From Things to Signs: Changing Perspectives in the Study of Material Culture in Europe*

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The central topic of this paper concerns the study of the material aspects of culture within the discipline of European ethnology. This disciplinary sub-field has undergone quite spectacular changes during the last half century. Not only have the methodological and theoretical perspectives in the study of material culture changed in various directions but, even more importantly, the material world of European societies itself has undergone an unprecedented transformation due to industrialisation and post-industrial globalisation. The conception, production, circulation and use of material (as well as of immaterial) goods have become among the main characteristics of the growing complexity of our contemporary world. In this paper I would like to discuss some milestones in the ways that European ethnology (but also "general" ethnology or social and cultural anthropology) have approached and analysed the material dimensions of human cultures.

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Both general and European ethnology emerged as specific fields of academic interest during the second part of the eighteenth and more significantly during the nineteenth centuries (Vermeulen 1995). One of the first aims of our academic ancestors was *to document human diversity*. This documentation, much inspired of course by the model of the natural sciences, generally consisted in describing various "habits and customs" which were called by the first German-speaking pioneers *Völkerbeschreibungen or Ethnographien* (cf. Stagl 1998: 522),

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as well as in transcribing vernacular languages or dialects. Usually this written documentation was completed by collections of "characteristic samples" of local material culture as far as it was possible to transport and later to store them.

According to the predominant paradigm of the time, the first ethnological approaches of material culture were the elaboration of typologies and taxonomies based on formal characteristics, while collected artefacts were ordered and stored according to regional and "cultural" (i.e. linguistic) criteria. Here these artefacts began a new career as silent witnesses of faraway groups visited by explorers, colonialists, missionaries and other travellers or, within Europe, of disappearing rural communities observed by members of the urban elites. In order to facilitate and improve further scientific analysis, one of the first concerns of scholars during the nineteenth century was to elaborate instructions for the description of (the context of) production and use of the collected items. So to become of ethnological interest and value, every item had to be accompanied by a written record. In other words, artefacts without a written ethnographic "pedigree" became to be considered as worthless for science, as "dumb" or "muted" (cf. for example Bouquet and Branco 1988).

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the Darwinian evolutionary paradigm had an impact on the collectors and observers of human artefacts and techniques. This introduced new forms of typologies, which classified artefacts not only in formal and/or functional categories, but also in chronological series ranging from (supposed) primitive/"lower" specimens towards more complex/"higher" types. It should be noted that this chronological ranking of artefacts played an important role in the rise of popular, simplistic human evolutionism and in various forms of pseudo-scientific racism.

This chronological, evolutionary approach to the scientific understanding of artefacts not only affected archaeological findings or exotic objects, but was also used as a paradigm for the understanding of contemporary elements of national material culture like tools and (mainly agricultural) implements. As in many European countries the first local or regional archaeologists and ethnologists were often the same persons, very similar kinds of typologies were used to organise the collections and exhibitions of archaeological findings and those of more contemporary, rural artefacts in local, regional or even national museums. Material samples became in this context the indicators of progress as well as reminders of a past which could be considered either positively by the Romantics or negatively by the supporters of "progress".

Here we should remember that the end of the nineteenth century corresponds in many countries to the foundation of local and regional museums, where besides works of art, more and more attention was given to material

cultural elements as "witnesses of a disappearing pre-industrial world". While peasants were leaving their villages by the thousands to work in industry or to emigrate overseas, their tools and artefacts became objects of collection and contemplation for local and national elites.

As historians of nationalism, like Hobsbawm and Ranger (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), Anderson (Anderson 1980), Smith (Smith 1991) and others have shown, the geo-political context of both nationalism and regionalism in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century greatly influenced the methods and aims of the pioneers of European ethnology of that time. Old tribal identities were given to artefacts (Celtic, Germanic, Frankish, Slavic, etc.), while "primitive forms" were researched not only in oral traditions but also in ploughs, tools or rural architecture. Here material elements of popular culture became (political) emblems of the pre-industrial authenticity of regional and even national identities.

