



Fruitbox / Toolbox: Biography and Objects

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Abstract

Fruitbox / Toolbox: Biography and objects¹

This paper explores some issues to do with the biography of objects, beginning with the idea of the 'cultural biography of things' discussed by Kopytoff (1986) and more recent discussions of the idea within archaeology and anthropology. The limitations with these approaches are identified in terms of treating objects as commodities or gifts that have a cultural presence primarily through the value accorded to them in markets and rituals of exchange. The contradictions of writing a biography of material objects that assumes them to have a 'life' are explored in terms of the literary task of 'writing a life'. It is argued that objects do not have to be identified as 'singular' in terms of their exchange or ritual value for them to be worth writing about but the task of a biography of objects involves taking a particular object and making it singular through the process of writing. The biography of objects is recovered as a useful way of studying the cultural changes through which ordinary objects survive using the example of a toolbox made out of a fruitbox. The paper argues that rather than focussing on the process of exchange as the prime way in which cultural value is assigned to objects, it is the location of the ordinary object in the context of mundane social lives that gives it specificity and singularity.

Introduction

Not long ago when my father was in hospital I asked him if he had a torch. He replied that he did and said "If we had pockets in our skin then I'd have a torch in mine". The torch that he had in hospital was a small, brown, aluminium-barrelled Ever-Ready torch that had been part of his life for more than forty years by my reckoning. To declare such an intimate relationship with an object surprised me and it got me thinking again about the biography of objects.

It's a strange idea, the biography of objects. How can you 'write the life' of objects when objects don't have a 'life' in the same sense as humans or animals. They aren't born, don't breathe or think, they don't have feelings and emotions, they don't grow and they don't die. On the other hand objects do emerge into the world; the torch came off the production line at a certain point in time. And objects have experiences which change them. My father's torch had many scratches in the brown paint, especially at the ends, near the edges of the barrel. The glass over the bulb was a little scratched - though not nearly as scratched as the plastic of later models. Bulbs had been changed and of course batteries had been used up and died. Objects do 'die' but in a rather different sense from humans in that they stop working and are thrown away, usually without ritual or sorrow. Sometimes the disposal of objects is culturally constrained; should batteries be simply thrown away or should they be recycled? Because, later, I could not find the torch and therefore did not have the object to refer to as a document of its own life I will later use my father's toolbox as an example to explore some of the possibilities of a biography of objects.

The notion of biography singles out individual lives, treats them as special and distinct with an origin and an end. Biography is a very popular literary form that usually reflects on lives that have already been deemed interesting because of their

cultural presence and visibility (as writers, politicians, film stars and so on)². This approach can work with material objects too, for example Wernick's (1991) story about a Wedgwood copy of the Barberini or Portland Vase. But the problem that I want to explore is the life of 'ordinary' objects, ones that have not been identified as interesting and are only extraordinary to the extent that they are singled out for writing about. I wish to argue here that material objects are embedded within social lives and those social lives leave traces in objects. The study of such objects can tell us something of the changes that society has undergone. The objects contain within their material form clues about the culture into which they emerged and the contrasts between different periods of that culture. Objects really don't have much of a life but they do reveal in a variety of ways things about the social world around them. This is why ordinary objects - the cooking pots, weapons and tools that we gaze at in museums - are as informative about social and cultural lives as are 'special' objects such as crown jewels or great works of art. Special objects often have rarified lives away from the swirl of ordinary existence.

Biography as a literary and sociological form is not simply a gathering of facts, organised chronologically but is a narrative and interpretive form, into which what Virginia Woolf calls 'creative and fertile facts' can be incorporated³. The biography of objects involves writing about particular objects as if they had a life, which demands a focus on them and the cultural context of their use. It is this work of writing that provides a way of understanding social lives that have previously been inscribed in the object.

The life of things

I first came across the idea of a biography of objects through reading Igor Kopytoff's (1986) much referred to piece on the Cultural biography of things:

Commoditization as a process. Early on, the idea of the biography of objects sounds interesting:

The biography of a car in Africa would reveal a wealth of cultural data: the way it was acquired, how and from whom the money was assembled to pay for it, the relationship of the seller to the buyer, the uses to which the car is regularly put, the identity of its most frequent passengers and of those who borrow it, the frequency of borrowing, the garages to which it is taken and the owner's relation to the mechanics, the movement of the car from hand to hand over the years, and in the end, when the car collapses, the final disposition of its remains. (p. 67)

