

A passion for things has taken hold in a great many fields, as subjects of inquiry and as a crucial source of evidence. The difficulties of working with material evidence are legendary; an interest in material objects and traces does not necessarily translate into direct engagement with them. It is primarily archaeologists who have successfully taken on these challenges. We provide an overview of the wisdom in practice articulated by contributors to this collection, delineating a repertoire of strategies by which archaeologists induce things to talk, building and refining interpretive scaffolding in ways calculated to counteract the risks of projecting “pre-understandings” onto the past. A PASSION FOR THINGS In recent decades, the arcana of archaeology have come sharply into focus as a subject and a resource that humanists and social scientists cannot afford to ignore, however resolutely text-based or wedded to face-to-face, “reactive” modes of inquiry they may be. The “in-depth study of things,” declare the editors of the *Object Reader* (Candlin and Guins 2009: 2), has taken shape in a sprawling diversity of research programs ranging from metaphysical interrogation of materiality as such, to probing analyses of the ways in which meaning and matter are entangled in specific objects and contexts of action. Object biographies have captured popular imagination, in the form of the wildly successful *History of the World in 100 Objects* (MacGregor 2010), and now figure as prominently in the history of science and technology as in art history and cultural studies (Daston 2008). This attention to objects – this appreciation of the dynamic, consequential social lives of things – has catalyzed the formation of a distinct interdisciplinary field of material culture studies (Myers 2001: 5), one that now has a history of its own in which the insights that set the field in motion are themselves subject to critical scrutiny. To insist that things be seen as a medium through which the social is articulated and meaning communicated is now decried as a “colonization of the object by the subject and the social” (Candlin and Guins 2009: 4), charged with trading in the very Cartesian oppositions between mind and matter it was meant to displace (Henare et al. 2007: 1-3). 2 The turn to things – objects, the body, artifacts, traces – is thus reinforced by renewed insistence that objects must be engaged in material as well as symbolic and social terms. In all these contexts object studies are compelling, not only because the stuff of lives lived is intrinsically interesting and is constitutive of these lives, but because it is invaluable as evidence. Thinking with (or through, or about) things has opened up otherwise inaccessible areas of inquiry and it has reconfigured our understanding of a great many longstanding topics of social scientific interest, from the dynamics of popular culture to the form and logic of political regimes (Auschlander 1996), from the condensation of value and the nature of commodities to the ramifying construction of social difference and solidarity (Appadurai 1986; Myers 2001). The brief for assembling *A History of the World in 100 Objects* was to “tell a history of the world that [had] not been attempted before,” one that is “truer,” more comprehensive and, crucially, “more equitable than one based solely on texts” (MacGregor 2010: xv, xxv, xix). Objects and traces have the potential to “give voice” to those who left no texts, to contest history as written by elites and victors, to bear witness to dimensions of life no one thought to tell, or actively suppressed. This commitment to explore the kinds of history that “only a thing

can tell”(MacGregor 2010: xxii) is not new. “History from below” has been championed at least since the Marxist Historians Group took shape in the UK after WW2, and it has antecedents dating to the 1930s (Beard 1935, Becker 1931). Although E. P. Thompson’s *Making of the English Working Class* (1963) is the most widely cited example, Hilton is especially interesting because his research on medieval peasantry led him to initiate, with archaeologist Phillip Rahtz, the excavation of a deserted medieval village at Upton (Goucestershire); evidence of people’s houses and everyday possessions had the potential, he thought, to enlarge the scope of inquiry beyond dependence on texts. Expanding on the tradition of class-based analysis, feminist, critical race, and postcolonial historians, to name a few, have demonstrated just how different history looks when centered on the lives of those who have largely been written out of account. But to tell these counterMaterial Evidence | 2015 4 histories – of the everyday, of habit and localized practice, of the marginal – requires considerable ingenuity, reading canonical texts against the grain, expanding the archive to include what had been dismissed as ephemera and, crucially, drawing on the non-textual evidence afforded by physical traces and material things. Historical archaeologists have been especially forthright in insisting that rigorous scrutiny of material evidence is not just a supplement to text-based histories but often the only resource we have for exposing and correcting “superficial and elitist...myths[s] for the contemporary power structure” (Glassie 1977: 29): the systematic distortions that arise from ignoring “the inarticulate” (Ascher 1974: 11), the “endless silent majority who did not leave us written projections of their minds” (Glassie 1977: 29). These themes are taken up by contributors to a recent discussion of “Historians and the Study of Material Culture” in the *American Historical Review* (Auslander et al. 2009) which begins with the observation that, “while some might still associate [the study of material culture] with objects found in museums or things from the remote past, it is in fact a field that takes an interest in all conceivable objects and every historical period”; it is especially relevant to any historical subject that takes as its subject a “concern for everyday life and the material circumstances of ordinary people” (AHR editor, Auslander 2009: 1355). Parallel arguments for attending to material evidence also figure in sociology, although for more strictly methodological reasons. In a classic of the 1960s the proponents of Unobtrusive Measures (Webb et al. 1966) made the case that, given the inescapable limitations of “reactive” methods, it is folly to proceed “simply by asking,” whether this takes the form of participant observation or structured interviews, surveys or experimental interventions. They detail a range of interactive dynamics and interviewer or intervention effects that arise from the ways in which subjects manage their self-presentation in response to what they perceive as the expectations of a research setting, compromising the internal and external validity of standard research methods in the social sciences (Webb et al. 1966: Chapter 1). The only way forward is to engage the resources of multiple methods, including underdeveloped strategies for using inadvertently produced physical traces as evidence of patterns of action, preference, and intention that survey respondents or interviewees might not themselves be aware of, or might be disinclined to disclose (Webb et al. 1966: 3, 34). In a vigorous renewal of the case for “revalorizing

sources marginalized by dominant social science,” Lee emphasizes the value of “ephemeral traces” of movement and interaction in a social environment – physical erosion or accretion, the litter discarded, the “performative opportunities” afforded by objects – as “caches of data” that make possible strategies of triangulation (Webb et al. 1966: XX). The principle here is that evidence from very different sources, in this case archival and material, should be mobilized as an independent basis for assessing the results of reactive methods (Lee 2000: 1, 8, 14). The Tucson “Garbage Project,” initiated by archaeologist William Rathje in the early 1970s and later expanded internationally, embodies a similar rationale; the systematic analysis of what we throw away, recovered from curbside garbage collection and through the excavation of landfill sites, often reveals patterns of consumption that stand in stark contrast with the results of surveys that depend on self-reports (Rathje and Murphy 1992). In all these areas, then, an enthusiasm for the capacity of material things and physical traces to function as evidence reflects an appreciation of their stubborn concreteness, the “brute intransigence of matter,” as Daston puts it (2008 [2004]: 11), by virtue of which they are sometimes seen as impartial witnesses to the past, bearing marks of their makers, their various uses, and the shifting configurations of meaning and action in which they have been implicated in the course of their travels. However enigmatic they may be, this “bony materiality” sustains a certain epistemic optimism, even when the more naïve aspects of a “positivist historiography of facts” have been abandoned (Daston 2008: 15-16). But for all this, a recurrent theme in the literature valorizing objects as subject and source is that there has been too little attention to things themselves. This concern figures prominently in reflection on formative examples of object studies dating to the 1990s. Gell rejected sociological and iconographical alternatives to the “aesthetic preoccupations” of then-contemporary anthropology of art on grounds that they effectively ignore “the art object itself”; they “look... only at the power [of the object] to mark distinctions” or treat it as a “species of writing” and consider only its symbolic meaning (1992: 43).⁵ Similarly, Corn took aim at “object myths” in the history of technology.

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