In academic circles, "much ingenuity and industry went [in this period] into pointing out that certain types of objects were characteristic of particular [ancient] ethnic groups [and] the movements of an object in geographical space became a means of mapping [supposed] migrations" (Stoklund 1990: 6) of European peoples. Here European ethnology found a new type of interest for material cultural elements as they were no longer simply objects to study *per se*, but also indicators of more general processes at work in European history. Scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds like philology, geography and agronomy directed their research toward the spatial distribution and diffusion of material cultural elements. This new theoretical orientation which occurred around 1900 became known as the "cartographic method" in European ethnology; it was based at first mainly on indirect sources but later also on large scale surveys of for example agricultural implements, rural architecture etc. (cf. Bromberger, Dossetto, Schippers 1982–1983; Schippers 2004).

The promoters of this type of research (like E. Sigurdson in Sweden, M. Zender in Germany, B. Bratanic in former Yugoslavia or S. I. Bruk in the former Soviet Union) had various ambitions: some were rather modest, like those who intended to make regional or national inventories of artefacts which were threatened with disappearance by the forces of modernisation and industrialisation; while others were much more audacious, since they aimed to reconstruct the (pre-)historic cultural processes of migration and diffusion in Europe and beyond during the last millennia. As later critics, like Johannes Voskuil (Voskuil 1982–1983) and others have pointed out, both the strength and the weakness of these diffusionist studies of material culture lay in the fact that artefacts were considered in isolation from not only their social but also their ecological contexts

(Cox and Wiegelmann 1984). In the way the diffusion of artefacts was described, it seemed as if they were totally independent agents travelling through space. On the other hand, these large scale studies, based on indirect sources, revealed themselves to be very hazardous methodologically, if not bluntly erroneous, as critics of these "maximalist" approaches to historical ethno-cartography have demonstrated (e.g. Voskuil 1983: 105). Nevertheless, it should also be recognised that in many European countries the ethno-cartographic method allowed research on popular material culture to become more systematic and thus more scientific, except perhaps in German speaking countries, where the European ethnological landscape has been dominated, with a few exceptions, by the study of non-material cultural elements like folk narrative, folklore or linguistics.

Here one could mention, as an exception in the German speaking countries, the pioneering research done at the University of Graz in Austria by scholars like Rudolf Meringer and Hugo Schuchard followed by Viktor Geramb and later Hanns Koren and Oskar Moser (Eberhart 1983). Notwithstanding the disagreements between Meringer and Schuchard about *Wörter und Sachen* or *Sachen und Wörter* ("words and things" or vice versa), the main contribution of the later-coined Grazer Schule of Volkskunde (European Ethnological School of Graz), lay in the relations it established between the mental categories of language and the material world of artefacts. One of the most interesting aspects of the research tradition initiated by the members of the *Wörter und Sachen* Schule lay in its methodological and heuristic innovations based on a multidimensional approach to material culture. Combining the study of archives and literary sources with empirical data collected during fieldwork, the so-called *Wörter und Sachen* scholars not only crossed disciplinary boundaries and national borders (Moser 1992: 93), but also the institutional barriers that generally separated museums from universities (Meiners 1990: 25). This historical divide between museums and universities has been, in many European countries, characteristic of the national and regional ethnological landscapes until quite recently: on one side, a bi-dimensional universe of words, texts and theories; on the other side a tri-dimensional world of artefacts to be stored and exposed; on one hand the *Wörter* (words) and on the other the *Sachen* (objects), with in many cases no formal, institutional links between these two "worlds".

