

# SO374-15 The Social Life of Things

**24/25**

**Department**

Sociology

**Level**

Undergraduate Level 3

**Module leader**

Andre Celtel

**Credit value**

15

**Module duration**

10 weeks

**Assessment**

100% coursework

**Study location**

University of Warwick main campus, Coventry

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## Description

### Introductory description

The 'Social Life of Things' aims to introduce students to the ways in which material objects - things - have been theorised about in sociology (and other disciplines). Drawing on a wide range of cross-cultural and historical examples, the module explores how people create, value, exchange, consume, contest, discard and dwell in a world of things.

### Module aims

The principal aim of the module is for students to develop a broad understanding of a range of disciplinary approaches and theories relating to material culture. Students will be taught (and encouraged) to cultivate a sociological imagination in relation to everyday (and set-apart) objects, to look at 'things' differently.

### Outline syllabus

This is an indicative module outline only to give an indication of the sort of topics that may be covered. Actual sessions held may differ.

Things surround us. They are the bedrock of our lives. They are above us, below us, inside us, around us. They are everywhere (in fact, they make 'everywhere' possible): the bed we leave in

the morning, the sheets we reluctantly unfurl, the clothes we jump into, the bowl in which we pour our cornflakes (the cornflakes themselves, the box they come in), the transport we take to work, the room we work in, the park where we go for a lunchtime stroll, the rain that falls, the umbrella under which we take cover. Things. Things. Things. In exploring some of the key thinkers, theories and ideas associated with the 'material turn' in the social sciences, this module takes things seriously. Taking a cross-cultural and multidisciplinary approach, we explore how people create, value, exchange, consume, contest, discard and dwell in a world of things. We consider the social function and cultural significance of these things ('what things mean'), as well as exploring the extent to which things can be said to have subjectivity, being and agency of their own ('what things do'). We will also dip our toes into the realm of cognitive science to consider the ways in which things have become cognitive extensions of the human body ('how things extend'). We'll discover, through theoretical reflection and empirical examples, quite a bit about the social thinginess of things.

### Indicative Module Outline

1. Material things: an introduction to material culture
2. Anthropological things: gifts, commodities, and fetishism
3. Embodied things: personal objects and objects as persons
4. Religious things: materiality and immateriality
5. Everyday things: homemaking and the quotidian
6. Agentic things (i): art and agency
7. Agentic things (ii): actor-network theory
8. Dwelling among things: posthumanism and the more-than-human
9. Thinking through things: the extended and distributed mind

## Learning outcomes

By the end of the module, students should be able to:

- Identify, explain, and evaluate some of the central concepts and theories used in the study of objects and materiality.
- Critically assess and identify the complexity of objects and their impact on social life.
- Demonstrate how objects relate to people's understandings of themselves as individuals and as participants in specific cultural communities.
- Apply learning from the module to their own engagement with various objects.

## Indicative reading list

Appadurai, A. 1986. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Banerjee, M. & Miller, D. *The Sari*. New York: Berg

Bartmanski, D. & Woodward, I. 2015. *Vinyl: The Analogue Record in the Digital Age*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Boivin, N. 2008. *Material Cultures, Material Minds: The Impact of Things on Human Thoughts, Society, and Evolution*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Brown, B. 2001. Thing Theory. *Critical Inquiry*. 28: 1–22.

Carrier, J. 1995. *Gifts and Commodities: Exchange and Western Capitalism Since 1700*. London: Routledge.

Crane, D. & Bovone, L. 2006. Approaches to Material Culture: The Sociology of Fashion and Clothing. *Poetics* 34(6): 319–333.

Engelke, M. 2005. Sticky Subjects and Sticky Objects: The Substance of African Christian Healing. In *Materiality*, edited by Daniel Miller, pp. 118–139. Durham: Duke University Press.

Frank, S. 2016. The Force in the Thing: Mauss's Nonauthoritarian Sociality in The Gift. *HAU journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 6(2), pp. 255–277.

Gell, A. 1998. *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. New York: Clarendon Press.

Harman, G. 2005. *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*. Chicago.

Hebdige, D. 1983. Traveling Light: One Route into Material Culture. *RAIN*. 59: 11–13.

Ingold, T. 2007. Materials Against Materiality. *Archaeological Dialogues* 14: 116.

Ingold, T. 2021. *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*. London: Routledge.

