

Matter(s) in social and cultural geography

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1. Introduction

Social and cultural geography has recently been enlivened by a renewed encounter with the diverse problematics that surround matter and materialism. This has taken form in a number of high profile calls for the re-materialisation of social and cultural geography (see Jackson, 2000; Philo, 2000; Lees, 2002). It has also involved, on a slightly different track perhaps, inventive re-imaginings of ‘the materiality of matter’ that develop ‘a set of images depicting the stuff out of which all things are made and speculating about how that matter is arranged or is liable to arrangement’ (Bennett, 2001, p. 89). It is this broad and by no means singular context that this theme issue emerges from and aims to contribute to. It is based on a one-day conference that took place at the Department of Geography, UCL on the 3rd of September 2002 entitled ‘Material Geographies’. The day featured eighteen papers from across the social sciences. Published here are six that exemplify the range of topics that afford a renewed engagement with different forms of materialism: memorial tokens of a spatially and temporally distanced landscape, the bodies of those who listen and hear recorded music, eighteenth century political disputes over measurement, the regulation of complementary and alternative medicine, design and everyday consumer objects, and the networks of circulation that surround second hand clothing.

The papers were deliberately chosen to exemplify the heterogeneity of work that goes under the broad heading of ‘material geographies’. Each of them is primarily, although not exclusively, concerned with the specific materialities of different objects. Re-thinking the object, and the connected concept of landscape, is now one of the key sites for an encounter with various materialist traditions (see Bingham, 1996; Cook and Crang, 1996;

Jackson, 2000). The two other main sites in which a responsiveness to matter is being worked through are feminist work on the physicalities of embodiment (see Longhurst, 2001; Rose, 2003) and a series of literatures that have begun to attune to the hybrid constitution of a ‘more than human world’ (see Braun and Castree, 1998; Whatmore, 2002). The differences and similarities between these multiple encounters must, initially, place *in question* any simple postulation of matter or materiality. The theme issue should therefore be read, first and foremost, as a plea for specificity as we encounter a material (re)turn that twists in numerous directions. This introduction aims to frame the six papers by expanding on this call for care with a disclosure of some of the new materialisms and diverse figures of matter that increasingly populate social and cultural geography.

2. Absent matter(s)?

Empirically informed theoretical work has begun to describe the diverse geographies of a host of specific materialities that each cross-cut the separation between a realm of inert matter and a lively humanity (see, for example, on plants and gardens (Hitchings, 2003), on flesh (Longhurst, 2001), on landscape (Wylie, 2002), on cyberspace (Bingham, 1996)). This renewed sensitivity has aimed to demonstrate how the qualities that mark space-time, and bind space-time into wider sets of relations, change according to the processual movements of matter. It has also focused on how materialities themselves have very specific temporalities and spatialities and, consequently, has moved beyond the object fetishism that marked an earlier concern with the distribution of things (Jackson, 2000). The new responsiveness to matter and materiality that now marks social and cultural geography has, in part, emerged from a long term anxiety about the position of ‘the material’ in the twists of the ‘cultural turn’ (see Mitchell, 1995;

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Thrift, 1991). This anxiety has recently intensified into an assumption that the ‘new’ social and cultural geography had *forgotten* the materialities of culture. Philo (2000, p. 33), for example, writes that the attention to various immaterialities has foreclosed a focus on the ‘bump-into-able, stubbornly there-in-the world kinds of ‘matter’’. Jackson (2000, p. 10), working with a different understanding of matter, nevertheless stresses in a similar vein that there is a need ‘to take *material culture* seriously within a critical, theoretically informed approach to contemporary social and cultural geography’ (our emphasis). Both of these arguments are based on the assumption that matter has been/is absent in a way that it was not in earlier traditions of social and cultural geography. The theme issue shares the broad imperative of these calls: to develop more complicated configurations of ‘the material’ and ‘the cultural’. However, the teleological nature of this tale of ‘de-materialisation’ and ‘re-materialisation’ has, we would argue, also functioned to write out the presence of specific figures of matter in the multi-faceted cultural turn. Take for example the long tradition of work from within cultural materialism on landscape. Landscape has long been theorised as material, tangible, evidence of the effects of human culture (Meinig, 1979; Sauer, 1963). The effect of the cultural turn was to disclose a range of ‘new materials’ based on the assumption that ‘meaning is produced in the encounter between human subject and place, and other human subjects and a range of material artefacts’ (Crouch, 2000, p. 73). The politics of representation that developed around landscape research therefore raised issues of the materialities of exclusion based on gender (Rose, 1993) and race (Kinsman, 1995). Matter has subsequently come to be *contested* in the multiple trajectories of new research on the inhabitation of landscape (see Hinchliffe (2003) on the ‘building’ and ‘dwelling’ perspectives). It has never been simply bracketed and left to one side. There are, in addition, other examples of what we might call the uneasy presence of work on matter and materiality in social and cultural geography. Witness, for example, work on the materialities of nature (for example Fitzsimmons, 1989).