The often rather ambiguous relations between regional or national ethnographic museums and academic scholars can be traced back to the end of the nineteenth century, to the period of what may be called the codification of regional traditions all over Europe. Many things have already been written on

the "construction of 'folk' cultural heritage" (Hofer 1991), the "nationalisation of culture" (Löfgren 1989: 5) and other forms of the "invention of tradition" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). As well as ideology, material cultural elements have often been put forward in these contexts as "witnesses" of authenticity in regionalistic or nationalistic claims. Rural artefacts, especially, have frequently become central elements in regional or national narratives about local, regional or national belonging. Museums became considered in this context not only as places of collection and exposition but also of enthusiastic celebration by local or regional volunteers and activists. As an example of this, one can mention the *Museon Arlaten* created 1886 by the Provençal poet Frederic Mistral in the city of Arles in the South of France, which also became a place of almost devotional celebration and strict codification of the local culture by the regional *Félibre*-movement that Mistral – who was awarded in 1906 with the Noble Price for literature – had founded earlier.

In many countries academic scholars have observed these types of initiatives with mixed feelings if not with mistrust. For example in countries like Great Britain, France or the Netherlands this gap has been so wide that "national ethnology" has remained enclosed in museums or in a very few small institutes, while in the universities only general ethnology or social anthropology was taught and learned. Here rather little attention was paid to material culture, and objects were only analysed as forms of "art" and as examples of vernacular aesthetics. Even in the German-speaking countries, where so-called Volkskunde (national ethnology) entered the universities on a much broader scale, the direct study of material culture has generally been the *parent pauvre* of academic curricula and research interest almost until today. And as mentioned earlier, when material elements were studied at all, it was generally through the mediation of texts or pictures rather then with the help of empirical fieldwork. One can think here of the later historical research done in many institutes in various European countries based on the quantitative analysis of so-called historical "household inventories" recorded in testaments.

To summarise the ethnological study of material culture during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I would suggest that material culture was generally considered as a series of indicators of supposed evolution and migration of regional or national historical populations or "peoples". The methodological approach to artefacts was mainly concerned with their collection, cataloguing, display and storage in museums. The socio-economic, technical and ecological contexts of the production and use of material elements were rarely taken into consideration. Briefly said, until the 1950s the (European) ethnology of material culture could hardly be considered to be a human scien-

ce, with perhaps the notable exception of the Wörter und Sachen scholars both in Graz and in Hamburg.

But from the 1950s and especially from the 1960s onward, this whole picture of the study of material culture changes quite radically both in methods as well as theoretically, while perhaps the most important change occurs in the material world of the European population itself. Schematically we can say that during the two or three decades following World War II, the material environment of a majority of Europeans was transformed from a world of locally, often individually, produced artefacts into a world of industrially manufactured goods. This has also meant that at the local level of everyday life, which is the familiar site of ethnological research, *the majority of people were becoming consumers rather than producers of material culture* (Bromberger and Ségalen 1996: 5–16). Faced with these huge economic and socio-cultural changes and their consequences, ethnological research in the field of material culture underwent a parallel move away from (what Marxists call) the study of "modes of production" toward the study of *modes of consumption*. Here specific artefacts were no longer the indicators of regional identity, but goods became markers of class-belonging, of lifestyles, of *habitus*, etc.

A second major change that occurred during the post-war decades and which greatly influenced the nature of ethnological research on material culture was a *methodological* one. Influenced by extra-European ethnology, a new generation of European ethnologists adopted *direct empirical observation of small groups* as their main source for data production. So after a long period of extensive, large-scale, diachronic research with the help of written archives and postal questionnaires, European ethnology progressively entered the era of so-called holistic "community studies" and monographs. This methodological and also paradigmatic change, which occurred first in Scandinavia and Western Europe, has of course had many consequences for the very nature of ethnological research in Europe both from a theoretical as well as from a heuristic point of view.

