
ON THE
MATERIALITY OF
SOCIETY AND CULTURE

SIX ESSAYS ON THE MATERIALITY OF SOCIETY AND CULTURE

Edited by
Håkon Glørstad and Lotte Hedeager



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Differences that matter

Materialities, material culture and social practice

Fredrik Fahlander

IV

Abstract

The present text concerns the social implications of the material world, focusing on the sociality of materialities rather than their possible meaning and symbolism. It is argued that the interpretative approach only permit things and objects to be active within a conscious human discourse. It is suggested that archaeology would benefit from approaching materialities from a less humanocentric perspective and acknowledge a greater variety of ways in which materialities are involved in the structuring process of society. This, however, does not imply that the material world is equal to the human in terms of agency, nor does it suggest a symmetrical relationship between the living and the material. What is socially significant in the material context, and to which degree, is something that needs to be considered in each given case. A second issue concerned is the construction of models or fictions that we employ in our analysis of socio-material worlds. Given the great importance of such fictions for the outcome of our studies they need to be thoroughly discussed, and, considering that we might expect to encounter practices and ways of thinking that is no longer represented in contemporary societies, a creative element is also called for.

Introduction

The past worlds, like our own, are material worlds. We all need food, shelter, tools and things to talk about. The material constitution of the local milieu is also important as it tends to constrain some practices while encouraging others. Despite this, the human has traditionally been the main subject of study and the material

objects s/he constructs or modifies (i.e., material culture) have consequently been examined from a human point of view. In recent social science this humanocentric perspective has been criticised for neglecting the potential social roles of materialities in the creation of social relations and development. It is argued by many post-humanocentric proponents, as well as others, that the human and the non-human dichotomy is misleading and that social studies should to a greater degree also consider the social driving forces of the material world. These studies range from determinist technofetishism to less radical notions of the importance of the non-human in social studies. Despite that material traces are the primary source of information, archaeology has always been humanocentric in general, especially the post-processual, interpretative archaeologies. Of course, intentional and unintentional material traces of action, artefacts and other features are the primary data for archaeological analysis, but the social significance of the material world and its effect on past social relations and practice seldom go beyond questions of meaning, symbol/metaphor, status, identity and ethnicity. Things can, however, work in much more varied ways: They may simply be 'good to think through' as Lévi-Strauss argued (1966), or function as metaphors or vehicles for the mind (cf. Tilley 1999). The material milieu may have an almost determining effect on people. A person can be constrained or triggered by objects and features, consciously or unconsciously. Objects and other stuff may be produced or appropriated with specific intentions, and yet influence future actions in an unpredictable way. Indeed, some objects are indispensable for a typical way of social life. Things and features also constitute nodes, and direct appropriate or necessary movement within a site or landscape. Such concentration of movement to a limited array of paths certainly affects the numbers and forms of social encounters and by that will have an agglomerating effect by making contact surfaces smaller in number and smaller in size. The built-up environment is as much an active generator of social behaviour as it is constituted by it. Houses, buildings and the local setting of a hamlet or a small village function on different scales as nodes for repetitive action, owing to their inertness and resistance to change (cf. Sartre 1991, Østerberg 1998:29f).

Material culture against materiality

Material culture is indeed a central key-concept in archaeology, but what the term actually signifies is surprisingly little discussed. Who coined the term is uncertain (Buchli 2002:2; Andrén 1997:135), but this is of less importance, as the contents of the term vary between different research traditions as well as historically (Andrén 1997:151; Attfield 2000:35-41). In the dictionaries we find that material culture is generally defined as objects manipulated or manufactured by humans. Some, but not all, definitions also include features, biofacts and manufactures. Without getting lost in details it seems quite safe to say that the concept of material culture comprise the results or leftovers from intentional and unintentional human practice that can be interpreted contextually. The idea is that material culture 'contains' culture which can be 'read off' through contextual analysis (Gibson 2006:172). It is thus generally a humanocentric, one-way relationship: material culture is created by humans, which hence are employed for inferring human practice and thought.

In recent years the term *materiality* has become increasingly popular in archaeology and tends, at least in Anglo-Saxon archaeology, to replace the term material culture (e.g., DeMarrais, Gosden & Renfrew 2004; Fahlander & Oestigaard (eds) 2004. Tilley 2004; Miller 2005; Meskell 2005, Tilley *et al* 2006, Hodder 2006, Soefar 2007). This apparent change of terminology is, however, problematic. The term materiality implicates a rather different view of the social importance of the material world quite different from traditional interpretative frameworks. Basically, the term materiality is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as: 'the quality of being composed of matter; material existence; solidity; material or physical aspect or character'. Such definitions may suffice for the *word* materiality, but the *social study of materialities* goes beyond such lexical definitions. In a similar sense that 'ethnicity' is not a synonym for 'culture', materiality is not necessarily synonymous with material culture.

Archaeologists have, however, so far generally confused the terms, which have led to somewhat strange discussions. For instance, in the introduction of the recently published volume, *Handbook of material culture*, materialities is defined as:

the fleshy, corporeal and physical, as opposed to spiritual, ideal and value-laden aspects of human existence. Materiality can also be taken to refer to individual things, or collections of things, rather than to persons or societies (Tilley *et al* 2006:3).

