

Introduction: Biographies of Things

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How do things relate to people? This is a much-discussed topic of recent years. While it originally lay in the domain of sociologists and anthropologists, it has now very much entered the intellectual world of anyone who deals with material culture, in whatever form. The study of objects is also intimately related to other debates, for instance over agency, art, the life histories of people, and the interplay between things and people.

As an archaeologist, I am used to looking at objects and considering when and where they were made, by whom, and for what purpose; also what happened to them when they were considered to be at the end of their ‘use-lives’ (which may not mean ‘useless’ in the sense of non-functional, merely that they were no longer needed for their original purpose). In all these ways one can consider an artefact to have had a ‘life’. The life of an artefact is different from the life of a biological being in various ways, however. An artefact cannot assume a physical existence without, ultimately, commands from a human actor (I ignore for present purposes the facility at making ‘tools’ which some animals show); although one may object that in today’s world, and increasingly in tomorrow’s, robots make things, robots can (so far) only make things under the orders of humans. However entangled the world of humans and the world of objects, artefacts are what the word says: objects made through human ‘art’ or skill.

Objects, things, can be referred to in various ways; the term one uses gives some indica-

tion of what the author intends. Thus the anthropologist Daniel Miller writes a book called simply ‘Stuff’¹ – actually about the reasons why people accumulate things – and another about the ‘comfort of things’;² Marie Kondo³ writes books about how to ‘spark joy’ by ‘de-cluttering’, also known as ‘tidying up’, i.e. getting rid of things (no doubt essential in tiny Japanese apartments); the joy of de-cluttering extending to people as well as things, since some of her clients have got rid of the ‘clutter’ that was their husbands. Most people in ordinary life probably do not think about what objects mean or what their life consists of; they do their shopping, buy their ‘stuff’, and take it home, where it lives until someone decides to spark joy by de-cluttering it.

But stuff is more than what we accumulate in our lives. Objects, artefacts, play a role in all that we do; hence the assertion, now a familiar trope, that people and objects are

¹ Miller 2010.

² Miller 2009.

³ Kondo 2014; Kondo 2016.

entangled;⁴ this metaphor of entanglement is of course also used in quantum physics to express the relationship between particles that cannot be measured separately but only as a system (Schrödinger's *Verschränkung*). I am not sure whether the social scientists who developed the notion of entanglement in modern artefact studies consciously took the metaphor over from physics or not; to me its adoption smacks not a little of pretentiousness, since there are easier ways to express human-object relationships in the English language.

The study of object biographies is usually taken as going back to a seminal paper by Kopytoff.⁵ Here are some of the questions that Kopytoff asked near the beginning of the paper:

- What, sociologically, are the biographical possibilities inherent in its [an object's] 'status' and in the period and culture [from which it emanates]?
- How are these possibilities realised?
- Where does the thing come from and who made it?
- What has been its career so far?
- What are the recognised 'ages' or 'periods' in the thing's 'life' and what are cultural markers for them?
- How does the thing's use change with its age?
- What happens to it when it reaches the end of its usefulness?

All these are questions which archaeologists now recognise as regular aspects of our attempts at understanding the role of objects in past societies. Kopytoff gives the example of the changing role of a house, or the different status of a car in the US or Africa.

He also considers the whole question of commoditisation, the process by which 'things' do or do not become 'commodities'; not my present concern, though important in the understanding of material culture, past and present. But the distinction between the different role of things in small-scale and complex societies is an important one; in the former, which is what I as a prehistorian work with, things were mostly what Kopytoff calls 'singular', that is, things that are protected from commoditisation – which is not to say, of course, that some items did not become commoditised during prehistory. Metals, in ingot form, for instance, may have been one such.

Janet Hoskins has considered the relationship between agency and object biographies in a number of articles and books. In her 1998 book she used the example of a group of women and men narrating their lives through their possessions; in this work she was trying 'to define a new category of "biographical objects", which occupy one pole of the continuum between gifts and commodities and are endowed with the personal characteristics of their owners'.⁶ Subsequently she has referred to several 'experiments with biographical writing about objects', dividing them into two dominant forms:

- (1) those 'object biographies' which begin with ethnographic research, and which thus try to render a narrative of how certain objects are perceived by the persons that they are linked to, and
- (2) efforts to 'interrogate objects themselves' which begin with historical or archaeological research, and try to make mute objects 'speak' by placing them in a historical context, linking them to written

⁴ Hodder 2012.

