

# MAKING MATERIALITY INTO AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL TOPIC: THE CASE OF WORK-AND-CONSUMPTION PRACTICES AND NARRATIVES

*(ETHNOGRAFEAST III PRESENTATION DRAFT – NOT AN ARTICLE)*

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## *1.*

From the three themes proposed by *Ethnografeast III* organisers, this presentation addresses the first one: “Beforehand: the agenda, the subject-matter, the categories”.

My aim here is to discuss some of the theoretical, empirical/ethnographic, and public sphere (meaning political and ethical) foundations for the building of a research topic, which for the moment I've been naming 'work-and-consumption identity practices and narratives'. I will regard this research topic from the viewpoint of a wider set of processes, that could be referred to as 'social constructions and uses of materiality'.

I will be discussing two connected ideas.

The first one is the practical (in daily life) – hence theoretical (for ethnography/anthropology) – relevance of materiality; I will pay a particular attention to the related power issues.

The second is the ability of consumption practices and narratives to serve the above as a field of inquiry, provided that said inquiry properly puts them in context (which applies to people, consumption subjects, as well as to consumption objects, consumption goods). Within this point I will discuss how the work-and-consumption option had unfolded from this stress on context.

## *2. The practical – hence theoretical – relevance of materiality and the power issues involved.*

Let me return briefly to my last fieldwork, which was carried out among machine operators in a fully automated glass container plant.

In such plants, molten glass is shaped into glass containers (bottles, jars, etc.) by automated, electronically controlled, forming machines. An operator is assigned to each one, answering for its proper running.

My departing research question was, in a nutshell: given their key position in the production process, and their attachment to a simultaneously sophisticated and human-dependent technological device, how would the social place of operators within the plant be constructed? What social things (besides material things) were they making, were they doing with their machines?

Well, of course the exclusively metallic, solid monster, tirelessly making bottles by itself, imposing its unquestionable presence and essence to the plant's occasional visitor, is but a chimera.

In fact, the levels of instability and complexity found in the technological process, the definitions of what technical efficiency could be, the degree of human-dependence assigned to the machine – briefly, everything

that builds the machine one deals with, the practical, the felt-as-real, the operative machine – are socially constructed, disputed, interpreted, within the dense, hierarchical, conflicting social space of the plant. Such diverse and competing practice-oriented representations are ever changing, but they are not time-unbounded: they have memory. They are locally made, context-sensitive, but bringing into the very operator's work post, right by the machine (indeed, into the operator's gesture and body) an entire world of technology providers, capital merging operations, stock markets, management fashions, consumption trends, locally claimed glass tradition, national labour policies and politics, etc., etc ..

Hence the machine is not metal-made. The machine is an inextricable matter-and-meaning relation. No answer would ever be provided to a hypothetical 'is this technologically-driven or culturally-driven' question about the operators' work practices.

Actually, as technology studies have been establishing for decades now, the very culture/technology (or culture/materiality) border is an endless and disputed work-in-process. This case study fully corroborates the well-known “social shaping of technology” (Mackenzie & Wajcman 1999) approach<sup>1</sup>: far from determining the social around it, the machine is built by it and built on it. This case study even corroborates the more radically ‘de-constructionist’ post-essentialist view (Grint & Woolgar 1997), insofar as the machine does not pertinently exist outside social relation, outside cultural discourse and interpretation. In this sense, yes, one could view the machine (or technology, or materiality) as a text and nothing but a text.

In so doing, however, maybe one would risk to miss a key part of the picture. Back to the glass machine operators, it is mandatory to mention their ability to mobilise the machine in the daily struggle they make to accomplish their job in an autonomy-oriented manner, taking hold of their work as a skilled and technically efficient action on the machine, rather than a subordinate, non-autonomous job of machine servants. This is done, at times, against particular organisational rules, and all the time against the general organisational spirit. So a multi-layered conflict arises, in which operators take as their main arguments the very materiality of production, the tangibility of the proper bottle vs. the poor-quality bottle – while others within the plant talk authority, profitability or market. The operators bind their technical practices to their social goals, and support those (social) practices through a legitimising rhetoric of technical efficiency and rightness.