Tilley's own recent book, *The materiality of stone*, (2004) does not, despite the title, contain any reference to the concept of materiality at all, rather he continues in the same phenomenological path as he has explored in earlier books, perhaps with a greater concern for the material *properties* of stones (surface, shape and colour). This theme, materials and material properties, are also the issue in Tim Ingold's recent discussion article on materiality in the journal *Archaeological Dialogues* (Ingold 2007). Another recent anthology, *Materialities*, edited by Daniel Miller (2005), also struggles with a definition of the main subject. On one hand, Miller argues, materiality refers in a basic sense to artefacts, but may also encompass:

...the ephemeral, the imaginary, the biological, and the theoretical; all that which would have been external to the simple definition of an artefact" (Miller 2005:4).

This is indeed a vague and pointless definition that doesn't seem to differ much from the concept of material culture. In the conference report, *Rethinking materiality*, (2004), edited by DeMarrais Gosden & Renfrew, materiality is mainly contrasted with the concept of materialisation. The latter concept normally focuses on the ways that power and authority develop through control over material and symbolic resources, labour, or knowledge, which normally have little in common with the study of the social significance of materialities. Materiality studies are described as:

...concern not only the study of the characteristics of objects, but also the more general notion that humans engage with the things of the world as conscious agents and are themselves shaped by those experiences" (DeMarrais, Gosden & Renfrew 2004:2).

This statement has been made many times before regarding artefacts and material culture in general and do not add anything new that justifies a change of terminology. It is perhaps not too surprising

that these volumes contain (although with a few exceptions) rather traditional material culture studies of ethnographical and archaeological cases.

There is nothing new or strange about certain terms that become popular in archaeological texts (during the 1990s it was almost impossible to find a paper that did not contain the terms ‘meaning’, ‘text’ or ‘context’), but in this framework the terminology is important. For instance, most post-humanocentric work written on materialities in the social sciences is not compatible with hermeneutic and interpretative perspectives. It may thus be problematic to employ the concept of materiality as a variation or synonym of material culture. Most things that can be classified as material culture are often materialities, but the latter concept embraces a far greater variety of material things and substances. What is at stake here is that the material can be social in other ways than as symbols loaded with meaning. The social world is not simply a matter of differently empowered individuals that interact with things and each other; different kinds of materialities (things, natural features, animals, substances such as rain and snow etc.) often play crucial, although often sublime, roles in social development by just being there.

Do things have agency? Humanocentrism vs. techno-fetishism

Traditionally, social scientists tend to displace the material world in favour of elaborate analysis of human behaviour, psyche, and biology on one hand, and collective representations and structure on the other (Fahlander 2001:57ff; 2003:34ff). For instance, Durkheim writes:

Things do affect quite much of the social development, whose speed and, as a matter of fact, direction varies according to their properties, but they lack prerequisites to actually make things happen. They are the physical materials that the vital forces of society utilise, but they do not release that power by themselves. The only remaining active factor is hence found in the human milieu (Durkheim 1895:93, 12).

Durkheim’s account of this matter is clear and precise. A similar

conception is to be found in the work of Talcott Parsons, to whom cultural objects are parts of the individual's personality, but only 'indirectly relevant' (Parsons 1951:89, 4). Also contemporary sociology seems to neglect the social importance of materialities. For instance, Anthony Giddens (1987) briefly discusses the importance of 'cultural objects', which includes artefacts. The artefacts are, however, in Giddens' framework of minor importance in relation to his principal types: written texts and electronic communication. Cultural objects (i.e. texts), Giddens argues, are distinct from artefacts in general, because they are durable media of transmission across contexts, means of storage and of retrieval (1987:209, 216). This rather negligent attitude to the material world in the social sciences is, of course, something that we need to bear in mind when we employ social theory in studies of material contexts.

In more recent social studies of materiality, however, the focus is rather set on the social significance of objects and other material matter in the constitution of social structuration. In later decades we have seen an increasing interest in the 'socialness of things', that is, the social dimension of materialities (e.g. Latour 1991, 1999, 2005, Riggins 1994, Gumbrecht & Pfeiffer 1994, Gottdiener 1995, Komter 1998, Dant 1999, 2005, Chilton 1999, Schiffer 1999, Preda 1999, Attfield 2000, Graves-Brown 2000, Harré 2002, Buchli 2002, Brown 2004, Knappet 2005). These attempts to emphasise things, artefacts and aspects of the environment in the social process, range from symbolic to functional, aesthetic and technical perspectives. The multidisciplinary nature of these studies and their varying subject matters constrain a clear definition of the what materiality studies actually is about (Barck 1994:258; Pfeiffer 1994:7), but in general, the above scholars agree that material objects and other fluid or solid matter often are more important in the formation, interaction and structuration of social situations than is normally recognised.

Bruno Latour, one of the initiators of this discussion, has in a number of texts criticised the social sciences for neglecting the objects (or in his terms, *actants*) in social interaction studies. He argues that:

...in order to understand domination [power relations] we have to turn away from an exclusive concern with social relations and weave them into a

fabric that includes non-human actants, actants that offer the possibility of holding society together as a durable whole (Latour 1991:103).

Latour rejects the distinctions between material infrastructure and social superstructure as well as sociologism and technologism. On the contrary, he stresses that social relations are made up from chain links between humans and non-human actants (vehicles for action). These chains form networks which operate in various ways; actants may function as a prolonged arm of a human being, replacing the human subject, or to facilitate, or constrain, certain tasks. For instance, how barbed wire can 'replace' a shepherd and a dog, or how speed bumps are used as a means to protect children, but actually relies on the concern of the driver who slows down mainly to protect the car from damage (1999, 2005). Other actants are not compatible, as in the case of traffic light sensors that do not respond to bicycles made of plastic, or a door that by its mode of construction may prevent some individuals (e.g., disabled people or small children) to use it (Latour 1992:234).

