

# Stuff

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## Abstract

The cultural consideration of the material world increasingly involves not only recognition of material things in their diversity, many different things, but ideas and concepts which frame the material world as a whole through particular paradigms. *Stuff* provides us with one of these sweeping paradigmatic interpretations of material culture, both a popular discourse and a set of academic frameworks. *Stuff* is about proliferating consumer goods, about domesticity, about the substances things are made from, about the overwhelming artificiality and human-made quality of the material world, and about sustainability. When using the term *stuff*, we are talking about those moments when the material world is important for its quantity, not only its qualities, and when we perceive the normative state of the material world as artefactual, and human-made, rather than normatively natural.

## Main Text

The term 'stuff' has multiple definitions, but has recently proved useful as a way to try to encapsulate certain specific tensions in the study of material culture, which arise from experiencing the material world in quantitative as well as qualitative ways. In some ways, the topic of *stuff* is a re-phrasing of much older material culture debates. In other ways, it attempts to reframe the problematics of contemporary social life in terms of materiality, and draws attention to areas of thinking where a more developed theoretical language may be required of anthropology. *Stuff* is a popular issues-oriented discourse, about proliferating consumer goods, about domesticity, about the substances things are made from, about the overwhelming artificiality and human-made quality of the material world, and about sustainability. Some thinkers are responding to these issues interpretively and conceptually with theoretical ideas of 'stuff'.

*Stuff* refers primarily to the proliferating array of goods which surround people in contemporary society. Because of its imprecisely-defined boundaries, in that anything material is potentially *stuff*, it is a normative category. *Stuff* particularly implies domesticity, potentially globalised culture, and the category of the everyday. It implies that social and cultural life is constructed predominantly around acts of mass consumption. It is a term which normalises the conception of the material world as formed or shaped. *Stuff* once was a word which referred mainly to materials and substances, the materials of unformed resources, but now is refers primarily to goods and artefacts. Importantly, the cultural importance of *stuff* is indicative of a recognition that 'artificial' more than 'natural' is normal and predominant in material culture.

Different approaches to stuff have developed over the years, each of which comprises a critical perspective on culture. These include the humility of objects, as epitomised in mass consumption (eg. Miller 1987, 2009); stuff as rubbish (eg. Thompson 1979), disorder or clutter (eg. Makovicky 2007); as matter or substance (eg. Drazin and Kuchler 2015); and as a project or manifestation of a subject for activism (eg. Molotch 2003). This overview considers each of these viewpoints in turn, then the common ground between them.

As the expression of a problem or provocation, stuff is about those moments when the material world manifests a cultural tension between qualitative and quantitative meanings. Stuff indexes significance through quantity rather than quality. Objects which are stuff are in one sense replaceable or disposable, lacking individual distinction. However, at the same time it is in its capacity as stuff that material culture comes to be culturally important of itself, so the holistic importance of any part of the mass then resists disposal. A home, the feel of home, may come to be manifest in a conglomeration of objects, each of which individually is replaceable by the rest, but each of which also resists disposal because it comprises part of the mass and hence the home. Hence the disturbing paradoxes of stuff, that it can be seen as an inevitable process of demolishing distinction and specialness, while also constructing alternative modes of meaningfulness.

Stuff may in this sense be considered as a different kind of post-semiotic materialism, one materialism in a culturally diverse world of many materialisms (Boscagli 2014). Price suggests a range of relatively specific characteristics of stuff:

*"I use the term 'family stuff' to capture the fluid materiality of daily family life that includes transient, non-durable, de-materialized, iconic, indexical and inalienable objects intricately interwoven with each other and with the people, relationships and practices that give them weight. Family stuff is 'not just the hapless bearers of symbolic projection'."*

(Price 2012: 304)

Price's characterisation is of a material world of discrete but nonetheless inseparable entities and objects. In her consideration, stuff reflects collective identities such as family.

Stuff is only one way in which anthropology has considered the kinds of new materialisms which this new, normatively artefactual material world demands. New materialisms have especially proliferated since Latour's critique of seeing the material world purely through semiotic paradigms (cited above by Price). For centuries, an Aristotelean hylomorphic model of the world has predominated in the popular and academic imagination, which sees a separation between matter (which is quantifiable) and form (which is discrete objects). In response to the challenge to the dominance of this model, we can develop ideas of the processuality of the material world (Ingold 2010), network models, or models of new materialities and materialisms such as stuff. Whatever our response, we must acknowledge the necessity for new ways of thinking about and framing the material world.

