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ISBN: 9780080970868

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How might we begin to describe and understand the relationship of collective life to the material universe in which it unfolds? How is the materiality of, for example, bodies, artifacts, and environments implicated in formations of power, identity, and belonging? Is the material world significant only insofar as it is interpreted and represented by humans, or should we think of matter as an autonomous power, possessed of its own determinations and agentic capacities and thus as capable of intervening in human affairs in ways that challenge or refuse social scientific explanation?

The terms ‘materiality’ and ‘culture’ have been the subject of some of the most intense and wide-ranging debates in contemporary social and cultural theory, drawing on a broad range of intellectual influences, including Marxism, structuralism and semiotics, philosophy, human geography, biology, and physics (Coole and Frost, 2010; Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2012). In anthropology, a renewed attentiveness to the material world has been fostered too by, among other things, science studies, especially the approach some times referred to as Actor Network Theory, with its call to include other-than-human presences and agencies in accounts of social life, a call to which contemporary ecological crises are seen as lending a new urgency (Latour, 1993, 2013). At the same time, anthropological theorizing developed on the basis of ethnographic research conducted in (predominantly) non-Western contexts, notably Melanesia, has drawn attention to the variety of ways in which humans and material things are interconnected, suggesting the possibility of understanding personhood and agency as ‘fractal’ or ‘distributed’ (composed of relationships extending across time and space) rather than simply individuated (Gell, 1998; Strathern, 1988; Wagner, 1991). There remain, however, profound disagreements among many of the parties to these discussions. Indeed, it may be that ‘culture’ and ‘materiality’ necessarily exist in a relationship of tension. On the one hand, the concept of ‘culture’ in anthropology has often been understood as that which defines the distinctiveness of humans as a species, as well as the differences among human groups, whether this is understood for (example) with reference to language, to the use of symbols more generally, or to the broad array of beliefs, values, and behaviors that, according to Tylor, humans acquired by virtue of their participation in a social group (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952; Tylor, 1903). ‘Materiality’, of course, can be taken as referring either to particular material things or to the material being of the world in general. As such, it might be understood as pertaining not to what sets humans apart but to what they share inescapably both with other life forms and with material entities of all kinds. For example, the human beings who, as culture-bearers, have featured as anthropology’s self-designated object of study lead lives that are inextricably entangled with a variety of material worldly presences. These might include, on the one hand, features of the physical environment such as trees, rivers, mountains, oceans, or a range of humanly manufactured artifacts, including cooking utensils, items of clothing, buildings, ritual objects, automobiles, computers, and cell phones. At the same time, human beings are themselves material entities, that is, bodies composed of cells and molecules. As such, they eat, drink, urinate and defecate, fall sick, become sexually aroused, grow old, and eventually die and decompose, whereupon their constituent substance is redistributed and recombined with that of their surroundings. Materiality and culture are, therefore, neither straightforwardly identical nor unambiguously distinct. Rather, they remain for anthropology inextricably yet unre solvably entangled.

Despite this seeming centrality to anthropology’s self-designated subject matter, however, it has often been suggested that materiality has emerged only in recent decades as a focus of sustained anthropological inquiry. Certainly, the period since the 1980s has witnessed a striking proliferation of works of anthropological scholarship specifically focused on aspects of the material world, from fashion to communication technologies to home decoration. Yet, this rapid expansion of interest can be contrasted with a relative lack of interest on anthropology’s part throughout most of the twentieth century in the variegated materialities of social life. This lack of interest has sometimes been explained with reference to the divisions between ‘Mind’ and ‘Matter’ or between ‘Nature’ on the one hand and ‘Society’ or ‘Culture’ on the other that have often been taken to characterize modern, Western thought. Some commentators have suggested that these dualisms can be traced to the so-called ‘scientific revolution’ in seventeenth-century Europe and the resultant division of academic labor between the natural sciences on the one hand and the social sciences on the other (Latour, 1993; Shapin and Schaffer, 1985). Others have drawn attention to the influence of the protestant Reformation’s denial of the efficacy of religious relics and the reality of transubstantiation as a repudiation of the agency of material things and their relegation to a more passive role as