This hypothetical car has a story; its life becomes intertwined with a series of different human characters who are instrumental in determining the life course of the car. It is easy to imagine that if things were different - if a particular owner used it carelessly, if a mechanic failed to change the oil, if it was stolen - then that story would take a different course. But what Kopytoff (1986, p.69) is really interested in is how the economic or exchange value of objects changes as the culture changes. He draws a distinction between the commodity which is exchangeable for sale and is therefore "common" from those objects that escape reduction to this commodity status and are therefore "singular". The move towards singularization keeps the value of certain goods above the process of exchange so that their cultural biography "becomes the story of the various singularizations of it, of classifications and reclassifications in an uncertain world of categories whose importance shifts with every minor change in context" (p.90). Although Kopytoff is an anthropologist, the article is disappointing because it concentrates mainly on the economic value of

goods as they are offered for exchange or withdrawn from exchange as 'singular' and above the equivalence of exchange. His concept of the commodity as "a thing that has use value and that can be exchanged in a discrete transaction for a counterpart" (p.68) includes economic value prior to the money form but excludes gifts in which any obligation to reciprocate is not discrete to the transaction

The process of singularization may express social power through economic value as happens when the state, the sovereign, religious or other powerful groups make certain objects sacred or beyond the legal control of others. The status of an object as either singular, and so beyond exchange or as a commodity that is always exchangeable, are two ideal extremes that according to Kopytoff (1986) are "humanly and culturally impossible" (p.70). Humans classify objects through "culture's function of cognitive discrimination" (Kopytoff 1986:70) within a system of homogeneity and distinction which leads to economic equivalence between goods that are unlike in appearance or function. Categorisation changes over time so that the object that endures will change in value; its cultural biography in Kopytoff's sense is the story of these changes between commodity and singular status.

A very similar line was taken seven years earlier by Michael Thompson (1979) in his book with the delightful title Rubbish Theory. Thompson actually uses a particular car as an example - a Morris Traveller, an estate car with a wood-framed rear body. The life history of this car includes its origin as just another vehicle on a production line, its decline in value as it begins to age, the improvements in its fortunes when it is serviced and repaired and the shift in cultural values that begin to make it a much sought after collector's item in its old age. Things that have become rubbish may later become prized possessions; the car sold for scrap may be renovated and not only used but also shown at a concours d'élégance. It recovers

singularity precisely because its peers die or are scrapped. The renovation will preserve the object, in a way re-birthing it, making it a different sort of thing in a different context; a collector's item rather than a commodity acquired for use.

Kopytoff (1986) refers to Thompson (1979) as he picks up the theme of 'collectibles', objects that at one time have no social or economic value - old beer cans, matchbooks, comic books - and at another time become items that gain in value as groups want to collect them and own them so that they take on "the weight of cultural sacredness" (Kopytoff 1986, p.81). He points out that cultural sacredness is open to dispute which is not simply about economic value but about taste and appropriateness. Singular objects, such as public sculptures for example, are a vehicle for values and meaning that are judged on grounds of cultural sacredness. The process of selecting, displaying and responding to the object is a developing process of cultural valuation.

Singular objects such as statues can be understood as having a biography that is akin to the biography of famous or important people. But as regards ordinary objects, both Kopytoff and Thompson are interested in variations in exchange value. The cultural biography of objects becomes little more than the story behind the changes in price. Kopytoff does not explore the biographies of any objects, or even, of any class of objects. By sticking to the commodity / singularity binary, Kopytoff is stuck in a form of economic reduction that only enables him to suggest the idea of the biography of objects, rather than to develop it. Objects have more interesting lives and more to tell us about social and cultural processes than we can glean from their exchange and varying economic value.

In a recent paper setting the scene for a special edition of World Archaeology devoted to the 'Cultural Biography of Objects', Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall

(1999) pick out some of the key moments in the emergence of a biography of objects. They take a lead from Kopytoff in accepting that "[t]here is a mutual process of value creation between people and things" (p. 170) but go on to explore a number of other themes beyond the process of exchange and changing value. They want to draw out the social context of use as the way that the meaning of an object is understood; it is how the object is part and parcel of social interactions that is important. Following Gregory (1982) they point out that commodities reflect the "congealed social relations" (p. 173) of their production and even gifts are concerned with "the production of sociability" (p. 173) in the choice of object and the ways it can be incorporated into everyday lives. Neither object form is more significant culturally because of its place in a system of exchange although they suggest that variations in the extent to which an object can be alienable from social relations will affect their biographies. Gifts are just as important as commodities in establishing and sustaining relationships between people and Gosden and Marshall refer to Strathern (1988) to make the point that in some cultures such as the Melanesian, "[a] person is ultimately composed of all the objects they have made and transacted and these objects represent the sum total of their agency" (p. 173). There is then within anthropology a strand of thought which recognises that objects can have agency and may even be construed as social actors (Gell, 1998).