In the field of material culture studies, it meant *a shift away from an artefact-centred perspective towards an actor-centred perspective*. This change in perspective started off in various European countries in quite independent and different ways. For example in France, the disciples of the well-known ethnologist and archaeologist André Leroi-Gourhan (Leroi-Gourhan 1943/1971, Leroi-Gourhan 1964–1965), developed a methodological framework for analysing *l'action technique* (technical action) in mainly rural contexts (peasants and craftsmen). Here micro-level analysis focussed on the physical and mental aptitudes displayed by individuals in producing or using a particular artefact, and material ele-

ments are observed and analysed through the person's interaction with them. So in this perspective *material goods became closely associated with the knowledge used to make or to handle them*. And the acquisition, implementation and transmission of know-how became the central topics of an "ethnology of techniques" rather then an "ethnology of things". Some keywords of this Leroi-Gourhanian school of ethnology of material culture are for example *système technique* (technical system), or *style technique* (technical style) as well as the heuristic framework formed by the continuum between on one side general, abstract technical "tendencies" like hitting or cutting or crushing; and on the other hand precise, empirically observable, local solutions or tools. The ultimate goal of this approach of material culture is to analyse the *technical choices* of various groups in their interaction with material things and constraints: why, for example, certain groups seem to prefer certain technical solutions instead of others, like why this group uses to carry things on their heads, while their neighbours prefer to carry loads on their shoulders.

This type of ethnological research has of course not been limited to so-called traditional techniques or artefacts. It is also used *to analyse the continuity in technical solutions or in styles of presentation* of certain industrial products (Deforge 1981; Lemonnier 1996) or of national styles in football/soccer-playing (Bromberger 1995). The central scientific aims here consist in *clarifying the triple articulation* between technical choices, social groups and ecological constraints. Material choices and technical solutions are from this perspective *not only indicators for the observing scientist, but also markers of identity for the people studied* (*cf.* Dufour and Schippers 1993). Here so-called "etic" and "emic" approaches to material culture are compared in order to study what *the social meaning of artefacts* in a given context is or has been. The field of food and culinary techniques offers many powerful examples of how some apparently minor technical difference can become invested with important social significations in regard to the distinction between "us" and "others".

Until the 1970's, one of the empirical limitations of the Leroi-Gourhanian school's approach to material culture has been its analysis of rather simple artefacts made or used by individual craftsmen or operators. But new directions have also started to be explored here, for example in the way people *transform* standard industrial goods like cars or motorbikes in order to meet their individual criteria and social goals. This domain of so-called "customising" or *bricolage* of standardised products offers contemporary ethnologists a still-little-explored, but promessing field of research which combines the study of technical skills, aesthetics – sometimes summarised as "cultural choices" – with the analysis of sentiments of social belonging and identity. One can think

here of such various examples as youngsters intentionally damaging their clothes in the 1980s (the so-called "destroy look" of "punk culture") or the technical or aesthetical transformations of mass-produced houses, cars or food.

On the other hand, the ethnologist's interest in observing and analysing material culture at a micro-level has proved more difficult to transfer to the often hyper-complex contexts of the industrial *production* of mass goods. The methodological difficulties of apprehending the complexity of the production of modern goods and things was by-passed at first in the 1960s by researchers of what is sometimes called the "Scandinavian School" of European ethnology. After having abandoned the cartographic method of pioneers like Sigurd Erixon, a new generation of Scandinavian ethnologists like for example Orvar Löfgren, Jonas Frykman, Marianne Gullestad and Bjarne Rogan have focussed their interest mostly on *the use rather than on the production of material goods.* This "user-focussed" ethnology can be placed in the more global context of the 1960s and the rise of multidisciplinary "consumer culture" research. It corresponds also with a period of theoretical turmoil and debate around structuralism, semiotics and Marxism: *here material culture was transformed into a structural world of signs and symbols* and it was considered the ethnologist's task to decipher and "demystify" all this, if possible "critically". One of the paradoxes of the study of material culture during this period was – as one of its protagonists recently recalled (Löfgren 1996: 143) – "that this come-back of 'things' on the ethnological scene, did not always mean the come-back of what is material". Things were considered as "*text*[s] *to be read*" (Geertz 1973: 3–30), as icons, signs and symbols rather than as what they really were: material goods that are acquired, bought, given away, stolen, manipulated, used, broken, repaired, forgotten, re-used etc. Later, one of the keywords in this type of consumer/owner/user-centred approach to material culture became *competence* and much research has since been done on how women and men in modern society become 'competent' in their interactions with a more and more complex material environment, sometimes jokingly called the "neo-electric" era.

