

Paolo Magaudda

Elizabeth Shove, Matthew Watson, Martin Hand
and Jack Ingram, *The Design of Everyday Life*. Ox-
ford: Berg, 2007, 174 pp.

(doi: 10.2383/29580)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 1, gennaio-aprile 2009

Ente di afferenza:

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

Licenza d'uso

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda
<https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

Book reviews

Elizabeth Shove, Matthew Watson, Martin Hand and Jack Ingram, *The Design of Everyday Life*. Oxford: Berg, 2007, 174 pp.

doi: 10.2383/29580

The Design of everyday life takes into account the role of objects, things and technologies in everyday life, presenting and reorganizing work done by the authors on this issue in the last few years. The book consists in a robustly theory-driven collection of empirical analyses of everyday objects and their uses. The authors consider the presence of different things and objects in people's routinely activity with the aim of showing how these represent constitutive elements in the shaping of social relations and social order. In analysing the relation between people, objects and society, the authors adopt a fruitful conceptual framework that they distil from sociology of consumption, science & technology studies (S&TS) and material culture studies. At the theoretical level, therefore, one of the book's attempts is to mix together ideas and perspectives from these different fields and to use the resulting conceptual scenery in order to display, at the empirical level, how material objects have consequences on the creation, stabilization and disappearance of shared social patterns in everyday life.

The authors' main idea about the relationship between objects and society suggests that these objects *co-evolve* during time together with social practices and with broader elements that constitute peoples' experience. Indeed, the authors argue that human activities should be understood as stable configurations made up of heterogeneous elements, which consist of people and things as well as of their representations and the broader social context, and which they define in an analytical way as «social practices». The centrality of objects in shaping everyday practices, therefore, emerges from the tight interconnection between all these different elements: changes in each component, in fact, trigger further changes in the whole configuration of activities and practices. The authors are thus able to show how things and objects play a relevant role both in transforming and in stabilizing everyday life practices, but – and this is a relevant point – not as a single factor but as elements that react with other components of the configuration constituting everyday practice.

After a first chapter in which the authors make this perspective explicit and express their commitment to the development of a «theory of practice», the following five empirically grounded chapters deal with very specific objects, their uses and their representations. From a methodological point of view, the empirical researches presented here are based on interviews and observations, as well as on the analysis of documents. Chapter two focuses on kitchen objects and specifically on renewals of home kitchens. This case helps to explain that people do not change objects – in this case kitchen furniture – on the basis of objective and functional needs, but because new things in the kitchen enable people to redefine their expectations and aspirations and to imagine and assemble novel ways to act and operate in the domestic environment. Chapter three considers do-it-yourself (DIY) projects and those forms of consumption that require people to build or assemble things for themselves. In this case, the authors point out that DIY practices involve the use of objects and tools and, consequently, they also require people to develop

specific skills. In so doing, people's DIY practices depend also on the individual's career in the use of these tools, therefore clearly showing how practices, objects and people constantly *co-evolve* together. Chapter four considers the world of digital photography amateurs and allows the authors to show that digital photography, as well as traditional photography, is embedded in a strong context of technologies and objects. The analysis of the appropriation by new users of the system of digital photography shows how the different technologies and systems in digital photography directly affect the ways in which people get involved in photographic practice. Chapter five sketches a cultural history of plastic and plastic stuffs. In this case authors show how the relation between the material, objects and their role in society is based on visions and expectations that are socially shared and historically contingent. Plastic and other materials are chosen and applied not only on the basis of the properties of the objects in themselves, but also of the visions and expectations about how the same objects will be used. Finally, chapter six further develops this idea, considering the dominant discourses among product designers and their role as intermediaries in choosing materials and shaping objects in relation with social expectations. In doing so, the authors argument around the fertile idea that considers design professionals – with their discourses, cultures and approaches – as relevant, although not fully recognized, players in shaping what people do and what they can expect to do in the future with objects.

These different empirical chapters offer an original and challenging insight in different social spheres and practices, presenting useful examples of analyses of the deep relation between people, objects and social practices. As it has already been said, the relevance of the book is also deeply connected with conceptual choices and its attempt to build multiple theoretical bridges: between consumption studies and science & technology studies; between material culture and semiotic approaches; between social sciences and design. In order to better show this relevance we will next discuss three different levels on which this book offers a tangible contribution.