But, it is social context, the interactions between objects and human social actors, that provides the main theme for their perspective on the significance of biography. It is again anthropologists (including Appadurai, 1986) that Gosden and Marshall (1999) refer to in showing that political and social context tells us about the value of objects. The reverse is also the case so that objects can tell us about the political and social context of people's lives. For example, Janet Hoskins (1998) provides a biography of a number of objects that she found were helpful devices in

writing about the lives of particular Kodi people, in Eastern Indonesia. One of her informants, Maru Daku, always had with him a bag to carry betel nuts, areca nuts and lime. The bag was part of his social interactions, which involved the exchange of betel nuts, and was also where he kept his notebook. Daku had become a mouthpiece for his people and their culture when he became an informant to earlier visiting anthropologists. The notebook in which he kept records of ritual procedures to report to the anthropologists also brought him status within his own culture when he was called upon to adjudicate in how rituals should be done:

Maru Daku used the betel bag as a kind of alter ego, a metaphor for his own self, because it was an object that supported his claims to serve as a container for ancestral memories and a mediator of new alliances. (Hoskins 1998:26)

Instead of stressing the exchangeability of objects or their economic value or status, Gosden and Marshall (1999) argue that it is the performance of the object in its social context gives it its meaning. However, other contributors to the collection in World Archaeology show some confusion about what they mean by 'biography'. In the discussion of pearls, rock art, carved stone balls and masks, it is not individual, discrete objects whose biographies are explored, but classes or types of object. There are however interesting examples of objects moving between cultural contexts - especially through the hands of archaeologists, collectors, anthropologists and curators - in which material objects endure changes of meaning while bringing with them "fragments of old lives, threads of earlier meanings" (p. 177). It seems that archaeologists, whose stock in trade is objects from which they construct past social lives, often borrow their key ideas from anthropologists who see cultural value embedded in the object either through Marx's analysis of the commodity and its

exchange or Mauss's (1990) analysis of the gift and its rituals. But some archaeologists, following some anthropologists, are also asserting the importance of social context as the way to make sense of what objects mean.

What the idea of biography adds to the study of the object is the realisation that the stability of the material object misleads us into thinking that its meaning is steady over time. Gosden and Marshall (1999) alert us to the idea that meaning is more far reaching than economic relations of relative value and worth. Neither Marx nor Mauss had much to say about performativity or the use value of objects, that is, how they fitted into everyday lives, giving those lives a particular shape. To turn Marx on his head, again⁴, exchange value is an occasional expression of use value but it is not the sole basis of cultural value. The cultural meaning of objects lies in how they are used and the feelings people have about them. Objects acquire meanings through social practices in which they are used over their life course. The aim of a biography of objects should be to recover through a reconstructive narrative, clues about the social contexts in which the object emerged, the purposes to which it was put and how there might be differences between the meaning of different objects in different cultural settings.

I have argued elsewhere (Dant, 2000) that the emphasis on consumption in sociology has paid too much attention to the moment of exchanging cash for goods in understanding material culture. Here, I wish to develop the idea of biography to address ordinary objects that are of little or no monetary or ceremonial value. Biography is always historical, always concerned with changes over time, with the passage of years. For sociology then, the biography of objects will begin to tell us something about how cultures change over time. To resist the slide into the work of history I will argue that a sociological biography of objects must attend to particular

objects which survive into the present; what their past lives tell us needs to be understood in relation to their - and our - present lives.

Biography as a form

There is within literary biography a debate about the status of facts and their relationship with story telling. Ira Bruce Nadel (1984) relates Pirandello's definition of a fact, "A fact is like a sock which won't stand up when it's empty. In order that it may stand up, one has to put into it the reason and feeling which have caused it to exist." (p. 10). Although there are facts, or even data, Nadel (1984) argues powerfully that the form of biography requires an aesthetic of writing that organises facts into a narrative whose linear form shows us something of the progress of a life; its changes, its drama, the influences on it, the things that flow from it. He argues that treating the facts of the life as determinant of the narrative kills biography which should always be treated as a task of writing. The linear form of written language reflects the linear form of history and of the life-course. But it is the writer who imposes form and shape on that life, usually accepting the sequence of events in that life as in some sense cumulative and causal⁵. The task of writing a life involves selection, interpretation, evaluation and condensation as well as reporting facts. Biography attempts to transform the complexity of a life into a single narrative but always fails - which is why there are endless possible 'versions' of a life which can lead to multiple biographies. For example, Nadel reports 225 for Samuel Johnson, 57 for Charles Dickens and 71 for James Joyce. He sums up the task of biography as one which; "triumphs over experience by structuring the confusions of daily life into patterns of continuity and progress" (p. 9).