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**Abstract**

‘Materiality’ and ‘culture’ are among the most discussed terms in contemporary social and cultural theory. This article offers a broad introductory overview of current debates both within the discipline of anthropology and beyond and situates these briefly with reference to anthropology’s and social thought’s entanglements with longer-term histories of, for example, capitalism and Western colonial expansion.
bearers of humanly assigned ‘symbolic’ meanings (Keane, 2007). Yet others have suggested that anthropology’s longstanding disinclination to engage materiality on its own terms must be traced back further to the beginnings of Western thought, in particular to the overturning of pre-Socratic cosmologies (like that of Heraclitus of Ephesus) based on material flows and transformations with a new emphasis on intelligible form as the basis of identity, knowledge, and classification, the latter view finding one of its most influential expressions in Aristotle’s Physics, where it is argued that acts of creation, of making, involve precisely the imposition of form, morphe, on inchoate matter, hyle (Harrison, 1993; Ingold, 2011). These different periodizations nonetheless concur in seeing anthropology’s neglect of the material world as symptomatic of a more longstanding and deep-seated Western intellectual prejudice and in arguing for a contemporary reengagement with materiality as a way of overcoming this. Indeed, a number of commentators have noted that recent work in material culture studies has often echoed the idioms of postcolonial theory in arguing for the ‘emancipation’ of material things from what is seen as a hitherto one-sided emphasis on culture, history, society, or the human subject (Fowles, 2010). Many contemporary debates about the status of material things and processes can be understood as centering precisely on the degree to which different conceptual and methodological approaches can be seen to have succeeded in achieving such an emancipation by supplanting the entrenched dichotomies of nature and culture and mind and matter against which such a project is staked.

Nonetheless, contemporary anthropology’s awakened interest in materiality is not without historical precedents. Indeed, the emergence of anthropology as a discipline is, arguably, closely intertwined with the transformations of the material world brought about by the parallel histories of European colonial expansion and the development of industrial capitalism. For example, the nineteenth-century heyday of European imperialism that coincided with the beginnings of anthropology as an academic discipline also witnessed the influx into Europe and North America of quantities of non-Western artifacts from Europe’s onetime colonies. These in turn came to form the basis of major ethnographic collections, like those of the Museum of Natural History (New York), the British Museum (London), the Pitt-Rivers Museum (Oxford), the Musée de l’Homme (Paris), the Ethnological Museum (Berlin), or the Russian Museum of Ethnography (St. Petersburg) and were extensively discussed in the writings of many of the founding figures of anthropology, like Franz Boas (Boas, 1983). Many of these same artifacts, exhibited in museums or sold in the open market would prove to be a source of inspiration for pioneers of artistic modernism like Braque and Picasso. As such, they would also facilitate a sharing of influences between anthropology early twentieth-century literary and artistic avant-gardes, as in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s. The resultant moment of ‘ethnographic surrealism’ (as James Clifford would later describe it) was one that brought together anthropologists like Alfred Métraux, Marcel Griaule, and the young Claude Lévi-Strauss and figures on the fringes of the Surrealist movement like Georges Bataille, in part on the basis of a shared curiosity about material artifacts (Clifford, 1981; Wilcken, 2010). It was this same milieu that also produced one of the classic works of economic anthropology, Marcel Mauss’s Essay on the Gift (1925) a work exploring the mutual entanglement of human persons and objects of ritual exchange (mainly in the context of Pacific island societies) and often cited as an important influence on contemporary material culture studies (Mauss, 2000). The focus on artifacts characteristic of much of the nineteenth and early twentieth-century anthropology was, nonetheless, to a large degree displaced from the 1920s onward by the rise of fieldwork-based anthropology and, in particular, the approaches known as functionalism and structural functionalism. Rather than being treated as a potential source of cultural insights (as in the writings of Boas and others) material objects were often henceforward to be relegated to a merely utilitarian significance or else disregarded altogether in pursuit of more abstractly conceived understandings of social structure (Tilley et al., 2006a,b). More recent scholarship, however, has sometimes returned to reconsider the fate of colonial era and later artifacts and the transformations to which they were subject in traversing the different contexts of, for example, religious or ritual use, commercial exchange and display in museums or galleries (e.g., Thomas, 1991; Price, 1989).

