

BOOK REVIEWS

HARVEY, PENNY; ELEANOR CONLIN CASELLA; GILLIAN EVANS; HANNAH KNOX; CHRISTINE MCLEAN; ELIZABETH B. SILVA, NICHOLAS THOBURN; KATH WOODWARD (eds). *Objects and Materials: A Routledge Companion*. New York: Routledge. 2013. 422 p. ISBN 9780415678803 (hardback, 2013), 978-0-415-67880-3 (hardback, 2014), 978-1-13-889941-4 (paperback, 2015).

This weighty volume has come out of the exciting interdisciplinary work carried out at Manchester's Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change (CRESC), which has hosted some path-breaking conferences and workshops and a good number of scholars from the social sciences and humanities. The book's thirty-six essays, written by over forty international scholars from many disciplines, include a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches. This certainly justifies the first sentence of the introduction in which its authors, Penny Harvey and Hannah Knox, invoke the crazy Chinese encyclopaedia described by Borges and imported into social theory by Foucault in *Les Mots et les Choses (The Order of Things)*. *Objects and Materials* really is more of an explorer's companion than a guide along well-beaten paths!

To summarise the work briefly is nigh on impossible, and I can only mention a handful of the authors in this review. Broadly, the collection sets out to address a relatively new but now core question in social thought: What matters about objects? Thus the back cover and the main introduction and the introductory texts to the book's five sections rehearse a vocabulary that is familiar from humanities and social science investigations of the current condition: practice, relations (or relationality), mediation, agency (particularly non-human agency) and affect. The most prominently cited authors are, unsurprisingly, Gilles Deleuze and Bruno Latour, but it is perhaps the latter whose influence is most felt. This is also reflected in the editorial line that gives generous room to empirical illustrations but also to ethnographic investigation as a type of analytical work.

The book will interest readers from very divergent backgrounds with very different methodological toolkits (even mutually contradictory ones). Its strong anthropological and specifically its ethnographic content will appeal particularly to those already immersed in the literatures on socio-technical change, or the many different ways in which that small word, 'thing', has been subjected to scholarly scrutiny. A book about materiality published in the early twenty-first century is of more than academic importance. Several texts consider the shared crises that beset our times and which are increasingly framed as symptoms of earlier intellectual and even academic mistakes, notably of misplaced trust in the continuities of the material and object(ive) world. This is perhaps the area where Deleuzian thought, especially around the concept of 'affect', becomes particularly prominent: it gives the volume's authors tools for keeping in view both instability and resistance to change, a vocabulary for resisting the temptation to privilege *either* human subjectivity *or* material objectivity.

The first section, 'Material Qualities', offers provocations to think in new ways about what exactly the material could be, or how it could be understood, and thus rehearses

philosophical questions around epistemology and ontology and subjective experience (e.g. an interview with the artist Helen Barff). Those approaching the volume for resources with which to come to grips with technical change and power will find insightful essays on infrastructure, including a particularly informative view of irrigation systems by Maurits W. Ertsen and clear texts by Chandra Mukerji and Penny Harvey on the state's logistical power and solid waste respectively.

The second part is titled 'Affective Objects', the third 'Unsettling Objects'. Both sections include texts that explicitly draw out emotive responses as they consider material, often fleshly processes of human suffering, but also the virtual dimensions of experience. Both consider time, objects and experience altogether in often eloquent writing. Morten Axel Pedersen's ethnographic essay, in part three, makes a particularly sharp set of theoretical observations about what he calls the 'fetish of connectivity' in contemporary social thought. Another text worth signalling is the engaging, clear and informative chapter by Matthew Fuller and Andrew Goffey, who write about innovations in computing and their effects from their cultural-studies backgrounds.

Part four turns to 'Interface Objects'. Here authors survey the capacities that objects have in different domains, such as in the household (Noortje Marres) or bio-digital processes (Adrian Mackenzie) and, of course, the ways these are animated in human interaction. In this section authors turn more overtly to one of the book's recurring themes, namely temporality, whether in relation to making environmental and financial futures (Hannah Knox and Martin Lenglet respectively) or making use of the past (Sarah Green). The fifth and final part, 'Becoming Object', deals with objects and materials across a range of social domains as emergent but also as what one might think of as stably unstable or consistently inconsistent. Depending on the reader's preferences, these texts may feel like an excess of self-consciously unsettling ideas and modish vocabulary, or like a timely intervention into the ways contemporary life could be rendered more adequately thinkable.

Chris McLean and Gillian Evans capture something of the volume's contribution more generally in their introduction to the final section, when they note that it seeks to focus in on 'repeated acts of material and conceptual differentiation' (p. 323), which I understand as the precise processes of creating words and things, and on how these shape practices and possibilities. Indeed, the final section's case studies throw into sharp and disquieting focus some of the many mundane and taken-for-granted material-semiotic practices in which people are caught up, whether they like it or not, whether these are somehow sanctioned or not. The empirical sources are drawn from the creation and use of scientific (Matei Candea), medical (Chris McLean) or population (Alexandra Hall and Jonathan Mendel) databases, patent law (Mario Biagioli) and urban regeneration (Gillian Evans). Putting these illustrations together with the rest of the book, and considering the insights about the generative powers of materials and objects spelled out throughout its chapters, it is a little disappointing that more space was not given to 'stuff' understood as either consumer desirables or infrastructures, which are part of the reason for the growing interest among sociologists and anthropologists in 'the material'.

The volume does not pretend to offer a uniform theoretical framework for the study of materials and objects. Nor does it appear to build consistently on a specific scholarly heritage despite the Deleuzian and Latourian references or, indeed, recurrent mentions of

Tim Ingold's anthropology and other (implicitly or explicitly) Heideggerian approaches to knowing, being and becoming. What is taken as given is that to make sense of the world as social thinkers or, indeed, as artists or activists, it is necessary to understand the world as complex and relational. On the other hand, the relationship between objects and materials is something that each text deals with on its own terms. And so some of them end up labouring what should be the obvious complexity, sometimes also shrouding the narrative in awkward neologisms or taking liberties with the English language. Fortunately the authors manage to say constructive and novel things about as philosophically a tricky terrain as this without getting stuck on binaries. In a (predominantly) textual work such as this there will always be pairings that both writer and reader know to be tricky, such as matter and affect, thing and object, detached and attached.

Without a doubt, the topics in *Objects and Materials* brush on many important problems in political life and scholarship. So it is still worth highlighting Graham Harman's text, 'Objects are the root of all philosophy', which takes aim at no less than 'several centuries' of 'anti-object-oriented trends' (p. 238) in philosophy. Harman also suggests that many scholars simply find grappling with the world outside the mind *boring*. I find the 'weird model of objects' (p. 245) that he proposes anything but boring. Still, what bores and what excites in this varied collection will depend quite simply on each reader's predispositions. How fortunate then that the expansive collection is available not only in the extremely expensive hard-back version but also electronically and in paperback.

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