

MATERIALITY AND SOCIAL PRACTICE
TRANSFORMATIVE CAPACITIES OF INTERCULTURAL ENCOUNTERS

Edited by

Joseph Maran and Philipp W. Stockhammer

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1.

Introduction

Joseph Maran and Philipp W. Stockhammer

The contributions in this volume are based on papers delivered at the conference *Materiality and Practice: Transformative Capacities of Intercultural Encounters*, that took place in the Internationales Wissenschaftsforum Heidelberg on March 25 to 27, 2010. The conference was part of our research project ‘Materiality and Practice: Cultural Entanglements of 2nd millennium BC East Mediterranean Societies’. Our research and the publication of this volume were generously funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Foundation) within the Cluster of Excellence 270/1 ‘Asia and Europe in a Global Context’ at Heidelberg University. We are grateful to the directorate of the Cluster of Excellence for enabling us to undertake the interdisciplinary project from which the idea of this symposium took its start. The conference and its publication were facilitated by the support of specific people and institutions, to whom the organisers are very thankful. In particular, we would like to thank the director of the Internationales Wissenschaftsforum Heidelberg, Professor Jan Christian Gertz, and the manager, Dr Ellen Peerenboom, for allowing us to convene at the wonderful venue of the Wissenschaftsforum. Moreover, we would like to thank our student assistants Nadine Becker, Maribel Dorka Moreno, Martina Riedl and Kristina Sauer, whose highly contagious enthusiasm in the organisation of the symposium was much appreciated. Special thanks are due to Kristina Sauer for the layout of this publication, and to Éilís Monahan for her careful language editing of the texts. Finally, we would like to express our gratitude to two peer reviewers whose insightful comments helped us to optimise the quality of the contributions and our publisher Oxbow, especially Julie Gardiner, whose support made the publication of this volume an easy task.

The contributions in this volume aim to investigate the transformative potential arising from the interplay between material forms, social practices and intercultural relations.

Such a focus necessitates first, an approach that takes a transcultural perspective as a fundamental methodology and second, a broader understanding of the inter-relationship between humans and objects.

Adopting a transcultural approach forces us to change archaeology’s stance towards items coming from the outside. By using them mostly for reconstructing systems of exchange or for chronology, archaeology has for a long time reduced them to their properties as objects and as being foreign. In contrast, our research is based on the notion that the significance of such items does not derive from the transfer from one place to another as such but, rather, from the ways in which they were used and contextualised. The main question is how, through their integration into discourses and practices, new frameworks of meaning were created conforming neither with what had existed in the receiving society nor in the area of origin of the objects.

As is well known, in the 1980s cultural studies and the social sciences increasingly turned to subjects of interculturality and materiality as research topics. This development superseded a long period of neglect of such issues, in which social and cultural anthropology focused on local societies that were approached as if they could be studied as self-contained entities. At that time, the investigation of material forms was regarded as the realm of an outdated, antiquarian approach with no relevance for the analysis of the social world, which was imagined as mostly abstract and detached from materiality. Hans-Peter Hahn (2008) and Bernhard Streck (2000) have recently pointed out that the renunciation of this ‘atomistic approach’ in cultural studies, and the turning of attention to questions of cultural globalisation, in some cases has led to the re-appearance of a vocabulary, and of ways of representation, that are strangely reminiscent of the ‘culture-historical school’ which

dominated German ethnography in the early 20th century. One of the shortcomings of this diffusionist school of thought of the early 20th century was that the appearance of the same form was taken to represent the same origin and the same meaning, or as Jonathan Friedman (1997) has put it ‘culture was contained in its embodiment rather than its generativity’. On the other hand, as Hans-Peter Hahn has reminded us, it should not be forgotten that the culture-historical school was founded on the almost revolutionary insight that the mobility of cultural forms does not necessarily require a complex political organization, thus conceding a high degree of agency to people of non-modern societies who, at the turn of the 20th century, were usually thought to be incapable of achievements like long-distance travel and the creation of wide-ranging exchange networks.