One interpretation of the question of what culturally characterises stuff is that of the creation of the everyday, normative, accepted social worlds and understandings. What makes stuff is its ordinariness.

Miller argues how mass-consumed things can be central to cultural phenomena, but nonetheless possess an "inherent invisibility" (1987: 15). The

"humility of objects" (ibid: 85) comprises a set of arguments that it is in the taken-for-grantedness of mass consumed objects that their significance lies. Their meaningfulness is not about explicit semiotics so much as unconscious, emotional connections, bodily praxis and the playfulness of imagination, happening in a process of objectification. In the engagement of people with things, at certain moments, people project cultural ideas in a playful, imaginative fashion on to the stuff of the world, and then experience moments of embodiment or assimilation. In this theory, while objects are culturally crucial, they are rarely if ever independent of human activity, praxis and imagination. Miller however resists defining 'stuff' per se (Miller 2009), preferring to use it as a loose term which affords some theoretical and subjective liberty, and adaptation according to different empirical situations which anthropologists observe and interpret.

Hence the ordinariness of objects matters. How this has happened has changed historically. Historical accounts of mass consumption outline how shifts in authority can affect consciousness of goods as ordinary and normative. One seminal moment of re-conception for example is shown by the changes in the economy of furniture from the late seventeenth century through to the early twentieth century in France (Auslander 1996). From the medieval period, furniture was conceived of as valuable but mobile and transportable, linked more to a family than to a house. Furnishings would often be produced individually, object by object, through direct contact with crafts persons. The production and distribution of furniture changed, centralised into larger production centres, large workshops, and warehouses. Taste was less and less decided in conversations between the consumer and the artisan. Instead, a class of 'taste professionals' emerged who engaged with furniture factories, large department stores, and media outlets. This meant that the capacity for judgement of taste was distanced from people, who became 'consumers', and also that furniture design came to be gradually more normative and conservative, often referencing back to well-known classic French styles. In this new grammar of taste and form, one item might become substitutable by another.

Histories of consumption like this one indicate how the material world as stuff can concern not just mass-production of goods, but mechanisms of mass consumer consciousness, and forms of judgement involving personal perceptual distancing from objects, mediated by style. Consideration of material goods as stuff here manifests as when goods are both so proximate to persons as to be essential to identity, indeed almost indistinguishable from them; and yet at the same time to be located in more abstract knowledge frameworks.

Since the 1980s, anthropologists have considered how stuff relates to social identity and self-conception. The idea of selfhood here is important, because as a way to culturally conceive of persons it resonates better with the concept of stuff than other alternatives, such as the explicit representations implied by 'identity', or the qualities, relationships and responsibilities implied by 'personhood'. 'Self-hood' by contrast is often about experience. The world of stuff here acts as a substrate to specific experience and happenings in one's life, knitted in with the events one has gone through. This apparent inevitability of acquiring personal stuff as literally the facts of one's life parallels the inevitable acquisition of experiences inside the body as memories. In extreme examples, stuff displaces even the body as a repository of personhood through experience (Layne 2000).

Processes of disposal, gifting, and sacrifice can be as important as acquisition to constructing self-hood. Stuff, this material substrate which accompanies us, offers

up the possibility of sacrifice because it is in a sense a part of us, and yet is constituted collectively by association. Having fewer and fewer functions except for memory, it can easily be disposed of as rubbish, and yet to do so seems a deliberate sacrifice of a part of one's self.

Considered as mass consumption, there are several levels and aspects to the definition of stuff. As well as comprising certain kinds of consumed objects, stuff is also a "new, plastic materiality... matter whose plasticity, its transformative potential, comes into being, inextricably, with the human" (Boscagli 2014: 2). As mass consumption, stuff offers new understandings, both academic and popular, of how subject and object engage and intermingle.

One approach to stuff would suggest that it involves a concern with things which are clutter, out of place or messy. When out of proper context, things become stuff. Ideas of order and disorder have long been a concern in anthropology. Clutter presumes its mirror image, a sense of order; but as anthropologists we can locate this sense of order in different places. The human mind is one such locus. Objects which index human designs and intentionality can be seen to correlate with order. In this sense, when stuff evades manifesting a quality of mind or cognition, its unintentional disorderliness and unruliness indicates stuff.

The home, that material shell of stuff which is owned and yet also inherited, can also be an important locus for objects which exist on the periphery of being planned, or unintentional. In the home, things can be the subject of individual planning, but also the result of plans and intentions by people no longer present. Homes provide not only frames for ordering, but frameworks for understanding materiality. Things can be seen as clutter because they are 'matter out of place', or because they represent collective intentions and seem to possess their own cultural agency.

