Chapter 27: Material Culture and Long-Term Change

Long-term change, unfolding over decades, centuries or millennia, is hard to grasp or conceive of, existing as it does at a scale beyond that of the human life span. However, I shall argue here that cultural and material forms existing over long spans of time form a channelling for human being that helps orient and shape short-term processes and events. Looking at our lives at the biographical scale of the individual human life, we can see that each of us lives by sets of skills of making and discrimination which we learn in the course of our lives, with crucial learning taking place in childhood. How we make and use things in a manner which is appropriate both to the materials from which things are made and to their social purposes is fundamental to our lives as skilled social beings. How to walk, how to eat, what to give and when to receive are all things we need to know, such knowledge encompassing skills of making things, but also those of taste and discrimination which provide a sense both of the conventional and of impressive novelty. We are taught to make and use things by people through verbal instruction or emulation, but the crucial teachers are things in themselves. As a parent it is possible to prepare a child to ride a bicycle by talking about balance, speed and when to turn the handlebars. But the real teacher is the bike itself, which will tune muscles, set up the faculty of balance and provide the social expectations of what other bike riders will do. Textiles, hand axes and fish stews are other vital teachers in human history and it is only through action, or more particularly interaction, that we learn what will work and what will fail. Educative artefacts often have longer lives as collectivities than people do, forming communities of their own through similarities of form and decoration. In this chapter I want to explore the long-term histories of some of these communities of objects, how they behave and change, obeying logics of their own. The interaction between these long-term histories of things and the shorter-lived communities of people represents a vital and virtually undiscovered aspect of human history. When considering
the prehistoric past, individual people drop away, so that things stand out, as do the means by which they render the world intelligible for people.

New work on the operations of the human body help render it a truly active element, unlike in many considerations of the body where it becomes a form of text or inscription. The intermingling of the body and of material things also becomes highlighted in a manner of relevance for all those interested in material culture. I shall start with a brief consideration of the nature of skills and intelligence, as developing in a number of areas, such as robotics and artificial life, which are coming to emphasize the distributed and extended nature of intelligent action (rather than the representational abilities of intelligent thought) before making the point that a concentration on material culture and its social lives, especially when considered over the long term, supplies a lack encountered in theories stressing the human body.

The approach I am favouring here is rather different from earlier analyses of long-term change within archaeology. Three main past approaches can be identified: social evolutionary approaches, structural-Marxist views and symbolic or post-structuralist archaeologies. In each case there is a crucial lack of a deep theory of material culture and its deep involvement with social forms. I shall look briefly at each in turn.

Past Archaeological Approaches to Long-Term Change

All three of these approaches felt that they took material culture seriously, so that a definite argument needs to be made as to why such was not the case. Social evolutionary approaches derive ultimately from the nineteenth century, taking inspiration from Darwin. However, it is their twentieth-century incarnation I shall concentrate on mostly. Just as with other organisms when taken from a biological point of view, it was felt that the crucial element of human history was the ability to harness energy from the environment. Unlike most other organisms the human ability to produce tools and technology allowed a sophisticated capacity to gather and store raw materials and food
which were then used to underwrite aspects of the social process. The complexity of social relations ultimately depended on a human ability to extract energy, so that the motor of human social and political history was technology. As technology advanced, so did social organization. The notion of advance was a key one for social evolutionists, who saw historical developments as taking the form of shifts from an early hunter-gatherer lifestyle in all parts of the world prior to 10,000 years ago to the development of farming in some areas, followed later by the move to cities and states which eventually saw the rise of industrialism in Europe in the eighteenth century. These changes in production and surplus were paralleled by social changes from hunter-gatherer bands to farming tribes or chiefdoms to urbanized states (Childe 1930; Sahlins and Service 1960; Service 1962, 1971; White 1959). Not dissimilar views of history were found in the nineteenth century (Tylor 1871). The main problems with such views were long ago identified and have been much discussed – a progressive view of history which works only for some parts of the world and a functionalist notion of technology, conceived of in terms of its physical impact and consequences. To a critical eye these suppositions about the manner in which human history works look like nineteenth and twentieth-century economic rationality and Western supremacy applied to human history as a whole. The emphases on functions and measurable outcomes leave a lot of human life out, assuming that structures of meaning, thought and feeling are epiphenomenal and weeded out by the long-term processes of human prehistory.

Also, taking inspiration from the nineteenth century, but with a much more compelling theoretical basis, is structural Marxism (Friedman and Rowlands 1978). Structural Marxism was an attempt to develop Marxist theory in a manner in tune with the record of a deep prehistory that had obviously been unavailable to Marx himself. As is well known, Marx took a historical view of human society, holding that no point in time could be understood without looking at the social forces which have led up to that point. He developed a general history of modes of production from primitive communism to present-day capitalism. Marx’s view of a mode of production was that it was made up of the forces of production, which were the technological means by which society produced the goods it wanted, and the relations of production, which specified the relations between people pertaining to both the division of labour and the division of the items produced. With the exception of the influences from Morgan, Marx paid little attention to modes of production outside those known from the history of Europe. This
has left Marxist anthropologists and archaeologists with a series of basic principles pertaining to the process of labour, and the social and ideological relations resulting from that process, but little in the way of specific models to apply to non-capitalist societies. Also over the century since Marx died there have been subtle currents within Marxist thought which have subjected principles drawn from Marx to constant criticism and revision.

Structural Marxism, as this trend is known, has been influential on the other main area of Marxist thought influencing archaeology. Recent Marxist writers have tackled a particular aspect of the base-superstructure problem: what sorts of relations of production are exercised in the absence of classes and how is the control over production translated into social power and standing? One answer given to this problem was that direct control was not exercised over production at all, but that power derived from the control of the flow of high-ranking items of exchange. These in turn were used to control the flow of people in marriage, which had important consequences for the demographic strength of a group. In societies dominated by kinship the conclusion consequently was that it was the relations of reproduction which were central to the social process rather than the relations of production. These ideas had a direct impact on archaeology and were worked into a general model by Friedman and Rowlands (1978). To accuse a Marxist approach of lacking a theory of material culture may seem ironic or misguided. However, I feel that the concentration on production inherent in many Marxist views stifled creative thought about more rounded relations between people [p. 427 ↓] and things, especially in the areas of exchange and consumption. As we shall see below, some of the most interesting aspects of contemporary thought concern the impact that things have on people through our sensory experience of them. Social relations shaped by the forms that objects take was immanent in Marxist thought, although the main emphasis was on the manner in which social relations shaped objects.