Another important antecedent of present-day material culture studies is to be found in the writings of Karl Marx. Marx’s influence on the social sciences is a varied and widening one (Bloch, 2010; Diamond, 1979). Nonetheless, two aspects of his work in particular seem especially pertinent to contemporary engagements with materiality and culture. The first of these is the version of materialism (sometimes referred to as ‘historical materialism’) that Marx developed through his engagements with the philosophical legacy of Hegel on the one hand and the history and political economy of industrial capitalism on the other. Marx’s materialism was one that emphasized productive human activity and sought to understand social institutions and forms of consciousness on the basis of their derivation from modes of human interaction with the material world. In this respect, he distinguishes his own approach from what he takes to be the passive or ‘contemplative’ materialism of contemporaries like Feuerbach (Marx, 1978). Marx’s writings are, therefore, concerned primarily with the productive transformation of materials by human labor rather than with the ontological status of materials themselves or the possibility that they might lead a life independent of the humans who make use of them. A second aspect of Marx’s thought that is frequently referenced in contemporary debates about materiality and culture is his discussion of the fate of humanly manufactured objects under capitalist conditions of production. One aspect of the alienation experienced by workers under capitalism in Marx’s vein consists in their inability to recognize themselves in the products of their own labor, which are appropriated and sold for a profit by the owners of the means of production. Under capitalism, Marx suggests, objects are, increasingly, produced as commodities. That is, they are produced in order to be transferred to others by way of market exchange and to derive their ‘exchange value’ precisely from their relation to other commodities and
to the money form as a universal equivalent capable of expressing the market values of diverse products. In this respect, Marx’s principal interest is, arguably, in what commodities have in common with each other as objects to be exchanged. Consideration of the sensuous particularity of objects is, rather, reserved for the discussion of ‘use values’ – that is, of the capacity of particular things to meet particular needs on the basis of their specific material properties. In contrast, later ethnographic studies of the material life of commodities have often introduced more extended consideration of the material and symbolic differences between different kinds of objects of exchange. Sometimes this has meant focusing on a particular commodity and its movement through an emerging capitalist world system (Mintz, 1986). Sometimes it has involved exploring the ways in which particular objects can be understood as shifting in and out of commodity status, for example, by being bought, resold, given as gifts or incorporated into private collections, making it possible, so the argument goes, to consider gift-based and commodity-based economies as potentially contemporaneous and coexistent rather than successive moments of a linear historical teleology (Appadurai, 1988).

In recent decades, such a shift of emphasis from production to consumption has also been characteristic of much work done under the name of the interdisciplinary field of material culture studies, the development and rapid expansion of which is attested by the establishment of specialized academic programs, like the one at University College London and specialized publications, like the Journal of Material Culture (edited out of UCL and founded in 1996). Material culture studies is, however, a wide-ranging and heterogeneous field, practitioners of which have, at various times, defined themselves in terms both of breaks from and continuities with anthropology’s past, acknowledging some antecedents (including Mauss and late nineteenth and early twentieth-century studies of ethnographic artifacts), while pointedly disavowing others. Structuralist influenced approaches, for instance, had previously sought to extend consideration of the social meaning of manufactured objects by locating them in a larger system of relations from which their individual significances are understood to derive. Lévi-Strauss himself collected quantities of indigenous artifacts during his fieldwork in Brazil (1935–39) and criticized functionalist approaches like that of Malinowski for their neglect of material culture. Several of Lévi-Strauss’s own published works were devoted to the analysis of material artifacts, for example his study of the Northwest Coast Native American masks that he first encountered in New York’s Museum of Natural History (Lévi-Strauss, 1982; Wilcken, 2010). From the 1960s onward, Lévi-Strauss’s writings would in turn influence a number of studies of the consumer culture of Western, capitalist societies, such as Roland Barthes account of the ‘fashion system’ (Barthes, 1990). Nonetheless, despite obvious commonalities of subject matter, more recent work in material culture studies has often been explicitly critical of structuralist approaches, not least for their indebtedness to the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure (1885–1913). In particular, structuralist accounts of material objects have been criticized for their emphasis on symbolic meaning as a relational effect of disembodied sign systems and their consequent neglect of the material specificities of the objects under consideration (Saussure, 1998). Webb Keane, for example, argues that Saussure’s understanding of the linguistic sign, with its insistence on the arbitrary and conventional relationship between signifiers and signifieds, represents a version of what Bruno Latour has called the work of ‘purification,’ reflecting a characteristically modernist desire to definitively separate meanings and materialities, humans, and nonhumans, to be accomplished in part by denying the agency of material things. Keane criticizes such a separation as being expressive of a characteristically modern, Western ‘semiotic ideology.’ Instead, he argues for a view of material objects as existing radically independently of human interpretations and actions and, therefore, capable of intervening on human affairs to unforeseen and surprising effect. As an alternative to Saussure, he proposes a renewed engagement with the semiotic theories of the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), including the latter’s insistence on the nonarbitrary relationship of certain signs to their referents, notably icons and indices, understood as linked to their referents on the basis of resemblance and physical contiguity, respectively (Keane, 2007; Latour, 1993; Peirce, 2011).