One of many examples that Latour uses to illustrate these intricate links between the human and non-human is the heavy lump of metal that one often finds attached to keys in European hotels. The obvious purpose of these clumsy dead weights is to force the customer to leave the key at the reception when leaving the hotel. A plea to leave the key is often verbally expressed in information brochures, on signs at the reception and on the key itself. However, Latour notes, it is not the verbal or literal request that actually makes people leave their keys, it is the uncomfortable weight attached to them. In a sense, the printed pleads only serve to explain why the key is so heavy; they do not necessary play any significant part in the process. Latour's example is mundane and borders on the naive, but it nevertheless indicates that materialities more often than we like to believe interact in social situations, not only through symbolism or semiotic messages, but also as plain material objects/substances. Latour's critique of the negligent attitude towards the socialness of the material world in the social sciences is refreshing, but he does unfortunately not present any explicit theory that can be employed in archaeology. Also, by focusing mainly on technology, Latour has been criticised for his rather stiff and functionalist view of social action as he tends to

neglect intentional variability among human agents and overrate the socialness of things. For instance, Harry Collins and Martin Kusch (1998) have pointed out how human intentions differ from the pseudo-agency of materialities (cf. Vandenberghe 2002). They make a distinction between mimeographic agency (mechanical, routine actions), and polymorph agency (all other actions), which encompass an enormous variation in the ways they can be initiated and performed. It may thus be questionable, in a general sense beyond the single situation, to view the actor-actant relations as a network, especially as a total symmetry as Latour proclaim. There need not to be a direct relation between chains of action at one time with another - despite the fact that both chains involve the same actants. For instance, materialities may act on a distance in space and time, as a lagged or delayed effect (cf. Bhaskar 1993:140-141).

Notwithstanding the criticism, Latour is basically correct in that it is questionable to do social analysis without considering the material context proper. Any given case of social study, global or local, always contains material components of varying significance. For instance, a soccer game without a football would be quite pointless and a weapon in the hand of one party can radically alter the outcome of a dispute. In the latter case, the National Rifle Association argues in their slogan that "Guns don't kill people, people do" (a humanocentric perspective). The statistic on fatal accidents is, however, telling on this matter. An irate person with a gun in hand may in an instant become a murderer, who without a weapon might have 'settled' the dispute with verbal and physical abuse (not to mention all unintended accidents with weapons).

The main question is not whether if materialities are involved in the social structuration process, but rather to what degree. For instance, are the NRA right, that only people kill people, or can it be claimed that a gun also possesses some sort of agency? It must be clear that materialities only have a *potential* in some situations to be social in the sense of stimulating, prompting or determining social action. This property of certain things has by Gell (1998) been termed 'secondary agency' and by Knappet (2002) as 'pseudo-agency'. To designate a general active property of all materialities, would, however, be unfortunate, not only because it sustains the dichotomy of the human and the non-human, but also because agency is a complex issue from a philosophical point of view. Indeed,

it would be questionable to assume that every human possesses 'primary agency'. Latour summarizes the argument elegantly:

purposeful action and intentionality may not be properties of objects, but they are not properties of humans either. They are properties of institutions [collectives of humans and non-humans], apparatuses, or what Foucault called *dispositifs*" (1999:192).

Just to pick one example to illustrate Latour's point. In *History of Madness* (2006), Foucault implies that the very existence of leprosarias in the early 16th century Europe played a part in the process of discern the mad as a social category. After the leprosarias became obsolete they, if not precisely ewoke, perhaps at any rate stimulated that process by just being there, ready to embrace a new category of 'mad' individuals (2006:5f). Similarly, in *Discipline and punish* (1975), Foucault addresses the structure of prisons, schools and factories as a material manifestation of the modern discourse of increasing surveillance and discipline of bodies. It may, of course, also be that the obsolete leprosarias just become handy in an already ongoing process and the structuration of official buildings might likewise only be a non-dialectical material manifestation of an already established discourse. But it must be clear that materialities are not just the intentional or unintentional result of human action, but that material objects and stuff always are involved, and in varying respect, influence the structuration of the social world. This means that there are no clear-cut boundaries between so-called natural objects and culturally modified objects. Materialities with potential social driving force can involve a great variety of things, from artefacts, landscape, layout and material of buildings and settlements, trees and vegetation, to animals, bodies and less evident material matters such as rain, ice and snow.¹ What

¹ One special category of materialities that may suffice to clarify the distinction between the two concepts is the human body. The majority of scholars would probably not include the body in the concept of material culture, but the body is nonetheless often a social materiality that has great effect on the outcome of social practice. The corporeal body as materiality has very little to do with the individual or person, but emphasizes the appearance and bodily constitution in the process of subjectivation and categorization as well as in practical ways of getting certain tasks done. Corporeal aspects such as body posture, sex, age and variations in hair and skin colour are well documented aspects that certainly have great effect for

is socially significant, and to which degree, is thus something that needs to be concerned in each given case.