In books such as *The Domestication of Europe* (1990) Ian Hodder attempted a contrary view of long-term continuity and change focusing on structures of meaning and ritual (see also Hodder 1987). The coming of the Neolithic did not so much herald a change in subsistence from hunter-gathering to farming as it had for the social evolutionists or a shift in the relations of production as seen by structural Marxism, but rather a symbolic revolution. Sedentary life concentrated social tensions within the home and
the village, so that relations between men and women, or worries about life and death, needed dealing with in new ways. Novelty was seen in ritual structures, such as greater care over burial or the symbolism inside the house playing with wild and domesticated forms. This revolution, although it had material expression through houses or pots, was ultimately a revolution of thought about the different categories of things that made up the world and the tensions between these. Material culture formed a series of texts to be read by the archaeologist and it was the ephemeral meanings that were interesting, open as they were to varying forms of interpretation by people in the past and in the present. This was an interpretive archaeology, whose solid material base gave rise to meanings and interpretations, and was thus ultimately fluid rather than solid. Fluidity of course was an emphasis of much post-structuralist thought. Much of this emphasis was liberating, opening up new possibilities of seeing the world. But it did ignore what Bourdieu called the non-discursive elements of human life, those habitual actions we are little conscious of and find difficult to talk about. Many of our non-discursive relations are with things and things have become ever more central to a range of disciplines over the last decade, as we shall see.

Intelligence: Embodied, Distributed, Extended and Material

What is the quintessential marker of intelligence in a human being? An answer to this question until recently would probably have concentrated on abstract reasoning, the ability that humans have to represent the world through logical notation or geometrical forms. These days many might say that being able to pick up a plastic cup full of hot coffee on a moving train without injuring oneself involves a series of skills of a very complex, but uncelebrated, type. There has been a distinct shift over the last few years from the view that intelligence involves abstract reasoning that takes place in the mind to an approach which sees intelligence deriving from the actions of the human body and its interactions with the material world. Such ideas have important implications for the study of material culture, but these have not so far been spelt out in any detail. Ideas on embodied and distributed intelligence derive from a variety of literatures, ranging from neurosciences, which concentrate on the body, to robotics, which tries to simulate
the actions of the body in relationship to external environments, to studies of artefacts, which tend to take the body and its skills as a vital background for production and consumption without focusing on the skills of the body as such. There is something of an inside-out structure to this spectrum of accounts starting with what happens inside the body and moving out into the world. Whilst ultimately wanting to break with this inside-out structure of thought, I shall use it initially to provide a direction for discussing current work and identifying the key weakness, which is a lack of real understanding of material culture.

Spinoza said that the mind is the idea of the body. This aphorism has been the basis of much recent work, which has provided empirical evidence for such a view. In Damasio’s work, for instance, he makes a distinction between core consciousness and extended conscious, whilst saying that all kinds of consciousness arise from our awareness of our bodies. Core consciousness, which we share with many other animal species, derives from ‘the creation of mapped accounts of ongoing relationships between organism and objects’ (Damasio 2000: 197). Here mapping refers to the internal chemical and neurological systems of the body which provide a continuous set of charts of the states of the body and its external positioning and objects refer to elements of consciousness like memories. Such maps are updated enormously quickly, with impulses travelling through the body in a fraction of a second, so that many elements of core consciousness occur without us being aware of its unfolding. There is thus something of a paradox here – consciousness may well flux and unfold at speeds too fast for us to grasp or to put into words. We are always trying to catch up with ourselves. Extended consciousness gives rise to the biographical self in which memory is crucial in connecting up the here-and-now with past states of the body in its world, so that there is a complex tracking back and forth between immediate sense impressions and those recalled from other times, or anticipated in the future. Extended consciousness may not require language and might be something we share with other primates and other animal species. It is worth noting that Damasio uses the term ‘extended’ primarily to refer to time – past, present and future intermingle to create the true complexity of experience. However, his self is a somewhat isolated neurological being, undoubtedly in contact with the material world and with others, but lacking any real richness of social or material relations.
Damasio’s notion of extended consciousness starts to move from the realm of neuroscience to philosophy, a move developed by Lakoff and Johnson in their attempt to create ‘an empirically responsible philosophy’ (1999: 3). In attacking the concept of an abstract, virtual, disembodied mind, they state three basic premises – the mind is inherently embodied, thought is mostly unconscious and abstract concepts are mostly metaphorical (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 3). Thanks to the speed of bodily processes much of our awareness of the world and thought about the world are unconscious. What was taken, in the older paradigm of the mind, as the quintessence of human being, abstract thought, arises from the everyday operations of the body. Crucially, two elements of human being which used to be separate are now linked – perception and conception. Our concepts arise from our ongoing apprehension of the world, so that we need to know more about our visual systems, our motor systems and our neural binding to understand how we conceive of the world. An older definition of philosophy, as thinking about thinking, will no longer do, as acting and thinking are linked, so that metaphor has a consistent ontology rooted in the actions of the body. Metaphor is found when words are applied to things or events other than those which they normally designate. An idea may ‘go over our heads’ or a relationship may be ‘at a crossroads’ or we may fail to see ‘the point of an argument’, so that abstract circumstances or relationships are clothed in more concrete words. Rather than stressing a gulf between the mind and the body, Lakoff and Johnson are engaged in knitting together again physical existence and abstracted forms of consciousness, images and representations. As a slight aside, it was worth noting that there are issues of timescales – many of the operations of the body occur so fast that they elude conscious awareness and indeed if we were aware of all we are doing all of the time, little space would be left for broader forms of awareness.

The embodied mind provides a concrete basis for abstraction and awareness. However, moving a little further out from the body are forms of thought that use terms like ‘extended’ and ‘distributed’ in a slightly different manner from their usage by Damasio. The most balanced of these accounts is that by Clark (1997), who develops the ‘equal partnership hypothesis’. Work in robotics and artificial life, by Brooks (2003) and others, has shown that early attempts to create robots and animats with a large central processing unit (what would be known in a real creature as a brain) in which complex representations of the world can be assembled have generally failed to replicate
intelligent behaviour. On the other hand, developing robots with a relatively simple set of sensors and motors can allow them to navigate around quite complex forms of terrain, performing tasks. Clark contrasts two sorts of projects. On the one hand is CYC (short for ‘encyclopedia’), a project which started in 1984 with a budget of $50 million. The idea was to feed into a powerful computer a series of language-based rules, making explicit much of the tacit knowledge we have about the world (‘most cars today have four tires. If you fall asleep while driving, your car will start to head out of your lane pretty soon’ – Clark 1997: 3). It was thought that the big constraint on artificial intelligence was not inference, but knowledge, and once a sufficient knowledge base was assembled CYC would be able to read and assemble written texts and ‘self-program’ the rest of its knowledge base. Despite much money, a long period of time and the use of a powerful language for encoding logical relationships, self-programming and intelligent reasoning do not appear on the cards. The lack of success of these large, representational systems has been balanced by a more embodied approach, which creates creatures with little central processing power, but which are able to operate effectively (intelligently?) in the world. One such example is Brooks's robot, ‘Herbert’.