The biography of objects, even as a tool of sociology or other social sciences, has to recognise from the start that it is a writerly task that cannot be reduced to a

systematic method. Facts are a necessary component but cannot write themselves. The work of biography shapes information, giving it an order and the pattern of a life in which there is a process of change that has cumulative but undeterminable effects. Norman Denzin (1989) explores the role of biography as a method within the social sciences and defines it as "the studied use and collection of life documents, or documents of life which describe turning-point moments in individual's lives" (p. 7). He goes on to draw out from some classic biographies - of people - a set of topics that they take-for-granted including; social origins in terms of family, gender and class, objective life markers, turning point experiences, the status of observers and commentators and the distinction between truth and fiction. We can see that Kopytoff's (1986) approach to cultural biography could fit with Denzin's model. The exchange of objects between people are turning points, the context of others and family beginnings points to the individual object being one of a class that has been produced alongside other objects. The price would provide an objective life marker (Thompson, (1979), actually provides a chart of the changing value of his Morris Traveller) and the observer is likely to be the biographer although other accounts may be incorporated. However there is more to be written about a life than these turning points of exchange if the object of the biography is to be recovered from the 'confusions of daily life into patterns of continuity and progress'.

Biography of things?

Real objects cannot tell their own biographies - although logbooks, blackboxes and memory chips carry useful biographical data - it has to be written for them by a human. And telling the story of objects has become a sub-genre within modern literature⁶. For example, Tibor Fischer's (1986) novel The Collector Collector features a vase which has awareness, memory and articulacy and does indeed tell

its own biography and classifies the physical and behavioural attributes of human beings that have come across its path in its two thousand years. Its prodigious and precise memory is a super-human capacity, as is its ability to repair and even transform itself. Its antiquity and rarity make it a collectors item and the vase itself is a collector of collectors:

Lately I stick to collectors of note. Moneybags. Lugals. Those deformed by excessive wealth, those who will lay down reverence around me. The trials of being a utensil didn't bother me for a long time, but I've become soooooo tired of indignity, of some dullard keeping terrapins or Busy Lizzies in me. (p. 6)

The vase not only takes in the life that goes on around it, it can share accounts with one of the characters, Rosa, a 'vase tickler' who through touch alone can know stories from its life.

This magic realist form of biography derives its fantastic quality precisely from the problems facing the aspiring biographer of objects. Firstly, the biography of human lives treats them as an object of the biography - even if it is an autobiography - but treats them as subjects in their own lives. As subjects, biographees are presumed to be at least partially autonomous, with free of will and a mind. In contrast to Fisher's vase, objects do not have any autonomy of action or independence of reaction and do not earn the status of a subject by demonstrating free will or a reflexive awareness. However, to begin to think of the possibility of a biography of objects is to begin to give to them a certain degree of subject status. It is to recognise for example the discrete status of a particular object as opposed to a class or category of objects. A biography of an object requires singularity, not in the economic

sense so much as in the recognition of a distinct, separate object that can 'have a life' independently of other objects or any specific human.

There are of course histories of classes of ordinary objects and technologies (e.g. see Giedion, 1969; Braudel, 1992; Briggs, 1990). Histories show the evolving links between families of related objects without ever telling the story of an individual object. They deal in turning points in the history of the category or type of objects just as a history of a people or a society studies the collective experience of that people as if it were a unity. But the idea of a biography of objects would go rather further to describe a specific object and articulate its life as Fisher does.

Secondly, as Fisher's (1998) vase moves from singularity to commonality, from a container for Busy Lizzies to collectors prize possession, it experiences cultural changes. The object is the focus of its biography but the story is of the various and differing situations it has been in. The vase not only collects collectors but also collects remarkable and varying experiences and so provides a vehicle for understanding the difference between the different cultural contexts it has passed through.

Thirdly, then, for a thing to be the object of a biography means that it must be treated as singular in the sense of being distinct from other objects and having an identity that endures over time. So, as with Fisher's (1998) vase, the object stays the same thing throughout its life, even though its appearance alters and the way it is recognised varies. As an individual and particular thing we need to have a sense of its boundaries (is the spare wheel part of the car or an accessory, what about the toolkit?) and its capacity to endure. The discrete object may be affected by past events, so that for example if it is dropped and broken (as Fisher's vase is in the story) the effects of the damage or loss will stay as part of the object in future. Even if

it is repaired, the structural alteration will remain part of it. This becomes a part of that particular object affecting its subsequent life; the antique vase will carry its patina and damage as marks authenticating its age and provenance. Indeed, Fisher's vase when it reassembles itself after being casually broken, reports that it does so "carefully recreating my former cracks" (p. 26).

