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”The Centrality of Materiality”: A Response to the Comments

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“The Centrality of Materiality”: A Response to the Comments

by Richard Swedberg

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First of all I would like to thank not only the five commentators who have taken the time to comment on my paper, but also the two editors of *Sociologica*, Filippo Barbera and Marco Santoro. It is surely an honor – and a great luxury – to have one’s work read by so many important and interesting scholars.

One commentator, whose statement I got much out of, is Trevor Pinch. It was more or less through Trevor Pinch that I became interested in materiality (we are colleagues at Cornell); and what awakened my interest was his argument that institutions have a material dimension. He made this point a few years back, at a time when the interest in institutions was at its peak, and when most of us thought that everything that could be said about institutions also had been said.

Trevor and I later organized a conference, with the purpose of trying to bring economic sociology and science and technology studies closer together, by using materiality as the conduit between the two. The result is a collection of essays that will appear on the MIT Press in the coming fall, entitled *Living in a Material World*.

In commenting on my paper, Trevor Pinch makes two important and subtle points that I like very much. The first has to do with the fact that sociologists, and social scientists more generally, have a tendency to take some contemporary term and apply it backwards in time, to some context that is quite foreign to the semantic field in which it first emerged. Trevor Pinch uses “technology” (and my misuse of this term) as his example; and he shows how it grew out of the Nineteenth century and its concern with large technological systems, such as the railroads.

Implicit in Trevor Pinch’s discussion is perhaps also a similar critique of the term “materiality.” Having its origin in a reaction against the “thin” type of social

science analyses that are common today, can it also be used, without further ado, in talking about Greek Antiquity? Having raised the question is also having answered it; and I shall leave it at that.

The second point that Trevor Pinch makes in commenting on my paper, and which I really appreciate, has to do with what he calls "*invisible materiality*." His argument is that de-materialized types of social science analyses, such as the one that is characteristic of modern sociology, can only work as well as they do, on the silent assumption that material objects are present at various strategic points. Again, this is a subtle and important point of the type that readers of Trevor Pinch's work have come to expect and appreciate.

While Trevor Pinch is a science and technology scholar, two of the commentators are mainly associated with economic sociology. This is Paul Hirsch and Alex Preda (who also works in science and technology). Paul Hirsch is the author of a number of distinguished articles in economic sociology, one of which is "*Dirty Hands versus Clean Models: Is Sociology in Danger of Being Seduced by Economics?*" [Hirsch, Michaels and Friedman 1987]. The title shows why this article is relevant for the problems I discuss in *The Centrality of Materiality* (and I wish that I had cited it).

Paul Hirsch also makes the interesting note that much economic sociology makes the same error as economics, namely to abstract away from material elements – and then reintroduce them in the form of "exogenous forces." This is true not only for technology, Hirsch points out, but also for the legal system, income inequality and stratification. He adds that economic sociologists, in discussing materiality, may also want to pay more attention to power and political economy. Again I agree.

While I tried to "resurrect" home economics and an older perspective on the household in my paper, Paul Hirsch wisely notes that much of this critique of mainstream economics can also be found in modern feminist economics. Besides the authors he cites, I would like to add Nancy Folbre and her work on care and caring labor.

Alex Preda's work is well known and appreciated in contemporary economic sociology; and I am very grateful for his thoughtful and interesting comments. He makes a number of fine points, which are well worth repeating and reflecting further on. One of these is that the "thin" theory of *homo oeconomicus* can only exist on the condition that a number of supporting events take place, each with its own material side. Similarly, *homo oeconomicus* presupposes certain institutions, again with a material dimension. The reader will note the affinity on this point between the thinking of Trevor Pinch and Alex Preda.

In a gentle way Alex Preda also points out that it may be more to the point to discuss other societies than ancient Greece, when we discuss materiality and eco-

conomic life. In this context he also makes the excellent point that we may want to focus on *practicality*, if we are to properly understand materiality. It is first when we start looking at practical knowledge and practical actions that we begin to understand the interaction of social relations and materiality. *Practicality-Materiality!*

The advice of focusing on practicality (along the lines of say Peirce or James in their work on pragmatism), also shows its strength when confronted with the idea of a virtual economy. Alex Preda argues very nicely that this idea is akin to the spiritualized notion of economic man; and that real societies and real human beings are much more material than these “scholastic notions,” as Bourdieu used to call them.

The two last commentators agree on an important fault of my paper, when it comes to relevant literature. This is that I ignore the literature on material culture, especially as this has developed within the study of consumption. My view is that they are correct in making this critique and if I were to rewrite my paper, I would include references to this genre.