Herbert was made up of a series of layers of behaviour which were influenced and directed by inputs from the environment in which they operated. Herbert’s task was to collect drinks cans from a crowded and chaotic laboratory. A central processing approach to this problem would have been to create a rich map of the laboratory that Herbert could use to navigate and this would have had the disadvantage that the furniture, people and the cans kept changing configurations, so that the map would need constant updating. Herbert instead was made up of some simple navigating routines, using sensors to detect obstacles and motors to stop and reorient motion. Once a table-like outline was detected by the sensors, using a simple visual system, locomotion and obstacle avoidance routines were temporarily suspended and a laser beam and video-camera swept the table top. If a can outline was detected the robot moved so that the can was in the middle of its field of vision, extended an arm, which if a can outline was encountered activated a grasping routine and the can was removed. Herbert then moved on. Crucially, Herbert's relatively simple set of routines worked only through stimulus from the environment, so that in a sense Herbert's actions and intelligent behaviour derived partly from the mechanics of the robot and partly from the surrounding environment.
Such instances gave rise to Clark’s notion of the equal partnership between organism and environment, where the boundaries of a creature or mechanical device are less important than its emplacement within a world and its ability to act with respect to specific elements of that world. Humans are rather more complex than Herbert, but some of the same ideas still apply. We are intelligent in interaction with the world around us and in this sense our intelligence may be said to be distributed or extended, as the material world provides a series of cues and prompts to action in special ways. Furthermore, many of our intelligent actions may not be directed by our central processing unit, that is, our brain, but may derive from a series of skills of the body working in partnership with the physical properties of the world around us. Human skills can be seen as a series of fragmentary abilities and skills, held together rather loosely by the patterns in the material world and our responses to them. Abstract representations do occasionally obtain and help us think about the world through words and images, Clark accepts, although truly abstract thought that is productive is very rare (Clark 1997: 174–5). I shall return to the issue of abstract representations below.

In the everyday encounter the flickering of attention between people and things constitutes both as elements of society and these complex interactions have been brought out well in what have been called ‘joint attention studies’ reported on by Tomasello (2000). Between nine and twelve months of age infants start to follow an adult’s gaze, to engage in extended bouts of social interaction mediated by an object, to use adults as social reference points, modelling their reactions on those of others, and to act on objects in the way that adults are acting on them (Tomasello 2000: 62). The basic alchemy of human life is to transmute our relationships with material things into social relations, so that the values that attach to things help create the values that attach to people (and vice versa). Joint attention studies show how this may happen. We are starting to approximate in thought some of the true complexity of the human and material worlds. Joint attention studies show triadic relations between two (or more) human subjects and the objects they are using. Human and material relations unfold over time through a complex mutual referencing and sets of influence moving backwards and forwards in non-linear manners.

Recent views, whether from neuroscience or robotics, have started to provide empirical detail on physical interactions with the material world, either on the part of humans or other entities. Focus has shifted swiftly from the isolated human body and mind,
separated from each other and at some distance from the world, to the embodied mind with the activities of the body rooted in the world. Conceptions and representations are actively created, not passively contemplated, with perception and conception being tightly linked. Action is the root of thought. Through views, such as Clark’s equal partnership hypothesis, the link between humans and their world is highlighted. But here occurs a gap in people’s current understanding, this gap being constituted by a lack of real grasp by many disciplines of the nature and social role of material culture. Many of these recent theories travel a path that leads to the material world and the intermingling of humans and other entities, but an absence occurs where there should be a rich material presence, that of material culture and the nature of the humanized landscape. If we follow Clark’s desire to understand the equal partnership between people and the material world, we need to know what each partner brings to the relationship. Our newly enriched views of the human body throw into relief the thinness of many pictures of the world.

The obvious groups who can help make the equal partners truly equal, through a knowledge of material culture, are the archaeologists and anthropologists. But we are only just starting to engage in these larger conversations. Two thinkers are of considerable relevance here, but each has his own approach to the material nature of things. The first is Ingold, whose ecological approach has much in common with Clark; and the second is Gell’s work, which has spawned much discussion of the agency of people and objects, but from which I want to take some thoughts about style as a starting point for later discussions. In Art and Agency Gell (1998) starts to consider the idea of effect, focusing on how objects effect and shape relationships between people. The forms things take and the impression they make on the senses are seen as integral to the manner in which people think and feel about the possessors of those things. A key example is Trobriand canoe prows, where the intricacy of the carving and brilliance of their painting have a stunning effect on potential exchange partners, making them much less able to resist the blandishments of the canoe’s owners. Canoes are not just a passive but intricate backdrop to exchanges, but a vital element in those exchanges. Although canoe prows in this instance are especially compelling forms of art objects, many items falling within the category of ‘art’ will have effects on how people relate to each other, changing and channelling social relations. Gell’s work causes us
to think about singular objects: how people are halted and surprised by things, making them attend to the world with special care.

Ingold's ecological perspective enjoins holism and asks us not to look at the finished forms which things take, but rather at the rhythms that exist in different areas of life which help create and grow things within a series of echoing forms. Human energies, in Ingold's view, are part of a broader set of energy flows within the biosphere, parts of which are given shape and direction by the poetics of people's lives. Poetry and music are important elements in Ingold's thought, as well as walking, basket weaving or everyday speech. All are held together by a sense of rhythm, so that the rhythms of action become embodied in things: the structure of a basket can be seen as the outcome of the regular movement of hands directed in part by the pliability and resistance of the materials they are weaving. Ingold upbraids us for being more concerned with outcomes than with processes, seeing objects as solid presences of particular forms, instead of viewing each artefact as part of the overall flow of life, where flow and movement are ultimately more pervasive than the temporary forms that things take, which arrest our attention so much. There is much in common here with the views of both neurosci-entists and philosophers, who are starting to emphasize the vital link between action and knowing: habitual acts and conscious knowledge of the world.