The apparently unavoidable perpetual transformation of homes into repositories for clutter, where uncontrollable objects constantly exercise their own demands to become the home, means that domestic stuff is about historicity. Through clutter in the home, we are located in history. Makovicky (2007) relates the acquisition of 'stuff' to Walter Benjamin's notions of historicity in objects. The faded and plush interiors remembered by Benjamin in Central Europe were for him things which bore the marks and hints of very personalised routines and practices. Every home has shaped itself to a body or bodies. When the person is present, these objects have evident sense in relation to that person, but in their absence or their passing, the stuff remaining simply marks the person's absence. The human voids which open up around stuff in the eddies of history, and a twentieth century Europe marked by migration, loss, and change, make domestic stuff inevitably linked to remembrance and nostalgia. As it accretes, stuff can operate as a social cosmology, and serves to position people within history. Clutter is not simply an accidental process, the relics left over from other activities, clutter makes sense.

Cross-cultural studies of clutter show us how there are many ways and mechanisms by which stuff proliferates in the home. In Japan, homes are overburdened by an imagined ideal of the materially minimalist 'Japanese home' (Daniels 2010), devoid of stuff. And yet there is a profusion of things. In much of Asia, gift receiving is exaggeratedly prestigious, and consequently the acquisition of stuff cannot easily be refused, nor necessarily contained, part of a constant battle in the object world between circulation and accumulation. Many gifts are ornaments, things designed with the sole purpose of being seen and, basically, hanging around. In Japan, this battle necessitate the development of homes with the means to store,

contain, hide, display, or re-gift objects. Strategies such as storage help people in Japan to try to uphold ideologies of a morally good and tidy home.

These domestic ethnographies cast a cultural light on clutter. While many American-based studies of consumption may place emphasis on traditions of direct purchase for oneself, and intentional acquisition, clutter also happens because of traditions of gifting and obligated receiving, or because of other cultural traditions. One object becomes two or three, and they develop a mass-like quantity. Domestic stuff mediates relatedness and individualism. The connectedness of people through memory concerns the creation of family through the home, which is not governed by a given kinship structure, but becomes a vessel for activities intended to build relationships.

Moving from the micro-framework of home to the macro-framework of society, the idea of stuff as rubbish or garbage can be seen as a mapping of the fundamentals of how power works. 'Rubbish theory' (Thompson 1979), from archaeology, suggests that power hierarchies and relations in society are largely supported by who in society is able to make the decision that something is 'rubbish' or not. Since stuff exists on the borders of disposability, it follows that who decides what is stuff or not also parallels who is in charge.

The anthropology of clothing in particular has contributed to this field. At some point, it is discovered that domestic articles are no longer individually wanted, but are part of an indiscriminate mass of wardrobe stuff, and they may become waste or donated to various second-hand channels. Second-hand clothing, often quantified by weight and sold by the kilo, traces local and global hierarchies and mutual connections; and when not wanted as clothing per se, may be shredded and reconstituted as rough fibres and new textiles in India or China. Such tracings of the social lives of clothing reveal the multiple stages at which objects are reconstituted as stuff, and map the operation of capitalism at a global level in response to clothing as stuff.

In this vein, anthropology has over the years provided multiple studies of clutter, of rubbish, of institutions of disposal, and of second-handedness. When we consider charity shops, or American garage sales, flea markets, different kinds of car-boot sales across Europe, and localised online trading networks and platforms, we witness the plural cultural ways that societies have developed to mutually deal with stuff. What all of these institutions do is to construct things as stuff, and deal with it through processes of depersonalisation, anonymisation, transportation, processing and cultural reconstitution.

Approaches to stuff as clutter or rubbish therefore show us how power relations in society can articulate closely with powers of shaping matter. The normative conception of stuff moving from 'matter' to 'masses of consumer goods' might signify that it is less important to study stuff as substance, but equally it could be argued that it is a broadening of the category of substance to include form.

