In Craft Specialization’s Penumbra: Things, Persons, Action, Value, and Surplus

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ABSTRACT

Objective approaches to craft specialization founded in systems theory are obsolete and should be replaced by more fine-grained approaches capable of dealing with human agents, social practice, and meaning. All craft production, not just specialized production, is equally interesting and important for understanding the operation and change of past societies. Agents made, exchanged, and used a variety of objects in daily practice, and these had different meanings and values that affected social relationships, personhood, and social reproduction. This chapter reconsiders the role of things in the unfolding of everyday experience and in the production of meaning and being.

Keywords: personhood, value, surplus, labor, property

Over the past decade my interest in craft specialization has waned at an accelerated pace as I have wrestled with its explanatory deficiencies. The neon questions that drew me to the topic in the 1980s concerned social reproduction and cultural evolution, but I think these are now better addressed by theories of instantiation, value, personhood, engagement, and practice. Past treatments of craft specialization have obscured more than they have clarified. Shadowed issues include notions of persons and things, action, material and social values, and surplus.

In my original AAA paper I evaluated specialization from different theoretical perspectives, and I was surprised to find that evolutionary archaeology, human behavioral ecology, and behavioral archaeology have done little with the matter, either from disinterest or an incapacity to make sense of the phenomenon. Given this observation, I argued the poor treatment of specialized production under these theories was a clear sign of their inadequacy to deal with social issues. Here I consider an alternative: that craft specialization may be uninformative.

Current categories of craft specialization grew out of systems-thinking, neo-evolutionism, and holistic views of social change. Categories were instrumental and accorded explanatory power. Subsystems, such as craft specialization, were thought critical to system maintenance or change of the body politic. System perspectives have since been abandoned by many scholars, but their conceptual legacy endures in myriad subtle ways in lingering concepts from the 1960s, such as craft specialization. Even a cursory appraisal of recent craft specialization studies reveals a cascading concern for social action and agents (Costin 2001, 2005), notions corrosive to postulates of holism, systems, society, and neo-evolutionism. Our categories of craft specialization still represent generic summaries of typifying behavior of constituent human entities involved in subsystems. Current questions require we break into these venerable subsystems and acknowledge the faces and hands really involved. Our analytical categories should share the same causal assumptions as our theory. At the moment they don’t.

I do not attempt here a state-of-the-art summary of current proclivities or a critique of stray nonsense found in recent discussions of craft specialization. Rather, I raise troubling issues whose solution might advance the objectives of those interested in the organization of labor and production.
My own research has not advanced far enough to resolve the questions that intrigue me and that I raise here. I remain interested in social reproduction and believe detailed studies of labor, agents, technology, production, goods, exchange, organization, and consumption of various kinds of material goods are fundamental for understanding ancient histories of peoples. Cathy Costin’s (2001, 2005) recent exhaustive summaries of craft specialization demonstrate, unintentionally, that the major deficiency of all studies is theory. Almost no serious effort has been made in this area. Archaeologists dealing with crafting cite other archaeologists rather than economic or ethnological theory, and most discussions re-hash tedious operational details of specific cases. I do not advocate theory for its own sake but as an avenue to increased understanding. Many have recently adopted agency perspectives in which material goods play fundamental roles in social interactions and negotiated values and meanings. As discussed below, the implications of action theory for crafting remain to be worked out.

**Back to Production**

Studies of craft specialization rarely justify their attention to the phenomenon. Interest is an antecedent condition of research, perhaps a primal fact of our own recent past and attempts at historical self-awareness. The shift from feudalism to capitalism, as well known, owed much to the rise of trades and the organization of towns. Historically, increased manufacturing represented differentiation, complexity, dependency, and potential social harmony. In Western experience we rarely question the catalytic impact expanding craft organization had on the furtherance of social aggregation and power. Concern with specialized production was central to eighteenth-century treatises on political economy and amassed wealth. Commodity production was thought to lead to prosperity and peaceful coexistence among nations. A century later, rationalized crafting, manufacturing, and exchange remained critical in speculations on the evolution of first civilizations, and they retain currency even now because of their believed causal powers.

Specialized manufacturing is a subset of all crafting activities. To assess the impact of manufacturing, one must extract it categorically from its encompassing matrix. For interpretive ends, this classificatory move must be justified with good reasons. Most serious debate about craft specialization in archaeology concerns only two questions. First, how should prehistoric productive activities be parsed to isolate specialized crafting from related activities? What is specialized, and what is not? What are crafts, and what are not? Second, is the division justified? More to the point, are the assumptions supporting the division culturally appropriate? There has been insufficient debate of this matter although, as pointed out in Chapter 1 of this volume, specialization as a concept has been invoked in several contrasting ways by many scholars. Many archaeological schemes for craft specialization presume or impose postulates of neoclassical economics on prehistoric peoples. Assumptions of supply and demand, property, price, and the like are inappropriate for ancient peoples to an unknown degree. Their appropriateness should be research questions rather than a priori postulates.

The recent trend is to address justification issues by breaking down types of craft specialization into bundled sets of independent attributes or parameters of variation, such as production time, output, types of goods, characteristics of work stations, and so forth (see Costin 2001, 2005). This trend has been important for operationalizing concepts and linking observations to known explanatory principles. Once a typology guides thinking to the point where types fragment into component variables, the typology’s utility diminishes. As perceptual tools, taxonomies and concepts channel observations and allow measurement and controlled comparisons. Good typologies generate their own replacements by promoting sharper categories that allow improved perception, measurement, and analysis. The built-in obsolescence of typologies became most apparent to me when I tried to repair a scheme for assessing production of obsidian tools (Clark 1986). To place a workshop on the production continuum, I had to calculate its output—what the scheme was meant to bracket in the first place. Putting a workshop on the output line actually represented a degradation of crisp information in exchange for vague positioning. Types steer thinking, but they lose vigor with changes in observational scales, as is now occurring with craft specialization. The same paradox that dissolves original types of craft specialization also erodes the boundary between specialized and nonspecialized crafting. This is apparent in the multiple ways that specialization has been defined, as discussed by Flad and Hruhy in Chapter 1 of this volume. If conditions of production can be described for individual cases by their attributes, what analytical utility remains for excluding personal crafting? The insights to be had concerning specialized production derive from placing it within all the material production activities of a society.

Analyses of production require a hierarchy of categories, from general to specific. Broad categories bridge the divide between specialized and nonspecialized production and specify the boundary condition or cutoff point between them. It is well to remember that analysts specify these cutoffs by fiat depending on their questions and biases, and proposed boundaries vary widely. We should rethink
these categories and their purposes. For example, why is the distinction between specialized and nonspecialized production worth making?

