents acting of their own volition and inanimate materials, and to begin to build models of social action and society that recognize the complexity, and challenges, of the worlds that we enact.

Notes:
In this review, we have drawn heavily upon discussions and syntheses in our recent Cambridge University Press books, *Material Cultures, Material Minds* (Boivin 2008) and *Memory and Material Culture* (Jones 2007). We acknowledge in these books the many individuals with whom we have discussed and debated our ideas about material culture. We cannot mention all of them here, but would like to acknowledge their contribution and assistance. Boivin would like to thank in particular Richard Bradley and Carl Knappett, while Jones owes a debt of gratitude to Dan Hicks, Josh Pollard, and Laura Watts whose insights, support, and assistance have been particularly relevant to the material discussed here. We would also like to thank Dan Hicks and Mary Beaudry for their invitation to contribute to this volume.

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