Gell and Ingold on superficial consideration seem to have opposite points of view, but they are in fact complementary. Ingold is trying to place the human subject within their overall flow of life and their total environment, one active element among many. He is thus suspicious of attempts to break up the flow or distance people from the world in which they dwell. Too much emphasis on the finished forms of things seems to provide too many breaks and barriers to the analytical attention, which becomes unappreciative of flows. Gell wants us to linger and attend to form, saying that the forms that artefacts take are vital to the manner in which they shape relations between people. Indeed, form is the means by which objects relate to each other, in the inter-artefactual domain, so that the forms things have taken constrain and direct the creation of new forms. Gell's key term 'stoppage' emphasizes the manner in which people and objects can pause in each other's company when especially important relations are being cemented, so that human attention is arrested by things which then redirect action. In this manner things can be agents too. By concentrating on the moments when people stop, overwhelmed by complexity of form, Gell does not allow himself to dwell on flows. Ingold stresses
forget-fulness, the moments when people are so immersed in what they are doing, they become as one with the tools they are using and oblivious to anything but their own actions. Gell likes the power to shock – the moment when someone is taken aback by a thing, due to the virtuosity of its making or its originality against a general background of other things.

A currently pervasive form of thought emphasizes relations, saying that entities (both people and things) do not have essential properties of their own, but are given these properties through the relations into which they enter. We are also aware that entities help create and shape relations. A world of pure relations starts to look undifferentiated and shapeless. Taking a more dialectical view, we can see that the forms that things take help create relations between them and those relations affect the aspects of form that are taken as salient or influential at any one moment. A full view of the manner in which the world unfolds needs to take account of both flows and stoppages, a general pattern of action and individual things and people that occasionally stand out and redirect a flow of action. Owing to a quirk of how our understanding operates it is hard to appreciate both overall rhythms of life and more singular objects at once. It thus [p. 431 ↓] becomes an analytical question as to whether one temporarily emphasizes rhythms and flows (that is, relations) or stoppages (the forms that things take). Neither one allows a full sense of the temporality of human life: an understanding of the real sense of the shared attention between people and things. So far I have been discussing these issues in the same temporal register as Gell and Ingold, thinking about how life unfolds in the relatively short term of the here and now moment. Flows and stoppages of material culture also operate on time scales beyond that of the human life span. The longer-term unfolding of material forms is a vital, but largely unacknowledged, part of human life and it is to this I shall now turn.

Flows and Stoppages or Analogy and Typology

Archaeologists have thought about material culture in terms of both flows and stoppages, although they have rarely used these terms. Typological thought leads to a notion of stoppages, so that the series of types, it is assumed, are important markers of
the history of a culture or social formation. Typology has been basic to archaeological approaches to material culture since the early nineteenth century, when it became the foundation for chronological understanding of Europe's prehistory in the shift from stone, to bronze to iron, providing the basis of the so-called 'Three Age system'. Typology and the Three Age system have both been roundly criticized for reifying basic types which then create an overly rigid distinction between one period and another when much continuity as well as change can be seen between the Neolithic and the Bronze Age or the Bronze and Iron Ages. The Three Age system undoubtedly produces a prehistory which is too compartmentalized, but this is not my concern here and I would rather celebrate the typological urge for a moment, owing to what it can tell us about things individually and as a mass.

To give some initial sense of how typology works let us take one of the most famous recent explorations of types and their changes: that of Deetz and Dethlefsen (1966, Deetz 1977) looking at gravestones on the eastern seaboard of the United States. They and others created a series of tombstone typologies for New England and the eastern seaboard more generally, which defined types of tombstones in terms of their decorations and epitaphs, together with their changes through time. The great advantage of tombstones for creating a time series is that they have on them the date of the person buried. Many can also be attributed to individual carvers, as some are signed and others provide indications of their activities through diaries, account books and other forms of archival record. Nor did tombstones move far from their point of manufacture, with a thirty-mile radius encompassing most movement of tombstones, which were usually made in a town and then exported out to the countryside. Between 1680, when the first stone tombstones were carved (before then memorials in wood were common) and 1820 three basic forms of design are found, each of which derives from a different form of religious sensibility. Tombstones help make links between people's feelings for the world and material forms. At the end of the generally austere seventeenth century winged death's heads predominated, reminding people of the fragility of life and the certainty of death. Early in the eighteenth century death's heads were replaced by winged cherubs as tombstones became more reflective of an ideology in which the personal qualities of an individual helped shape their life after death. Tombs shifted to becoming individual memorials, with epitaphs that reflected people's life and deeds. The decline of the death's head parallels the decline of Puritanism. At
the end of the century the third style came in, which was a willow tree and an urn, a further softening of imagery and helped stress once again the possibility of salvation through good works on earth.

These overall trends can be described by so-called ‘battleship curves’ (see Figure 27.1) which chart the coming into being of a new style, its rise in popularity and its decline when succeeded by a further style. Such curves have been used to describe the history of styles in a whole range of artefacts, prehistoric as well as historical, seeming to capture general tendencies in the history of types. Styles often go through processes of initiation, florescence and decline, and analogies have been made with biological organisms. Deetz’s work shows some complications to this pattern. Styles of tombstones were often introduced from England, arriving first in the major metropolitan centres such as Boston, MA, before spreading out to more rural areas. Taking the eastern seaboard as a whole at any one time, there would have been a mix of styles in operation, depending on proximity to urban influences spreading out from the towns like ripples across a pond. But not only was there conservativism in the countryside, there was also the more active creation of new local styles, so that local influences and craft practices flowed into the overall mix of stylistic changes, with local diversity reaching a peak before 1760, when general forms of communication were most difficult. At a broad temporal and geographical scale, the shift between the three patterns happened sequentially; but looking at the picture more finely there was a complex amalgam of material forms, depending on the biographies of craftspeople, the nature of religious belief within communities and the flow of ideas across the Atlantic and within the region generally. On this last point, Deetz’s assumption, deriving from his structuralist orientation, is that material forms followed the structure of ideas abroad in society, so that the coming into being of the ‘Georgian order’ was part of Enlightenment thought expressed in rational principles of architecture and material forms. Greater reciprocal influence may well have been at work, so that the forms things took helped influence the manner in which people thought about the world, rather than just reflecting that thought, a point I shall return to below. We can see in general that people were born into worlds of material culture which lasted longer than it took to replace human generations. Each form lasted for at least forty years and often a lot longer, considerably more than the conventional time period given for a human generation of twenty-five years, although not quite as long as a human lifetime.
(although life expectancy may not have far exceeded it for some). We are able to see constant change, looking back in time, but for those contemporary with the things made and used things would have represented a series of stable or slowly changing entities through which to build social relations, or, as in this case, relationships with the divine. The nature of intelligent action was refracted and made effective through material forms of some stability and durability.

