# Boundary Objects, "Translation" and Institutional Work: "Consuming History" and "A History of the World in 100 Objects"

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**Abstract**

This paper analyzes the relationship between production and consumption in terms of *relational materialism* and *performativity* (Callon 1998; Latour 2005) in "a posthumanist practice theory orientation" (Nicolini 2012): (i) introducing the analogy of "material culture as text" (Olsen 2013); (ii) and considering the practices of *institutional work* (Lawrence, Suddaby 2006) that connect "human and nonhuman actors" (Carlile *et al.* 2013) with "institutional dynamics in markets" (Araujo *et al.* 2010; Dolbec, Fischer 2015). To investigate how things are transformed into (written) discourse and, in general, as the latter builds the relationship between things and texts ("textual approach to things": de Groot 2009; Olsen 2013), the work takes the form of a case study using an original project by the British Museum as *revelatory incident* (Belk 1988, 2006). The analogy with the "(re)turn to things" in the evolution of archaeological studies (Shanks, Tilley 1992; Olsen *et al.* 2012) allows you to reflect on a *practice-based approach* in marketing studies.

**Keywords**: *discipline of things, material culture as text, consuming history, institutional work*

## 1. Introduction and Theoretical context

18 January 2010, BBC Radio 4. The then director of the British Museum (BM), Neil MacGregor, introduced the first episode of the radio program "*The History of the World in 100 Objects*" with these words:

> «In these programs, I'm travelling back in time and across the globe, to see how we humans have shaped our world and been shaped by it over the past two million years. And I'm going to tell a history of the world in a way which has not been attempted before, by deciphering the messages which objects communicate across time – messages about peoples and places, environments and interactions, about different moments in history and about our own time as we reflect upon it. I've chosen just a hundred objects from different points on our journey, carefully designed and then either admired and preserved or used, broken and thrown away – from a cooking pot to a golden galleon, from a Stone Age tool to a credit card, and all of them come from the collection of the BM».

In the following weeks, until 22 October, they broadcast other 100 episodes, each lasting about 15 minutes. Later on, BBC Radio 4 produced a *PODcast* of the

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successful program and, in the autumn of the same year, MacGregor oversaw the publication of the book, a true publishing event, translated into several languages.

As suggested by Russell Belk (1988), among the different ways in which objects can become part of our *extended self*, the *collecting* is one of the most significant activities related to consumption processes. The BM project is a true "collection of objects" chosen from one of the most prestigious "institutional collections" available to the world (Belk 1988). This work investigates a particular institutional aspect of this collection, considering the "(re)turn of things" (Shanks, Tilley 1987, 1992; Olsen *et al.* 2012; Olsen 2013) of the theoretical archeology as a process of change in which the "materiality of the historical narrative" and the role of "situated cognition" (in terms of *consuming history*: de Groot 2009): (i) redefine the *collective practices* in a "field of forces" that connects people, technologies, social structures and knowledge; (ii) trigger a process of "stabilization" (*social ordering*) that lets you define the nature of the relationship between *people and artifacts*; (iii) set these artifacts to work in terms of content of the *social practices* of the involved actors (*Institutional Work*-IW and *Working Consumers*-WCs).

The theme of objects and technology within specific research traditions is linked to the investigation of languages (meaning) and practices (sense) of consumption, as much to reshape contexts in view of *relational materialism* and *performativity* (*Science & Technology Studies*-STS: Law 1986; Latour 2005; *Social Construction of Technologies*-SCOT: Bijker *et al.* 1987; *economic sociology*: Callon 1998).

Belk himself (2014) pointed out that the interaction related to the possession of objects can show itself in terms of action caused "by human and non-human actants" (Law 1986; Latour 2005). In the research strategy of the Actor-Network Theory (ANT): "we may properly regard these objects as acting […]; but it takes the whole network of actants, usually including the human for these actions to take place" (Belk 2014: p. 252). In management and organization studies (MOS), a "posthumanist practice theory orientation" is widespread for some time (Schatzki *et al.* 2002; Carlile *et al.* 2012; empirically, among others: Nicolini 2012; Nicolini *et al.* 2012; Monteiro, Nicolini 2014). With the notable exception of the work by Russell Belk (or other works affected by his perspective), only recently the "materiality of consumption processes" is producing an *ontological turn* (Araujo *et al.* 2010).