So, given that objects do not have the same status as human subjects, what might it mean for them to be treated as 'quasi-subjects' worthy of being biographied? I want to argue that ordinary objects are more likely to tell us about ordinary lives, about the routines and concerns of daily life than special objects are. They may be unremarkable in themselves as objects, not things that readily attract attention. But how they have been fitted into particular lives makes them singular in a way rather different from Kopytoff's (1986) notion of singularity. The biography of the objects begins to tell us about social lives and how they have changed.

Fruitbox / Toolbox

The object I want to tell a story about is a toolbox that I inherited from my father. It was around the house since before I was born and always seemed to me to be scruffy and old, nothing of any value, just a box for keeping tools in (see Figure 1). But what made me see it rather differently was when I brought it into my house and it stood beside my toolbox - another very ordinary toolbox but very different from my father's.

[Insert Figure's 1 and 2 near here]

Let me describe my father's toolbox. It is homemade from a fruitbox, a wooden box that originally carried loganberries from Portland, Oregon in the United

States. This toolbox does not display any skilled carpentry. The original fruitbox provides the structure that has become that of the toolbox. The two sides, two ends and the bottom were made out of cheap wood and nailed together for transporting soft fruit - apparently across an ocean. On both side pieces, which are much thinner than the ends, there are large holes where knots have fallen out. The way that the fruitbox has been transformed into a toolbox displays considerable ingenuity despite the absence of sophisticated joints or fine woodworking. There are two lift out trays that have been made from similar wood but with no markings (see Figure 2). I would guess that they were made by cutting down another fruit box. They fit closely and smoothly inside the main box to provide three levels; the lower tray rests on runners, one fixed on each end, about two inches from the bottom. Tools can be separated on these three levels and the two trays can each work as a mini-tool box and used separately from the main box. At the end of each tray is a loop of leather to make lifting them out easy. My father kept often-used tools in the top tray (hammer, pliers, screwdrivers), less-used tools in the second tray (files, chisels) and old pastel and tobacco tins filled with screws, tacks and nails in the bottom.

On one side of the box, two pieces of wood have been nailed so that the teeth of a tenon saw can sit in the groove between them. There were two leather straps that went over the top of the saw, holding it to the side of the box, which have now rotted through. I suspect that the leather for these straps and the tray loops was cut from some old leather furniture that was being thrown out. Attached with staples to each end of the toolbox are handles made from loops of three core rubber-covered wire flex, bound with plaited material.

The fruitbox / toolbox is finished off with a lid made up of two pieces of wood with a frame that acts as a lip to hold it in place on top of the box. The top of the lid is

the only painted part of the toolbox and was probably made from a piece of furniture that was originally lacquered. The wood of the lid's frame has a shape routed into it that suggests it was recycled from some other source. The lid can be turned upside down and the lip to make it a tray - it has scores and cuts and paint splashes on its under surface. With the lid on the box can be used as a stool to sit or stand on.

Before exploring the biography of this object which is singular in the sense that I've never seen or heard of another one like it, I briefly want to compare it with my toolbox (see Figure 3). Mine is a little bigger but is made of dark blue plastic with bright orange clasps and handle. It has just one lift out tray at the top which has its own central handle and a set of moulded compartments. At the front it has a set of small, see-through compartments for screws and nails. Inside there is just a large space for tools but like the fruitbox / toolbox, the flat lid makes the box a good stool or step. My toolbox was chosen from a stack of identical ones at a DIY superstore and is not a singular object. There were three or four models to choose from that varied in size and compartments. I could have bought a metal one but I didn't see any wooden toolboxes.

[insert Figure 3 near here]

Writing the object

Of course to describe the object in the way I have is already to begin to present it as an object with a biography. The act of describing it, of choosing to attend to it, picking it out as an object worthy of being written about, immediately singularises the object, arrests its commodity status. The classic of this genre of writing is James Agee's (1965) haunting description of the material conditions of life in dustbowl America in the 1930s. The linear path of Agee's writing seems to follow a

slow, scanning, almost filmic gaze, that moves through and into a scene as if in a dolly or zoom shot. One can imagine the description of what is directly in front of the eyes being talked into a tape recorder - not that this is how Agee did it. Here's an example to give a flavour:

The one static fixture in the hallway is at the rear, just beyond the kitchen door. It is a wooden shelf, waist-high, and on this shelf, a bucket, a dipper, a basin, and usually a bar of soap, and hanging from a nail just above, a towel. The basin is graniteware, small for a man's hands, with rustmarks in the bottom. The bucket is a regular galvanised two-gallon bucket, a little dented, and smelling and touching a little of a fishy-metallic kind of shine and grease beyond any power of cleaning. . . the water tastes a little ticklish and nasty for drinking, though it is still all right for washing. (Agee & Evans 1965:150)