*Figure 27.1* Battleship curves describing the changing popularity of different grave-stone motifs at various places in New England, 1700–1830 (after Shennan 2002: Fig. 6)
Types of things, such as tombstones, never existed in isolation, but were part of a complex cultural ecology of material forms. The tendency within archaeology to see material culture as a changing series of types has a long pedigree, but it is becoming counterbalanced by a search for linkages among forms of material which have otherwise been separated by our analytical categories. In an important study, Ortman (2000) has explored how meanings are generated, looking in particular at the links between pottery decoration and the structure of weaving and baskets. Ortman discusses Lévy-Bruhl and others who felt that ‘primitive’ thought was basically analogical, being especially fertile in making links between people, animals and things in a manner that would not occur to Westerners. Totemism, whereby an animal or bird is taken as the symbol of a clan and treated in a special manner as a result (it cannot be eaten, for instance), or animism, occurring when objects are seen to have capacities of movement, action and volition, both break down the divisions Westerners make between animate creatures possessed of some will and purpose and the inanimate and unwilled. It may well be that it is Western thought that is historically unusual, so that the distinction between inanimate objects and willed subjects is part of the process of objectification, itself a result of mass-production and consumption found under capitalism. The more pervasive form of analogical thought manifests itself in the links between varying classes of objects and between people and things. Ortman is interested in metaphor as a means of mapping relationships (2000: 616), although these are ultimately relationships of meaning (see also Tilley’s work on metaphor, 1999). Drawing on the work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980), he shows that metaphor moves from the concrete to the abstract, so that the words and images we use are often grounded in bodily experience. Taking the influence of his theoretical source material, Ortman’s approach is dominated by linguistics and the manner in which meanings are shaped and conveyed through words. However, his analysis is impressively material.

Looking at the Great Pueblo period (ad 1060–1280) in the Mesa Verde area of the American south-west, Ortman concentrates on the links between textiles, which form the basis for much of the decoration on pottery. Textile forms include coiled basketry, plaited basketry, non-loom weaving and loom-woven cotton cloth. Each of these was made by a different technique. Coiled baskets were created by sewing successive circuits of an outward spiralling coil on to itself; plaited baskets were made from a plaited square mat of yucca leaves which was forced through a circular hoop and sewn
up; non-loom weavings were created from a patchwork of warps and wefts often of very different materials (ranging from dog and human hair to cotton, yucca and other fibres); cotton cloth was woven on backstrap or upright looms to create warp-weft weaves purely of cotton (Ortman 2000: 621). The arid conditions of the American south-west have preserved a whole range of such materials, although obviously not the complete set of such materials from any place and time (Ortman 2000: table 2). Working from the analysis of pottery and published information, Ortman identified twenty-five analogous features of pottery decoration that originated in woven forms.

The decorative motifs found on sherds can definitely be seen to originate in textiles, as they mimic the techniques of construction of the textiles, which are thus integral to the textiles themselves. Some details of decoration were not intentionally woven into textiles, but derived from the weaving processes themselves (Figure 27.2). The motifs cannot have moved in the opposite direction. The processes of painting required the surface of the pot to be laid out and decoration applied in a consistent and structured manner, resulting in some systematic differences between the decorations on textiles and those on pots. Some combinations of motifs, never found together on a single textile, as they derive from different manufacturing processes, can be found combined on one pot.

Table 27.1 Styles of pottery decoration in the Mesa Verde
The systematic sets of linkages between the two domains leads Ortman to conclude 'that POTTERY IS A TEXTILE describes an ancient mental phenomenon that really was shared among Mesa Verde potters and that is decipherable from archaeological remains alone' (2000: 637).

Such a conclusion raises the question of why pots and textiles should be linked in this way. Ortman feels that the broad category of container feeds through into other domains of *pueblo* life. A crucial aspect is the *kiva*, a circular subterranean structure, which had clay walls and a timber roof. 'This combination of a “coiled basket” roof with “pottery bowl” walls in the kiva suggests that textiles and pottery were linked in

![Image of table](https://example.com/table.png)
additional metaphorical concepts that defined the Mesa Verde Puebloan [p. 435 ↓] world’ (Ortman 2000: 638). Modern Puebloan views of the cosmos emphasize an earth-bowl below and sky-basket above, so that it might well be that pottery and textiles are combined in a broader conceptual system, as parts of a larger cosmological whole.

Figure 27.2 The links between pottery and weaving styles in Mesa Verde (after Ortman 2000: table 3)

Ortman’s analysis is compelling both in its detail and in its overall discussion of the importance of metaphor. Implicit in this discussion is the notion that concepts and sensibilities exist in a mental universe before they are applied to the material world, so that the links between pots and textiles were initially set up in abstract mental thought and through language (see the quotation in the previous paragraph, that this was ‘an ancient mental phenomenon’) which was then applied to the material world.
Following the general line of argument deriving from embodied cognition, we can see that the arrow of cause may be reversed – the creation of material forms and types of decoration could easily have given rise to mental representations. It is hard to see how a Puebloan cosmology of earth-bowl and sky-basket could have come about without the existence of pots (made from the earth) and baskets. We encounter a more subtle and complex causality here. Material forms give rise to abstract thought and representation; the ability to manipulate the world in an abstract manner through thought can help change and variegate the forms the world is made to take. Material forms don’t just embody concepts they help create them, linking the habitual skills of the body in potting and weaving with domains of mental representation. The body and the mind become much more difficult categories to hold separate; material forms are not existing ideas made manifest, but help create and shape representations of the world which would not exist in the same forms without the prior existence of artefacts. Much has been made of the Vygotskian concept of scaffolding (see Clark 1997), which looks at material things as a means of creating and shaping social relations between people. Discussions of scaffolding again tend to imply that social relations are prior and primary, and objects exist to create concrete links between people, or to help more concrete human skills.