Alfred Gell too, in his widely cited Art and Agency, explicitly rejects the extension of Saussure’s formulation of the ‘arbitrary nature of the sign’ into material culture studies on the grounds that such a move represents an ‘over generalization of linguistic semiotics.’ Developing a theory of art based not on aesthetics but on an analysis of the effects that artworks can be seen to produce, Gell argues, famously, that material things as well as human subjects can be understood as possessing agency not only insofar as they produce worldly effects but also because they can be viewed on that basis as indexing a prior intention to produce such effects (Gell, 1998). Subsequent commentators on Gell’s work, however, have often expressed doubt as to the degree to which his account does, in fact, grant agency to material things in their own right. James Leach, for example, suggests that, for Gell, the intentions indexed by things are, ultimately, human ones, while Daniel Miller, another influential contemporary theorist of material culture, characterizes Gell’s theory or art as one of ‘natural anthropomorphism’ in which the primary point of reference remains the humans behind the artifacts (Leach, 2007; Miller, 2005). Miller himself emphasizes rather the interactions between subjects and objects and the ways in which they can be understood to reciprocally constitute one another. In a series of studies of shopping and consumption, Miller invokes not Marx but Hegel to argue that such practices can be understood in terms of the externalization of human powers and intentions in the guise of institutions like the economy and the overcoming of such alienation through practices of consumption. In this respect, Miller differs from a number of other contemporary commentators on Marx and Hegel, notably the philosopher Slavoj Žižek, for whom Marx’s historical materialism remains definitively grounded in the thought of Hegel (Žižek, 2013). Instead, rejecting Marx’s vision of revolutionary change, Miller argues that this two-way movement of the externalization and reappropriation of human powers is a continuous and open-ended process rather something that will, eventually, be definitively resolved through the revolutionary transformation of capitalist relations of production (Miller, 2001). Miller’s emphasis on the human appropriation
of material objects has been criticized by his colleague Christopher Pinney, who argues for an engagement with materiality beyond the assumed complementarity of subject and object and the human-centered understandings of context and history that have tended to go with it. Instead, Pinney invokes the work of two thinkers associated with the Marxist-influenced Frankfurt School, Theodor Adorno and Siegfried Kracauer (who, in his later writings, draws explicitly on the work of Lévi-Strauss) to argue for a ‘nonhomogeneity’ of time and an excess or ‘torque’ of materiality that can never be fully assimilated to the closure of ‘culture’ or ‘history’ (Pinney, 2005).

Another influential current in contemporary material culture studies has called upon the resources of phenomenology to explore the varieties of human sensory engagement in the material world. Drawing upon the philosophical work of, among others, Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, such approaches seek to overcome received dualisms of mind and matter by taking as their starting point the experience of a human subject understood as always already embodied in the world. This approach has proven particularly fruitful in studies relating to landscape, like those of the British archaeologist Christopher Tilley, who has drawn on phenomenological literature to explore sensorial engagements with archaeological sites, particularly prehistoric structures where there are no supporting documentary sources to provide access to the intentions or cultural self-understandings of builders, occupants, and users. Instead, Tilley suggests that the sensing body can provide important clues to the interpretation of such sites by way of, for example, the experiential contrast between open and closed spaces or the mutual visibility of built structures within a particular landscape (Tilley, 1994, 2004).