Consider a simple example. Many complain that the definition of specialization I proposed in an article with Bill Parry (Clark and Parry 1990) is too inclusive because by my "loose" criteria all societies have it. My definition (called the "product specialization" definition by the authors of Chapter 1) does need rethinking (see below), but not for this reason. Concern over boundaries raises a serious question: Is the distinction we wish to make between types of production qualitative or quantitative? If the latter, we can save the effort wasted in forcing this unwarranted distinction on our data and move directly to reporting values for continuous variables and rankings for ordinal ones. The literature on craft specialization is clogged with needless angst over the inability to specify full-time versus part-time specialized production or distinguish between part-time specialization and private production. Doubts are compounded by inferential challenges of estimating total production of various kinds of goods, of delimiting production periods, of calculating the number of artisans, and of converting these guesses into estimates of artisan production per annum. The range of error in the estimates easily exceeds the ranges specified in the boundary conditions. If one decides for practical reasons to draw the boundary between specialized and nonspecialized production of pots at five per year, is this license to ignore situations in which a supposed ancient artisan produced only four pots (plus or minus three) instead of six pots (plus or minus four)? There would be no credible difference between the two, but both would differ in degree (and maybe in kind) from production of 500 pots (plus or minus 50). The latter distinction would best be made by comparing original numbers rather than collapsing real observations into spongy categories of craft specialization and then manipulating labels. Labels should not trump data. Any argument for qualitative distinctions would have to come from other observations or logic. Some recent efforts confuse categorical distinctions or dichotomies (independent versus attached) for continua (see Inomata 2001:323, 344; Flad, Chapter 7 in this volume, offers a similar critique). We need clearer thinking about categories and their interrelationships and correspondences to real-world phenomena, as well as pragmatic thinking about their analytic utility.

Current categories of craft specialization are neither general enough nor specific enough to handle interpretive challenges. They remain necessary as organizing links in a hierarchy of categories (Clark 1995), but most productive analytical work now takes place several levels below them (e.g., scale, goods, workshops, locus), and most interpretive payoffs are several levels above (e.g., organization of production, modes of production, political economy). A pressing need is to justify choices of subcategories (attributes and variables), preferably by specifying their suspected causal connections to social consequences in different settings. What causes specific effects, and under what circumstances? Studies of craft specialization have always been concerned with people making, exchanging, and using things in various social settings and with outcomes of such usage. To pursue these issues in post-systems-thinking, we need realistic theories of things, persons, and action. A good place to start is to reconsider ignored claims for the spirit of the gift.

Revenge of the Gift

Marcel Mauss's (1923–1924, 1990) study of the spirit of the gift has been central to debate in economic anthropology (see Graeber 2001; also Carrier 1995; Gregory 1980, 1982, 1997; Goedelier 1999, 2004; Parry 1986; Sahlin 1972; Schrift 1997; Thomas 1991) but has not been taken seriously in craft specialization studies. Most scholars consider gift-giving and special crafting as mutually exclusive. Gifts as items of exchange differ from other imagined objects (commodities and goods). Mauss argued that some spirit or essence in gifts compels their return to their initiator. C. A. Gregory distinguishes gifts from commodities as follows: "commodity exchange is an exchange of alienable things between transactors who are in a state of reciprocal independence... non-commodity (gift) exchange is an exchange of inalienable things between transactors who are in a state of reciprocal dependence" (Gregory 1982:12). Mauss's identification of gifts as inalienable things has been verified many times in subsequent ethnography. His ideas raise at least three interesting and potentially critical issues for those working with craft production. These concern distinctions between persons and things, types of circulated objects (alienable or not), and connections between persons and objects.

Persons and Things

I started thinking about implications of gifts when dealing with claims of evolutionary and behavioral archaeology for the AAA version of this essay. Both theories claim artifacts are phenotypic of human beings (Leonard 2001:69; O'Brien 1996:xiv; Schiffer 1996:648; Walker et al. 1995:5), a basic category mistake of conflating persons and things. At the time I was aware that Maussian interpretations of the gift entail the same metaphysical slippage. Many peoples see affinities between persons and objects, and even in our society where we keep them separate we lapse into personification of inert objects (see Csikszentmihalyi and
Rochberg-Halton 1981; Elkins 1996). In some native beliefs human essence extends to objects, and these objects receive special treatment. In such thinking, where does the individual artisan stop and the craft object begin? Where are the boundaries between persons and things? Marilyn Strathern (1988, 1999; see also Gell 1998) discusses individual versus individual persons and partitive notions of self. With individual or partitive personhood, one can cleave part of oneself and transfer it to objects that become part of one’s person. Conversely, persons can absorb qualities of things with which they share identity. The conceptual transformation necessarily works in both directions, and it has profound implications for the meaning of objects and their roles in social intercourse (see Carrier 1995). These concepts affect understandings of crafting. John Barrett highlights the central issue:

[H]uman identities are not only objectified in the things exchanged, they are also objectified in the labour of making those things in the first place. The artifact thus objectifies both the labour of craft production in the making of things, and the relationship between gift partners in the making of exchanges. [Barrett 2001:152]

Would taking extensionist views of thingness and objectified personhood into account alter definitions of craft production? Must one consider such beliefs in trying to understand the production organization of a society? Julia Hendon (2001) raised this issue in her comments on Takeshi Inomata’s study of elite Maya crafting of wealth items and status markers. Inomata (2001:344) responded that inalienability makes little difference because the objects were traded in any case. Maybe the issue merits more worry. In Mauss’s (1990) exegesis the return compelled by a gift was not its own homecoming but a return of different goods representing the original’s equivalent, plus increase (see Sahlins 1972). Parry states,

It is because the thing contains the person that the donor retains a lien on what he has given away and we cannot therefore speak of an alienation of property; and it is because of this participation of the person in the object that the gift creates an enduring bond between persons. [Parry 1986:457]

There are different degrees of inalienability. James Carrier considers inalienability simply to mean associated with a person, a possession, “part of self, somehow attached, assimilated to or set apart for the self” (Beaglehole 1932:134). ... saying that a gift is inalienably linked to the giver does not necessarily mean that the giver has the jural right to reclaim the object, that such a right could be exercised in practice, or that the recipient has no right to dispose of the object. The nature of these rights and practices is an empirical question. What is important is the central point that the object continues to bear the identity of the giver and of the relationship between the giver and the recipient. [Carrier 1995:24]

