

# Encyclopedia of Consumption and Waste: The Social Science of Garbage

## Material Culture Today

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Material cultural studies presume that objects contain traces of their cultural importance. Objects thus become central to accounts of socially meaningful use and waste, because the materials of culture are remnants of consumption. Objects carry their history and continually pick up residual meaning.

What happens as objects move through the social system through unique, creative, or unexpected trajectories? Defining objects as relational, but still inherently material, allows for both the reconception of culture beyond subjective experience and reimagining consumption as not simply structured by institutions; each becomes interrelated precisely through the personalized histories of specific objects. Past uses and meanings continue to exist through the persistence of the object, even if cultural values have changed.

The purpose and meaning of things are not simply imposed by the people who possess them; objects equally figurate their beholders because they contain past interactions with others in their very design and continued possession. Ordinary objects are thus cultural texts that call into being collective publics and subcultures as they are repossessed by people who reclaim potential waste as significant material. Popular books recounting histories of mundane foods such as salt, coffee, or sugar mark an underlying current of what might be called—following French philosopher Michel Foucault's work on power and governmentality—a “genealogical concern for the material origins of ordinary life.”

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## Cultural Commodities

A material culture approach can focus, for example, on what Will Straw calls the “spectacles of waste” of secondhand culture, which allows a view of the commodity cycle beyond the traditional two-step definition of purchase and disposal. Cultural commodities, in particular, tend to move toward sites of accumulation, whether in private collections, auctions, or secondhand stores, and they are thus exemplary illustrations of the possibility of recursive stages of possession, discard, and reuse. The

circulation of secondhand culture—hand-me-downs, vintage clothing, used books and compact discs, antiques and ephemera at auction—encapsulates how meaning and value are negotiated and redefined through practices beyond acts of simple possession. Consider a brief, idealized history of one such specific but mundane object, a T-shirt.

It is 1982, and a teenage boy is attending his first heavy metal rock concert with friends. His parents do not approve, but he has just begun his first summer job and can purchase the ticket himself. At the merchandize display, he buys one of the band's souvenir T-shirts showing the most recent album cover on its front, listing all the stops on the tour on its back. Pleased and proud with this memento, the teenager thinks little of how this T-shirt was produced, the labor that went into it, the journey it had to take from factory to wholesaler to concert venue. Over the next months, he wears the shirt often and gladly tells about attending the concert when strangers start conversations by asking about the T-shirt. The next year he gives the T-shirt to his first girlfriend as a sign of his undying love for her. Although she appreciates the symbolism, by the time she goes to college they have split up and the defunct band is now considered juvenile among her college friends. She still wants the keepsake, but puts it at the back of her closet. Years pass before her parents decide to give all her remaining youthful things to the local charity shop, where the T-shirt ends up in a bulk-purchase bin amid a pile of similarly storied clothes. Enough years have passed that nostalgia for the music of the rock band has emerged. A young entrepreneur buys the T-shirt and a dozen others to sell at a premium at a vintage clothing shop, where the entrepreneur promotes used clothing in relation to environmentalism and awareness of overseas sweatshop labor. The T-shirt is washed and put out for sale, catching the attention of a young skateboarder, who wears it with hipster irony for a few months. The skateboarder is surprised to have more than one ageing metal fan point to the T-shirt and express continued fandom. He auctions the T-shirt online and mails it to the highest bidder in another county. The online buyer is so much an enthusiast of the band and values the rare collectible item so much that the buyer puts the T-shirt in a frame and mounts it on a wall as part of a display of the history of the band.

The T-shirt, as an object, collects more meaning than was consciously held by any of the persons who had a hand in its history: the manufacturer, laborers, band, designer, and original merchandiser had only limited intentions or contact with the shirt, as did each of the people who possessed it in turn. The same is true of any specific

academic interest in the T-shirt: pop music fandom, fashion and identity, lifecourse patterns, consumer habits, environmentalism, social networking—all are important but partial ways to analyze the case study of this T-shirt. Tracing the circulation of objects begs for an interdisciplinary approach precisely because objects circulate in and out of disciplinary fields of concern as they get produced, used, reused, and discarded. Even this account of the T-shirt misses the full variety of possible material histories of clothing, which could attend to the cultural legacies of cotton plantations and thus slavery, colonialism, and globalization; looms and sewing machines, and thus industrialization and urbanization; fashion and shopping, and thus arcades, department stores, ready-to-wear clothing, marketing, and branding; and factories and sweatshops, and thus unionization, child labor regulation, and workplace safety.