Instead, therefore, of matter per se we would argue that it is two specific figurations of matter that the cultural turn has forgotten. The first is the familiar realist equation between matter and unmediated, static, physicality that continues to dominate, albeit in different forms, some of the natural sciences. The second is the use of ‘the material’, or ‘material conditions’, to refer to an ostensive social structure that over-determines ‘the cultural’. The move from these two figures is not, however, teleological. For example, there have been calls to re-consider the material basis of the social or cultural (see Mitchell, 1995). In addition certain discussions of the nature-culture binary continue to equate

matter with ‘the real’ (see Castree, 2004). Because it is not simply matter per se that has been forgotten it becomes impossible, and undesirable, to simply ‘re-materialise’ social and cultural geography (compare, for example, Cook and Harrison (2003)). Matter is too unruly as a term to simply be ‘included’ at the expense, or in addition, to a focus on ‘culture’ (whether figured as ‘signification’, ‘discourse’, ‘representation’, ‘language’ or ‘ideology’). However, the renewed encounter with matter has also placed in question the corresponding figure of ‘the cultural’ as a realm of pure signification. It is therefore somewhat problematic, if rather unsurprising, that a division between word and world has framed some of the recent work that calls for a rapprochement between culture and matter: including, to name only a few examples, social significance and material form, discourse and matter, language and materiality, modes of representation and physicality, signification and material inequalities, and discursive meanings and material practices.

3. Matter(s)

The papers in this theme issue contribute to a renewed sensitivity to matter through either reflections on, or exemplifications of, a range of at times quite distinct theoretical resources that all question this separation of ‘matter’ from ‘culture’. Each of them folds into different traditions of thought, such as cultural materialism, actor-network theory or non-representational theory, that have animated the interest in matter and materiality across the social sciences and humanities (see also Pels et al., 2002). The theme issue as a whole aims, in particular, to enact the *differences* between the figures of matter and materiality that emerge from these and other traditions of thought. Differences that challenge the use of the term matter to refer exclusively to the real physicality of actual objects (see Kearnes, 2003). In order to draw out some of these differences we want to turn to comment on how each of the papers engage with the question of matter.

In Divya Tolia-Kelly’s paper, *Materializing post-colonial geographies: examining the textural landscapes of migration in the south asian home*, photographs and paintings are understood to be prismatic of the value of landscape relations to post-colonial migrant women living in Britain. The myriad visual cultures of the home are positioned as signifiers and metonymical devices, refracting lived landscapes and utopian landscapes of belonging. As such they signify particular power geometries which refract modes of South Asian identity, mobility, memory and the environmental location of multiple cultures of citizenship. When positioned in the UK these cultures contribute to a sense of South Asian Britishness. The positioning of matter in the paper is

in the cultural materialist tradition of describing how the processes of identity, contemporary citizenship and cultural nationalism emerge from daily engagements with cultural forms. Embedded in this figure of matter is a set of proposed dialectical identifications where the colonial and post-colonial become mutually constituted as relational environments of identification. Matter is therefore understood as meaningful physicality rather than simply as text. Through her focus on everyday cultural materials Tolia-Kelly presents an identity-politics of the post-colonial figured around landscape experience and the translation of cultural materials into embodied co-ordinates of memory and belonging.

The focus of Nicky Gregson and Vicky Beale's paper, *Wardrobe matter: the sorting, displacement and circulation of women's clothing*, is on how wardrobe matter circulates with varying speeds, and rhythms, to momentarily pleat together subject positions and social relations. In articulating clothing as one particular type of material culture the paper draws on, and contributes to, the material culture tradition of thought that has been influential in thinking through the relation between people and things (see Miller, 1987). This refuses the more radical ahuman position of other renditions of matter, such as the relational materialism of actor-network theory, to focus instead upon 'why some things matter' (Miller, 1998). As Jackson (2000, p. 13) stresses, the emphasis is on 'when and where the materiality of material culture makes a difference rather than assuming its importance in an a priori manner'. Gregson and Beale demonstrate the motion(s) of wardrobe matter through a subtle description that avoids postulating dynamism as a condition of matter 'in-itself', or the actions of categorically separate meaning making humans, but rather the rhythm and routine of practical actions. By attuning to the displacement and circulation of clothing Gregson and Beale counter the tendency to think of material culture as necessarily static or fixed in comparison to the more elusive immaterial matters of culture. Their paper therefore supplements the burgeoning focus on the social life of 'things-in-use' (see Appadurai, 1986).