These attributes of gifts certainly make them more meaningful to givers and receivers, but it remains an open question how to distinguish exchanged gifts from commodities. Inalienability is a slippery concept in gifting systems. Gregory (1980) distinguishes between “gifts-to-men” and “gifts-to-god” systems that have different possibilities for alienation and material accumulation. In the former, a “gift is like a tennis ball with an elastic band attached to it. The owner of the ball may lose possession of it for a time but the ball will spring back to its owner if the elastic band is given a jerk” (Gregory 1980:640). The critical point is that owners transfer “possession” of items but not “control” (Gregory 1980:641); the elastic remains in place. In contrast, in gifts-to-god systems, such as the classic Potlatch of the Northwest Coast, “what a gift to god accomplishes is the alienation of the inalienable” (Gregory 1980:645, original emphasis). In sacrificing their goods, owners forego possession and control. Maurice Godelier’s (1999, 2004) recent distinction of two types of gift-giving systems (agonistic and non-agonistic) and three types of objects adds further complications. In terms of transactions, different types of objects relate to “selling, giving, and keeping”; “objects in these contexts are presented respectively as alienable and alienated (commodities), as inalienable but alienated (gift objects), and as inalienable and unalienated (sacred objects)” (Godelier 2004:19).

A larger issue is how things and persons combine in notions of personhood and being. It is widely appreciated in modern society that “clothes make the man” and that one can “dress for success.” Both slogans signal volatile social and psychological relationships between individuals and things that color the nature of each. As Carrier notes, “for most people, objects serve as depositories of personal meaning and identity. Objects are a way that we define how we are to ourselves and others” (Carrier 1995:25). It follows that “we cannot understand how people think about objects unless we attend to the ways that having an object bestows distinction upon the owner” (Carrier 1995:2). There are critical social as well as psychological aspects of artifacts as instruments and framing devices for being.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi identifies three critical functions of artifacts in the objectification of self:

They do so first by demonstrating the owner’s power, vital erotic energy, and place in the social hierarchy. Second, objects reveal the continuity of the self through time, by providing foci of involvement in the present, mementos and souvenirs of the past, and signposts to future goals. Third, objects give concrete evidence of one’s place in a
social network as symbols (literally, the joining together) of valued relationships. In these three ways things stabilize our sense of who we are; they give a permanent shape to our views of ourselves that otherwise would quickly dissolve in the flux of consciousness. [Koike 1993:23]

These dynamic views of persons and things go well beyond issues of specialized craft production. They dictate that we consider the full range of things made, circulated, used, treasured, and remembered by ancient peoples and not just those durables crafted by specialists. Barrett’s (2000, 2001) nuanced approach to agency and material conditions is a promising approach for understanding persons and various kinds of things in unfolding cultural practices. From the technological side, Marcia-Anne Dobres (2000) provides marvelous instruction as well. Issues of perception and representation are also critical (Elkins 1996).

The ontological status of individuals and things is philosophically complex. Frederick Doepke (1996:98) argues that personal identity as an enduring entity requires self-awareness of one’s self as a physical object within a larger system of physical objects. This blurs the boundary between persons and things while at the same time signaling promising ground for their mutual rapprochement in social action and cognition. As a biological package, the body is clearly an object to self and others. Margaret Archer (2000) argues that practice and embodiment are necessary for a sense of self. Developmentally this requires a pre-linguistic and pre-social differentiation of one’s body from other things through action in a real environment. Notions of self and other emerge together, thus avoiding the category mistake involved in partitive personhood and the spirit of the gift. But this distinction refers to self and not person. The latter is a social and cognitive construct not logically bound to pre-linguistic practice and perceptions. The critical distinction Archer (2000:108) makes is between “the concept of self” and “the sense of self.” The spirit of the gift implies concepts of self rather than the sense of self.

Gifts, Commodities, and Goods

Gregory’s (1980, 1982, 1997) trichotomy of objects and value systems presents a serious challenge for those working with craft specialization. He identifies a rupture between “Political Economy” (derived from classic economics) and “Economy” (from neoclassical economics), most evident in the types of items in circulation and their relationships to various agents (see below). Gifts and commodities are objective concepts of political economy. In contrast, the concept of goods is based on neoclassic economics, value at the margin, and subjectivism.

The Political Economists used the term ‘commodities’ to describe objects of exchange, a term whose etymology suggests an objective relation between the things exchanged, i.e. prices. Economists on the other hand, have opted for the term ‘goods’... This term connotes a subjective relation between an individual and an object of desire. The expression ‘goods’ epitomizes the whole ‘subjectivist’ approach to Economics in the same way that the term ‘commodity’ epitomizes the fundamentally ‘objectivist’ approach of Political Economy. [Gregory 1982:7]

This classification of items also concerns notions of value, property, and agentic action, as discussed in the following sections. Debate has concerned the nature of wealth and its production and allocation in capitalist and noncapitalist societies. Beginning with political economists of the 18th century, this has also concerned prices in specific markets.

Prices involve values of various kinds and in complex ways:

A commodity is defined as a socially desirable thing with a use-value and an exchange-value. The use-value of a commodity is an intrinsic property of a thing desired or discovered by society at different stages in its historical evolution. . . . ‘Exchange value’ on the other hand is an extrinsic property, and is the defining characteristic of a commodity. ‘Exchange value’ refers to the quantitative proportion in which use-values of one sort are exchanged for those of another sort. [Gregory 1982:10–11]

Gifts and commodities form a complementarity along a continuum of possibilities; “the concept commodity, which presupposes reciprocal independence and alienability, is a mirror image of the concept of gift, which presupposes reciprocal dependence and inalienability” (Gregory 1982:24). These represent packages of polar attributes: gifts are unique, permanent, and non-fungible; commodities are the opposite. As Carrier states, “In commodity relations objects are impersonal bundles of use value and exchange value that are bought and sold. In gift relations objects are personal possessions that are given and received” (Carrier 1995:18). In commodity relationships “both the parties and the objects are fungible rather than unique [like gifts] and are alienable rather than inalienable: they are linked to each other in no enduring way” (Carrier 1995:29).

