

## Tinkering Through Material Culture

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Review of "Thinking Through Material Culture: An Interdisciplinary Perspective" by Carl Knappett (2005); Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press.

[Editorial note: and see [Martin Holbraad's response to Danny Miller's review on this site of the book \*Thinking Through Things\*](#) as a cross-reference to this review and for an interesting discussion of some of the limits of the category of material culture...]

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After agreeing that it does indeed have a great cover, it was indicative of how clichés come to exist when a colleague picked up Knappett's book from my desk before I'd even had a chance to start it and began to read. After a minute or so she put it down with a sigh and said, 'hmm, well I disagree completely with the first few paragraphs of the introduction'. I thought to myself that this could not possibly be the case. She must surely be exaggerating. How could anyone say anything so controversial in the opening gambit? Overall I have to say that she was right.

One of the main problems with this text is that it has no real thesis. Knappett is a 'rebel without a cause' in his attempt to carve out a niche for this book. Indeed, the idea that dualistic thought has hindered the social sciences is far from new. Moreover, there are not that many people, scholars or otherwise, who have any real qualms with accepting or even exploring existential,

phenomenological, poetic, post-modern, symbolic or the many other types of non-Descartian modes of being-in and understanding the world. From his preface, we should acknowledge and sympathise with the difficult interdisciplinary task that he has set out for himself. One is nearly ready to suspend disbelief in order to tolerate the omission of certain details in lieu of this idealised project. This is difficult to do for two reasons however. The first, ironically enough, is that Knappett is his own worse enemy in straying from the interdisciplinary path and providing what is largely a conventional cognitive archaeology point of view (unless he feels that examining his own coffee cup is some sophisticated new form of illusory satire in auto-ethnography).

The second is that he himself has no inhibitions in taking to task some significant perspectives and their key advocates. For instance, his understanding of Lakoff & Johnson's work on metaphor is dated. They have written extensively since the last citation he uses from the late 1980s. Most notably their *Philosophy in the Flesh* (1999) is one of the many texts that would undermine his claims to innovation regarding the relationship between mind, body and materiality. Furthermore, his criticism that Tilley relies almost solely "for his cognitive slant on the work of just two cognitive psychologists..." (p.103) is completely inaccurate. Ignoring that Lakoff is a cognitive linguist, it is clear that Tilley is far from a cognitive theorist. He relies as much on James Fernandez (1991), Game & Metcalfe (1996) and many others as he does on Lakoff & Johnson.

In terms of significant absences, the most obvious is that Knappett has nearly completely ignored the contributions of some of the most significant thinkers in material culture studies over the past decades (Buchli 2004), with the exception of his exhaustive coverage of the French *Matière à Penser* School. Even if one does not like the work or the perspective of the people in the material culture group at University College London, it is simply reckless for a British based archaeologist to ignore their achievements and fail to cite over eighty percent of them when writing a book about this topic. He performs this intellectual dishonesty, it would seem, as a smokescreen to an American audience. That is, to make this book seem more original than it is. It is clear that nothing like this could have been published by a British publisher aware of the real state of affairs in the field. In fact, even though he does reference two individual scholars from this group (one of which he unfoundedly challenges as described above) he does not overtly mention in the text the impacts of this 'school of thought' or the existence of the JMC as such (for which he is obviously aware since he then cites his own publication in that Journal). As I have suggested, he has most likely done so deliberately in order to give his book novelty value. What's more, for someone who has written an entire chapter on Social Network Theory (chap. 5), Knappett demonstrates a shocking double standard by disregarding so many of the relevant people in this academic network.

The best chapter in this volume comes from the material in his own empirical research on Minoan cups in Crete (chap 7). Even this chapter is not exhaustively situated into a socio-historical context. It is largely a descriptive example. For instance, he mentions the relevance of burial graves in relation to symbolically charging objects involved in burial assemblages but more detail would have been helpful (p.136). Still he convincingly makes the case for how Middle-Bronze Age ceramic vessels have come to stand for 'Minoanness'. What is interesting is that it is in this grounded archaeological case study that Knappett's promised interdisciplinary perspective is materialised somewhat. It is here that he is finally able to chronicle the ways in which the cups exhibit

consistencies in variation that reflect a comprehensive cycle of other Minoan transformations in relation to wider issues involving production and consumption. But the most important lesson learnt at this late point in the book is that he should stick to what he knows and dim down his aspirations towards theory building or attempting to understand modern material culture.

It is interesting that this volume tries to coax material culture studies back into the realm of archaeology. Indeed, the text explicitly makes the claim that archaeology is the privileged home for this approach and conceptual focus. Yes it goes on to say that we are in an interdisciplinary era where material culture studies can exist everywhere. But it nonetheless overtly stipulates that “of all the disciplines, it is archaeology that needs material culture most” (Knappett 2005:1). Most art historians, architects or consumer designers would surely question this. Perhaps these disciplines are somehow seen as less worthy or less dependant on tangible things? Yet at this post-interdisciplinary crossroads, we should be lenient about the intellectual possession of what is becoming known as a rejuvenated interest in the cultural understanding of human-material worlds. Modified extract from Laviolette, P. (2006) Material Culture 10 Years On – Disciplinary Exodus and the Tin Commandments. [Cambridge Archaeological Journal](#). 16 (2): 253-256.

### *References*

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