Sometimes, nothing remains except the object as a record of the coordinated relations between humans. Among academic disciplines, archaeology often studies unearthed artifacts as a way of deducing cultural meaning from the material remnants of past civilizations. Studying the present, anthropology also often focuses on material artifacts as emblematic totems of group membership and as a way to translate insiders' meanings into terms more generally understood by outsiders. Similarly, qualitative research methods within [p. 518 ↓ ] sociology can rely on responses to objects elicited through surveys and interviews as a means to externalize in language interior feelings and opinions. The form of such expressions allows literary studies to focus, in turn, on the representation of objects in texts, just as historians can look to the archived record of the same objects to represent a cultural past. With reference to the T-shirt, the anthropologist might be interested in the neo-tribal ways people recognize fellow group members through symbols; the sociologist might be more interested in how objects mark distinctions of class position and identity; the historian might focus on how consumer goods represent a zeitgeist; while the media and cultural scholar might be more interested in how popular culture is built upon commodified memorabilia. The T-shirt's life cycle as a commodity incorporates all of these approaches, but the interdisciplinary scope of a general material approach allows the continual risk of objects becoming waste to come to the forefront by attending to the continual reproduction of the cultural meaning of material objects.

# Excess

Waste is just one option for what people do with excess. Attending to cultural excess illuminates some canonical theories of material culture. Discarded culture can be cast aside as garbage, following Mary Douglas's definition of "dirt" as matter out of place, but the very idea of surplus and thus security can also be ritualized in potlatch, central to Georges Bataille's writing on the general economy. The ritual offering has its equivalent in the gift, which Marcel Mauss argued as a fundamental objectification of social ties. Each of these dwell in the anthropological or symbolic character of objects deemed no longer needed. Excess symbolic value can also be objectified as sacred totems, following Emile Durkheim's theories of religion, but transformed in secular modernity into conspicuous consumption in Thorstein Veblen's characterization of the leisure class. Such sociological understandings of how objects mediate economic and cultural realms are extrapolated by Pierre Bourdieu to nearly all things as signs of taste and markers of class distinction. While each of these theories of objects can be applied across class positions, between societies, and over time, Walter Benjamin was concerned especially with the dominance of contemporary commodities and thus focused squarely on the display of consumer products in 19th-century Paris arcades.

Benjamin's turn to the value of display atop use and exchange complements Bataille's reconstruction of the economic. Both counter assumptions of scarcity and rational choices, with emphasis instead on the situated presentation of excess and luxury and, in turn, the dislocated representation of objects through media and technology. These theories allow a consideration of relations focused on the gift (and the obligation created through it), the collection (and its catalogue of prices), window-shopping (and the leisurely *flâneur*), the souvenir (and the gazing tourist), and the status symbol (totemic for forms of legal-rational leadership). These relations are geographically and temporally dependent and cannot exist without designating meaning through some form of material object relation. However, these meanings, like the material cultures they contain, are not unchanging or unchangeable.

# Object Interaction

In contemporary cultural studies, Bruno Latour's articulation of actor-network theory is notable for defining objects as social actors, distinct but nonetheless on par with intentional human actors in reproducing culture. People interact with objects—from doors and chairs to airplanes and surveillance monitors—as much or more than with other people; social interactions are mediated, or figured in Latour's terminology, through objects as often as through interpersonal commingling. Objects thus exert inscribed norms with as much force and efficacy as people. Emerging out of studies of science and technology, Latour's tipping of the balance of attention toward the object is a robust, general argument for the importance of material culture, albeit so generalized as to render waste and commodities as merely types of objects among many others.

## Conclusion

Contemporary reconsiderations of material culture have shown how modernity and global capitalism are made meaningful through the circulation of objects: the relations and flow of capital; the movement [p. 519 ↓] of goods, markets, and cultures; and the global connections across modes of production and consumption. The centrality of circulation of goods in globalization is foundational—not simply parallel to—the flow of information, capital, and migrants around the planet. Cultural connections made through the production, consumption, and discard of objects can thus become a central concern in studies of global capitalism and late capitalism. Material culture at once surrounds society and is also as specific and distinct as a T-shirt. Objects are in constant movement through cultural spaces and provide a wealth of locations within which one can begin to understand their meanings.

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### Further Readings

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