Commodities presume individual property rights, and gifts presume communal property relations (Gregory 1982:18). According to Gregory, both differ from goods, an incommensurate concept from a different paradigm. The neoclassical or “Economy” approach makes different assumptions about society and action. Among other things, “Economy” represents a shift from a focus on society and relations of production to individuals and from objective to subjective views of exchanged items and their values under specific conditions (Gregory 1982:26). These changes
required a shift in concepts and vocabulary, such as from commodities to goods. In the subjective view, goods are evaluated for future utility rather than past labor; they fulfill needs and wants. Good is a "universal category" whereas commodities and gifts are historically specific (Gregory 1982:25, 28; see Chapter 1, this volume, for further discussion of the contextual nature of commodities and gifts). As with commodity, the term it replaced in the paradigm shift, goods presuppose private property, relations of interdependence, and rights to exchange property. Goods would seem to be a more inclusive category of exchanged things that could subsume both commodities and gifts, and most of us use the term in this manner, but as Gregory (1982) argues, it comes with conceptual baggage antithetical to "Political Economy" and its concepts. Recently, Gregory (1997:79) has proposed a restricted definition of goods as fixed, inalienable possessions. His claim deserves further discussion. (In the remainder of this essay I will use good as a general, inclusive term unless otherwise specified.)

If gifts and goods are inalienable (Gregory 1982; Thomas 1991; Weiner 1992), is it proper to talk about their exchange? And if they are exchanged, does this not implicate specialized production by definition? Archaeologically, both would be produced and allocated to people in distant places and would be virtually indistinguishable. The concept of gift certainly undercut my definition of craft specialization as "production of alienable, durable goods for nondependent consumption" (Clark and Parry 1990:297). I built this definition around the notion of separation—alienation of goods from producers. At the time my pragmatic objectives were twofold. I needed a broad definition that would allow identification and coding of instances of craft specialization from ethnographic descriptions, even when the activities were not identified as specialized by those describing them. Second, the definition had to be sensitive to archaeological concerns or I would not be able to use the results to interpret archaeological phenomena. I started with the rudimentary definition of craft specialization as production for exchange and then proceeded to restrict this definition. Craft production as creation of durable goods was not a problem, but exchange presented, and still presents, challenges. Archaeologically, I was accustomed to exchange as transfer and movement of materials and goods from manufacturing locations to distant ones. Inferring social and economic relationships from displaced goods is rife with problems and remains a primal weakness of all archaeological studies of exchange (Clark 2003) and, hence, of specialization as production for exchange. Viewed archaeologically, exchange covers all conceivable mechanisms for moving goods across space and between hands. In most instances, we concede benefits of the doubt proportional to the magnitude of displacement. Long-distance movement is comfortably seen as exchange, interregional movement is as well, but things get sticky with stone's-throw distances within site.

Because I consider exchange and specialized production as logical complements, in coding ethnographic information my types of specialization were defined by the types of transfers involved (Clark and Parry 1990). These also marked social relationships, a focal interest. As inferred from final consumption of displaced goods, craft specialization is rather simple to operationalize archaeologically (see Costin 2001). Inferring the types of transfers from object displacements is more problematic, but Colin Renfrew's (1975) early work with archaeological correlates of different social arrangements provides hope for teasing these out. Greater difficulties arise in inferring specialized crafting from production loci alone because displacement of goods is not involved. To address workshop issues I relied on economic fictions of household consumption and independence. I had practical issues of archaeological inference very much in mind at the time, having contested definitions and interpretations of Mesoamerican obsidian workshops (Clark 1986, 1989). In the absence of evidence for the removal (possible export) of items from a production location one can determine whether production probably exceeded family needs—meaning that some output may have been destined for exchange.

Other standards and economic fictions could have been devised, but I thought the satisficing family unit (Sahlins's 1972 Domestic Mode of Production) the most satisfactory (see Clark 1995). Clearly, such usage obscures any material transfers among family members. It also presumes some private consumption of one's special product, something not logically entailed in craft specialization. In any event, the only serious question about these criteria concerns the demarcated boundary between specialized and private production—not a particularly interesting question. Rather than agonize over the width or spacing of these categorical cubbyholes we should document the concrete production for individual cases.

Exchange implicates contractual relationships between producers and consumers; presumably these are mutually beneficial. In thinking about the conditions of possibility for exchange to take place, I worried about the rights to enter into exchange and benefit therefrom. I settled on the notion of alienation (separation of goods from producers rather than producers from society). Clearly, alienation presumes transfer of property rights from one person to another (Gregory 1982:12). I appropriated Timothy Earle's (1981) terms, attached and independent production, to signal fundamental differences in this property relation and, consequently, in potentialities of benefiting from transfers of various kinds of things. Flad adopts this perspective in his discussion of
“context” in Chapter 7 of this volume. I devised my typology to be encompassing, but I inadvertently privileged commodities over gifts. Defining commodities as alienable objects, my definition of craft specialization can be more simply phrased as production of commodities. This would exclude the objects of most interest to me, production of gifts. Given Gregory’s definitions of commodities and gifts, my definition clearly is too narrow. This was certainly not my intention. At the time I did not consider gifts as different kinds of goods or non-property, nor had I incorporated Gregory’s (1980, 1982) clarifying discussion of gifts, commodities, and goods.

Earle’s (1981) comments that generated so much useful thinking about types of craft specialization concerned different classes of objects, an insight reinforced by Gregory’s (1982) distinctions. Attempts to corral Earle’s insight within parameters of then-current concerns for craft specialization may have chased down the wrong trail. Perhaps we should return to the original insight and contemplate types of things and their social functions, despite postulated origins, specialized or not. Current studies move directly to things and their deployment in social interaction, but these studies are needlessly burdened with rhetoric about specialized production as a concession to past disciplinary interests (cf. Spielmann 2002). With archaeological biases of instrumentalism and operationalism, I attempted to link production and types of goods, taking a page from the cost-of-production theory of value to argue for envalued and encoded special goods. I wished to bridge the gap between labor and meaning, as mediated by goods (Clark and Parry 1990). The relationship between successive increments of labor and encoded information (in the technical sense) is straightforward, but that between information and meaning is not. There is no necessary or consistent connection between labor and meaning or between labor and value. As I argue below, meaning and value are negotiated, historically contingent, social constructions and not essential properties of raw materials or their skilled modification.

Connecting Persons and Things

Categorical distinctions among gifts, commodities, goods, and sacred objects signal different social relations based on different property relations or access to the means of production. As Gregory (1982:23) observes, the same object can serve as a gift or a commodity, depending on the social arena in which it is exchanged (see Aswani and Sheppard 2003 and Thomas 1991, and also the introduction [Chapter 1] and contribution by Flad [Chapter 7] in this volume for specific examples and critical discussion). He argues that the two categories are ends of a continuum and that individual objects can slide between them. These claims undercut Gregory’s commitment to objective analysis of things because the type of allocated object (gift or commodity), and its value, are clearly socially defined in concrete circumstances rather than by intrinsic properties. Thus, both the objective and subjective view of goods see the distinction of types as dependent on social circumstances.