However, if the burgeoning interdisciplinary field of material culture studies has been an exceptionally productive one in recent decades, it should also be emphasized that the range of approaches it represents does not by any means exhaust contemporary discussions of materiality and culture. For example, despite the emphasis of much phenomenologically inspired work in material culture studies on sensory experience as a way of dispensing with assumed distinctions between subjects and objects, this has often entailed little or no sustained engagement with the ways in which the biological and cognitive sciences have sought to understand the sensing body as a material entity. Indeed, phenomenological perspectives have sometimes been criticized by scholars working outside the field of material culture studies for presenting themselves as a more empathetic and humanistic alternative to the supposed reductionism of scientific accounts of the body and thus as failing to acknowledge or respond to the intellectual challenges that the latter might be seen to pose (Colebrook, 2010). It is worth noting, however, that a number of anthropologists influenced by phenomenology have recently begun to engage more explicitly with current research in the neurological and physiological sciences (e.g., Downey and Lende, 2013; Marchand, 2010).

Among anthropologists Tim Ingold has criticized material culture studies both for failing to overcome the separation of material realities and mental representations (continuing to treat them rather as distinct realms that need to be brought into relation through the work of analysis) and for its predilection for the study of readymade artifacts such as consumer objects rather than processes of making. Closer attention to such processes, he suggests, might yield an approach to the material world based not on discrete objects and the collective or personal significances with which they are supposedly endowed, but rather on material substances and their transformations, whether at the hands of human artists or craftpersons or through the actions of other than human agents such as meteorological processes. The term ‘materiality’ is, Ingold suggests, “too abstract to adequately convey the density, dynamism and variegatedness of materials, which are,” he argues, “better understood with reference to a more expansively conceived ecology of ‘life’ encompassing a range of human and other than human presences” (Ingold, 2011). Ingold’s arguments have been echoed more recently by Eduardo Kohn, in calling for an ‘anthropology beyond the human’ addressed to an ‘ecology of selves’ encompassing not only human subjects but also animals, plants, spirits, and entities of other kinds. Like Keane, Kohn suggests that, rather than Saussurean linguistics, Peircean semiotics, with its openness to semiotic modalities other than the symbolic, may be a more suggestive basis for engaging the nonhuman world (Kohn, 2013).

Thinkers seeking an alternative to phenomenology’s emphasis on a sensing, experiencing human subject have often found inspiration in the work of the philosopher Gilles Deleuze (including his collaborations with the activist and psychoanalyst Félix Guattari). Deleuze’s prioritization of becoming and the impersonal movement of ‘A Life’ of which both subjectivity and the individuated organism are understood as transitory products have proved suggestive not least in their traversing of familiar distinctions between the human and the nonhuman, the material and the ideal, the theoretical and the practical and have exercised a direct influence on, for example, Latour and Ingold. At the same time, Deleuze’s commitment to the irreducibility of difference, refusing any appeal to transcendence or a hierarchy of being, combined with his insistence on the reality of concepts and the imperative to continuously create new ones offers, arguably, a strong provocation to rethink the terms on which anthropologists engage with others both human and nonhuman (Deleuze, 1994, 2001; Jensen and Rödje 2010). In this respect, Deleuze’s thought has been a significant influence on what has sometimes been called the ‘ontological turn’ in recent anthropological theory, along with the work of, among others, Marilyn Strathern (United Kingdom), Roy Wagner (United States), and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (Brazil). Rejecting what they take to be a false and parochially Western distinction between a material world understood as given (or ‘nature’) and different peoples’ variegated representations of it (‘culture’), anthropologists associated with the ontological turn have argued for the need to ‘take seriously’ the concepts generated by the people anthropologists study. Rather than treating such concepts as representations or misrepresentations of a world assumed to be external to them, they argue (like Deleuze) that such concepts are efficacious worldly entities that contribute to the production of particular realities. One of the most sustained applications of this approach to the study of the material world is to be found in the volume Thinking through Things (Henare et al., 2007). Although referencing Latour’s
account of the simultaneously purifying and hybridizing work of the ‘modern constitution,’ contributors to the volume also distance themselves from Latour’s own universalizing ontological claims regarding the ubiquity of networks by arguing for a plurality of ontologies and for a methodology of anthropological engagement with the material world that might allow these to emerge. Rather than appealing to assumed social or cultural ‘contexts’ as a basis for understanding material artifacts and their implications in collective life, they suggest that the ethnographic study of things (a term preferred to the allegedly more theoretically laden ‘objects’) might allow the latter to dictate the terms of their own analysis. Hence, for example, Martin Holbraad’s account of the aché powder that Cuban Ifá diviners both use and talk about as constituting their divinatory power argues that aché should be understood as presenting a challenge to anthropology to revise its own theoretical lexicon by moving beyond the assumed Western opposition between concepts and things insofar as aché powder is simultaneously and irreducibly both a material substance and a power of divination (Holbraad, 2007). In a more recent essay, Holbraad argues that his earlier approach does not go far enough, concentrating as it does on the diviners’ own definitions of aché rather than on the material qualities of the power itself (e.g., its motility and particulate composition) as directly informing its conceptualizations by its human users (Holbraad, 2011).