The examples of Latour and Foucault highlight an aspect of the material not usually recognised in archaeological studies of material culture. Archaeologists generally agree that material culture is *active*. It is active because it is ‘meaningfully constituted’ and carries meaning and symbolism (e.g., Hodder 1982:75; 1992:15). The examples of Latour and Foucault above thus differ quite a lot from interpretative (humanocentric) material culture studies because they also recognise the potential socialness of the materialities themselves – both outside and within the human mind – which is something quite different from just being ‘meaningfully constituted’. There is thus a paradox involved in this newfound interest in the socialness of things. The turn to things is at the same time a turn away from objects and artefacts. As the human subject often becomes decentred and deprived of its ego and personality in social studies, the artefact becomes a materiality together with other less impressive material traces and objects. The new turn to things is not so much about the aesthetic and symbolic dimensions of great artefacts, but more of a recognition that materialities are involved in social action and that some even have a *potential* of being socially important by initiating, conserving or rendering possible practices and processes that is not always recognised by the agents involved.

Working with materialities: The microarchaeology of social practice

To work with human-material contexts as outlined above, there is a need for theoretical and methodological development on two levels. First, we need general social theories that really include both human interaction and the material context in a more integrated way. Second, we need to develop operative methods for analysing various social contexts that employ material evidence in its full potential. There are already a few theories and methods at hand, but it is nonetheless important that we continue to develop others and more complex

the individuals’ possibilities to do things and also as to how they are valued and apprehended by others (Fahlander 2006).

ones to better suit our specific questions and contexts.

In archaeology, some sort of sociocultural unit has always been regarded as a natural and logical point of departure for archaeological analysis even though the analysed data may be particular. Working in this tradition implies using information from spatially separate areas to reconstruct the cosmology and typical practice of a social group during a certain time-span (i.e., culture). The main idea is thus to combine fragmented and incomplete material evidence from different regions to reconstruct virtual social entities like a great jig-saw puzzle. This tradition is represented in both processual and post-processual archaeology. Processual archaeologists have tried to establish functional traits that define each type of social form, whereas post-processual, or interpretative archaeologists, have been more interested in the cosmology or symbolic schemes working from a hermeneutic framework. In contrast to much processual archaeology, the postprocessualist stresses the plural and multivocal understanding of meaning and claims that sociocultural systems are open and populated by knowledgeable heterogeneous agents (e.g., Shanks & Tilley 1987, Hodder 1992). Still, many archaeologists seem to presuppose that individuals within given social entities share a common interpretative horizon, in which social action has meaning and can be understood. This hermeneutic standpoint contradicts, however, the image of open systems, and this fundamental problem cannot be solved by *ad hoc* arguments. The aim of much interpretative archaeology to actually *understand* meaning and thoughts of past peoples is not only humanocentric, but also perhaps a bit too optimistic.

In order to facilitate an approach that recognises both general heterogeneity and multivocality of any society and also the possibility that people do not fully correspond to known ways of reasoning and practice it may be better to abandon hermeneutics in favour of a less humanocentric perspective. One such approach is the *microarchaeological* framework (Fahlander 2003). The theoretical basis of the approach is neither processual nor post-processual in character, but seeks to combine strands of thought, methodology and practice, independently of their origin. The most notable sources of inspiration are Sartre's theory of serial collectivity (1991), Foucault's 'archaeology' (1972), Žižek's (1989) awry reading of Marx and Lacan, and the structuration theory of Giddens (1984). In a combination of

these works, the bulk of social life, including ideologies, is argued to operate at a semi-conscious level. Jean-Paul Sartre made an important point concerning this issue in his concept of seriality (1991). In short, he argued that much daily life results in momentary, but repeated, series of individuals whose 'intentional' actions tend to centre on materialities and the inert fabric of the local and general context. Indeed, much social practice is repetitive, performed collectively, and in close relation to the social and material milieu. Individual agency seems not to be that unique and varied as it may be experienced, but can rather be described as related, connected, attached and associated with general structures which pours in and out of the local context (cf. Latour 2005:176f, Alcorn 1994). The idea of repeated social practice as mediating the particular and the general is the basic point of study of microarchaeology and the approach obviously share some common notions with other practice theories, such as Bourdieu and Giddens. However, by combining Foucault and Sartre with Žižek, we nonetheless end up with a distinct theory and methodology specifically designed to suit prehistoric conditions (for extended discussion, see Fahlander 2003:13-48).

The methodology of microarchaeology is quite basic and does not differ much from normal archaeological procedure. The key point is to seek patterns and regularities of materialities in time and space, which can be 'translated' to practice, or bundles of related practice (fig. 1). From a traditional point of view, the 'normal' way to approach a locale or time period is to discuss how the place in question relates to other contemporary locales with similar attributes.

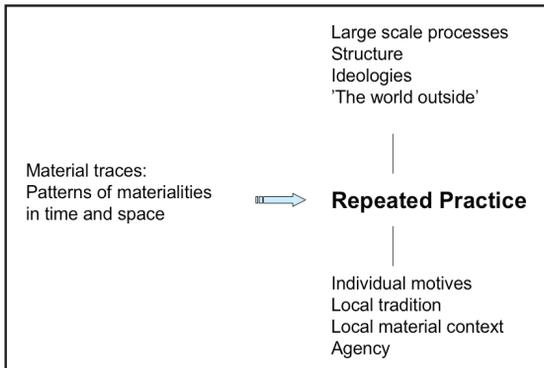


Fig. 1. A schematic illustration of the mediating aspects of repeated, reoccurring social practice.