An artifact, therefore, produces a network of material relationships, a "system of alliances" made up by the object itself, a process of translation of the practices as a result of a negotiation that involves the different actors (a "controversial/*disputed*" interpretive process). Consistent with this research strategy, Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) identify the development of the IW perspective: "a practice orientation focuses on the world inside the processes […] – the work of actors as they attempt to shape those processes, as they work to create, maintain, and disrupt institutions" (p. 219). Monteiro and Nicolini show how it is possible to combine (2014: p. 1): (i) on the one hand, "the idea that materials are part of the way in which social processes and organizations are enacted and stabilized"; (ii) on the other hand, the theoretical position for which "institutional agency is better conceived as both emergent and distributed". In marketing studies, the idea that objects participate in the institutional dynamics in the markets is more recent (Bajde 2013; Scaraboto, Fischer 2013;

Scaraboto 2015). Dolbec and Fischer (2015) connect the terms of the matter effectively: "a market may be defined as an organizational field encompassing a set of institutions and actors, governed by institutional logics, supported by institutional work, and characterized by institutional boundaries" (p. 1449).

This theoretical framework allows to redefine the role of artifacts in the production and distribution of the actors' skills, indirectly affecting the social structures related to production and consumption (Araujo *et al.* 2010). Declined in terms of consumers' immaterial labor (Cova, Dalli 2009a, 2009b) and *consuming history* (de Groot 2009): "the phenomena considered here tell us much about the possible relationship to, and valuing of, historical knowledge. They offer a series of versions of the past that suggest a variety of experience but also a deep sophistication in reading and responding to historical discourse" (p. 6).

## 2. Empirical context: *"The History of the World in 100 Objects"*

In a TED Conference held in February 2012, Neil MacGregor summarizes the properties of the "archaeological objects": «The things we make have one supreme quality – they live longer than us. We perish, they survive; we have one life, they have many lives, and in each life they can mean different things. Which means that, while we all have one biography, they have many».

A woodcut by Dürer summarizes the ambitions of the BM project, as admitted by MacGregor: a "monument to our endless curiosity about the world beyond our grasp, and to humanity's need to explore and try to understand it" (p. xxvi, Book). "*Dürer's Rhinoceros*" is the title of the September 17 episode: object number 75 closes the fifteenth part of the project, related to 1375-1550 AD, in the quintet of objects dedicated to the theme "On the threshold of the modern world". Among Albrecht Dürer's works, this portrait is particularly curious, although it represents one of the most famous Renaissance art images. The particularity of this work lies in its history. The great artist reproduced a beast he had never seen, based on the witness accounts of a particular journey among those who were characterizing Europe in around 1515: the descriptions Dürer was acquainted of came from the stages of the journey of an Indian rhinoceros sent from Gujarat to the king of Portugal and that the latter wanted to give it to the Pope to be able to assert his imperial pretensions in the East. Surviving the ocean crossing, between Sant'Elena and Portugal, the beast never reached Italy since its ship sank in a storm in the Ligurian Sea. The story told by this object is the story of the economic and political power of the journeys; as well as the journeys' power to spread ideas and people, of how a sketch and a few confusing information could move between India, Portugal and along international trade routes, up to Nuremberg, to arouse the admiration of people and the attention of one of the finest intellectuals of the time.

## 3. Methods

*Data collection*. The work takes the form of an interpretative case study (Belk 2006). The material aims to bring out the "MacGregor method" and rebuild the

"scientific content" of the BM project through: the *podcast* of the program; the book, with the same title (2010, Penguin); public interviews and video materials on the project (in particular, from YouTube channels); a TED Conference (*www.ted.com/speakers/neil_macgregor*); internet websites, BM and BBC Radio 4 official platforms; several "annual reports" and public strategic documents of the BM; official reviews of the book; readers' remarks (on different online sale platforms or readers blogs), an international press review.

*Analytical process*. "*The History of the World in 100 Objects*" is a project with interesting characteristics in terms of *confluence between media* such as to consider the objects of the collection as *boundary objects* (*BOs*), epistemic artifacts that "inhabit several intersecting social worlds and satisfy the information requirements of each of them" (Star, Griesemer 1989, p. 393). As recalled by Nicolini *et al.* (2012), theory suggests that "objects become *BOs* when they function as translation and transformation devices at the disciplinary or professional boundaries between different work communities". In this case, the most interesting aspect of the relationship between producers and consumers concerns the reconstruction of the rules that should govern their interactions (between the public, the museum institution and technologies of "historical narrative/discourse") and the ways in which the project is developed (and continues to evolve) over time.

Table 1 recalls the theoretical framework of the work (the interpretive constructs are linked to the IW of "*maintaining* type") and describes the process of analysis: distinguishing the "second-order themes" linked to the concept of *consuming history* (*popular history*; *amateurs histories*; *performing history*); and the "first-order categories" used to encode the research material (inner part of table 1).

