



## The state of things

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We delight in special requests and challenging commissions; our in-house designers and craftsmen are experts at realising a client's specific needs and desires. Whether the idea is ambitious or whimsical, Asprey's bespoke services have no limits. (Asprey's of London)<sup>1</sup>

The social psychologist Mick Billig was once commissioned by the British Psychological Society to write one of several short pieces by eminent figures in the field responding to the public outcry that marked the days after the death of Princess Diana in 1997. Whilst the other responses dealt with such weighty matters as stereotyping, emotional literacy and conspiracy theory, Billig pointed to one small, almost insignificant detail. Found amongst the wreckage of the crash in Paris was a personalised gold cigar cutter from Asprey's of London. Billig ponders the significance of this object. What does it tell us about the life of the 'People's Princess' that she would have considered this to be a meaningful gift? What does it tell us about the life of an individual for whom trimming the ends of uncut cigars is such a chore that it requires him to carry a special implement for the task, and one made of gold, no less? Billig then uses an orthodox, but nevertheless apposite reading of Marx's 'commodity fetishism' to peel away the layers of meaning built up on the ill-fated cigar cutter. He points to the process whereby this object came to circulate as a symbol in a social circle so very far removed from the labour and lives of the people who extracted the gold from which it was made.

Billig's piece is a classic instance of finely honed critique. But it is also interesting for another reason. It shares in the now common conceptual move of placing artefacts at the heart of analysis. In this case the cigar trimmer 'speaks' to us directly, it cuts through the mystifications involved in the post-hoc positioning of Diana as in any way close to the hearts of 'her' people. What the analyst might need a great many words to accomplish, the cigar trimmer does directly by saying what it is: a truly obscene symbol, an absolutely tainted commodity. This kind of analysis demonstrates the extent to which studies of material culture have, in the past two decades, created a space where both classical and post-Marxian analysis can be rearticulated. The focus on artefacts serves as the lynchpin which holds a revived notion of political economy close to its partner (and rival) category of cultural economy. At stake here is what artefacts actually

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<sup>1</sup> This is taken directly from Asprey's of London's website – see <http://www.asprey.com/bespoke-services/>.

say when we allow them to speak to us. Do they tell of the various traumas of their exploitative and violent birthing? Do they scream to us the real history of their production that has been systematically repressed by the artifice of their commodification? Or perhaps they are already a little more knowing, rather more sophisticated in their appreciation of the network of relations which allow them to perform themselves as 'market objects'? Perhaps, when we give it voice in our analysis, the cigar trimmer will perform its own auto-ironic deconstruction of cultural logic of the market which ultimately placed at the scene of the Paris crash?

To some, it is, of course, the very height of theoretical over-exuberance to suggest that artefacts 'speak' in any kind of way at all. We are on safer ground with the more modest observation that social relations are highly mediated by the use of artefacts. As Michel Serres has described at length, human relations considered in themselves are lacking in the necessary ballast to hold together social order:

Our relationships, social bonds, would be as airy as clouds were there only contracts between subjects. In fact, the object, specific to Hominidae, stabilizes our relationships, it slows down the time of our revolutions. For an unstable band of baboons, social changes are flaring up every minute. One could characterize their history as unbound, insanely so. The object, for us, makes our history slow. (Serres, 1998: 87)

We delegate to objects the work of forming and maintaining the social bond. Describing the process of this delegation – which is the task that Actor-Network Theory has set itself – is simultaneously the recounting of a history that is made possible by our relationship to artefacts. Whether it be sharing a dinner, parking restrictions, financial transactions or mass communication, our capacity to speak and be heard by others in a meaningful way passes through objects. They grant us the power to do the very things we feel make us human. They give our speech its meaning, since it is through them that we communicate. Some things can indeed only really be said with the gift of a solid gold cigar cutter.

The rather limited powers of the human body and the reach of our otherwise narrowly bounded cognition is vastly expanded when they are augmented by arrays of objects. We can think and do things that are otherwise unimaginable through the affordances of the object-world. How else could we be touched by the deaths of persons in places (and times) that are otherwise remote to us? Artefacts enable a restructuring of the human. They remake us as very different kinds of beings. Anthropologists and psychologists have demonstrated this empirically for some time. To point to one specific body of work, the concept of 'situated cognition' (Lave, 1988) deals with the transformation of our powers of reasoning when different kinds of artefacts are made available. Mundane tasks such as monitoring how much we eat are transformed when something as simple as having the tools to measure the amounts of food stuffs we cook with are provided. Once again, Serres' (1995) work is instructive. He argues that the things we consider to be great scientific-technical advances are underpinned by the constitution of a new object-mediated relationship. The sun dial or 'gnomon', for instance, is revolutionary not because of its role as a measure of time, but rather because it brings the heavens to the earth. It makes the sun and the positions of the stars a calculable part of social relations.

Human history might then be told from the perspective of how artefacts have enabled social, cultural and practical transformation. But is there not also a history of things to be recounted? For they too have been busy. Today we live surrounded by communication technologies, from RFIDs to Bluetooth devices, which are constantly exchanging information and building new relations all around us and through us. Wireless networks of communication, control, and cooperation proliferate in mysterious ways, all speaking an infra-language of organization, inscribing new techniques of governance. That fateful car ride in Paris, for example, could be told equally well from the perspective of networked information flows – from CCTV images, swipe cards, short-wave radio transmissions and digital photographs. Whilst there is ample material here to keep the most avid conspiracy theorist going, the real scandal is that these vast networks of relations between things are no longer shocking. We are well aware that artefacts track, record, calculate and anticipate our every action. From automated credit ratings, biometrics and behavioural profiling through to the mundane recording of our mobile phone signal or ATM transactions, our ‘bare life’ is wrapped in a digital cushion that makes it available for as-yet scarcely imaginable kinds of relations and transactions. Of late, things have been very busy indeed.