The study of crafts, and various kinds of embodied making, show how materials and bodily activities can seem inseparable. Many craftspeople do not only produce certain shapes and forms, and do not only use certain kinds of tools, but also identify with a certain material. The properties of that material, its resistance, the way it molds itself, and so forth come to be indistinguishable from the bodily consciousness of the maker. As substance, therefore, stuff is important in the individual self-conception of persons. Because the world is made of stuff, the sensory boundaries of the person are blurred and subject-object boundaries are indistinct. Some advocate looking at textility in this instance (Ingold 2010), or at

techniques in the long-standing French tradition. In other circumstances, anthropologists retain the conception of matter as significant in itself, for example in the light of renewed anthropological attention to materials and materials innovation (see Drazin and Küchler 2015) and materials which have agency, or “vibrant matter” (Bennett 2010). Such approaches consider materials as not simply resources for making, but also potentially subversive, converters potentially of both knowledge and of cognitive qualities of mind.

Seen as a world of materials, stuff is a potentially infinite resource for the production of meaningfulness and varied structures of meaning. Matter can be culturally prolific. Metaphorical associations of a contextual kind (Tilley 1999) can spin from material culture, because objects are not only made from one substance, but contain and articulate many, and because substances cross-cut the forms and interconnect them. Substance is also the focus of modes of production and making, and so persists in manifesting a feeling for the kinds of embodied labour and personal praxis which produced certain things, long after they have passed into new hands. While the form of an object - a scratch, a curve - may be indicative of a moment of action, the kind of stuff it is made from, wood or metal or plastic, indexes long-term actions, production networks and personal organisation.

Lastly, we have anthropological studies of stuff which conceive of it as some kind of project-ness of the material world. Hence it is deeply personal, agentic.

*"Where does it come from, this vast blanket of things - coffee pots and laptops, window fittings, lamps and fence finials, cars, hat pins, and hand trucks - that make up economies, mobilise desire, and so stir up controversy? ... In the world of goods, as in worlds of any other sort, each element is just one interdependent fragment of a larger whole." (Molotch 2003: 1)*

The subject of stuff seems inevitably connected with the subject of sustainability. This is because the framing of the world as stuff implies a holistic relationship with the material world. Objects affect one another, and what one does to one object now may affect others in future. This means that, as stuff, material culture is considered to have implications for the production and reduction of matter in the longer term.

The attempt to establish a level playing field of material objects and substances, where one may be compared and contrasted with another, is a part of projects to establish a material politics around the consumption, design, and production of objects. Design here is a professional mode of human activity which helps envisage the interchangeability of many aspects of material goods: substances, forms, and purposes are shapeable, malleable and interchangeable.

Stuff as a material politics is not purely a perceptual shift. Globalisation of material flows and information give a more pertinent and biting dimension to this idea. Digital and informational capacities mean that goods and materials are unavoidably tracked, recorded and measured in digital ways which can present one against another. A person sitting in Australia can more easily have a conception of the importance of how stuff in Canada may affect them.

Ethnographies of the politics of food have been particularly rich in exploring this vein of thought. Some studies emphasise the possibility of choosing one thing over another, as in a boycott. For example, studies of boycotts can reveal how people may aim to consume less stuff and yet cannot represent their own identities and ideas without stuff (Isenhour 2010). Other ethnographic work

emphasises the ethical constitution of goods in active proposals for shaping the material stuff of which they are made. Many food-oriented movements can be seen as reactions to the advance of anonymous substances, an attempt to re-enchant food production, provisioning, meals and eating.

In summary, stuff can refer to materials, as it traditionally once did, or it can refer to masses of made objects. In contemporary anthropology, stuff signifies a shift of normative perceptions of the material world to the domain of the artificial, to objects and human-made materials, rather than the natural. In this sense, it reflects changes in the ways that the material world is generally perceived, and is emblematic of the need for new forms of thinking about materialism.

The anthropology of stuff incorporates a range of work which is striving to reformulate and think about contemporary cultural and social problems in material culture terms. Anthropologists differ in terms of conceptualising what sort of a problem is posed, and some derive their work from observation of particular ethnographic phenomena (the proliferation of mass consumer goods, mess, materials, or sustainability), while others frame more theoretical problems (form vs substance, design, subject-object relations). There are however commonalities. The anthropology of stuff considers moments when the material world is meaningful in terms of quantity, proliferation or agglomeration, more than in terms of quality. There is a sense in which stuff concerns the inevitable demolition of a sense of specialness of material things, by which they become ordinary. In this sense, stuff celebrates popular mass culture, and may involve a sense of disenchantment. This does not mean that stuff is necessarily meaningless. Indeed, many objects are inherited and connote important relationships, but their importance is recognised as decreasing, and they come to be seen as clutter which cannot easily be disposed of.

## **SEE ALSO:**

Consumption  
Consumer Culture  
Home  
Material Culture  
Materiality

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