What the previous two elements of my discussion indicate is that people exist in a world made up of forms which are spatially and temporally complex. Material culture changes through time at rates slower than the replacement of human generations, but also exists in a field of complicated links of form and decoration, cross-cutting the analytical divisions we tend to make between different classes of materials, such as textiles and pots. The types of links between pots and textiles identified for the Mesa Verde are found in other times and places. Sherratt (1997: 366–7) points out that various Neolithic pottery assemblages in Europe are probably modelled on earlier forms of baskets and other organic containers. In north-western Europe grooved ware and the Middle Neolithic phase of the Nordic Trichterbecker culture contain bucketlike shapes with a decoration deriving from constructional techniques of stake-frame basketry. **Linearbandkeramik** pottery of central Europe may have been more influenced by coiled basketry traditions deriving from the Middle East. Later in the Neolithic and the Bronze the plasticity of clay is again put to use when pots echo metal vessels (Sherratt 1997: 381–2), this time maybe as an attempt at imitation by those unable to obtain high-value metal objects. Wengrow (2001) notes that between the early and late Neolithic
in the Middle East there was a shift towards surface decoration on pottery and that much of this decoration derives from constructional forms of basketry. Baskets existed at least since early Neolithic times, using techniques of twining, coiling and plaiting. Indeed, basketry frames may have been used in the production of pottery. Making baskets required control of rhythmical processes of weaving and provided knowledge of the three-dimensional geometry of shapes. As Wengrow says, ‘the craft of hand-woven basketry would have equipped Neolithic potters with the applied knowledge of spatial relations and properties of number required to reproduce complex geometrical designs on ceramic forms’ (2001: 179). It was not just the specifics of design that were transferred from one medium to another, but a more general set of appreciations of form and process, which included ‘the division of patterns into uniform segments, the systematic use of radial and rotational symmetry on vessel interiors and of linear repetition on exteriors, the rigid geometry of figurative designs and the overall harmony of decorative pattern and vessel form’ (Wengrow 2001: 179). Whilst visually the effects of pottery decoration may have been similar to those of baskets, there were important tactile differences. Pots and baskets may have looked similar (although the translation from a three-dimensional woven form to a two-dimensional painted one would have given a different impression), but they would have felt quite different in terms of weight, tactile qualities and a sense of fragility. The movement of decoration from one material to another took place through a process of decontextualization, whereby elements of design integral to basketry or weaving were reapplied using different materials and bodily movements in another medium.

Jones (2001: 342) uses the concept of citation to look at the metaphorical relationships between pottery, metal axes and the human body in early Bronze Age Britain. For Jones, objects can have body-like qualities. Chevrons in linear zones found on the ‘neck’ of a beaker echo ornamentation on a bronze necklet and also similar motifs on the central portion of a bronze axe. Ornaments are promiscuous, crossing categories of objects – pot, bronze necklet and bronze axe – but all have a possible central referent in the human body (Jones 2001: 342). We may see here a cosmology rooted in the human body, in contrast to the broader cosmology of Mesa Verde encompassing sky and earth. It may be that we have not learned to follow the trail of similarities of form, motif and materials which might link early Bronze Age bodies to broader sets of associations. Associations flow across material boundaries, linking pots, baskets and metal vessels.
A number of more general lessons can be adduced from these specific cases. First of all, metaphors deriving from and adhering to material forms may create a widespread set of connections which cross types of materials (and thus the boundaries between archaeological specialisms). Some connections might have a central cosmological focus, such as the human body, or a broader one linking heaven and earth. The forms that things take and the sets of links between them do not make manifest ideas with a prior existence, they may call these ideas into being. Such ideas may be very general ones, such as concepts of number, an appreciation of three-dimensional form or a sense of the correct sequence of actions. Alternatively, they can be quite specific, deriving from the actions needed to make baskets, pots or metal vessels and the forms these create. Crucially the links between objects can help understand the genesis of forms of abstract thought. The crucial element of a general form of representation (the idea of number or three-dimensional geometry) is that it can exist outside a specific context. Numbers work, if the rules of arithmetic are applied properly, irrespective of what they are applied to. The movement of one type of decoration or formal quality of an object out of its originating context (woven textiles, in the Mesa Verde case) to another (pottery decoration) involves a process of generalization and decontextualization, the very mark of abstract thought and representation. The arrow of cause is generally seen to run from a pre-existing realm of meaning in people's heads to types of decoration or forms of objects. On occasions where form and decoration escape a specific context they give rise to abstract forms that can then run wild across the material world, creating a much more recursive set of connections between action, material form and thought. It does mean that we have to attend much more closely to form and its ability to give rise to thought.

A tantalizing aspect of Gell's book *Art and Agency* is what he calls the 'inter-artefactual domain', an idea he mentions almost in passing and never gets a chance to fully develop. The inter-artefactual domain is a means of approaching the concept of style, as a set of relations between relations (Gell 1998: 215). Artefacts are decorated with motifs that are transformed one into another by regular and generally small modifications. Indeed, Gell feels that stylistic change occurs by the ‘principle of least difference’ – that is, differences occur between motifs through making the least modification that is possible in order to establish something as different. Such a field of tiny differences can be understood only once artefacts are looked at as a corpus
from which it can be seen that the constraints governing production are the constraints
governing the possibility of transforming a motif or form into a related form. The
Marquesan style of artefacts, for instance, is the ‘sedimented product of tiny social
initiatives taken by Marquesan artists over a long period of historical development’ (Gell
1998: 219). Crucially Gell criticizes the view that culture as a whole dictates the
practical or symbolic significance of artefacts, saying rather that the inter-artefactual
domain is one in which artefacts obey rules set up by the style as a whole in some way
removed from and different from the intentions of human makers and users. Although
he doesn’t explore the conceptual implications of this idea, Gell’s view that artefacts
form a world with its own logics somewhat independent of human intentions is vital
in demonstrating that there may be many cases in which forms of abstract thought
and mental representation take the shape suggested by objects, rather than objects
simply manifesting pre-existing forms of thought. Decisions taken when making objects
may occur without deliberate reflection on meaning, but never without some overall
cognizance of the prevailing social context of material forms. One of the mysteries of
things is that they take an infinity of forms, but often also have marked resemblances
one with another, and the notion of style tries to probe the tension between similarity
and difference which maintains and creates both.

Gell’s ideas form part of an emerging attempt to take the material world seriously in
terms of how it affects human relations. Such attempts are also found in disciplines
such as art history where links between sociability and objects are eagerly sought,
although the dangers of imputing sociability to objects are recognized. In his article
‘What do pictures really want?’ Mitchell (1996) feels that we should take the desires of
objects seriously at an analytical level, as these are already taken seriously in everyday
life. When pornography is seen not as a representation of violence against women,
but as an act of violence; when style and substance become confused in a celebrity’s
presentation of self; when a painting is discussed in terms of what it does to the viewer,
then we are imputing desires to things which we might otherwise see as inanimate.
Objects with desires, rather than objects of desire, might seem to take us into the realm
of fetishism, totemism, animism or idolatory attitudes to the world acceptable in children
or non-Westerners but dubious for sophisticated postmodernist actors to hold. But if
these attitudes do exist – and Mitchell makes a convincing case for their presence in our
lives – they demand some form of understanding. Ultimately his attempt to understand
the desires of things is [p. 438 ↓ ] a little disappointing, but Mitchell does point out that objects are an important element in plays of recognition and knowing that pass between social actors all the time in daily life. What it means to know others depends on our ability to know others which are objects as well as others who are people. The conditions of knowing derive not just from mental schemes in people’s heads, but from the forms taken by things, which require that we know them in particular ways. The independence of the style of objects from human cultural forms, discussed by Gell, allows us to talk about how things themselves create the grounds for our understanding of them. We know them in their ways, rather than purely on our own terms.