Roberta Sassatelli devotes a substantial part of her comment to what I say about Georg Simmel, namely that his sociology lacks materiality. It is wrong, she argues, to reduce Simmel’s sociology to his formal sociology, especially since Simmel has written on materiality over and over again.

It is true that Simmel was greatly interested in objects. Take, for example, an essay such as *The Handle*, which goes into quite a bit of detail in telling us how a vase can be gripped, what happens when it is gripped, and so on [Simmel 1959]. It is also true that Simmel mixes the material and the spiritual quite a bit, again as exemplified by *The Handle*.

Roberta Sassatelli points out that according to Simmel, social processes take place through material culture and that “the growth of material culture” has great consequences for the individual. Here one might, however, want to refer back to the point of Trevor Pinch, namely that one should be careful with exporting contemporary concepts to countries of the past. The reason I say this is that Simmel is not talking about “material culture” but about something else – what he calls “*objective culture*.” Objective culture and subjective culture, he argued, are in contradiction to each other; and as society progresses, objective culture will increasingly suffocate subjective culture.

Are we here talking about “materiality” or about something else that has a few points in common with the current use of the term? One also wonders what a materialistic reading of Kant would look like, by Simmel or anybody else. The thing-in-itself, after all, is unknowable.

Another point that Roberta Sassatelli makes, following Zelizer, is that economic sociology has mainly concentrated on production, while anthropology, cultural soci-

ology, and cultural studies set consumption in center. This is true up to a point – but there also exist other thoughts and theories in economic sociology. According to one of these, what is characteristic about the modern economy is that is capitalistic in nature, and that consumption and production can only be understood in this context.

Since I have repeatedly argued for this position, I shall very quickly present the key argument, and point to its implications for scholars who argue for an exclusive focus on consumption. The capitalist process can be understood as a process that starts with production, proceeds with exchange, and ends up in 1) consumption *and* in 2) profit. The feedback loop from profit to production is what keeps the system dynamic and accumulation never-ending [e.g. Swedberg 2004].

Now, when you look at things from this perspective, consumption becomes very closely tied to production – but also to profit or, more precisely, to the need for profit. There is a strong pressure on consumption to take place, in order that there will be an accumulation of profit. George Ritzer has suggested that we use the term “means of consumption;” and this expression nicely captures what is behind the invention of department stores, shopping malls and the like [Ritzer 1999].

Finally, Donald Miller argues, similarly as Roberta Sassatelli, that I have wrongly ignored a huge literature on material culture. He also gives a few other references that he feels should have been included, such as the work of Stephen Gudeman and Stallybrass’ paper on *Marx’s Coat*. These works (and also those of Donald Miller himself) are important and recommended reading in discussions of materiality.

All in all, then, a number of valuable points were made in the comments on my paper. As emphasized by Donald Miller, the current division of labor in the social sciences is such that it is easy to by-pass what is going on in neighboring fields. This constitutes a problem that goes beyond the discussion of my paper – but it is nonetheless there, and it made me ignore valuable literature.

Other commentators made very valuable points as well – such as Hirsch on exogenous forces, Pinch on invisible materiality, Preda on materiality as practicality, and Sassatelli on the need to also look at the non-formalistic side of Simmel. I am grateful for all of these opinions, and again would like to thank the commentators as well as the two editors of *Sociologica* for their efforts to create a truly live and interesting sociology journal.

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“The Centrality of Materiality”: A Response to the Comments

Abstract: This essay represents an attempt to bring the notion of materiality to the attention of economic sociologists. The point of departure is that what most people view as “the economy” consists of a mixture of objects, actions and relationships. “We are living in a material world,” as Trevor Pinch has put it. This insight, however, is missing from modern economics. Originally, economics was closely allied to materiality, as exemplified by the economic theory of antiquity. After Xenophon and Aristotle, however, the materiality of economic life has grown successively thinner in economics; and today economic theory is defined (in mainstream economics) as simply an approach and a perspective. Earlier attempts to focus economic analysis around materiality, especially in home economics, are also ignored today.

Keywords: economic sociology, economic theory, materiality, home economics, Adam Smith.

Richard Swedberg is Professor of Sociology at Cornell University, Department of Sociology since 2002. He is a Swedish citizen and his specialties are economic sociology and sociological theory. He has a law degree from Stockholm University and a PhD in Sociology from Boston College. Before coming to Cornell, he worked at the Department of Sociology at Stockholm University where he in 1996 was appointed “Professor of Sociology, especially Economic Sociology.” His works include *Max Weber and the Idea of Economic Sociology* (1998), *Principles of Economic Sociology* (2003) and *Tocqueville’s Political Economy* (forthcoming in 2009). He is also the co-editor together with Neil Smelser of *The Handbook of Economic Sociology* (1994-2005).