⁵ Kopytoff 1986.

⁶ Hoskins 1998.

sources such as diaries, store inventories, trade records, etc.⁷

The first she sees as mainly practiced by anthropologists, the second by archaeologists. She herself clearly belongs to the first group. For archaeologists she cites the work of Lynn Meskell (Egyptian burial practices)⁸ and David Fontijn (bronze depositions in the Netherlands)⁹. She also considers how the work of Alfred Gell has influenced the debate about the role of art and artefacts.¹⁰

To what extent is it really possible for those working on remote periods of the past to ‘interrogate objects themselves’? Isn’t it inevitable that we will be reduced to guesswork, to speculation, about things which are essentially unknowable? This depends, of course, on your view about what can truly be ‘known’ about the ancient past, particularly that part of it not enlightened by textual sources. This is a debate that has been running for at least thirty years, ever since the reaction to the scientific, or New, or processual, turn in archaeology of the 1960s and 1970s. Some reacted to what they saw as the aridity of scientifically oriented archaeology by attempting to write a story of the past based on de-constructing the thought processes involved, and then re-constructing them through devices such as narrative. A typical work in this genre is that by Mark Edmonds, who unapologetically wrote a book on the Neolithic without any *apparatus criticus*, starting each chapter with a narrative, or imagined scene in the Neolithic world he was describing.¹¹ Another well-known example is the report on the fieldwork at Leskernick, Cornwall,

by Barbara Bender, Christopher Tilley and Susan Hamilton,¹² where the strictly archaeological information is submerged in a ‘narrative’ – of the excavation as much as of the ancient past being investigated. Obviously these narratives are not matters that can be ‘known’, but that was not the intention of the exercise.

Modern artefact studies in fact have a range of sophisticated means of providing information about the past – and thus about their own lives. Some of these come from advances in compositional analysis, which enables us to pin down where and how they were made; but others relate rather to the identification of ‘home areas’ where particular types were dominant, and distribution patterns that give information on the same artefacts outside their home area. Studies of Middle Bronze Age women’s clothing ornaments are a classic case.¹³ I have myself attempted to do similar things for other objects with a particularly personal use, such as razors.¹⁴ Of course, in the strict sense these are not ‘known’ nor can they be; but as with scientific hypotheses, it would seem unreasonable to withhold provisional assent to a belief in what they appear to be telling us, until such time as further investigations prove otherwise.

Returning to what Marie Kondo calls de-cluttering, one wonders to what extent the widespread practice of disposing of apparently usable objects in ancient times can be illuminated through such a notion. In Bronze Age studies, where I work, enormous quantities of bronze were deposited in the ground and never recovered. There has been a long debate

⁷ Hoskins 2006, 78.

⁸ Meskell 2004.

⁹ Fontijn 2002.

¹⁰ Gell 1998.

¹¹ Edmonds 1999.

¹² Bender – Hamilton – Tilley 1997.

¹³ Wels-Weyrauch 1989.

¹⁴ Harding 2000, 191f.

over the reasons for this (hiding valuables in times of trouble, storing scrap metal for re-use, gifts to the gods, etc), without any one explanation accounting for all instances. One explanation that has been advanced might amount to de-cluttering: simply getting rid of things that had been superseded, for instance getting rid of bronze objects as superior iron ones became common. Actually I doubt this can account for more than a tiny amount of the total, but the idea of simply 'getting rid of stuff' is a persuasive notion, whatever the ultimate cause.

It is quite obvious that objects in the past, as in the present, came into being, had a use-life, and went out of use. You can call it birth, life and death if you like. Given the 'entangled' nature of our relationship with objects, it is how they interacted with people, what they tell us about the lives of the humans who created, used, and disposed of them, that we are trying to elucidate. In this sense, the life of objects is no more nor less than the life of humans, of ourselves.

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