

## **“Dear Editor”, An Opinion Piece about *Thinking Through Thinks* by Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad and Sari Wastell**

Anthropology studies human beings from various perspectives, including the analysis of objects in which the intangible aspects of culture (values, knowledge, codes, structures) are embedded and take on a visible and lasting form. This is the so-called 'material culture', the main theme on which the argumentation and the proposal for a new methodology in the text *Thinking Through Thinks* is developed. Indeed, the authors propose that artefacts, encountered in ethnographic contexts, can be approached in their own terms. More precisely, anthropologists should not resort to familiar conceptions and thus attribute a Eurocentric meaning to the artefact. What is presented in the text is a new methodology, in which artefacts, which in the text are referred to more neutrally as 'things', can state their own meanings, without automatically being attributed other meanings.<sup>1</sup>

However, from my point of view, what the authors propose does not always seem to be consistent with reality. In fact, the first point I would like to analyse is precisely the main thesis proposed, and I quote: “With purposeful naïveté, the aim of this method is to take ‘things’ encountered in the field as they present themselves, rather than immediately assuming that they signify, represent, or stand for something else”,<sup>2</sup> ( that is, that meanings are not 'carried' by things, but are simply identical to them). In my opinion, this is a very difficult attempt at change. Firstly, because from the moment we are born, we learn the system and conventions of representation, the codes of our language and culture. We are endowed, from childhood, with cultural know-how that enables us to function as culturally competent subjects. To understand this better, we can refer to psychology and how we function.

At birth we all have two innate fears: that of sudden loud noises and that of emptiness; the rest of our fears are learnt as we grow up, through experience. Imagine what happens in the body-mind system of a child when he is confronted with fire; intrigued by the colour and movement of the flame he approaches it to see what it is. He reaches out a hand until the burning sensation from the periphery of his body reaches his central nervous system, which processes the pain stimulus. At this point the child withdraws his hand and perhaps bursts into tears; the next time he sees a flame, he will no longer think "What if I touch it?", but will stay away from it. In fact, the memory of that pain will create a 'map of the world' so that he will not have to experience that burning again in order to stay away from it. Obviously things are more complex than that, but the example illustrates well how learning helps us to create maps that facilitate our moving through the world without having to have

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<sup>1</sup> Henare, Holbraad & Wastell 2007, 1-3.

<sup>2</sup> Henare, Holbraad & Wastell 2007, 3.

a direct experience of it each time.<sup>3</sup> The same thing happens with anything else, such as objects. For example, we learn from childhood that a glass is a container of various materials, shapes and sizes, used to bring liquids to the mouth for drinking. Maps serve us to understand the world.

From an anthropological-ethnological point of view, this is not to say that our 'maps' are correct in interpreting 'different worlds', i.e. those of artefacts and objects encountered in other cultures. However, our maps do lead to a Eurocentric approach to ethnographic objects, but fortunately they are not rigid and fixed maps, they can be modified and improved. In fact, I believe that the meaning of 'things' must be produced and constructed, rather than simply 'found'. Produced and constructed by society (social conventions), by the historical and social context, either the one we grew up with, or learning from the new one we encounter for the first time. For this very reason, things 'in themselves' rarely have a single, fixed and unchanging meaning. A stone can be a stone, a boundary marker or a piece of sculpture, depending on what it means - that is, within a certain context of use. It is through our use of things, and what we say, think and feel about them - how we represent them - that we give them meaning. From my point of view, encountering 'new worlds' is a wonderful opportunity to expand one's maps and vocabulary of meanings, even while respecting the new culture one encounters.

This also relates to an example that the writers give in their text. The example is that of a group of Cuban soothsayers who claim that 'dust is power'. The writers point out that this should not be taken as some kind of bizarre empirical statement that requires anthropological interpretation or explanation, because it is not a statement about what we know as dust. It is a statement about a concept of dust that we are not familiar with. They therefore ask how we can hope to understand a concept of dust that is completely new to us. Their answer is to conceive a different dust, to think it into being. For the authors, 'conception' is a mode of revelation that creates its own objects, so to 'see' these objects is to create them. Therefore, according to them, to realise the 'different worlds' found in so-called 'things', one must accept that seeing them requires acts of conceptual creation, acts that obviously cannot be reduced to mental operations.

I agree that the concept is important to understand this 'new kind of dust', but in my opinion it is not an act of conceptual creation, but rather a conceptual exchange. Because each of us understands and interprets the world in a unique and individual way. However, we are able to communicate because we share more or less the same conceptual maps and thus make sense of or interpret the world in roughly similar ways.

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<sup>3</sup> Romagnoli 2020, 32.

This is indeed what it means when we say we 'belong to the same culture'. By interpreting the world in similar ways, we are able to construct a shared culture of meanings and thus build a social world that we inhabit together. A shared conceptual map is not enough. We must also be able to represent or exchange meanings and concepts and we can only do this when we also have access to a shared language. And it is precisely the link between concepts and language that allows us to refer both to the 'real' world of objects, people or events and to imaginary worlds of fictitious objects, people and events. Perhaps at first it will not be possible to share the same map or language, because they belong to different cultures. This, however, does not mean that one cannot try to create new ones, to enable communication on both sides and be able to exchange their 'different worlds' in the best possible way.

Although the writers of the text *Thinking Through Things* have gone to great lengths to substantiate their thesis, by means of lengthy explanations and scientific texts, from my point of view their arguments are simply an excessive preoccupation and a disproportionate set of thoughts in relation to the subject of material culture. A topic that is certainly a difficult one, but one that has already been hugely discussed, even on a semantic level. Furthermore, I think that people working in this field, and thus in direct contact with other cultures, certainly have a certain sensitivity in dealing with new artefacts in an open manner, without labelling them in a Eurocentric way from the outset.

## **Bibliography**

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