The strength of their arguments doesn't rely, of course, on any kind of technological determinism, for the materiality they invoke is socially/culturally constructed. It is shaped, however, not into a text, a discourse, an interpretation, not into some kind of unbounded, floating thing. Materiality is socially/culturally shaped in a way that obliterates the shaping process, in a way that naturalises it, that pushes it outside the social, stressing its very material, tangible qualities.

For, as technology studies also teach us, building the social/technology frontier, although being an endless task, is an inescapable one. Studies on technological innovation show in what extent the (always provisional and contested) definition of such a border – hence the making of materiality as a-social – is required to bring

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<sup>1</sup> For related views and discussions, see also: Bijker, Hughes & Trevor (eds.) 1987; Hughes 1983; Latour & Lemmonier (eds.) 1994; Lemmonier (ed.) 1993; Noble 1984; Smith & Marx (eds.) 1994; (just a few examples from a huge literature). For particularly anthropology-oriented works, still within the ‘social shaping of technology’ surroundings, see, for example, Jamard et al (eds.) 1999; Lemmonier 1992; Pfaffenberger 1988; Pfaffenberger 1992.

into existence a new technological object (Akrich 1993; Latour 1992<sup>2</sup>). It is required to allow action.

In a related way, making materiality into an a-social thing is also what establishes it as a powerful social resource, insofar as a space of inter-subjectivity, of shared representations on something regarded as objective, is thus opened up. Part of my own ethnographic encounter with glass machine operators has taken place within that space, which provided us with a place to start empathy and relation.

Starting ethnography from such a place was, by the way, to follow an honourable tradition, for Malinowski (1961 [1922]: 5) himself reports having decided to start his Trobriandese fieldwork 'doing technology'. Malinowski was thinking of a socially neutral technology, a matter in which he could show interest while avoiding his natives' 'suspicion'. But he couldn't carry out his goal, because he was not yet mastering a key cultural code – language – and so the supposedly neutral technology was for him, at that point of his research, unreachable territory.

In the glass plant, the space of inter-subjectivity provided by the machine was obviously a contested and movable one: the operators' machine is not the graduate engineers' machine, though they partly overlap (otherwise, glass containers could not be produced in such a context). I had to choose which machine to consider and suspicion – or, at least, perplexity – obviously arose among those left aside. Constructed as tangible and objective, materiality becomes political.

## *2. The need to put consumption in context and the work-and-consumption option*

Similar issues of materiality and power (agency vs. domination, hegemony vs. appropriation, etc.) are obviously central to consumption practices and narratives, as well as to the consumption studies field itself, since its founding works (Appadurai (ed.) 1986; Bourdieu 1979; Douglas & Isherwood 1979; Miller 1987). Like technology, consumption appears, then, as a good place for studying social constructions and uses of materiality.

When designing such an object, the recent re-emergence of materiality, in the last decade or so, as a hot topic in anthropology (as well as in a number of other related fields), must of course be acknowledged<sup>3</sup>. As it is widely known, after having played a major role (that of palpable evidence) in the early, positivist anthropology, artefacts (and their social and technological processes of production and use) were dismissed as research topics in most (though not all) subsequent anthropological projects – for their very materiality came to mark them as rather obvious and irrelevant matters. Their formerly praised material opacity (which entitled them as valuable evidence) was now read as uninteresting social and cultural transparency. However, that material things are now back to anthropological research, under theoretical frames so far away from evolutionism or diffusionism, is in itself a strong illustration of their plasticity, of their relational character: a strong illustration, indeed, of how disparate the social constructions and uses of materiality can be.

It must be underlined, however, that the 'materiality' currently claimed as a research topic does not exactly match the common meaning of the word: non-material entities are often included, in an effort to construct the

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<sup>2</sup> Two quite enlightening cases, among a vast *corpus*.

<sup>3</sup> Besides a number of international conferences and sessions in conferences, as well as some thematic issues of leading journals, many articles and books could illustrate the topic's current 'hotness'. A sample of recent collections: DeMarrais, Gosden & Renfrew

new topic and to set its theoretical value (e.g. Geismar & Horst 2004; Hastrup 2005; Knorr-Cetina 2001; cf. also Fabian 2004). Yet the core of this new field still is “the very materiality of human artefacts as something demanding recognition” (Fabian 2004: 53). Hence the presence of ideas like ‘the multiple and sensuous qualities of material forms that give them particular powers and effects in social life’ (Geismar & Horst 2004: 7).