Production of commodities implicates different circumstances of production and society than does the production of gifts (see Carrier 1995; discussion in Aswani and Sheppard 2003). “It follows from these definitions of exchange that commodity exchange establishes a relationship between the objects exchanged, whereas gift exchange establishes a relationship between the subjects” (Gregory 1982:19). Gift economies are debt economies, and commodity economies are not: “What a gift transistor desires is the personal relationships that the exchange of gifts create, and not the things themselves” (Gregory 1982:19). In contrast, in a commodity economy, exchanged items matter more than social relations. Goods circulate in economies based on exchange of anticipated use-values. Gifts and commodities are commonly part of the same economies (Gregory 1982, 1997).

I have cited Gregory’s (1982, 1997) foundational studies sufficiently to show I think they can be a departure point for future discussions of these matters. I lack the knowledge to go beyond his analysis. For the moment, I use his observations and claims as a foil to raise questions for consideration. Each of his proposed types of goods represents different relationships between persons and things, persons and persons, and different concepts of personhood. Consequently, identification of types of goods depends on specifying first the relationships implicated, whether gift, sacred object, commodity, or good (in the limited sense). It follows further that identifications of types of production depend on determining the types of goods and relations involved since goods derive their identities from social relationships rather than from their intrinsic properties (see below). Given different goods’ ability to slide between gifts and commodities, identifying types of production is clearly a messy exercise—and, by definition, a redundant and unnecessary one.

The central implication of Gregory’s analysis is that goods can only be understood by placing them with agents in particular historic circumstances (cf. Barrett 2001). The types of goods (and hence production) are identified by their social roles, their circulation among various producers and consumers, and the consequences of their use (Carrier 1995). Once social usages and artifact histories have been identified, the type of production involved can be specified, but this final exercise becomes one of picking labels after the fact, and it provides no additional information about artifacts, agents, or their mutual actualization. Such labeling
may conserve some utility for building up holistic pictures of larger systems for comparison to others. Even so, it would seem that we could better expend our efforts on understanding how agents used artifacts, as well as the consequences of their use, rather than worrying about identifying types of craft specialization.

If I have characterized matters correctly, they add up to a significant epistemological point: we have the inferential chain backwards. As a guilty party to this crime, I will begin the case for the prosecution. Craft specialization studies have always been interested in elucidating social relationships and events of various sorts. Coming from a materialist perspective and epistemology, the expectation is that understanding conditions of production will aid in comprehending the rest. This is the Marxian way. The inferential chain begins with artifacts and their production; proceeds to guesses about the scale, purpose, and type of production; and then culminates in speculations about the social relations of production and the use of special artifacts in social interaction. The critical, unexamined link of this chain concerns value. We presume to infer the nature of artifacts from their intrinsic and added properties, such as raw materials, transport distances, labor expended in production, degree of skilled crafting, and so forth. These are all critical attributes to monitor for ancient artifacts, but they cannot deliver the blessings promised because the objective assumption about inherent value is wrong. If value is subjective rather than objective, as history and anthropology indicate, then conditions of production do not determine the value, meaning, or type of goods. By definition, the uses to which objects are put determine their nature and identity. This means that one can only infer types of production by monitoring the circulation of goods and social circumstances, and not vice versa. Once one has determined the use of goods in specific circumstances, however, typological issues of specialized production become redundant exercises in labeling.

**Crafting Valuables and Value**

The fundamental unresolved issue swirling around production concerns the generation of value. *Value* is an inherently ambiguous term because it embraces such a broad spectrum of things, from material goods, to ideas, to expectations for moral behavior. The heading for this section captures the range of normal usage in studies of specialized crafting. Production is thought to impart value to raw materials in the creation of exchangeable goods and valuables. As manipulated in social interactions, however, material goods may influence social mores and norms and may even come to objectify, materialize, or instantiate concepts and ideologies. Goods are implicated in the full range of values as perpetuated or changed during the course of social interaction. Here I focus on material and ideal values.

As noted, the paradigm shift from “Political Economy” to “Economy” that Gregory describes began with the replacement of an objective theory of value with the subjective theory of value proposed by various economists who focused on supply, demand, and the value of marginal differences at the close of the 19th century: both theories derived from contemplations of fluctuating prices in markets (see Dobb 1973). Anthropology still needs a concept of value applicable for nonmarket economies that parallels the notion of price. To date, little progress has been made in formulating a theory of exchange equivalences. Whatever these currencies may prove to be, they will include various kinds of real or perceived values. Classical economists concerned themselves with labor value, use value, and exchange value. Marx added the concept of surplus value to deal with the notions of profit and exploitation. Neoclassical economists proposed the subjective concept of marginal value or marginal utility. I am becoming convinced that the marginalist economists (see Mises 1996, 2003), and not Marx, have the better argument on value with their emphasis on the subjective preferences of individuals. This means my past appraisals of craft specialization are flawed because they presumed objective rather than subjective value.

**Material Value and Utility**

Common sense, the bane of social science everywhere, suggests that crafted objects derive their value from conditions of production. This appears reasonable—until we go to a really great sale and swoon over prices. Clearly, there is no constant relation between value, as invested labor, and prices. Nor is there a direct relationship between value and usefulness or utility (as the comparison of diamonds and air shows). These disjunctions locate the rift between “Political Economy” and “Economy” as that between objective and subjective value. Most studies of craft specialization, mine included, presume the common-sense view of labor-quantity value handed down from the Physiocrats through Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and Karl Marx. This view explains value as an objective or intrinsic quality of manufactured things, “proportional to the quantity of labor contained in the commodity” (Schumpeter 1951:27–28). But value does not happen this way.

The objective theory of labor value was exposed as erroneous over a century ago, but I did not stumble to it until recently. The anthropological bias toward substantive over formal economics made me naturally suspicious of Western categories such as price, so I did not pursue the matter in the
right literature. Now I need to repair some of the damage my ignorance may have perpetrated. I contend that studies of ancient production will be greatly improved if we replace objective theories with subjective theories of value. Objective theory claims that value, as abstract labor, is added to manufactured objects as a function of the labor expended, all other things such as artisan skill being equal. As Mohun writes, "Thus the value of a commodity varies directly with the quantity of abstract labour objectified in it, and inversely with the productivity of the concrete labour producing it" (Mohun 1983:508).