Setting objects free from immediate human influence and control has something of a heritage in archaeology. David Clarke (1978) felt that populations of artefacts had their own behavioural characteristics, which were more complex than simply combining characteristics of their components of style and form, but also more predictable than individual components looked at historically. Clarke was influenced by the battleship curves of Deetz and others within American archaeology and sought to explain why such regularities of change happened, pointing out that while some artefacts went through a sequence that could be glossed as birth, maturity and death, others changed more slowly into completely different types. Structure was found in types of artefacts partly because to create a type a repeated sequence of actions was needed, and these were in some sense implemented by the type. Some of the originality of Clarke’s view was vitiated by his ultimate belief that artefacts arose as ideas in the makers’ mind which then were substantiated in an object. Giving a degree of autonomy to things acting together in large numbers, which can change the pattern of people's thought as well as respond to the nature of those thoughts, would provide a much more rounded sense of our relationship with objects, especially as these unfold over the long term.

Becoming Roman in Britain

One key way of understanding how objects influence human sense and sensibilities is to look at periods of dramatic change in both material and social forms. One such period occurred between 100 bc and ad 100 in Britain in the transition from the later Iron Age to the Romano-British period. A series of complex changes occurred in material forms during this period, which is more generally thought of in terms of the Roman invasion
of Britain (AD 43) and the political and economic changes attendant upon that event. However, if we ignore the invasion, initially at least, and concentrate on the shifts in material forms, together with some continuities, a different picture emerges from the conventional one of barbarian Britain brought within the scope of the Roman empire by the might of the legions. Indeed, these two centuries stand out as one of the periods in Britain’s (pre-)history which sees a most dramatic shift in the basic conditions of people’s lives.

In 100 BC material forms in Britain were changing fast, against a background of some continuity. Continuity was provided by the basic circular form of houses and settlements, which had a long history back to the Neolithic (Bradley 1998). In most areas of southern Britain people were abandoning hill forts and moving into smaller enclosures in both upland and lowland areas, but keeping the circular nature of their houses. These, in turn, were the basis for a series of cosmological manipulations of the world, based on the orientation of the house (doorways often faced east or southeast towards the sunrise) with propitious and less propitious areas which must have arisen in part from the lived experience of dwelling in a circular house and not just from ideas arising in the abstract and then applied to the house. Continuity also existed in the digging of pits and ditches, and the very acts of digging such large features (many of the ditches were kilometres long) would have helped shape and cement social relations. Artefacts and the bones of people and animals were placed in subterranean features of all types, the forms of which again helped channel thoughts and links between people.

From the first century BC onwards things started to change, although there was a great deal of regional variability which can’t be dealt with properly in a brief survey such as this. Rectangular buildings are first found in the mid-first century BC and the only previous non-circular structures had been temples and granaries, which might well have had sacred associations that came to infuse the new rectangular forms. Large, probably urban, settlements emerge as a novel feature in the immediately pre-Roman period. Silchester (which became the Roman civitas capital of Calleva Atrebatum) was founded between 20 and 21 BC prior to the Claudian invasion of AD 43 and had both rectangular buildings and an orthogonal ground plan from the start, features that were previously [p. 439 ↓] thought to have arrived only with the Roman invasion. The widespread nature of these novel forms of architecture is hinted at by similar plans at Heybridge and possibly also Abingdon. Claudian Silchester was laid out on an east-west axis, some 45° from
the late Iron Age south-east-north-west axis, showing that the Iron Age innovations were not always seen as signs of beneficial progress by some Romans, who wanted to use town plans to reify their power and not to have the possibility undermined by innovating Iron Age dynasts. These new urban forms were central to emerging large-scale polities with a well defined elite and kings. The king’s power was best exemplified and mobilized through objects like coins, which bore the king’s name from the first century bc onwards, as well as various symbols derived from Rome or transformed from Roman originals. Early in the first century bc wheel-turned pots were made for the first time in Britain, bringing about a much greater range and standardization of forms, which in turn must have responded to new foodstuffs, sauces and wine stemming from Roman forms of dining and celebration. The new pots were often painted in designs quite unlike older Iron Age types, so that pottery and food together created a new set of sensibilities in people. Moving into the first century ad, Roman pottery types, such as Samian, quickly moved into households across Britain and these included houses still built on the older circular pattern as well as those in new rectangular forms. Not everyone wanted or could acquire such new forms, but even small rural sites in southern Britain yield up finds of Samian, indicating that the new types penetrated deeply (Millett 1990).

Richly decorated forms of metalwork show complex patterns of change. In the second and early first centuries bc much material labelled ‘Celtic’ art, that is, bronze, iron and gold work decorated with abstract and figurative motifs, concerned the human body, being made up of weapons and torcs (Hutcheson 2004; Jope 2000). Power seems to have resided in the body of the powerful person. This changed during the first century bc, when personal ornament became more mass-produced and less spectacular (torcs and weapons become less common and brooches are made in much larger numbers to standard designs). The emphasis of virtuoso craftspeople, in some areas of the country at least, is now on horse gear and chariot fittings, making power less personal and more generalized, a fact reinforced by the commonness of horses on coins. This emphasis on horses and chariots continues into the Roman period, especially in areas like East Anglia, showing marked continuities before and after the Roman invasion. Also, in the first century ad, more complex forms of brooches make a comeback, often utilizing techniques developed initially in the Iron Age, such as enamelling as well as motifs derived from ‘Celtic’ art, like the triskele. For reasons that are poorly understood, people
after the Roman invasion were drawing on forms and materials with a long history to them, grounding some of their claims to power and sociability in the past.