This new actor-focussed ethnological research has proved quite stimulating during the last decades in many European countries. The empirical "ethnology of doing" (Frykman 1990) has allowed to gather precious data on how people actually deal with artefacts in everyday practice: *Umgang mit Sachen* (dealing with things) as the 23rd Congress of the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Volkskunde* (the German European Ethnological Society) in 1981 significantly called it. These shifts in perspectives, combined with new theoretical frameworks, have of course also led to methodological innovations and to a narrowing of

the differences between European ethnology and general ethnology/anthropology, at least in those countries where such differences had existed.

For example, much more attention is paid today to the *social and cognitive mechanisms and contexts* in which material things or immaterial technical knowledge are transmitted and adapted to local cultural settings. Situations of so-called "creolisation *in absentia*", where tools, techniques or objects are introduced in contexts very different from their (social) settings of origin or invention, form new privileged sites to study the specificity of local cultures through their ways of adopting/adapting these foreign objects not only practically but also mentally. A now-classical example is the *American hamburger*, for a long time considered as a symbol of cultural convergence – the so-called "McDonaldisation process" – which has shown astonishing changes in recent years as fast-food restaurant companies are adapting their products to national cultural contexts. Many other multinational firms have now developed very precise marketing and packaging strategies to fit in with local material culture expectations, even sometimes with the help of ethnological expertise and advice called "ethno-marketing". These "think global, act local" industrial strategies also remind us of the importance of material culture in contemporary societies.

On the other hand, recent ethnographic research has shown that very similar objects may be perceived or used very differently according to time and space. One has only to remember the solemn attitudes required in family homes a few decades ago while watching television or to observe the various contexts in which TV-sets are switched on or off in different parts of Europe today, to get an idea of the heuristic interest of studying material culture empirically. This is not only true on a local level but also on a much wider comparative level. Material cultural elements often play a crucial role as *mediators* in so-called intercultural communication or in multicultural contexts. As the structural and semiotic approaches of the 1960s and 1970s have taught us, "dealing with things" is generally not an "innocent affair", since it is also the "production of meaning and significance" like Roland Barthes or Pierre Bourdieu have often underlined. Not only may the ownership or use of certain artefacts express social belonging or identification, but also the lack or the avoidance of certain material goods has acquired the same expressive social value: the so-called *apostasia* or non-use or non-possession of for example a television, a car or certain services seem more and more to be deployed as social differentiators in our consumer-centred societies.

The traditional ethnological interest in small, apparently insignificant, routine and humdrum details, which was stressed by the pioneers of European ethnology long ago, here allows the discipline to develop particular types of

knowledge and skills. These micro-level data about daily routines of ordinary citizens interacting with material goods also differentiate ethnology from neighbouring disciplines like sociology or history. Modern (European) ethnology is one of the few contemporary human sciences that *produces* itself an important part of its data not only with the help of interviews but also by active, systematic empirical observations. This methodological originality – for which some have coined the term (from the ancient Greek) *'rhopography'*, the representation of ordinary things (Cornell 1993 cited by Löfgren 1996: 148) – has proved especially interesting in the study of material culture. Indeed an important part of the interaction between people and artefacts is based on so-called *non-verbal* elements, like visual imitation, sensory contacts, olfactory or auditory evaluation etc. When interacting with materials, people engage various senses to evaluate for example different qualities or technical properties. The apprenticeship of how to handle or how to estimate both material goods and techniques has revealed itself to be a fascinating domain for ethnological research both in the domestic sphere as well as at the workplace. For example precise studies of *how people deal with laundry at home* have revealed not only the various criteria people use to decide to wash something (smell, appearance, routine) but also how they classify various categories of laundry not only according to fabric, colour, or type of garment, but also according to gender, age or kinship relations (Denèfle 1992). In a more professional sphere, ethnographic research about the acquisition of technical know-how and expertise in urban or industrial sites have created new concepts like the earlier mentioned 'technical culture' or 'competence' in order to analyse the specific ways in which craftsmen or technicians learn and improve their professional capabilities. Here ethnographers have studied such various places as nuclear plants (Zonabend 1989), industrial shipyards (Tornatore 1991) or small garages (Mallard 1999).