In the process of exchange something homogeneous is expressed, and the only common property which all commodities have is that they are all products of labour. Thus the process of exchange renders all the different types of labour producing commodities homogeneous: the homogeneous labour which produces commodities is called abstract labour. Value is then defined as the objectification or materialization of abstract labour, and the form of appearance of value is the exchange value of a commodity. [Mohun 1983:508]

Value inheres in the object and can be appreciated by roughly estimating labor costs, a wonderfully convenient property for archaeological analysis.

Labor has a problem, however; it obeys the law of diminishing returns. Thus, there is no necessary, predictable relationship between incremental amounts of invested labor and the value of produced commodities. Not every increment of labor can be of equal value, and this is the least of labor’s problems (for discussion see Deane 1978:19–28, 65–69, 106–118; Dobb 1973; Schumpeter 1951:28–29, 1954:588–604, 909–924). In subjectivist views of marginal utility, "Value always expresses a judgement of the estimation in which something is held, because a thing has a value if and only in so far as it is wanted or desired" (Ballvé 1994:13). Schumpeter stated, "The magnitude of the value of a commodity depends on the importance of that concrete want, or partial want, which, among the wants covered by the available total quantity of the commodity concerned, is the least important" (Schumpeter 1951:169, citing Böhm-Bawerk). Value varies according to producers’ and consumers’ "subjective valuations of economic goods" (Mises 2003:178; also Greaves 1990) at a given time and place, so archaeologically value must be reconstructed for each specific context. As Ballvé put it, "Nothing has value in itself. The consumer confers value on it by seeking to acquire it. Hence, the value of a thing is never objective, but always subjective" (Ballvé 1994:116–117, original emphasis). This claim reinforces the epistemological emendation mentioned above. Observable values of goods appear in exchange and consumption rather than in production, so we ought to approach problems of production from this pragmatic and realist point of view. We need to curtail commitments to the labor theory of value.

Not all will be lost. Labor theories remain critically important for understanding ancient societies from a phenomenological point of view. Exposed fallacies were once our own primary Western realities (they continue in common practice), and they remain others’ current views. Some societies clearly operate with labor theories of value in which elaborated objects, or those of exotic materials, or those from distant places are accorded greater value (see Helms 1976, 1988, 1993; Thomas 1991). But these are culturally dependent rather than logically necessary, universal relationships. Labor obviously adds value to things, but to an unknown and unpredictable degree; thus we lack a strong inferential basis for inferring relative values from assessments of instilled labor (production and transportation costs). My theory of hypertrophic goods, for example, derived from sound ethnography and received support from labor theories of value, but it does not describe a universal relationship between value and labor investment as I once thought. Value and meaning depend more on social discourse and semiotics than on manufacture, expended energy, esoteric knowledge, or artisan intention (see Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981 and compare with Hruby, this volume, and Carter, this volume).

Labor and Property

In addition to labor, a critical concept associated with commodities is property. Both are entailed in my definition of specialized crafting. When I proposed it, I was not familiar with John Locke's classic definition, in his second treatise on government, of personal property as the annexing of one's labor power to natural materials. By accident my definition conforms to Locke's labor theory of property: "Whatsoever then he removes out of the State that Nature hath provided, and left it in, he hath mixed his Labour with, and joyned to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his Property" (Locke 1698 [1698]:228). I have not resolved issues of private property as they relate to crafting and exchange (I took these as a priori). They are critical and merit future debate. The spirit of the gift presumes some sort of proprietary right. Conceiving objects as part of one's being appears a much stronger claim than imagining jural rights to the fruits of one's labor. But both Gregory (1982) and Strathern (1988) argue that property rights are absent in gifts; Carrier (1995) considers them "possessions." Gift economies correlate with clan organization and group rather than private ownership (Gregory 1982:18). One reason things are inalienable is that agents lack rights to private property. I remain to be
Convinced of this claim, but if it holds up, a central question that ought to engage attention is the origin of private property (both moveable and permanent). Questions of property have engaged philosophers for over two millennia, with no clear answers in sight, so perhaps the pragmatic way to proceed will be by careful study of concrete cases, as was done by Gregory.

Annette Weiner (1992) argues that some precious goods are never intended to be exchanged and they cannot be alienated: they derive value from being withheld from circulation. Godelier (2004) calls them “inalienable,” “kept,” or “sacred objects.” They are passed down through time, however, and sometimes passed to other societies. These goods carry essences of ancestors and are crucial for social identity and political legitimacy (cf. Aswani and Sheppard 2003). The basic claim for these goods is that they cannot, or should not, be given away or exchanged. This is a different kind of inalienability than discussed by Mauss, Gregory, and Carrier. The inalienability of these special goods changes the dynamic of transferring things between persons in social interaction, whether through space or time. To think through the implications of such goods for issues of crafting and social reproduction we need to start with personhood and its constitution. Issues of human nature, natural rights, and natural law will also be critical.

Agents and agency are hot topics of the moment, but what are their implications for craft specialization? Agency action necessarily involves choice among alternative ends for premeditated reasons rational to situated agents, presumably to increase satisfaction or to remove dissatisfaction. These are a priori postulates and apodictic truths of “Economy,” a discipline concerned specifically with human action and choice (see Mises 1996, 2003). The postulates of “Economy” fit current interests in agency much better than do those of “Political Economy.” Action requires that agents have proprietary rights over their own being and labor. This natural right may be the correct starting point for comprehending issues of property as parts of extended selves (see Arendt 1959:62 for a contrary view). In turn, property and rights to transfer it are necessary and sufficient conditions for commodity exchange. Mauss’s insight about gifts identifies the alienability of things as a fundamental issue that should be considered for understanding the roles of objects in social interaction. In one sense, transfers and circulation of inalienable property constitute a sharing of selves. Partitive individuals literally share co-essence with the same objects in a spirit of gift brotherhood. Gifts really are about social relations rather than things. Commodity production shifted the emphases to relations between fungible things and persons, facilitated by changing notions of property and personal responsibility.

**Surplus Value and Surplus**

Developmental questions concerning production, such as the shift from gift to commodity relations or economies, require a broad scale of analysis at the level of political economy. An agency approach is still required, but with attention to how individual agents make cooperative decisions for groups, such as lineages and communities (Saitta 1994). The central production issue at this scale concerns what Dean Saitta (1992, 1994; Saitta and Keene 1990) calls “surplus flow.” Critical to his analysis is the notion of surplus labor. In reviewing these issues, it will be useful to address first Marx’s concept of surplus value. Surplus represents accumulated resources above a specified baseline, and it is produced by surplus labor. Surplus flow represents the distribution of surplus throughout society for various ends. Specialized crafting can be part of surplus labor and also a recipient of surpluses consumed in production.