For archaeology, the post-structuralist re-discovery of the significance of materiality and interculturality has opened up new perspectives for dealing with such issues, although this requires careful reflection on the flaws of the culture-historical approach to avoid the risks of repeating earlier mistakes and inadvertently creating a sort of Neo-Diffusionist paradigm. One especially has to be aware of this danger in Germany where, in contrast to the United Kingdom and the USA, the ideas of diffusionism and culture history continued to exert an influence on archaeology long after the 2nd World War (when they had long been abandoned in ethnography). The flaws of culture-history and its diffusionist approach consisted, above all, in the object-like approach towards culture, the lack of concepts of agency and of practice, as well as the obsession with origins, and finally the concentration on abstract ‘influences’ and ‘flows’ of cultural traits and the disinterest in the actual contextualisation of cultural forms and possible shifts of meaning (Maran 2012).

In order to avoid the pitfalls of culture-history, the focus must thus be on the generative, rather than the representative character of culture, and the highly localised approach of post-diffusionist social and cultural anthropology needs to be merged with an outlook that transcends the local level and is open to the manifold repercussions of interculturality. In other words, the effects of intercultural relations must be investigated locally, which means concentrating on phenomena of appropriation and studying how foreign cultural forms were re-contextualised through their integration in social practices and discourses. This publication sets out to take a step in this direction by tackling the overarching topic of the transformative capacities of intercultural encounters from various points of view. While the main thrust of many of the contributions lies on aspects related to the Mediterranean interaction spheres of the 2nd and early 1st millennia BCE, others enrich our issue by approaching it from different thematic angles. In our view, it is necessary to analyse the relation between agency and materiality in the constitution

of what is perceived as social realities. Until quite recently, it seemed self-evident that social relations are tantamount to human relations, and that such relations, as already mentioned, could be studied on a largely abstract level, ignoring the world of social goods. Recently, this position has been challenged by discussions within the social sciences and cultural studies deriving from the insight that the realms of the social and the material are closely interwoven and that social practices and discourses constitute the interface between them. This raises the important issue of whether the concept of agency should be stripped of its exclusively anthropocentric meaning and extended to include non-human agents (*cf.* Latour 1986; 2007; Law 1992)?

In our opinion, this broader concept of agency is necessary to understand better the relationship between humans and objects. Following the first modernists of the late 18th and 19th centuries, modernity had always aimed at understanding and explaining the world on the basis of a single worldview. Since the 1970s, post-structuralism has tried to move past this approach by emphasising the multiplicity of the discourses and codes that are supposed to explain the world. While acknowledging plurality, however, in one important respect post-structuralism did not overcome modernity, since its focus was still on worldviews and texts rather than on the analysis of the engagement of individual agents with the world. In contrast to this, we try to merge lines of thought introduced by Pierre Bourdieu (1982), Bruno Latour (1986; 2007) and John Law (1992) to emphasise the decisive role of the habitus, individual agency and the material world. Thus, we argue the necessity of shifting the focus from discourses and codes towards practices and the intimate entanglement between humans and their surroundings on the basis of those practices. We assume that the relationship between humans and objects comprises at least three dimensions: firstly, the creation of objects as functional tools to adapt to our surroundings, as proclaimed by Leslie White (1959, 8; *cf.* Binford 1962, 218 – *i.e.* the basic notion of modernity and the connected ideas of processual archaeology); secondly, the creation of objects as symbols in non-verbal discourses (as one of the basic notions of post-processual archaeology; *cf.* Hodder 1982); and thirdly, a silent discourse between humans and objects that is neither functional in its modern sense nor symbolic in its post-structuralist sense. In the course of our interaction with objects, a dialogue develops in which the objects become agents that are able to trigger or influence our action. This dialogue is non-verbal and non-symbolic and is completely dependent on each specific individual context. However, the way humans and objects communicate during social practices is very powerful: it makes us naturalise our man-made surroundings, it persuades us to change either the surroundings or ourselves and it forces us to believe that objects have a will of their own.

Following this line of thought, landscapes created by many generations of humans influence our idea of what constitutes a natural landscape, the smell of burning food tells us to change our cooking habits, and puppets tell the puppet master how they want to act. Although the objects do not speak, they address our senses (smelling, seeing, tasting, feeling) in such a powerful way that our worldviews cannot be understood without including materiality and social practices in our analysis.

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