Another aspect of material culture was introduced by (Scandinavian) ethnological research on material culture in the 1990s: this was the concept of 'career' as related to artefacts. Here not only the various uses and symbolic values given to certain objects are analysed diachronically as in the 1960s – how for example an agricultural tool becomes a symbol of rural life when exhibited on the wall of a restaurant – but the researchers have also investigated how material elements are related to individual life stories. These 'consumer-biographies' first studied the 'careers' of various types of artefacts like clothes, furniture, TV-sets, cars etc. within the domestic lives of individuals, households and families. They reveal that some objects circulate quite rapidly while others are kept even if they are not used anymore. Some artefacts become "'favourite objects' [that] serve as beacons or guideposts to orient in, and

personalise, both space and time" (Wallendorf and Arnould 1988 cited by Löfgren 1996: 145). Here some of the most ordinary things like shoes, hats or cigarette-lighters, become invested with emotions and are, as well as more rarely bought equipment like a car or a house, considered as the *material reminders* (and sometimes also remainders!) *of one's curriculum vitae.*

But are these fascinating micro-level ethnographic studies of how individuals deal with the material elements of their environment the only way of researching material culture in Europe today? What about the huge workshop started by the pioneers of ethnological study of material culture in the XIXth century and which has been more or less abandoned for various reasons after the last World War in Western Europe and in the 1980s in Europe's (former) socialist countries: that is, the scholarly tradition of extensive, regional cultural area research? Is so-called globalisation really wiping out local cultural differences by the diffusion of standardised products? Many of the old problematics developed by the early European ethnologists still remain largely unanswered today. Here, in conclusion, perhaps one might predict some *new challenges* for European ethnologists studying material culture. Today (European) ethnologists can for example benefit from the huge amounts of quantitative data produced by industrial and commercial companies or national consumer statistics. Submitting these types of data to ethnological questioning could be very interesting for the study of regional specificities. For example a classical ethnological study of colour-analysis would be very interesting when applied to the regional or national statistics of colour preferences in automobile sales. Most of modern consumer habits can be studied nowadays with much more geographical and quantitative precision than in the good old days of the questionnaire-based research. The use of computers also facilitates greatly the production of maps and cartograms of cultural phenomena.

A renewed interest in more large-scale research both in general ethnology and in European ethnology seems to come today from a growing social but also economic demand for so-called 'cultural expertise'. As already mentioned, one of the characteristics of our societies is the huge increase in circulation both of people and of material goods. After some notorious failures, industrial firms have become more and more aware of the so-called 'cultural dimensions' (Hofstede 1980/1984) not only in management, but also in production, packaging and retail sales. Here the methodological and theoretical tools developed especially by the ethnology of material culture can prove very interesting, not only scientifically but also for students who are looking for new job opportunities. One may foresee that the combined use of various textual sources and ethnographic fieldwork will allow ethnologists to explore new directions in the stu-

dy of material culture in order to answer old questions like: why people in this region or of this group prefer a certain type of artefact, while others seem to prefer another type with the same functional characteristics. If ethnology is the discipline that studies social and cultural differences between individuals and groups, *material culture should be considered of central interest today in a more and more visualised, iconised and 'branded' world.* The abundance of goods in most Western countries has become, for better or for worse, emblematic of our societies especially when seen from other parts of the world. The possession of material goods has become a criterion of socio-economic differentiation studied by economists and sociologists. But it seems that it is the task of ethnologists to show the cultural aspects and consequences of being a "material girl [or a material boy...] in a material world" as Madonna sang a few years ago.