This piece is written in the present tense and makes no reference to antecedence, distinction or singularity. Agee goes on to contextualise this description of a particular house belonging to a family called the Gudgers with other houses he's seen; towels are always made of an old floursack, not all farmers use soap, many do not use 'toilet' soap, the basin and the dipper are usually of unenameled tin. He is specific about the achievement of distinction through material culture in a way that Veblen and Bourdieu seldom are:

The use of enamel ware is a small yet sharp distinction and symptom in 'good taste', and in 'class,' and in a sort of semi-esthetic awareness, choice and will. The use of gray as against white is still

another discriminative. That they bought small sizes, which are a very few cents cheaper, speaks for itself. (Agee & Evans, 1965, p. 151)

These are particular, ordinary objects that were worth writing about but their biography is lacking in interest; they do not have interesting or auspicious origins, they are unremarkable except to the well-off, living many years and miles away and there are no turning points in their lives worthy of report.

But sometimes descriptions of objects introduce biographical features to relate them to the lives of their owners. For example, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) in The Meanings of Things, recount the stories of people describing their most cherished objects and these often involve 'turning points' and the origins of the object, at least in terms of taking possession of it. One respondent told them:

I am going to keep this thing (a bust in a teenage girl's mother's room) forever. I wasn't even in school and me and my mother went to the store and I told her this looked like her, so she bought it. I'm going to keep this for life. It reminds me of my mother. (p. 77)

What impressed the authors was how little the aesthetic qualities of such objects was important to their possessors. Their symbolism or representation was important not for timeless values or for status or social distinction but for personal biographical reasons. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton comment on the way that televisions as objects are tools for experiencing the present rather than binding people to their own past or bringing them closer to others. But in the last example of writing about objects I want to draw on, the television, along with many other

domestic objects, has its own history which is intertwined with its users and possessors.

Stephen Harold Riggins (1994) writes about the things in his parents home in what he calls an 'autoethnography'. This is the home in which he grew up and in which he still plays a significant part. His approach is strongly influenced by James Agee who he suggests "imaginatively reconstructed the biography of individual objects" in his description of sharecroppers' homes (p. 105). But I think it is Riggins rather than Agee who exemplifies the idea of a biography of things in his description of objects. Like Agee his description scans the room, but unlike Agee he tells the life story of some of the objects - because, of course, he knows what it is:

My parents purchased, to quote the term used by the manufacturing company in its advertising, a "traditional style" television set (Model XL-100 Solid State). Since the set is now about 25 years old, it would have to be considered "low tech", at least in comparison with products presently available. Stylistic elements recall premodern styles of furniture. . . . The veneer on the television cabinet is slightly cracked due to water damage. (Riggins, 1994, p. 124)

We hear in this something of the biography of the television set; its age, features that situate it in time and space and events such as the damage to the veneer. But what is most interesting about Riggins' autoethnography is how he utilises the material objects in this room to describe the life and character of his parents, himself and their relationship. The lives of the people are intertwined with the objects so that describing the things, exploring what is distinctive about them reveals something about the lives of their users.

Sociobiography

Objects can be written about in a variety of ways that shape them into a narrative which is theirs, not simply that of their owner/possessor. But what does this tell us about the world we live in? Let me begin to draw out some of the sociological impact of my father's fruitbox / toolbox, in contrast to my plastic toolbox.

I calculate that he made this toolbox shortly after the war, shortly before I was born - lets say it emerged as a toolbox in 1948. It's origins are tied up with post-war austerity, with the fact that consumer goods were in short supply, that factories geared up to making armaments had not yet returned to producing items for the domestic market. I am sure that toolboxes could be bought in those days - wooden ones, canvas toolbags, metal ones. But they would have been expensive and intended for professional use. This toolbox was homemade, a product of 'bricolage', of making use of what was to hand. It was a product of post-war shortages, before 'do-it-yourself' took off, before the days of Barry Bucknall on the television making things out of hardboard and chipboard (I remember watching those programmes sometimes because my Dad liked them). The toolbox stayed with him over a fifty year period and assisted in those 'jobs about the house' that many a white collar worker embarks on to save the cost of employing a tradesman.

In its transformation from fruitbox to toolbox, the object underwent a turning point, perhaps as dramatic as some of Fisher's (1998) vase's experiences. But the exchange as the box came into my fathers hands seems unlikely to have been as a commodity exchanged for cash or as an object of singularity. If it was a 'gift', given away by a greengrocer, there was no ritual that marked its changing hands or its emergence into its new status as a toolbox (my mother can remember all sorts of things from this period in her life but nothing about the toolbox). This is a resolutely

ordinary object whose singularity is not related to economic value, ceremonial performance or ritualised recognition.