The more secure judgement, however, is to say that there is a kind of co-evolution of people and things, where each lends its capacities to the other. The return of dialectical reasoning, or indeed of a classical Marxian analysis of technology, is always possible here. Marxists have long appreciated what can be done by adding electrification to human relations, after all. But the conceptual language which seems best suited to the task would appear to be that developed by Foucault and Deleuze with their twinned notions of ‘dispositif’ and ‘agencement’. Both terms explicitly seek to fold together people and things, codes and relations into arrangements following their own particular logics and inhering in fields of power. An interesting conjunction can be found in the uptake of Foucault and Deleuze in the work of Actor-Network Theory and some forms of Autonomist thought. Hardt and Negri’s Deleuze is of course not the same as Latour’s Deleuze, not least with respect to the role played by affective labour, but neither do they inhabit entirely different conceptual universes.

Hardt and Negri’s (2000) work also suggests, through the notion of ‘anthropological exodus’, that the co-evolution of people and things may well have reached some form of critical moment. In some oft cited passages they allow themselves to speculate that what may be required of the human body in the face of the dense thing-networks of power may be nothing short of revolutionary:

In the dark world of cyberpunk fiction, for example, the freedom of self-fashioning is often indistinguishable from the powers of an all-encompassing control. We certainly do need to change our bodies and ourselves, and in perhaps a much more radical way than the cyberpunk authors imagine... The will to be against really needs a body that is completely incapable of submitting to command. It needs a body that is incapable of adapting to family life, to factory discipline, to the regulations of a traditional sex life and so on. (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 216)

Hardt and Negri are not the first to have seen the human body as ill-suited or ‘badly designed’, as Antonin Artaud put it, to cope with the demands of a grand refusal of codified life. Neither are they the first to point to the ‘modern-primitivism’ of ‘piercings and tattoos, punk fashion and its various imitations’ (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 216) as

forming the vanguard of social-corporeal transgression. But they do make a crucial link between the state of things and the state of humans. If subjectivity is rendered into a loose cloud of thoughts, memories and dispositions when it is articulated through networks of technical relations, then there is no return possible to a version of humanism that could catch and bottle the subjective, like a child clapping their hands to trap smoke. A transhumanism that takes bodies and subjectivities as sites for augmentation and experimentation – whether literally in the form of body modification, or practically through affective labour – appears to be the escape route to follow.

Transhumanism has its own history, which often makes for disappointing reading. A cursory engagement with the thought of the Extropian movement, for instance, is enough to convince that the revolution will not transhumanise (see Terranova, 1996). Body modification, or rather, the overcoming of the supposed limitations of the flesh, such that subjectivity might be ‘uploaded’ into new material/informational modalities, seems to be the hallucination of those dosed on capital in its purest forms. Put in more mundane terms, the drive to remake the body, to render it more flexible, more creative and hence better suited to the flows and mutations in capital itself is scarcely an act of transgression. It will take a hell of a lot of piercings before the factory cannot find a use for you. And the telos of many transhumanist arguments is to discover that the body has always been the site where this movement of transgression and subsumption has been played out. We have never been human, we have always been transhumanist/cyborg/posthuman. Donna Haraway (1991) had cogently established that point some years before Diana successfully transformed from corporeal being to pure hallucinatory media-borg.

Haraway’s work in recent years has pointed to a different kind of transformation. The shifts in the industrialization and commercialisation of the contemporary bio-sciences do represent an epoch defining movement. When eating and drinking constitutes a political act (e.g. GMO’s, bottled water), when sociality is electively defined through association with others who share similar genetic or biological impairments or enhancements (what Rabinow, 1992, called ‘biosociality’), and when we arrive at the curious proposition that ‘mobilised bio-science’ may be able to create an ecological utopia out of seeming disaster by altering the very terms of life (at a price), then the riddle of the relation between the cultural and the economic no longer seems to suffice. We are faced with a ‘biologization of political economy’. Here the difference between people and things, bodies and commodities, seems very moot indeed. What ontological categories can we conceivably draw upon to make sense of such a monstrous situation?

These special requests and challenging commissions were debated at the conference *The State of Things: Towards a political economy of artifice and artefacts* organised by the Centre for Philosophy and Political Economy (CPPE) at the University of Leicester, UK in Spring 2009. In this special issue we present a selection of papers from that conference. In our call for papers, we asked contributors to consider potential links between Actor-Network Theory and Autonomist thought, between these two varied approaches to engaging with artefacts. It became apparent that such an approach necessitated passing through the question of post- and trans-humanism. The five papers collected here display a range of responses. Johan Söderberg and Adam Netzén offer a

provocative juxtaposition of ANT and post-Marxism which they find equally lacking in historicity. Anna Feigenbaum focuses on a specific artefact – the ‘global fence’ that provides the technical support for a range of common exclusionary practices – to draw out the value of ANT informed analysis of political struggle. Dimitris Papadopoulos engages with Hardt and Negri’s anthropological exodus and sketches out an embodied alter-ontology of ‘insurgent posthumanism’. Norah Campbell and Mike Saren approach posthumanism from the direction of capital, and demonstrate that the ‘monstrous’ language of flow and becoming may not have the liberatory potential we often imagine. Finally Elizabeth R. Johnson goes straight to the ‘belly of beast’ by exploring the contradictions and possibilities offered by innovations in contemporary bio-science.

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