Surplus value is Marx’s term for profit-taking and exploitation in capitalist societies, a critical relation among persons, resources, and distributed benefits (Dobb 1973:150–154). As his accusation goes, capitalists pay unfair wages to workers to produce products. Surplus value is “the difference between the value of the product and the value of the capital involved in the production process” (Himmelweit 1983:472). Stated differently, “The labour theory of value reveals that the source of surplus value in the system of capitalist production is unpaid labour of workers” (Hyman 1983:475). Thus, capitalists get fat by skimming, by taking uncompensated labor value from landless laborers bereft of any other options than working for squeezed wages—at least this has been the socialist accusation for the past 150 years. But if the labor theory of value is wrong, Marx has no case.

Marx argued that with capitalism labor became a commodity on the market; thus it should share characteristics of other commodities, with its real value evident in its exchange for other commodities. If so, there is no exploitation, just market forces: relations among sponsors, workers, means of production, technology, and production of products. There was more heart than head in Marx’s analysis, as evident from the subjectivist response:

An attempt has also been made to find in labor a measure of the value of things. This results from insistence on determining the “just” value of things, thereby confounding an economic question with a moral question that has nothing to do with it. The attempt has been made in two ways. In the early days of classical economics it was said that since things are the fruits of human labor expended in the utilization or transformation of natural resources, their value ought to be measured in terms of the labor involved in their production. From this the socialists
derived their demand that the workers receive the whole proceeds of their labor; from which, it was charged, the capitalists retain a surplus value consisting of that part of the proceeds of labor which is not indispensable for the bare subsistence of the laborer.

The classical economists were not long in observing that, in the first place, the difficulty of the calculation made it practically impossible to take the labor involved in production as the measure of value of the product, and, besides, the labor required for the production of a thing varies according to place and time, depending on the skill of managers and workers at a given moment and on the extent to which techniques and means of production are perfected during the course of the years. Hence, they proposed measuring the value of things, not by the labor that they cost the producer, but by the labor they saved the purchaser. But this criterion, too, proved impractical because of the difficulty of determining how much labor the purchase of a thing actually saved the buyer in general.

Supply and demand constitute the mechanism of the market that determines prices, which are the value of goods and services expressed in terms of another neutral commodity, viz., money. These prices are formed by competition in the market, not only among those who offer to sell goods and services, but also those seeking to buy them. [Ballvé 1994:14-16]

Issues of calculation aside, the fundamental problem is that value is a sliding concept dependent on social circumstances, during both production and consumption. The value of a thing is what consumers pay for it (what they are willing to give up for it), and this includes labor power of disenfranchised workers. Moral questions are of a different order. Mobilization of labor in some social formations probably was decidedly unfair (according to various standards), but this should not affect how we go about analyzing the overall organization of their production, or their surplus flow.

Surplus flow implicates the economic fictions of surplus labor and necessary labor. As modified for application to small-scale societies, necessary labor is "the time and energy... required... to meet the subsistence needs of individuals" (Saitta 1994:226). Surplus labor is that exceeding this auto-subsistence baseline. For capitalist societies, surplus labor is "the time the worker is producing simply for the capitalist" (Himmelweit 1983:474). In simpler societies, it is the labor expended in producing social surpluses for the community.

Many of the traditional interests of craft specialization converge on the notion of surplus, meaning material resources exceeding amounts needed for social reproduction. In most models of the evolution of complex societies, surplus is seen as a necessary but insufficient precondition (see Hendon 2000). A given society's development depended on its organization or structure (Saitta 1994:201) calls this the "form of surplus extraction," or roughly its mode of production) and the ends to which extra resources are put (surplus flow). Disposable resources were sometimes deployed to fund specialized crafting, either directly or indirectly.

Given the importance of surplus in traditional questions, it is curious that recent agency approaches have ignored the issue. Saitta argues that "the most important problem with agency approaches in archaeology is their relative neglect of the surplus labor process in social life and in the differential role of individuals in groups within it" (Saitta 1994:204). These would seem to be critical issues for future dialog concerning crafting and other production. In particular, Saitta commends attention to "the precise form or mechanisms of appropriation in a particular instance, the social conditions which sustain those mechanisms, and the reproduction of the whole" (Saitta 1994:204).

Because of Saitta's commitment to a rare variant of Marxist jargon (especially his use of "class" as process), his arguments are somewhat difficult to comprehend. If I understand them correctly, he is making a plea that we study the political economy of small-scale societies, especially under conditions of intensification. His recommendation is a modified equivalent of the injunction "follow the money." For small-scale societies, we should "follow the surplus," or surplus flow. All productive and consumption activities are of interest, especially those of crafting non-subsistence goods. The production and use of resources (both things and people) above the baseline of fundamental needs is of particular concern. Who are the laborers and what are their relations to the social whole? What activities do they engage in for livelihood, and what do they do with their productive time over and beyond minimal requirements of caring for self and family? Issues of allocation are critical. What is the mechanism for rationalizing productive activity to meet the needs of the whole in the absence of market forces of supply and demand? The problem of economic calculation in communal-property economies, such as the primitive communist societies imagined by archaeologists, is particularly acute (see Mises 1996), and it remains an unexamined issue.

Social Value, Meaning, and Engagement

Analyses of the symbolic and social value of goods are the current growth industry in anthropology, so I need add little here. The social value of goods largely concerns intangibles and conforms nicely to the subjectivist view of value. Major questions concern the roles of various kinds of goods as used by different actors in specific social settings. None of this can be generalized. One question is whether material goods actually have agency and, if so, how? If some objects are extensions of persons and share their embodiment, they are involved in agency questions. Perception is everything here. Agents interact with objects on the basis of their perceptions of the nature of these objects, so objects
can clearly frame circumstances and warp the choices agents make (see Wobst 2000). But this does not make them agents in any serious sense. They are better considered as props manipulated by agents in social interactions.