From a microarchaeological standpoint, however, the critical question is rather to determine the relations between practices performed at the locale itself. Only at a later stage when a number of independent studies have been carried out, can we start to relate the similarities and differences of identified practices in order to reach a larger frame; a fiction (fig. 2). The term fiction refers to ‘our’ etc understanding of ‘their’ emic ideologies, an important distinction that often is confused in the concept of culture. The substitution of the term culture, or pre-understanding, by ‘fiction’ is thus not just a semantic twist, but seeks to emphasise the necessity to keep our general understanding of an area or time period fluid, actually allowing it to be modified by new data. The microarchaeological perspective thus emphasises the need to get better at recognising ‘intra-cultural’ change and variability within locales. A first step in the small-scale studies is therefore to establish relations between events in order to understand the internal development of each site. We need to find some sort of relational chronology of practices, or bundles of practices, in order to grasp social variability, including the queer and strange. By doing this, we can trace changes and internal variation on a much more detailed scale than by traditional approach.

Even though microarchaeology advocates a local, bottom-up

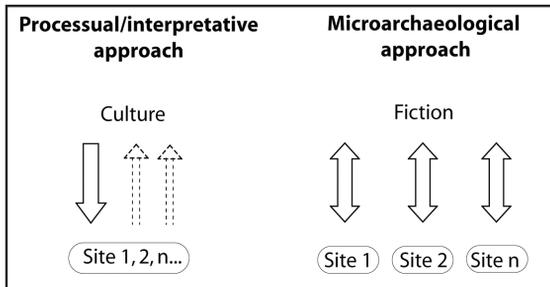


Fig. 2. A schematic illustration of the traditional top-down perspective and the microarchaeological approach. Left: The dotted arrows refer to the lesser impact of individual sites on the general idea of a culture, time period or region. Right: new and old information from individual sites are equally important for the continuous reconstruction of a general fiction (i.e., image, idea or preconception) of a time-space section.

perspective, it must not be confused with particularistic studies of places or locales. It is rather a way of discussing regularities in practice without the need to confine the study within a cultural context. The prefix *micro* should therefore not be mistaken for simply referring to a limited scope of analysis. The aim is not only to define specificity, but rather to employ small-scale analysis in order to get at large-scale patterns and processes. The point of departure is the relation between chains of actions and repetitive events analysed in terms of relations between the particular and the general as previously discussed.

To illustrate the relation between local practices and more general social elements we can employ the metaphors of fibres and threads. Threads are spun by twisting fibre on fibre. The point is that the strength or the essence of the thread does not reside in one fibre running through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres. The only thing running through the whole thread is the continuous overlapping of the fibres. The metaphor of fibres and threads gives an illustration of repeated practice and how they are related, and how individuals, groups and larger collectives are interrelated over time and space. The key point is that threads are made up out of fibres of different lengths. The fibres are momentarily woven together but do not remain so forever. If some fibres suddenly cease to correspond, the thread may either dissolve or take on another form by comprising other fibres. The metaphor of the thread is, however, not to be taken literally. The relations between social practices (fibres) do not form a closed, coherent system; it is perhaps more relevant to speak of clusters of fibres, more in the shape of 'dust balls' than a straight, consistent thread. Such clusters are not absolutely determining, never-changing, structural elements in the traditional sense. They are composed of clusters of repeated practices and are usually sensitive to change in one or more practices. Microarchaeology is thus a way of discussing regularities in practice without the need to confine the study within a cultural context. Instead, we find clusters of interwoven fibres, that is, practices or material patterns, of varying extent in time and space that may coincide with an ethnic group, but we should not be surprised if this way of looking at social practice turns out as something that crisscross assumed cultural units, regions or ethnicities.

Perhaps the best way of pointing out the possibilities of

microarchaeology is by addressing a particular case study. Up to date, microarchaeological analysis has mainly been carried out in the field of burial analysis (Fahlander 2003, 2008; cf. Gramsch 2007). But the general methodology is, of course, applicable on other areas as well, as suggested by a couple of cases of household analyses in the Mediterranean (Streffert-Eikeland 2006, Fahlander ms.). There is, however, little room to recount any of these studies here, but the following modern case study from the Americas will suffice to illustrate the general points made.

Ideology and air-conditioners in America

William Whyte's (1954) study of how the 'word of mouth' works is one interesting example of how a seemingly random, spatial pattern of materialities can be related to both individual agency, material setting and structural elements. Whyte's example is well selected; a neighbourhood consisting of similar, 12,000-dollar houses, inhabited by fairly homogeneous, white-collar couples at the age of twenty-five and forty who earn between 5 to 7 thousand dollars per



Fig. 3. The picture shows a residential area of Philadelphia during the 1950s. The houses that have air-conditioners installed are marked with a white X (from Whyte 1954).

year. The white X's on some of the roofs in the photo (fig. 3) indicate houses with air-conditioning installed, a new commodity that was not as common then as it is today. Despite the homogeneity of the neighbourhood and its inhabitants, we find that the conditioners are unevenly spread and clustered. Whytes' explanation of this pattern is that the word of mouth, the social contact between the families, is primarily spread between next-door neighbours and across the backyards but not across the streets. The reasons for this clustering depend on the given material conditions of the area, the outline of the houses and the neighbourhood, but also on the social practices of the members of the households and ideology in general. When Whyte interviewed some of the couples, he found that one reason for the stronger backyard connection was that social contact between the families was initiated by their children, who played with each other primarily in the backyards of their houses.