If the ontological turn argues for an understanding of materiality and artifactuality as variously emergent within different ontologies and world-making projects, other approaches have sought to depart from representational thinking by emphasizing the material world as a presence that potentially exceeds and disrupts human understandings of it. Jane Bennett, for example, has argued for a ‘vital’ materialism refusing any clear-cut separation between ‘inert’ matter and life. Drawing eclectically on science studies, complexity theory, and the philosophies of Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Deleuze, Bennett envisions a world in continuous becoming, populated by heterogeneous entities that are themselves emergent within the differentiating, world-forming flows of a single matter energy. A sensitivity to and an appreciation of the vitality of matter, she suggests, has potential political consequences insofar as it is likely, for example, to deter destructive and purely instrumental human engagements with the natural environment. At the same time (and in contrast to some phenomenologically inspired work) Bennett urges scholars in humanities and social sciences to pay closer attention to the new accounts of the material world being produced by the contemporary sciences, readings of literary, philosophical, and other texts being interspersed in her work with discussions of recent developments in fields such as evolutionary biology and nanotechnology (Bennett, 2001, 2010).

If one of Bennett’s stated aims is to promote more sensitive and sustainable human engagements with the material world, other recent theorists have elaborated a vision of materiality as more radically autonomous of and indifferent to human projects and purposes. An important influence here has been the work of Georges Bataille (1897–1962), whose writings ranged over anthropology, economics, literature, and surrealism. Like some more recent and canonical theorists of material culture, Bataille draws upon the writings of Hegel, but does so not in order to resolve the dualism of mind or spirit and matter but to insist upon and accentuate it. Bataille’s reading of Hegel (influenced in turn by the lectures of the Russian émigré Alexander Kojève) emphasizes not Spirit’s cumulative realization of its own freedom but rather the unsurpassability of the negative, which Bataille identifies specifically as an autonomous power of matter, reasserting itself continually in the face of humanity’s efforts to transcend it and as such suggesting the possibility of a ‘virulent materialism’ not subservient to any higher, ‘spiritual’ authority. Bataille’s work can be understood as a series of attempts to articulate this power of matter through a variety of genres and media, including experimental essays, pseudonymously published pornographic ficitions, reflections on Aztec human sacrifice, and European prehistoric art and through his uncompleted trilogy The Accursed Share, in which he sets out an alternative science of political economy (a ‘General Economy’) founded not upon assumed scarcity but on excess, expenditure, and the prodigality of matter-energy, understood as manifesting itself in the guise of superabundance if considered on a planetary or cosmic scale rather than a ‘restricted’ human one (Bataille, 1985, 1988; Kojève, 1980).