Kopytoff, I. 1986. The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process. in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, edited by Arjun Appadurai. Cambridge University Press.

Latour, B. 1992. Where are the Missing Masses? The Sociology of a Few Mundane Artifacts. In W. Bijker and J. Law, eds., *Shaping Technology/Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Latour, B. 1993. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

Malafouris, L. 2013. *How Things Shape the Mind: A Theory of Material Engagement*. MIT Press.

Miller, D. 2008. *The Comfort of Things*. London: Polity Press.

Miller, D. (ed). 2005. *Materiality*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Morphy, H. 2009. Art as a Mode of Action. *Journal of Material Culture*. 14: 5–27.

Pongratz-Leisten, B. & Sonik, K. 2015. Between Cognition and Culture: Theorizing the Materiality of Divine Agency in Cross-Cultural Perspective, In *The Materiality of Divine Agency*, edited by B. Pongratz-Leisten and K. Sonik. Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, pp. 3–69.

Preda, A. 1999. The Turn to Things: Arguments for a Sociological Theory of Things. *The Sociological Quarterly* 40 (2): 347–366.

Strasser, S. 2000. *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash*. Owl Books.

Weiner, A. 1992. Reconfiguring Exchange Theory: The Maori Hau, in *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-While Giving* (Oakland, CA).

## Research element

The assignment will be based on a portfolio of pieces, which will require research on the relevant theoretical literature.

## Interdisciplinary

The module will draw widely on theoretical positions and empirical examples drawn from anthropology, sociology, religious studies and cognitive science.

## International

Many of the empirical examples will be drawn from an international context.

## Subject specific skills

Advanced knowledge of material culture theories.

Advanced skills in theoretical analysis and expression.

Analytical toolkit for reflecting on the significance of everyday objects.

## Transferable skills

Advanced skills in open and critical conversation.

Analytical skills in applying central concepts and theories to case studies and other empirical examples.

Reflective skills in applying learning to everyday contexts.

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## Study

### Study time

Type	Required
Lectures	9 sessions of 1 hour (6%)
Seminars	9 sessions of 1 hour (6%)
Private study	36 hours (24%)
Assessment	96 hours (64%)
Total	150 hours

### Private study description

Preparing for seminars every week (4 hrs per week)

## Costs

No further costs have been identified for this module.

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## Assessment

You must pass all assessment components to pass the module.

### Assessment group A

	Weighting	Study time	Eligible for self-certification
Assessment Portfolio	100%	96 hours	Yes (extension)

Assessment is by a portfolio of (mainly) written pieces, comprising up to 3000 words (in some cases, sound/visual pieces may be included, but in such cases there will be a minimum of 2000 written words). The portfolio will be based on the critical and reflective analysis of a number of objects (2-4) in light of ideas and theories discussed in the module.

### Feedback on assessment

Written feedback on portfolio.

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## Availability

### Courses

This module is Core optional for:

- Year 3 of ULAA-ML33 Undergraduate Law and Sociology

This module is Optional for:

- Year 3 of USOA-L301 BA in Sociology
- Year 4 of USOA-L306 BA in Sociology (with Intercalated Year)
- Year 3 of USOA-L314 Undergraduate Sociology and Criminology
- Year 4 of USOA-L315 Undergraduate Sociology and Criminology (with Intercalated Year)

This module is Option list A for:

- ULAA-ML34 BA in Law and Sociology (Qualifying Degree)
  - Year 3 of ML34 Law and Sociology (Qualifying Degree)
  - Year 4 of ML34 Law and Sociology (Qualifying Degree)

- Year 5 of ULAA-ML35 BA in Law and Sociology (Qualifying Degree) (with Intercalated year)
- Year 4 of ULAA-ML33 Undergraduate Law and Sociology

This module is Option list B for:

- Year 4 of ULAA-ML35 BA in Law and Sociology (Qualifying Degree) (with Intercalated year)
- Year 3 of ULAA-M135 Undergraduate Law and Sociology

This module is Option list D for:

- Year 3 of UHIA-VL13 Undergraduate History and Sociology
- Year 4 of UHIA-VL16 Undergraduate History and Sociology (with Year Abroad and a term in Venice)
- Year 4 of UHIA-VL14 Undergraduate History and Sociology (with Year Abroad)
- Year 3 of UHIA-VL15 Undergraduate History and Sociology (with a term in Venice)