There are, of course, webs of complex relations that are involved in this specific case, but Whyte's example nonetheless illustrates the relation between individual agency, ideology and materialities. The houses were built for, and used by, typical, western, nuclear families, normally with the wife working at home, responsible for the care of the children. In another setting, let us say one in which nannies, instead of the housewife, look after the children, the backyard contacts would probably be less frequent between the individuals who have interest in and power to affect the equipment of the house. We would certainly not find the same patterns. Social action is thus not simply a matter of individual intentions but is always related to a larger frame of reference. This relation between the general and the particular makes it possible to move from detailed studies of particular material contexts to the general aspects of social life. We may thus view social practices of a particular situation as *mediating* the particular and the general, or in other terms, between agency and structure. The tradition of having the wife stay at home and tend the children is a typical example of a *thread*, and the practices she performs at the house can be seen as repetitive practices, or fibres. The example illustrates how social practice is in varying aspects a result of the social and material properties of the particular situation, but these cannot be seen as necessarily unique, as they also include traditions, institutionalised power relations and other aspects of the 'outside' world.

Although, this example mainly concerns the recursive relation between local agency and the general frame of ideology, it also exemplifies how materialities (nota bene, not only material culture) are consciously and deliberately involved in the social process and their unintended and non expected consequences. The main materials involved here are not the air-conditioners themselves and their possible relation to status etc., but the materiality of the houses, i.e., the layout of the suburb. It is interesting that the roads (designed for communication) actually inhibit some social communication. The example is thus a good illustration of how the material constitution of the local setting in some way can initiate human agency (and thus the distribution of materialities) in non predicted ways. In archaeology, we often encounter similar, seemingly random, patterns and clustering of features and materialities. It is easy to imagine that a traditional analysis of a similar pattern on an archaeological site (with the X's indicating houses with finds of a special pottery or artefacts) would probably look for connections between all X-marked houses in the whole area (c.f., Hodder 2006:55, 178). These non-related households are likely to be interpreted as signifying a status, a profession or a social/ethnic category, that is, simply by re-assigning a material pattern to a social category. In this case, we 'know' the answers beforehand. We already know a great deal about the typical ideology of the USA during the 1950s and Whyte could interview the human agents involved. It would, however, not be impossible to reach a similar conclusion without living informants, for instance, by carefully searching for patterns in other materialities than the air conditioners. All taken together, it ought to be possible to find clusters of practices that hint at a gender division and ideology typical of America during the 50s.

As this example seeks to demonstrate, modern day examples of materialities and social practice can often be good to think through. New perspectives often make old questions irrelevant while open up doors to new ways of looking at things. The most important aspects of archaeology are not found in theory, technique or methodology, but in the frame of reference we employ to make sense of the things we dig up. In prehistoric cases we face a special problem of uncertainty and a lack of proper frames of reference. Sociologists and historians often have more solid platforms from which they can relate one situation to another, and some sort of notion of the

general way of thinking during the time and place they investigate. Archaeology has no such firm notions to depart from; much of the practices and cosmologies of the past is, on the contrary, more or less unknown to us. They only survive in fragments and bits and pieces of material traces of action, which raises complicated questions on what kind of frame of references and comparisons that are valid. The fact that we always operate from some sort of images, or as I prefer to term them, *fictions* of the past, is evident, but how this process works and how we choose between the fictions is something that we need to adhere to in greater detail.

Chasing the leopard's tail: Fictions and models in archaeology

In all attempts of analysing something abstruse and obscure we always have to consider how our models and data relate to each other and discern random anomalies from significant variation. Models are indeed essential and unavoidable for any study of the past but this relation is nonetheless seldom explicitly discussed in recent years. As Taylor points out in the quotation below, models and concepts always run the risk of being transformed into the actual object of analysis, and non-normative material evidence thus tends to be squashed, manipulated or neglected to fit the types of the model.

Philosophers of science recognize the 'interpretive dilemma' in all attempts at archaeological explanation: in order to interpret something, I must have decided that there is something to interpret. Inevitably, by focusing on that something, I will have already formed some idea of what it is. I say I want to investigate the meaning of this or that burial, but I have already decided the most significant thing about it when I called it a 'burial'. The possibility of understanding anything new and surprising is dramatically lessened (Taylor 2003:37).

Social models encompass a great variety of general, implicit or explicit notions of human action, from the mythological savage to the 'economic man' or social types like hunter-gatherers and settled agriculturalists. Also concepts like male-female oppositions are still,