The paper by Dave Featherstone, *Spatial relations and the materialities of political conflict: the construction of entangled political identities in the London and Newcastle Port strikes of 1768*, creates a dialogue between the 'relational materialism' of actor-network theory and 'radical democratic theory'. Matter, in this tradition of thought, is akin to a realm of co-present artefacts that act and afford from within materially heterogeneous networks (see Bingham, 1996; Hinchliffe, 1996). ANT repopulates the world and concentrates on 'movement, on process, on the constant hum of the world as the different elements of it are brought into relations with one another, often in new styles and unconsidered combinations' (Bingham and Thrift, 2000, p. 281). Feather-

stone uses the material heterogeneity of ANT to question radical democracy's reinscription of the modern separation between humans and things. He also, importantly, uses the radical democracy literature to supplement the relational materialism of ANT by arguing that relations of antagonism, such as those that surround the politics of dispute, are central to the effectivity of artefacts. The materialities of political dispute have a volatility. They are not always smoothly, or unproblematically, enrolled or available. The paper demonstrates how specific materialities can therefore come to be creative of both new modes of conduct, and forms of political consciousness, as they are enrolled into networks in ways that are antagonistic, destructive and unruly.

Neil Maycroft's paper, *The objectness of everyday life: disburdenment or engagement?* uses the example of the design of everyday objects, such as toasters and bicycles, to think carefully about an ethics of use-value based on an attention to the 'inherent properties' of objects. This heralds an alternative, and currently slightly neglected, critical tradition that aims to make judgements regarding the co-relation between subject and object. It is therefore an exemplar of a normative materialism that has its routes to in the language of alienation and reification that have long been central to Marxist accounts of the phenomenalities of the object world. Maycroft supplements this tradition by interrogating the concept of use-value, which has been 'eclipsed' in a postmodern concern for 'sign-value'. The paper draws on a range of design theorists that are perhaps unfamiliar to a geographical audience: specifically Donald Norman, Albert Borgmann and Ivan Illich. The result is a recasting of materialism as a normative project concerned with fostering new subject-object relations based on certain explicit, but contestable, use-values of engagement and conviviality. Maycroft's working through of an ethics of use-value explicitly addresses the question of what place value judgements should have in work on the surfaces, and apprehensions, of the intimate geographies of the object world.

Marcus Doel and Jeremy Segrott address the materiality of complementary and alternative medicine in their paper *Materializing complementary and alternative medicine: aromatherapy, chiropractic and Chinese herbal medicine in the UK*. Their paper explores the differences that take place in practice to mean that CAM as a 'thing in-itself' does not exist as such. Instead there are 'worlds of difference' consisting of an excess of 'singular events'. Doel and Segrott enact this plane of pure difference through a descriptive ethos that strives to enact the excess of those matter(s) that when drawn together make up alternative and complementary medicine (and by extension allopathy). The paper therefore exemplifies a type of singular materialism that does not explicitly picture the nature of matter but instead follows the

post-structuralist injunction to attune to irreducible specificity and infinite connection. The focus is on how complementary and alternative medicines are formed through dynamic processes of materialisation. The result is a figure of matter based on the principle of repetition as differentiation that remembers a range of diverse post-structuralist thinkers on matter and singularity. This disrupts the equation between matter and formless mass. It also counters the glib assertion that post-structuralism reduces life to language and therefore forgets matter. Instead matter, in the words of Doel and Segrott, ‘simply takes place.. that is all’.

Ben Anderson’s paper *Time stilled-space slowed: how boredom matters* describes the geographies of boredom in order to consider the relation between different figures of matter and the non-rational dimension of social and cultural life. The paper traces how a dimension of immateriality is internal, rather than in opposition, to the very materiality of matters such as a bored body, a song that enlivens or a joyful movement from boredom. It therefore forms part of the effort to think through the matter of immaterialities that has recently animated non-representational theory’s engagement with the concept of affect. The form of affective materialism that is the result shares similarities with recent work that has attempted to develop an enchanted materialism based on a ‘lyric’ sense of matter (see Bennett, 2001; Thrift, 2004). It is, however, distinguished from them in that it uses the example of the lessening that occurs as boredom stills and slows time-space to argue that ontology’s of excess, or surplus, need to include the reality of loss or finitude. The resulting theoretical–empirical figure of matter as always ‘not-yet become’ is akin to the Spinozian image of an affective ‘non-ground’ consisting of ‘joys and sadnesses, increases and decreases, brightenings and darkenings’ (Deleuze, 1998, p. 145).

