

On Multiple Ontologies and the Temporality of Things

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An interesting book called *Thinking Through Things* (2007), edited by Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastel (see earlier discussion on this site, starting on Dec. 14, 2006), proposes that we think of ethnographic otherness in terms of multiple ontologies. Thus Holbraad reports that Cuban Ifa diviners tell him a certain red powder is power. He argues that in order to take this assertion seriously, we--those of us who are not Ifa diviners--must understand that their red powder exists within a radically different ontology from ours. It's not that there is one thing, powder, which diviners interpret in a certain way that differs from ours. Rather, in this alternative world, that's what the powder is.

Now in certain respects this is an appealing version of a familiar, if highly unstable, ethnographic move. If Azande say witches exist, the traditional ethnographer's first responsibility is to take them at their word (though the very act of writing tends to sabotage that epistemic stance). And certainly, against the Eurocentric self-certainties of nearly all other academic disciplines, this responsibility to alterity grounds one of anthropology's distinctive contributions to knowledge and its ethics.

But Henare et alia would, I think, argue that the Azande example doesn't go far enough, since at the end of the day, the usual treatment turns on reducing their statements about witches into nothing more than different interpretations of a reality the Azande share with those of us who are not Azande. In contrast, the editors assert that the claim about multiple ontologies is not just a matter of different interpretations or epistemologies. Ifa powder really is power.

Now there are various questions one might raise about this assertion. We might, for instance, ask for a more precise analysis of the semantics and pragmatics of the word the authors translate as "is," a notoriously difficult linguistic and philosophical problem. We might also wonder how the Cuban diviners in my old neighborhood in New York managed to converse with me and otherwise handle relations among the distinct ontologies they seem to inhabit. But what I want to point to here is a consequence that seems to follow for any attempt to make sense of the temporality.

The notion of radically different ontologies, if I read the authors correctly, seems inadvertently to render the very temporality of things incomprehensible, and to confine them within static realities. In material terms, history often reflects people's capacity to respond to the things around them in new ways. They see new possibilities in what had always been there. The world may surprise them. When people see new possibilities, it is often because they have discovered something new about their material surround. As things enter new contexts, they enter into new human purposes, afford new kinds of actions, and suggest new projects (see Keane 2003, 2008). If this is so, it seems to follow from two characteristics of material things. First, material things cannot be reduced to whatever happens to be found in concepts. Henare et al's invitation to rethink the relationship between "concepts" and "things" is certainly full of promise. But if we simply collapse the distinction, we are likely to overlook this: at any given moment there remains something about them that is unknown or unnoticed. Second, it is because things in their very materiality exceed any particular concepts, times, and projects, that they persist across different concepts, times, and

projects. They enter into quite distinct concepts, times, and projects.

From this perspective, then, the red powder of which Ifa diviners speak cannot be confined to that singular ontology in which red powder really “is” power, and “is not” whatever someone who is not an Ifa diviner thinks it is. In order to get at the historicity of people and their things, we need to understand things in ways that do not reduce them to some stable essence, to the particularity of a certain context.

If there were an essence—which I think is implicit in the idea of multiple ontologies--then things would never suggest anything new, beyond what is already known about them given the terms of any particular ontology. They would be like the US Constitution, according to Antonin Scalia: no one would ever get past the original intent of their creators. Things would have no futures, since there would, in principle, be no link between one ontology (the present) and another (the future or the past). Indeed, we might go so far as to say, people would have no futures either, to the extent they would always already be full masters of any conceptual universe they might find themselves within. There could never be any surprises, material or conceptual. But the importance of things for people lies, in part, in the ways they may contribute to new futures. They suggest new possibilities and, given certain novel conjunctions and shifts in experience, can steer people’s attention to new aspects of the world. The postulate of multiple ontologies, in its most radical form, seems to erect insuperable barriers between different parts of people’s present worlds, as well as between their pasts and possible futures.

References

Keane, Webb 2003. Semiotics and the Social Analysis of Material Things. *Language and Communication*, 23: 409-425.

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