despite decades of feminist critique, commonly assumed to be all-time, valid types of social categories. It does not seem to matter that these issues have been largely debated, deconstructed and demonstrated as heterogeneous and varied; mainstream archaeology has still not come to terms with the possible otherness of the different pasts. One recent example is Ian Hodder's book *The Leopard's tale* (2006). In his synthesis of the excavations at Çatalhöyük, one of the most fascinating, complex and well documented excavated sites, he falls back to a contradictory argument of the need of anthropological analogies in order to "make sense of the strangeness and 'otherness' of our deep-time destination" (2006:32). Although he stresses that analogies need to be handled carefully, critically and with caution, he chooses Raymond Firth's (1936) study of the small and remote island of Tikopia as a main illustration of a 'similar type of small-scale society'. So much for his previous emphasis on the importance of choosing relevant analogies (1982). The most curious aspect in his analysis is, however, the conventional way in which he treats such a great and complex material with so much potential. From a general perspective, he treats the whole site as a cultural whole, largely dismissing social variability and development over time, because of what he considers to be a "remarkable degree of continuity" in some elements (2006:163f). The complex and fascinating burials in the houses are simply discussed in terms of age, sex and status, despite the fact that nothing in them suggests that these were relevant social categories (2006:191-218). Instead, Hodder is concerned with questions such as why there are so few domestic attributes in the graves: He is especially curious as to why clay-balls, which are found in the houses and associated with cooking, never made it into the burials (2006:50ff). Now, why should they? They seem more likely to be a kind of everyday items that survives through time, but probably never was of any greater concern of the inhabitants. Why should they put them in the graves? One cannot compare apples to oranges, or clay-balls to elaborated obsidian knives as Hodder does. His concluding thoughts of social life at Çatalhöyük are also coloured by his choice of fiction. He bluntly argues that the social structure in Çatalhöyük was centered on kinship and descent, a general anthropological cliché with little support in the excavated data. Commencing from this assumption he concludes that:

People were probably closely allied to family, lineage and to the materiality of the house. Their lifecycles and those of the houses were closely tied. Identity was closely tied to ancestors and to social memory (Hodder 2006:108, 228).

Hodder's book on Çatalhöyük may be popular in style, but it nonetheless illuminates the problems of working from fictions derived from colonial anthropology.

In order to analyse the past in less stereotype ways, we need to elaborate fictions of the various ways in which people interact with each other and their material worlds. Such fictions can be derived from studies of contemporary small scale societies, from historical sources, or from modern-day examples as in the case of the air-conditioners. Ever since the formative period of archaeology as a discipline, it has obviously seemed natural for archaeologists to seek illustrations and comparative cases in anthropology and ethnography. **There can, of course, be no doubt about the necessity and importance for an archaeologist to have a wide frame of reference of the variety of human practices in small scale societies.** Our images of the past would certainly have been very different and probably dafter without the aid of anthropological accounts, theories and models, but it is nonetheless important to acknowledge the backsides of this disciplinary relationship. The many fallacies in employing anthropological examples in archaeology are well known and I shall not go in to detail here on that matter (but see Fahlander 2001, 2004). It may suffice to say that anthropological accounts need to be scrutinized with similar source criticism as do historical texts. The problem as I see it, is that archaeologists often treat anthropological theory and data in a too sloppy manner, which tend to restrain the development of more advanced, detailed and creative analysis of archaeological data. It is too easy to classify material traces of a prehistoric social aggregate as a hunter-gatherer group with a typical way of life, relation to biotope and a general cosmology. It has also been more or less praxis to take the old Saxe-Binford approach to burials for granted, that is, by only seeking patterns in relation to age, sex and status (like the case of Çatalhöyük). Instead, we need to fully acknowledge that contemporary societies generally are more varied, complex and often contradictory than we normally expect. This problematic has been discussed in anthropology for a long time. Clifford Geertz (2000:104) is one anthropologist

that recently has expressed confusion on this matter. He wonders, “What are we to make of cultural practices that seem to us odd and illogical? How odd are they? How illogical? In what precisely does reason lie?” As Geertz stresses, we cannot satisfactorily distinguish ‘strange’ from ‘normal’ practices. The same problem is apparent in the so called contemporary analogies in history (Andr n 1997). Many historians have accentuated the heterogeneity and hybrid processes of social practices and collectives which imply that we find very few straightforward origins and developments of certain seemingly similar practices even during short time-spans (cf. Ginsburg 2002:63ff). In prehistoric cases, the time-frames span over several generations and over large geographical areas. This fact alone suggests that we need to be extra careful in applying regional or ‘culture-specific’ comparisons. Most important, however, is that we obviously will encounter social relations, ways of thinking and social practices that no longer are present in the contemporary scene. The big question is then, how do we interpret traces of the possibly unfamiliar and unknown? As an exemplification, let us consider the following quotation from Saul Kripke on the existence of unicorns:

...even if archaeologists and geologists were to discover tomorrow some fossils conclusively showing the existence of animals in the past, satisfying everything we know about unicorns from the myth of the unicorn, that would not show that there were unicorns (Kripke 1980:24).

What Kripke is getting at is, if data are discovered that fit the description of unicorns, they may suggest that there once were horses with horns, but that they are not necessarily the same as the mythical figure of unicorns. Translated to a more relevant archaeological context, Kripke is hinting that, even if we discover attributes that satisfy everything that we know about, let us say a typical hunter-gatherer group, it does not mean that this is the same thing as a contemporary one. It may thus be appropriate to speak about *fictions* rather than models as a way of acknowledging their virtual character. It goes without saying that archaeological fictions will probably turn out to be most favourable if they are based on the given sociohistorical conditions, that is, the material traces of action. As Leach once argued concerning ethnographic analysis:

“Our concern is with what the significant social categories are; not with what they ought to be” (Leach 1961:27). Hodder’s discussion on the obsidian ‘mirrors’ found in Çatalhöyük is telling on this matter. Although he admits that they may have been used as regular mirrors he also suggests that they “may have been used to ‘see’ and ‘divine’ the spirit world” (2006:229). Here the anthropological basis for his fiction is clear and visible. The ritual interpretation of the reflecting obsidian items is clearly inspired by the exotism and the colonial figure of the ritually driven savage which once was a popular theme in pre WWII anthropology (such as Firth). The excavated data, however, do not support such an interpretation; on the contrary, it would be more rational to assume that people who were so keen on elaborate decoration of their houses also cared about their appearance. It might be argued that Hodder at least is honest about where he found inspiration for his fiction of life at Çatalhöyük, but does that make his choice of Firths study of Tikopia acceptable? Would one not expect scholars to consult more elaborate contemporary anthropology? Think about it, how would we react if someone outside our discipline made interpretations of the past solely based on the work of archaeologists such as O.S.G. Crawford or Gustaf Kossinna?