The six papers implicitly or explicitly articulate very different figures of ‘matter’: as meaningful physicality, as material culture, as a realm of co-present artefacts, as objects with inherent properties that afford, as a set of dynamic singularities, and as affective non-ground. Increasingly, there are, therefore, a series of productive divergences in how matter, and materiality, are encountered in the twists of the cultural turn. The papers are bound together by a move away from a figure of matter as an inert blank or a radical outside in favour of a focus on the processes whereby materialities achieve specific capacities and effects. The broad focus is on what matter *does* rather than what its essence *is* i.e. the ‘ground’ of matter is not already-always given ‘in potentia’. Indeed, the promise of the turn to a renewed questioning of matter is in the development of concepts that attune to the openness of matter and therefore refuse to speak of matter as an undifferentiated externality standing apart from the social or cultural.

4. Materialism(s)

Given these differences there can be no simple ‘return’ to ‘matter’ or to ‘the material’. The papers exemplify that social and cultural geography is increasingly marked by a profusion of new materialisms that afford very different styles of ‘materialist’ theoretical–empirical work. The materialisms that each of the papers exemplify, and some explicitly sketch out, all embody quite different assumptions regarding both the subject/object relation and how such relations emerge from a broader excessive plane made up of sets of diverse processes. Differences between these materialisms therefore cross-cut a range of axes that we want to only hint at here: how to think the intimacies of the subject–object relation? How is liveliness distributed between humans and non-humans and how are distributions of agency and power thereafter understood? These are, it should be noted, just some of the issues that animate the broad realm of ‘material geographies’. To exemplify the import of such differences consider one vital axis: the contrasting political practices, and definitions of the political, that different figures of matter lend themselves to. This is a vital question for work on matter. There has been a tendency to assume that a strategy of re-materialisation automatically leads to a more grounded orientation focussed on the ‘material realities’ of politics and economy (see McEwan, 2003). This is in comparison to social and cultural geography’s perceived concern with the aesthetic and immaterial. But the precise difference made by a figure of matter has been underplayed in the broad anxiety that ‘de-materialization’ equates to ‘de-politicization’ (see Barnett, 1998; Gregson, 1995). The link between politics and a specific figure of matter is, however, more complex because, as we have argued above, matter cannot function to unproblematically refer to the actual real. From the tradition of historical materialism, for example, an engagement with matter embodies a politics of transformative practice based on locating the matter(s) of culture within the structures of the social (see Mitchell, 2000). Re-encountering a materialist form of theoretical work is therefore foundational to understanding the ‘material ways’ in which power relations are lived and experienced. From this tradition, and the linked tradition of cultural materialism, an attunement to matter enables a political praxis of inclusion and recovery to be grounded in the *human* geographies of inequality and exclusion. Consider, however, other more post-humanist or amodern renditions of matter that increasingly populate social and cultural geography. Bruno Latour’s well-known (1993) image of a ‘parliament of things’ offers an imperative to think how ‘mere things’ could intervene and modulate ‘the political’. From a linked intellectual lineage, Bennett’s (2001, p. 162) inventive development of an ‘enchanted materialism’ aims to work on the ‘open’

dimension of matter by experimenting ‘with the possibility that human generosity can be enhanced by an onto-picture of a vibrant, quirky, and overflowing material world’.¹ Increasingly, therefore, different practices follow the claim that in a ‘more than human world’ a distinctively political realm need not, and should not, be based a conception of the uniqueness of the human (see Whatmore, 2002).

In these ways, and others, the figure of matter that underpins a materialism *matters*. It does not, we want to stress, determine political practices categorically but instead provides a certain disposition-towards that then feeds-forward to have different consequences for research. There are, of course, other differences beyond that of political practice. The deliberate multiplicity of this theme issue means that it does not, we should stress, argue for a particular ‘take’ on ‘matter’ or a distinct ‘materialism’. Even if, explicitly or by exemplification, each of the papers do (including our own). It does, however, preclude a return to a single image of matter that has supposedly been lost in the focus on culture. This theme issue intends, rather, to encourage an experimentation with new figurations that work with the potential that follows the turn to place matter *in question*. It therefore functions as a map of new potentialities and possibilities that discloses several of the different lines that have animated, and will animate in the future, a more explicit attunement to ‘the materiality of matter’ (Vattimo, 1998). Given this proviso it should be remembered, finally, that there is no single direction for a material turn. Despite having numerous points of entry and departure it is held together only by a sensitivity, and responsiveness, to diverse (im)material matters. Matters that exceed this theme issue.

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¹ Bennett (2001, p. 15) uses the neologism ‘onto-picture’ to refer to an ontology that presents ‘a set of claims about human being and the fundamental character of the world, even as these claims are presented as essentially contestable’.

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