But would it actually be enlightening to talk about ‘particular effects’ of material entities, or about ‘material restraints’ to human action (Hastrup 2005: 133)? Or could the essentialist or determinist traps be around the corner?

A homology could be found between essentializing and taking from context, insofar as both dismiss relation. Early anthropology’s ethnographic collection of artefacts, thus removed from their context of production and consumption, essentialized them as ethnographic objects, as scientific specimens (Fabian 2004: 51-52). In a similar way, taking consumption goods from their technological, economic and political processes of construction would naturalise them, as if they would spontaneously materialise on supermarket shelves. And taking consumers from their (multiple and dynamic) social locations would have the same effect on consumption practices and, actually, on the very consumption goods. For instance, to suppose that the mp3 player owned by the working class teen, who got it through his own wage money, is exactly the same player owned by the middle class teen, who got it from his parents, would be to essentialize mp3 players – forgetting that every material object is an inherently relational entity. In fact, the matter-and-meaning inextricable relation that makes the object is not the same in both cases, though overlapping zones obviously exist. And those are ever changing, disputed lands, which call for ethnography.

Putting consumption in context through a work-and-consumption research topic seems to be a useful way to underline and understand people as relational entities, for work is a social place where the general fact that subjective identity is not an individual-authored construction, nor a limitless one (cf. Herzfeld 2004), becomes particularly visible. Additionally, a number of works has been pointing to an interesting diversity and complexity of relationships involving work and consumption (Du Gay 1996; Fantasia & Voss 2004; Foster 2005; Gartman 1999; Rothstein 2005; Sennett 2007).

Studying work-and-consumption practices and narratives means, then, to build an ethnographic relationship that could allow to follow the same people in their work and in their consumption lives, trying to reach an understanding of the way they articulate both fields when constructing their identity attachments and detachments.

Such a research topic, however, is not an immediate one, one that could enter ethnography by “smuggling” from the public sphere (Bourdieu 1989), for work and consumption are still looked at as separated, even opposite, identity arenas (e.g. Ransome 2005). Indeed, the very path of re-emergence of materiality as an anthropological topic seems to illustrate this divide. As it’s widely known, the main way back of ‘material culture’ topics into mainstream anthropology has been the consumption studies field: it has not been the technology studies, let alone the work/labour/production studies. In spite of being around for long now, both these fields have remained mostly in the margins of the discipline, unable to influence its major developments.

Could the completely different fate of consumption studies in this respect illustrate any kind of links between ethnography and the public sphere? Likely so. Why seems consumption, indeed, to be much more marketable as a research topic than work or technology? Could it be because of the latter's usual linkage with issues of inequality, domination, collective identity and collective action – while the former tends to be thought of rather in terms of choice, empowerment, individual identity and agency? And why should materiality look more appealing to the research agenda when related to the first set of ideas than to the second one? If we were to debate this under the ethnography and the public sphere focus, it would probably be useful to note that a “virtual disappearance of the Worker, at a symbolic level, along with the simultaneous symbolic elevation of the Consumer”, can be argued to have taken place in most media and street discourses (Fantasia & Voss 2004) and to be no neutral regarding chief economic, social and cultural contemporary processes. It would ease the social acceptance of flexible capitalism (Fantasia & Voss 2004) and facilitate consumer's identification to commercial brands (Foster 2005). In a partly related way, Sennett (2007) identifies an analogy between the typical attitude of the consumer and the short term focused self who uniquely fits the ‘culture of the modern capitalism’.

Talking about public sphere and ethnography unavoidably leads to talk about private sphere, for the biography, the ethical and political views of the ethnographer are likely to be more clearly involved in his/her ethnographic choices when public sphere issues arise. Therefore, some of my own personal views are weighing, too, in the building of this research topic.

### *3. To conclude*

Thus, from previous ethnography (the knowledge it built as well as the way it happened), from the identification of a main theoretical questioning axis (also suggested by previous ethnography), and from the consideration of public sphere and private sphere issues, a compound, against-the-stream, research topic has emerged. It will, in turn, shape the next ethnographic work, and this one will – or won't – validate its pertinence.

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