The toolbox has a pre-life in that it had a career - although probably quite a short one - as a fruitbox before it became adapted. The idea of loganberries in England after the war does not fit with rationing and restriction. I like to think that this was a cast off from American servicemen who had enjoyed the fruit - but it's more likely that my father cadged the box from a local greengrocer. Probably in Leeds, maybe in London. Nonetheless, both fresh fruit and wood would have been in short supply. So would the spare cash for buying something like a toolbox. But anyway to buy a toolbox would have been too ostentatious; it would have indicated an aspiration to professionalism.

My father already had a profession (a sanitary inspector) and would not have wanted to make any claims to being a carpenter. Since the toolbox would not be part of earning money it did not deserve to be invested in. This was the toolbox of the amateur, the domestic worker. Moreover, the making of the toolbox fitted in with a post-war ethos of making do, of fixing things up, of managing. Less a project of the self, more a project of getting by. It also displays an ethos of apprenticeship; the first task for the bricoleur is to practice making from what is to hand. What better way to start than on something only the bricoleur will rely on. The work, the skill and the ingenuity remain enshrined in the object that in return remains with the man; his skill is materialised and goes with him when he goes to exercise those skills. There is nothing intrinsic in the object that links it to masculinity but the type of domestic tasks it is associated with - including its transformation from a fruitbox - signals its masculinity in the gendered work of the modern household.

There is something about the fruitbox / toolbox that situates it in an industrialised country, given the time it was made. It was designed to carry a number of small but relatively heavy steel tools. The bricoleur in such a society could aspire to gathering such tools about him. What is more, the toolbox is a product of a rather modern approach. The application of thought and imagination to its making greatly exceeds learnt skills such as knowledge of wood or acquired capacity with tools. The roughness of the execution suggests either following an abstract design (such as in a book) or considerably more thought and imagining than working with the materials. This is not for example the work of an apprentice carpenter (who might well have been instructed to make his own tool box, but also instructed how to make joints and finish wood), neither is it the work of a Robinson Crusoe presented with a problem which is solved quickly by a mixture of imagination and trial and error.

The biographical features of the life of the fruitbox / toolbox are thrown into sharp relief when compared with the mass produced, industrially designed plastic toolbox that it stands beside in my cellar. Both serve similar functions with a similar measure of success although there are differences. The double handle of the fruitbox / toolbox requires two hands to lift it whereas the single central handle of the plastic toolbox is very convenient. The lift off lid/tray of the fruitbox / toolbox is very useful and gives better access to the inside of the toolbox than the hinged lid of the plastic toolbox. Both toolboxes are directed to the amateur, the bricoleur but the plastic toolbox mixes cheapness with functionality so successfully that many professionals are happy to use one. Both toolboxes suggest a place within a modern home in an industrialised society where tools are accessible and where they are likely to be useful to the householder. It is easy to imagine the range of domestic social practices that the tools - and the toolbox - become incorporated in; fixing plugs and wiring, putting up shelves, fixing locks, refitting doors, repairing domestic tools, working on

the car. The plastic toolbox suggests a much less specific and distinctive biography than the fruitbox / toolbox because it is so clearly a commodity, made, sold and purchased in a very different consumption culture than that in which the fruitbox became a toolbox. This is not discoverable simply by looking at the moments of exchange - it is part of the material form of the object and the way in which it is brought into use. The fruitbox / toolbox is the product of a making-modifying, but the plastic toolbox is bought complete and made-for-purpose. It is a very long time since I've even seen a wooden fruitbox.

That the fruitbox / toolbox survived so well indicates that it was used in a domestic rather than a professional setting. It was never in daily use although it was much more used at certain periods in its life than in others - for example, when it was moved from one home to another and was called on as adaptations and repairs were needed to settle the family into a new material environment. The nailed together structure of the fruitbox / toolbox was even moved around within the home less than my plastic toolbox. Usually the tools were taken from it to the work that needed to be done (often using the lid/tray to carry those selected for the job) rather than the whole box being moved. My plastic toolbox, lighter and liftable with one hand, is more likely to be taken to the site of work.

The object of the fruitbox / toolbox is tied into a particular life in a particular culture and a particular time. It begins to provide a way of understanding something of those particularities because of the ways it has been intertwined with human lives; it is not an object simply lying on or under the earth. Although a description of the object begins to insert it into a cultural context, it is when the life of the object is seen as part of the life of a person that it begins to separate itself from a classification of objects (toolboxes) and is associated with particular practices and experiences.

The plastic toolbox immediately tells of a different era of production using materials and industrial techniques that were in their infancy when the fruitbox / toolbox came into being. It is a much easier object to treat as one of a series and as a mass-produced commodity it is more likely to occur in a wide variety of cultural contexts (professional and amateur). Of course, I wonder how many plastic toolboxes will survive fifty years of use as the fruitbox / toolbox has.