In the decades since his death, Bataille’s writings have proved intermittently influential in anthropology as in other fields, for example the work of the British philosopher Nick Land, who emphasizes the militantly antihumanist character of Bataille’s project (e.g., Taussig, 1995; Ochoa, 2010; Land, 1991). More recently, Bataille (and Land’s account of him) has been the subject of renewed attention by the philosophers and theorists associated with what has sometimes been called speculative materialism or speculative realism. The latter, encompassing a topically and stylistically diverse range of projects, has been characterized by an insistence on the imperative to think and describe a world understood as existing radically independently of its being given to a knowing, perceiving human subject. For example, the ‘theory fiction’ practiced by the (now US-based) Iranian thinker Reza Negarestani echoes Bataille’s fictions and literary essays by splicing together narrative and philosophical reflection to evoke a vision of the contemporary Middle East and the oil that flows from its subterranean depths as animate, sentient entities, capable of interfering in a variety of ways with projects of human history-making (Negarestani, 2008). Quentin Meillasoux, meanwhile, avails of a more conventionally philosophical idiom to argue both for a renewed engagement with what he terms the ‘ancestral’ or the ‘Great Outdoors’ – that is, with a material world understood as existing prior to and autonomously of human thought and perception. The sciences, he suggests – in particular evolutionary biology and geology – present a challenge to philosophy precisely because they purport to describe such a world, making reference to events such as the emergence of terrestrial life that necessarily predate human subjectivity and, thus, the possibility of philosophical reflection (Meillasoux, 2009). In contrast, the work of Graham Harman, who has been credited with coining the phrase ‘object-oriented philosophy’ (or ontology), has been characterized by a closer and more sustained engagement with objects as such, which, for Harman, are not necessarily material artifacts but can comprise a variety of other entities, including philosophical movements. Indeed, Harman, has been explicitly critical of the writings of Deleuze and those influenced by him for dissolving the density and
opacity of objects into what they assume to be an underlying flux of becoming and of Latour’s actor-network theory for subordinating objects to the relations that supposedly constitute them (Harman, 2009). Instead, Harman argues that objects are characterized by their capacity both to withdraw from engagement with humans and with each other and to enter into relations with one another without reliance on any mediating human presence (Harman, 2002). Harman, in turn, has been criticized by the literary scholar and cultural theorist Steven Shaviro for failing to provide a persuasive account of change, in particular of how objects (of what ever kind) come into existence (Shaviro, 2011). It is perhaps speculative materialism’s rejection of the view that the material world is inescapably mediated by a human subject, language or culture that presents the greatest challenge to anthropology. Indeed, what Meillasoux, Harman, and others ask us to entertain is, precisely, the possibility of a world without humans. As a result, perhaps (and despite the wider currency their work has attained in other fields such as cultural geography and philosophy), many of these thinkers have been only occasionally cited in recent anthropological literature (e.g., McLean, 2013), although the work of Harman (including his book length study of Bruno Latour) has attracted attention in science studies and archaeology (e.g., Graves-Brown et al., 2013). Nonetheless, the debates initiated by speculative realism seem likely to have a significant influence on future research and writing.

The above inevitably represents a selective sampling of past and present debates rather than a comprehensive overview. It should be apparent nonetheless that discussions of materiality and culture encompass a broad, heterogeneous, and often fiercely contested terrain, on which a variety of methodologies and theoretical perspectives have been brought to bear. If the relationship between materiality and culture remains central to anthropology’s understandings both of its subject matter and of itself as an academic discipline, it is a relationship that can perhaps never be definitively resolved, but is likely to remain rather a productive source of tensions and disagreements. Materiality, considered in relation to culture offers not the reassurance of a ground or a refuge of certitude but a constant source of new questions – questions that are of fundamental importance not only to the theory and practice of anthropology but also, more broadly, to human beings’ understanding of themselves, their place in the world, and the relations they maintain with other entities of all kinds.

**See also:** Craft Production, Anthropology of; Diffusion: Anthropological Aspects; Everyday Life, Anthropology of; Exchange in Anthropology; Fetishism; Infrastructures of Society, Anthropology of; Modes of Production; Potlatch in Anthropology; Property: Anthropological Aspects; Sociality in Anthropology.

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