Recent treatments of crafting and the creation of social value and meaning show warning signs of possible excesses to come. Objects clearly “carry,” “convey,” and “embody” memory and meaning in social interactions, and they can be crafted originally with such eventualities in mind, but as with material values, cognitive values arise from their manipulation in social interaction and not from conditions and intentions of production (see Maquet 1993:36). The instantiation of meaning in material objects is not a straightforward procedure, and it is not controllable (see Clark and Parry 1990). In a sense, recent proposals of “materializing ideology” (DeMarrais et al. 1996) or of “embodying memory” (Hendon 2000; cf. Joyce 1998, 2000, 2001, 2003) are cognitive equivalents of the labor theory of value. I take the general point to be that concepts (e.g., ideology or personal histories) can be given objective or material form in various kinds of goods. This is a labor theory of meaning, and it has no chance of competence. There are many meanings of material goods, ranging from their use as instruments, to symbols, to referents (see Maquet 1993:39). Meaning of objects as signs or symbols arises from social dialectics, not production. Things mean whatever they come to mean (intended or not) in social interaction. Meaning is labile, elusive, shifting, fleeting, dynamic. It cannot be pinned down, and it cannot be captured or imprisoned for long in material things. Production of an object represents but one moment in a stream of meaning over its use life. Meaning relies on social conventions, codes, histories, and interactions. Thus, creation of meaning is not an event but an unfolding, subjective, contingent process. Artifact meanings reside in the heads of specific agents, and they change in subtle ways with each additional thought and experience.

This is not to deny that “information” can be encoded in material objects, that codes can be communicated across space and time, and that encoded messages can be more or less unambiguously deciphered after creators of the object and its message are dead. The object will eventually outlive the social memory needed to understand and appreciate the original intent of its creators, and if it is still circulating among the living it will be accorded different meanings. This adds up to the simple point that meaning does not and cannot inhere in the object anymore than value can. Once something becomes part of social discourse, its meaning becomes impossible to control. Serious attempts to restrict meanings of objects must restrict access and consumption of these objects and exclude them in conversation. Specialized crafting is central to such attempts. Patrons can commission the fabrication of goods of certain specifications (i.e., encoded information according to desired norms), thereby effectively controlling the production process and safeguarding the meaning encoded (Clark and Parry 1990). But the original meaning will shift as objects get caught up in webs of social practice and significations.

Craft specialization finds itself in the middle of all pronouncements about the materialization of messages in special objects, and this will likely continue for some years before facile approaches are replaced by more realistic ones. We can continue to study and describe the manufacture of things under different conditions with the analytical tools now available, but if we wish to pursue issues of meaning, we need a theory that can simultaneously handle politics, agency, semiotics, and their interdependencies. Colin Renfrew (1994, 1998, 2001a, 2001b) recently has proffered the concept of “engagement,” which does precisely this. Engagement considers agents and objects in interaction and the changing meanings that ensue from living in life-worlds populated with manufactured things (cf. “cultivation” in Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981). The use of objects in the normal course of social events can give rise to new ideas and concepts, and new ideas can lead to the creation of different objects. To trace such changes, we have to reconstruct the parameters of their use lives and also the use lives of their predecessors and successors, or what I call artifact genealogies (Clark 2004). Patching together genealogies will require fine-grained analyses of attributes of many different kinds of objects, with particular attention to techniques of manufacture, evidence for use and abuse, and social contexts (see Carter, Chapter 6, this volume, for an example of this sort of effort). Skilled or specialized crafting will probably be involved, but it is likely to be of lesser interest. Specialized production will constitute part of the biographies of some objects, but it will not be the most important or interesting factor. As conceptual tools, our current categories of specialized crafting are simply too loose webbed to capture these kinds of data concerning past engagements.

**Points for Discussion**

With the hope that discussion can be of interest and useful, I have outlined some chronic concerns with studies of craft specialization. I made two main points. First, current categories have outlived their usefulness in various ways. Second, past attention to craft specialization has occluded other topics of greater importance that should be coaxed into the light. These include issues at different scales, from human choice to political economy. Related questions concern the nature of things, personal property, personhood, kinds of value, and surplus. All derive from concerns with specialized crafting in some way. I suggest production be dealt with broadly, in all its particulars. To do so, we will
need a credible and realistic theory of human action and the roles of agents and things in action. At the moment the most promising candidate for a general theory of action is practice theory (Archer 2000), Barrett (2000, 2001), Dobres (2000), and Renfrew (2001a, 2001b) propose useful lines for advancing these issues.

Some of my comments are self-critical, an unwelcome conceit demanded by shifting theoretical loyalties that are working themselves out. My main critique derives from the “Economy” view of subjective value based on the principle of marginal utility and price theory. This represents a mood swing from Marx to Mises that could hardly be more radical and a turn toward a priori categories of formal economies. I tempered this neoclassical turn by reconsidering the Mauussian middle ground of inalienable goods. I remain in a quandary over inalienable goods and their companion concept of partitive personhood. My reason for tagging these issues is that they appear important for understanding production in simple societies, and they deserve discussion. It may require a level of commitment only possible in dissertation research to resolve these questions.

Although not explicitly argued, my primary criticism of craft specialization studies is that they remain criminally under-theorized. Not much has been added since V. Gordon Childe’s application of Marxist postulates to the evolution of civilizations. Many of the current difficulties with concepts are that they were designed with global questions in mind, dealing with systems and their parts. With the turn to agency and individual and group action, the tired holistic categories of processual archaeology no longer work. We need an integrated theory of persons, things, actions, and objectification. Needed observational categories must conform to the postulates and scales implicit in this theory if they are to serve. We can start this task by removing obstructing categories to view more clearly the materiality of concrete practices. Hannah Arendt’s analysis of artifice and identity in the human condition offers a seasoned, yet still promising and unexplored embarkation point:

The whole factual world of human affairs depends for its reality and its continued existence, first, upon the presence of others who have seen and heard and will remember, and, second, on the transformation of the intangible into the tangibility of things. Without remembrance and without reification which remembrance needs for its own fulfillment... the living activities of action, speech, and thought would lose their reality at the end of each process and disappear as though they never had been...

The reality and reliability of the human world rest primarily on the fact that we are surrounded by things more permanent than the activity by which they were produced, and potentially even more permanent than the lives of their authors. Human life, in so far as it is world-building, is engaged in a constant process of reification, and the degree of worldliness of produced things, which all together form the human artifice, depends upon their greater or lesser permanence in the world itself. [Arendt 1959:83]

The things of the world have the function of stabilizing human life, and their objectivity lies in the fact that... men, their ever-changing nature notwithstanding, can retrieve their sameness, that is, their identity, by being related to the same chair and the same table. In other words, against the subjectivity of men stands the objectivity of the manmade world rather than sublime indifference of an untouched nature. [Arendt 1959:120]

Manufactured things are partially constitutive of our and past agents’ continuous senses of self—the fundamental criterion of agency and humanity. We would lose nothing, then, in shifting our research priorities and replacing issues of specialized crafting with more foundational questions of crafting and consumption as living or lived practice.

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