Conclusions

In this paper I have raised a number of issues about the role of the biography of objects in understanding contemporary material culture. In criticism of Kopytoff (1986), I have argued that economic valuation, singularity and commodity status provide a limited biographical account of objects. Although some anthropologists and archaeologists have rightly pointed to the social context of objects as a key way to use them as a device to understand material culture, the tendency to see them in terms of ritual, ceremony and other such singularizing social practices is still unnecessarily limiting. Rather than accept these limitations I have argued that the individual object can be singularised through attention to its particular and specific material form and writing about it as if it had a life. Ordinary objects in ordinary lives can provide clues about changes in cultural patterns - for example the relationship between the formal production of goods and the informal making of bricolage, between work outside the home and work inside the home.

Biography is about bounded time, a way of thinking historically that recognises the specificity of a single life that is in key respects distinct from other lives and which has a recognisable beginning and end. There are turning points and there are cumulative experiences; once the material form is changed by intention or accident it will tend to endure until transformed by a further experience. The length of

a human life varies and is unpredictable but the length of the life of objects is much more so; it may last from a moment to thousands of years in one form or another. However, the variety of life forms of objects should not let us confuse biography with history; the former is concerned with particularity, the later with generality.

Rather than look to economics as the anthropologists and then the archaeologists have done, I have suggested that it is the aesthetics of writing that illuminates the value of the biographical approach. To construe, in writing, a life, whether of a person or an object, is not a simple gathering of facts - and the facts about ordinary objects for which there are no records are at best, vague. Like much history and sociology, biographical writing is a task of narrative interpretation that needs to be revisited as time passes. However, the presence of the material object itself provides a facticity that is unusual in the historical and social sciences. In its material form we will find clues about how it was used and how it was incorporated into social life.

The biography of objects is about their place in the lives of the people who have owned, used and lived with them. Something of their selves, their personal identity and their social identity becomes embedded in the object and writing about it begins to bring out their stories - the life of the object becomes a metaphor for those human lives. This is the interest of the biography of objects; not to resurrect or revere the life of the object itself but to interrogate its afterlife⁷ to discover something about the lives of those who lived with it. The writing about objects that I've mentioned can be looked at in this way; Hoskins's betel bag can tell us about ritual and status amongst the Kodi, Agee's washing equipment tells us about the impoverished family lives that used it, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton's (1981) young woman reflects on how a bust marks her relationship with her mother, Riggins's (1994)

television records a stable, caring and materially comfortable if conservative lifestyle. My father's fruitbox / toolbox tells us something about the change in the role of bricolage or making do in modernising industrial culture.

The life of an object in itself is rather dull but writing about its 'afterlife' and how it was incorporated into the life of those who used it can be rather more interesting. Writing the biography of objects is one way of disembedding the social context of their use which can help in understanding details in the changing patterns of social lives.

¹ Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the conference Living in a Material World, Coventry University School of Art and Design, 25th-27th June 1999 and Timing Consumption, a BSA study group meeting at Manchester Metropolitan University on the 4th July 2000.

² Within sociology and history there is of course a tradition of the biography of ordinary people who exemplify a type of social life (see for example Stanley 1992).

³ See Nadel (1984, p.7).

⁴ Of course Baudrillard makes a very strong argument about the importance of objects as signs of status, a semiotic value that is not reducible to their economic or exchange value (Baudrillard, 1981).

⁵ Of course some writers choose to disturb this process, at least partially to upset any too-easy acceptance of sequence as progress. Barthes's account of Michelet and in his own autobiography are memorable examples (Barthes, 1977, 1987).

⁶ For example, Ian Banks's (1997) Song of Stone (a castle), Annie Proulx's (1996) Accordion Crimes (an accordion), Don DeLillo's (1998) Underworld (a baseball), Beryl Bainbridge's (1996) Every Man for Himself (a ship).

⁷ For Walter Benjamin it is in studying the 'afterlife' of the object, the object in ruins, one that has ceased to be a commodity and to have escaped its intended meaning, that one can get a sense of the "critical and utopian moments buried within it" (Gilloch, 1996, p. 110).

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Autobiographical Note

I currently teach sociological theory at University of East Anglia and have an interest in the sociology of things. In 1999 I published Material Culture in the Social World with the Open University Press and am currently running an ESRC funded research project on the professional care and maintenance of the private car. At the moment I am writing a book on Cultural Critique but my next writing project will be a book on Material Discourse. With Brian Gearing I have written on biographical work with elderly people - "Doing Biographical Research" in S. Peace (ed.) (1990) Researching Social Gerontology, Sage, London.



Figure 1 - The fruitbox / toolbox, circa 1948



Figure 2 - The inside of the fruitbox / toolbox.



Figure 3 - The plastic toolbox, circa 1998