

Thinking Through Things

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On Thursday 7th December a book launch was held for a new volume *Thinking Through Things*. Edited by A Henare, M Holbraad and S Wastell and published by Routledge.

The book is clearly of interest to anyone in material culture studies. The primary theme is concerned with transcending any dualism between things and concepts, for which purpose there is considerable engagement with epistemological and ontological issues. The intention is not to develop a new theory, but rather to affirm an analytical methodology, that anthropologists could utilise to gain insights in their various studies. The inspiration is quite clearly the work of Marilyn Strathern, and the degree to which this clearly represents a cadre of younger scholars working enthusiastically to related themes is testimony to her inspiration at Cambridge. After Strathern the other key influences would be the Brazilian anthropologist Viveiros de Castro who has been debating related issues with Strathern at Cambridge. The introduction works through the general concepts surrounding perspectivism that was central to these debates and the degree to which these raise such ontological questions.

The most impressive achievement of the book as a whole is the way these ambitious analytical debates are tied to a constantly high level of scholarship and ethnographic depth that characterise the individual contributions. The papers are much too rich to be constrained within any single theme. For example Amiria Henare's chapter concerns the interpretive flexibility with which they key treaty that bound the Maori and the colonialists has been dealt with in the subsequent period. She demonstrates how this interpretive flexibility is not something that came from the generic West but is grounded in Maori transformative and dynamic genres. A similar point is made by Wastell through showing that while the envisaging of Western law by the Swazi of Southern Africa as encompassing, was presaged by their notions of divine kingship, this was not an aspect of cultural continuity as conservative. Rather they should be seen as consummate modernists.

Another interesting pair of papers includes a revision of Alfie Gell's book *Art and Agency* by James Leach based on research he has conducted on collaborations between artists and scientists in Cambridge. Gell is also employed by Pedersen on shamanist ontologies in Mongolia and in a chapter by the PNG anthropologist Andrew Moutou on switching our conceptualisation of museums from issues of classification to issues of how people conceive of loss (something close to my own current work). Also based in PNG is a sparkling essay by Reed on smoking amongst prisoners in Port Moresby.

The most curious aspect of this book, however, is its first sentence. This states 'what would an artefact-oriented anthropology look like, if it were not material culture?' I found this slightly weird since my own conception of material culture is of a field in which people do not by and large define themselves in a semi-disciplined form, making it quite hard to see it as something one excludes oneself from. Rather, as one hopes is the case with this weblog, it is more a welcoming and inclusive space for people with shared interests and an eclectic base. The sentence is elaborated upon in the introduction largely by separating out the transcendence of the dualism of thing/concept

from that of subjects/objects. Actually I think this is not at all an accurate description of the papers that follow. Several, such as Empson's paper on Mongolia, seem to me quite clearly exemplifications of the concept of objectification and the way a Strathernian approach to relationships can best be understood through exploring the process of objectification itself which as is clear in Strathern's own work certainly implicates issues of subjects and objects. But the volume's introduction does lead to an intriguing result. I felt the fullest exemplification of this desire for separation comes in Holbraad's paper on the concept of mana which is also applied to a case study of his own fieldwork in which he asserts that one cannot distinguish between the concept of power and the actual powder as used by Cuban diviners. This is expertly done and I wholeheartedly recommend the chapter in question. But what intrigues me is that here it probably is the case that the degree of focus on this powder/power concept/thing ends up with the author paying relatively little regard to something that has been core in material culture studies which is the being of the Cuban diviner. In other words that appreciating that we have here a rather different kind of 'object' should in turn lead an appreciation that we have a rather different kind of subject. This then has a paradoxical, but I think highly significant result. The separation from material culture might have been an attempt to preserve a more central social anthropology. But it is clear that by narrowing the brief of the introduction the result (if the authors had actually followed such advice), would have not been to make the book more anthropological but actually less so. As I have argued in my introduction to the book *Materiality* (2005, Duke University Press), I think we should by now be beyond such issues and one of the most powerful contributions of material culture studies is to try and represent the vanguard of anthropology as a whole. An anthropology that no longer feels any such need to ground itself only in concepts such as society and social relations on the one hand, nor take refuge in cognitive studies on the other, but one that is comfortable with the idea of a prior materiality within which a more specific social anthropology can flourish. In short material culture is not a subset of social anthropology but more the other way around. Material culture is a condition for anthropology itself.

Such a material culture adds to anthropology but subtracts nothing. The problem is that this is a relatively new understanding of anthropology, and while adventurous in some ways these Cambridge anthropologists were quite conservative in others. To be frank, I suspect they chickened out of any direct identification with material culture since they were scared that the term might still have a somewhat lower status than mainstream social anthropology. Something which may reflect their parochialism, since in general I don't think this is a fear that holds much ground these days. To use the term would not then be a commitment to any particular approach, since again as this weblog shows it is both relaxed and eclectic. It is merely an acceptance that materiality is one of the necessary engagements of a larger anthropology.

Ultimately, however, whether people call themselves material culture or not is of limited interest, what matters is the quality of the work and the quality of the insights. And, whether the authors like it or not, this is a volume of considerable interest and consequence to anyone working in the field of material culture studies, with many exemplary chapters.