The first level is constituted by the contribution the book offers to the study of the role of the material dimension in the social context and, more specifically, to the development of the «material turn» in social theory and in everyday life studies. While the attention to materiality has been raised by science & technology studies and by consumer studies since the eighties, only recently different fields of the social sciences have turned their interest to the constitutive role of the material dimension in society. In this regard, the readers of «Sociologica» have had the possibility to see (in issue 1/2008) that in these last few years *The centrality of materiality* has also influenced mainstream sectors of sociology such as Richard Swedberg's economic sociology. While attention for the material world is not new in itself, the «material turn» means not only acknowledging the centrality of materiality, but also the way in which this materiality is actually considered. What the authors stress, therefore, is the shift from considering things as a reflection of other social aspects – e.g. Bourdieu's analysis of consumption objects in the *Distinction* – towards the consideration of how things are at the same time a product of social practices and they generate the conditions upon which these social practices take shape. From this point of view the perspective adopted in the book represents a relevant development in the analysis of materiality in the social world.

On a second and different level, the relevance of the book consists of the development of the interaction between sociology of consumption and science & technology studies, a work Elisabeth Shove had already developed in 2003 with her book *Comfort cleanliness and convenience*. Indeed, while both S&TS and sociology of consumption have produced the main spurs concerning the ways in which sociology has considered materiality, the attempt of this book is to combine the qualities of both approaches. The development offered by the book, therefore, consists of considering consumption – from a S&TS perspective – mainly on the basis of the interaction between people and artefacts; artefacts contain «scripts» and configurations of actions and this means that the relation between object and people develops on a pragmatic level, in their use. Objects are not relevant only for their semiotic and symbolic dimension, but also because they involve competences and skills, which are socially stratified. In addition, the authors try not to consider single technologies as the unit of analysis, as is commonly the case in S&TS approaches, but they adopt a different perspective and consider the whole set of activities within which the relation between people and technologies takes shape as the centre of analysis. In this sense, the book suggests a step forward, from considering the agency of material artefacts towards considering the role of «interrelated complexes of practices» and in so doing it represents a challenging contribution both for S&TS and for consumption scholars.

A third level of interest consists in the development of theoretical reflection as well as of empirical research in the field of a «theory of practice». As the same authors explain, the book is an attempt to combine the theoretical attention developed by the Latourian approach to «missing masses» with the attitude of considering social practices – therefore not a single object, nor individuals – as the units of analysis. To put it very shortly, theory of practice consists of a perspective which considers «practices» as the unit of analysis of social phenomena, aiming with this choice at overcoming the long-standing distance between structural and individualistic approaches. Moreover, theory of practice-based approaches emphasizes the heterogeneity of elements which participate in the generation of these social practices, including – as the accepted definition of Andreas Reckwitz (*European Journal of Social Theory* 5, 2, 2002) explicated – “forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, ‘things’ and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge.” Theory of practice, which has its theoretical roots in the works, among others, of Bourdieu, Giddens, Foucault, Garfinkel and Schatzky, represents a terrain of encounter between very different sectors of contemporary sociology, involving not only technology, objects and consumption, but also, for example, organization studies, through the work of Wanda Orlikowski. Furthermore, thanks to its potential in establishing cross connections along different paths of contemporary sociology, theory of practice represents an intriguing and potentially fruitful conceptual tool for contemporary scholars involved in multiple fields and objects of inquiry.

The book clearly appears challenging for people involved in consumption, S&TS and material culture studies. Although it is far from representing an organic and fully structured model – thus probably disappointing those who demand for systematic and exhaustive explanations – *The Design of everyday life* presents multiple suggestions, theoretical advances, and empirical insights into the everyday world. It presents a theor-

Magaudda

etical reflection that strengthens the otherwise thinly established connections between forms of consumption, material objects and the technological dimension of society. It also works as a highly respectable example of how to develop fruitful theory-driven empirical researches. More in general, it constitutes a relevant brick in the construction of the wall of materiality in contemporary social theory and in empirical research on everyday life.

Paolo Magaudda
University of Padua