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Nuo daiktų prie ženklų: keičiant materialinės kultūros tyrinėjimo perspektyvas Europoje

Thomas K. Schippers

Santrauka

Šiame straipsnyje Thomas K. Schippersas nurodo keletą gairių, padedančių suvokti materialinės kultūros tyrinėjimo Europos etnologijoje istoriją. Akademinis domėjimasis materialine kultūra prasidėjo XVIII a. kaip Europos ir už jos ribų esančių tautų nematerialių kultūros elementų aprašymo papildymas. Tai vyko sudarant muzeografinius rinkinius ir parengiant tipologijas. Panašiai kaip ir to meto gamtos moksluose, tikslūs išoriniai ir aplinkos aprašymai tapo „gimimo pažymėjimais", kurie leido įvairiems artefaktams gyvuoti etnologiškai.

XIX a. materialūs kultūros elementai moksle rodė (evoliucinius) procesus ir paliudijo (spėjamas) kultūrines migracijas ar paplitimus. Nors, apskritai kalbant, materialinės kultūros etnologinis tyrinėjimas Vakarų kraštuose buvo ne toks svarbus nei vadinamosios nematerialios kultūros, Thomas Schippersas kaip svarbią išimtį pamini „Wörter und Sachen Schule" tradiciją (Grace ir Hamburge). Ši mokykla buvo euristiškai produktyvi ir metodologiškai bei teoriškai naujoviška.

Autorius taip pat nurodo kartais probleminį politinio nacionalizmo ir regionalizmo ideologinės aplinkos ir (daugiausia kaimiškų) artefaktų rinkimo naujoviškuose nacionalinei ar regioninei kultūrai(oms) skirtuose muziejuose suartėjimą 1850–1950 m. laikotarpiu. Čia tokie materialūs kultūros elementai kaip įrankiai, taip pat drabužiai ar kulinarijos gaminiai buvo ideologiškai traktuojami kaip nacionalinio, regioninio ar etninio tapatumo simboliai ar emble-

mos. Šis politinis materialių kultūros elementų perėmimas dažnai vedė veikiau prie sutartinio stilių ir formų sisteminimo. Dėl to daugelyje kraštų didėjo atotrūkis tarp akademinių mokslininkų, muziejų globėjų ir rinkėjų neprofesionalų.

Nuo XX a. septintojo dešimtmečio materialinės kultūros etnologiniuose tyrinėjimuose įvyko gana radikalūs pokyčiai, tiesiogiai susiję su iki tol neturėjusiu pavyzdžio daugelio europiečių materialinės aplinkos pasikeitimu. Šioje aplinkoje materialių objektų tyrinėjimas vis labiau koncentravosi į vartotoją. Tuo pačiu metu daugelio Europos etnologų tyrimo metodai tapo empiriškesni ir rėmėsi tiesiogiai stebimų atvejų tyrinėjimais. Šis metodologinis pasikeitimas daug labiau nei iki tol leido atkreipti dėmesį į kontekstą tiriant materialinę kultūrą. Šiems tyrinėjimams darė įtaką Prancūzijos ir Skandinavijos mokyklos, individų sąveika su materialiomis gėrybėmis tapo svarbiausia. Vis dažniau etnologiniuose tyrinėjimuose simbolinis, semiotinis, transakcinis požiūriai derinti su empiriniu gestų ar elgesio stebėjimu ir vartotojo gyvenimo istorijų užrašymu. Nepaisant etnografinio susidomėjimo šiais moderniosios materialinės kultūros mikro lygio tyrinėjimais ir ekonominės naudos, kuri gali būti gauta iš šios eilinių žmonių kaip vartotojų elgesio ekspertizės, Thomas Schippersas baigia klausdamas savęs, ar platesnio masto tyrinėjimas, kai būtų pasinaudota gaunamais duomenimis apie materialinių gėrybių masinį vartojimą, neleistų Europos etnologams surasti naujų materialinės kultūros tyrinėjimo krypčių, kad jie atsakytų į keletą senų jų pirmtakų keltų klausimų apie (regioninius) kultūrų skirtumus ir savitumus.

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