As should be obvious from this brief sketch there are complex histories here, involving both people and materials, as well as continuity and change. New forms imposed novel sets of sociability. The patterns of daily life in a rectangular stone-built structure were quite different from those in a round wattle-and-daub house, not to mention the smells, sights and sounds in the two cases. Wheel-turned pottery took production out of the hands of the majority, making it the preserve of a few specialists; the new food and drink contained within such pots presaged novel tastes, using the word in both its senses. For the elite and some of the less well connected there were subtle shifts in personal ornament and the panoply of power, with complex and contradictory changes across the two centuries. Clothing, furniture, roads and drains have not even been mentioned but burrowed deep into people's social beings. The introduction and deployment of so many different forms would have re-educated people in a fundamental manner, yielding up a new sensory and social universe in which the old and the new combined in exciting or disconcerting ways. Becoming Roman did mean thinking and feeling differently, but the introduction of novelty was not primarily through literature or rhetoric, but mainly through artefacts and a new stylistic universe. Roman forms were not imposed from the outside, but grew up in Britain as a combination of local types and materials with long histories with outside influences, from both Mediterranean culture and neighbouring Gaul (Gosden 2004).

To use an expression come down to us from the Roman period we can agree that ars longa, vita brevis (art is long but life is short), with material forms enduring in a way that people cannot. But occasionally human generations are played out in periods of rapid change, such as the one we feel ourselves to be living in at present, and during the course of a human lifetime people are called upon by objects to change their mode of being. Not everyone heeds such [p. 440 ↓] calls, with some sticking with the older ways, but even these would seem like deliberate conservativism, having quite a different impact from when they are a general norm.
Conclusion

The following points are key to the argument I have developed here. Artefacts can exist as a mass in which they follow stylistic and formal logics of their own. This is because individual makers operate within an overall tradition, working to originality within that tradition. The past forms that objects take help shape and channel the choices made in the present. Because objects exist to a degree independently of people they shake not just the actions of the makers, but also give rise to categories of thought and notions of sensibility. People as social beings can be shaped in how they think and how they feel by objects. Ideas and feelings do not exist in cultural forms in a manner prior to things, but are created partly by them. The process of moving forms or decorations from one medium to another, for instance from baskets to pots, decontextualizes them, making them suitable for abstract thought. Once elements of material culture exist in an abstracted form then they can be manipulated imaginatively, unconstrained by the nature of the materials from which they are made. Abstract representation and things exist in a complex dialectic, by which one can influence the movement between the concrete and the abstract. We can start to see the full complexity of this process. Material culture is vital to the notion of embodied or distributed intelligence. Ideas such as scaffolding are not sufficient in order to understand material things, with the equal partnership hypothesis making much better sense, as long as we have a real idea of what both people and things can contribute from their side of the partnership.

Looking at how artefacts act en masse and at a distance from people calls into question a whole range of entities that we take for granted, from individual people to larger abstractions such as culture. In almost all views of our social and cultural worlds, people and cultures in their various different ways have been seen as active elements and material things as passive. But if it can be shown that objects educate people’s senses, and thus their basic appreciation of the world, they help shape and determine sequences of actions in making, using and exchanging things, and they also give rise to thought, then a very different notion of the relationship between people and things comes about, throwing into question many of our assumptions about the relations between people. What it means to be an intelligent human turns centrally on our ability to act as competent social beings. We need to be able to mobilize the material world
in order to be an effective social actor and we do this not under conditions of our own choosing but partly through following sets of rules laid down by objects. Objects, in turn, have their own long-term histories beyond that of the individual life span, so that we are educated into a sense of what it means to be a social actor through our sensory and intellectual relations with things.

Artefacts create categories and forms of thought. Indeed, the general concept of a category may derive from containers, such as pots or baskets, with a category containing a series of individual instances joined by some form of resemblance. Similarly, an understanding of number, weight, geometry, sequence and duration arises from both making and using things, providing a broad material substrate for thought. Cosmologies, such as the earth-bowl and sky-basket found among Puebloan peoples, are more specific instances of thought shaped by materials. The power of artefacts to shape and direct our thought and speech should be no surprise when we think that many objects were made in contemporary forms before we were born and may continue in those forms after we die. Cars have changed in their details since the late nineteenth century but are still, in the twenty-first, recognizably descended from older forms. No one alive today pre-dates the car. How long such forms will last is unknown, but we can see that materially and socially effective forms may have considerable durability even in periods of rapid change.

Material culture, especially in its long-term manifestations, raises many challenges for how we conceive of ourselves as people, as participants in cultural forms and as historically grounded beings. We are just starting to assimilate the depth of our involvement with the material world and to glimpse its power to shape us. An openness to what objects require from us may be key to our intellectual and social lives in the present and future, as well as to a rounded understanding of the past. Much new work can and should be carried out following a new emphasis on material culture. Both the social evolutionary and structural-Marxist views discussed above had a definite view of politics and political relations (often judged through the degree of hierarchy between people). Politics has been lost from more recent approaches. If we take the view that politics concerns forms of association and also that associations always involve people and things, both elements of which have their requirements, then new views of politics are possible. The band, tribe, chief-dom and state model prevalent for so long in so many approaches to prehistory was something of a hybrid view in that
material arrangements in subsistence and living space together with the use of surplus combined together with social relations. Relations between people were always primary and active, with the material role having a passive, supportive role at best. If we have to think what objects want and how these wants evolve over long periods of time then we are forced to consider new axes of association ranging from cultures of intimacy where relations between people and things are direct and unmediated to cultural forms in which interpretations of the object world are the province of the few, carried out on behalf of the many, who never have access to the full range of built or mobile forms of material culture. There is a shift in power structures of knowledge, from non-discursive forms of knowing and being deriving from direct sensory contact with the things to the interpretive structures possible and necessary once discursive knowledge and representation become key. The links between knowledge and power, so crucial since at least the work of Foucault, can be refined around varying forms of knowledge which implicate in turn different sets of relationships with the world. Politics and association could again become central issues in archaeology to the same degree, but in a different manner from how they figured for the social evolutionists.

The nature of and links between the senses, people’s overall sensibilities and the emotions become key in a way that they have never been for archaeology (Edwards et al. in press; Gosden in press). It is less a question of what people felt (using that word in both its senses) about any particular object or event, but more an issue about the conditions of knowledge and their long-term generation and changes. Archaeology’s great knowledge of material culture could be put to new uses if considered from the vantage point of the senses and the emotions, and the rather pernickety archaeological attention to material details (the squiggles on pots, the flanges on metal axes or stone tool knapping debris) could be put to theoretically informed use when thought of in terms of sense and sensibility.

It is hard to resist the impression that a new paradigm is emerging through a combination of neuroscience, robotics, artificial intelligence, animal intelligence and an interest in material culture through archaeology and anthropology. These last two disciplines are ahead of some elements of the new game in that we have both theory and methods that can be applied to the material world and human involvements in it. The simultaneous creation of the social and the material is one of the miraculous aspects of human existence and is at last being given the attention it deserves.
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