Perhaps a bit surprisingly, one of the clearest formulations of the ‘fact and fiction’ dilemma is not found in social theory but in an old episode of the TV series “The X-files”. In *The Sixth Extinction* (episode 7x03), the debris of a spaceship are discovered buried in the sand on an African shore which contained disturbing information on human genetics and quotations from the Bible. The material remains are clearly very old, much older than the discovery of genetics and the period when the Bible was compiled. One of the characters, special agent Dana Scully, is a train scientist who always seeks rational explanations for the unnatural things she encounters in the field. She is constantly struggling to make sense of what she is trained to believe as a scientist which seldom suffices to explain strange facts such as the spaceship in question. In a particular monologue she complains: “What is this discovery I’ve made? How can I reconcile what I see with what I know?” Dana’s frame of reference is clearly not sufficient to explain the data she is excavating. The question: How can I reconcile what I see with what I know, is perhaps something that we as archaeologist ought

to ask ourselves every now and then, whether we are excavating or reading texts.

It has been an often repeated mantra that we cannot analyse the past without analogies with the present (a generalising statement that to some scholars seem to excuse the most far reaching comparisons). I find it only partly true; why should we not be able to create plausible fictions that to some degree transcend our frames of reference? Fiction writers have done that for a long time, as well as certain scientists. One example is the interpretation of dinosaur fossils in the early 19th century. The idea of big dinosaurs that ruled the earth long before humans appeared was more or less unthinkable at the time. The contemporary religious discourse of the Bible refuted Earth such a long history and there were no living counterparts to the great dinosaurs with which to compare the scattered fossils (Cadbury 2000). Despite that, that is, against the common thought style and lack of a relevant frame of reference, the growing numbers of data led to the acceptance of an era of great dinosaurs on Earth. It should be possible to study past material traces of action on their own terms and sociohistorical setting. This simple and perhaps naïve difference is to me what actually defines archaeology as something other than anthropology and sociology. And furthermore, this difference is actually the prime object for us to analyse: It is a difference that matters.

Does it really matter? Concluding remarks

There can be little doubt that social worlds are material worlds. Without things and matter there would not be any social constellations for us to discuss and analyse. The material traces of the past do not, however, speak for themselves, neither through regional comparisons nor through analogies with the present. In order to analyse the past properly, we need elaborated fictions of the various ways in which people interact with each other and their material worlds. Such fictions can be derived from studies of contemporary small scale societies or from historical sources, but we must also expect to encounter ways of doing things and ideologies in the past that are no longer represented in the contemporary world. To work with the unfamiliar and trying to put aside common-sense explanations is often difficult, but in

order to make archaeology something more than simply mirroring the ethnographical record, it is a necessary exercise which can deliver more exciting and interesting fictions about the past. We thus need a creative element in our fictions as a way of expanding our frames of reference beyond simple and traditional social models and categories. After all, it is the uncertainty of prehistory that makes our discipline exciting and meaningful.

But is it possible to address social analysis if we discard any concept implying the existence of social or cultural units? In this paper, I have discussed the possibilities of such an approach that departs from a 'bottom-up' perspective where **one or several locales** are independently analysed in detail while minimising the impact of general 'knowledge' of the time and region in question. It is probably true that studies of materiality are easier to carry out on contemporary materials and more difficult to apply on prehistoric data. The obvious reason for this is found in the nature of the data, but also because of the mainly unknown social setting in prehistoric cases. The archaeological record does, however, often contain more information than we generally use. To find new and improved ways of extracting social information from such materialities is a continuing prominent task for archaeology.

Archaeology is by tradition a humanist science and thus to a certain degree humanocentric. It is important to point out that emphasising the social significance of the material world does not necessarily imply that we should abandon the human subject and human worlds as an area of study. Some scholars argue that we need to 'turn the tables' and focus on the non-human on the expense of the human (e.g., Olsen 2003, Knappet 2002). Others, like Latour, argue for a balanced symmetry. I believe, however, that it is important not to respond to the previous neglect of the material by dismissing or marginalise the human element. It must be clear that materialities do not have agency (secondary or pseudo) *per se*. Their possible social significancies in given situations need to be analysed on a case to case basis. Therefore we need a flexible integrated theoretical and methodological framework that can be applied in different situations and on different scale. The concept of materialities (as employed in the social sciences) and the theoretical and methodological framework of microarchaeology as outlined here is but one platform from which we can analyse past and present

socio-material worlds. We may lose something when abandoning hermeneutics and placing the human *beside* the pedestal instead of on top of it. But perhaps that loss is nothing more than the faint remaining echo of a culture's historical legacy? However, acknowledging social complexity and inter-social variation and development is a greater challenge, and who can resist that?

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