

Draft notes for paper presented at Designing and Consuming: objects, practices and processes, a workshop held at Durham University, UK, 11th January 2005. The paper remains the copyright of the author. Please obtain consent from the author before quoting from or otherwise referencing this paper.

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Material Civilization

Although classical sociology has largely overlooked the importance of social relations with the material world in shaping the form of society, Braudel's concept of 'material civilization' is a useful way to begin to understand the sociological significance of this relationship. The limitations of Braudel's historical and general concept can be partially overcome with Elias's analysis of the connection between 'technization' and 'civilization' that allows for both a civilizing and a de-civilizing impact of emergent forms of material relation that both lengthen and shorten the chains of interdependence between the members of a society.

From the sociology of consumption the idea of materiality as a sign of social relationships can be drawn, and from the sociology of technology the idea of socio-technical systems and actor-networks can contribute to the understanding of material civilization. I will also argue that the concept of 'material capital' can usefully summarize the variable social value of objects but to understand the complexity of material civilization as it unfolds in everyday life, an analysis of 'material interaction' is needed. Finally I will suggest some initial themes and issues apparent in contemporary society that the sociological study of material civilization might address; the increased volume, functional complexity and material specificity of objects and the increased social complexity, autonomy and substitutability that is entailed. A theory of 'material civilization' is the first step in establishing a sociology of objects.

Tim Dant, 17th November 2005

References

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