## 4. Findings

In "*The History of the World in 100 Objects*" case, you find: (i) the characteristics of archaeological objects; (ii) the mechanisms triggered by these objects to link archaeology and the processes of skills development for the "historical narrative/discourse"; (iii) and the phenomenon of *consuming history* (meant as the result of a collective action and activation of institutional change).

The properties of objects related to the dimensions of the historical story are: 1) *the necessary poetry of things*; 2) *the survival of things*; 3) *the biographies of things*; 4) *the things across time and space*; 5) *the limits of things*.

First, the way in which archeology, meant as *discipline of things* (Olsen 2013), developed the practical relationship with objects on the theoretical level gives interesting insights on "object-oriented approaches, taking things, their objecthood and materiality, seriously" (Olsen *et al.* 2012: p. 1). Moreover, the analogy of "*material culture as text*" allows to overcome the traditional perspective on historical narrative ("a culture-historical archaeology"). Recalling a distinction by Roland Barthes, Olsen (2013) suggests that "one productive step […] may be to consider the (material) text as 'writerly' rather the 'readerly' […], a necessary redistribution of power and 'agency' – not to the author, but to the text itself" (p. 50).

Table 1 – *Consuming History* and *Institutional Work*: research constructs and analytical process

| Consuming history (*) and Institutional Work (**) | Popular History | "Amateurs" Histories | Performing and Playing History |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Enabling work** | - Narrative History | - Local History | - Reinhabiting the Past |
| **Policing** | - Autobiography & Personal Memoir | - Roots, Identity, Genealogy | - |
| **Mythologizing** | - Public Historian, Historian in Public | - Popular Archaeology Treasure Hunting | - Role Playing and History |
| **Valourizing** | - | - New Sources, New Tools, New Archives | - Living Museums/ Living History |
| **Routinizing** | - Historical Biography | - History as Hobby: Collecting&Antiquing | - |

- **enabling work**: the creation of rules that facilitate, supplement and support institutions, such as the creation of authorizing agents or diverting resources
- **policing**: ensuring compliance through enforcement, auditing and monitoring
- **mythologizing**: preserving the normative underpinnings of an institution by creating and sustaining myths regarding its history
- **valourizing and demonizing**: providing for public consumption positive and negative examples that illustrates the normative foundations of an institution
- **embedding and routinizing**: actively infusing the normative foundations of an institution into the participants' day to day routines and organizational practices

*source*: (*) de Groot 2009, Olsen *et al.* 2012; (**) Lawrence and Suddaby 2006

The relational properties of objects (like *BOs*) allow Shanks and Tilley (1992) to consider archeology as "an interpretative practice, an active intervention engaging in a critical process of theoretical labour relating past and present" (p. 103). In the case of BM project, this allows us to appreciate the function of the collections: trigger the mechanisms of *popular history*, "*amateurs" histories* and *performing/play history* to rethink the processes of construction of the necessary skills for the "historical representation" referable to the practices listed in table 1. The concept of *consuming history* proposed by Jerome de Groot (2009) comes out from this *translation* process:

> «how a society consumes its history is crucial to the understanding of contemporary popular culture, the issues at stake in representation itself, and the various means of self- or social construction available. Indeed, it allows us to question the very notion of consumption, too, articulating the concept across a variety of different media and socio-economic models. Consumption practices influence what is packaged as history and work to define how the past manifests itself in society» (de Groot 2009: *Introduction*).

In this case, the objects contribute to reproduce the institutions and structures, playing a decisive role, in terms of IW, "in making society possible as a relational and hybrid collective" (Olsen 2013: p. 139).

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

*Institutional dynamics in markets and the discipline of things*. In this work, archaeological objects and the development of practices to (re)build the skills of "historical narrative" come out as a result of their mutual interaction (Callon 1998). In the case of archaeological objects, Bjørnar Olsen (2013) underlines that:

> «the commonplace assumption that the meaning or social significance of things primarily derives from outside has two problematic consequences. First, it denies things any constitutive role in generating meaning; and, second, it reduces them to loyal messengers transmitting meanings and phenomena that exist more or less independently of them» (p. 145).

In other terms, the process of institutional change pays attention to how "institutions reproduce themselves" (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006).

First, this happens by keeping a system of rules (*enabling work* and *policing*): with a number of practices to enable training, dissemination and reproduction of meanings and shared perspectives, considered important by the actors; or ensuring a certain level of compliance with institutional rules by individual and collective actors. In the case of "*The History of the World in 100 Objects*" project, this is referable to (de Groot 2009): innovative narrative mechanisms and the imaginative involvement of the public; or the incentive to rethink about objects in terms of personal memory or identification in the daily life.

An institution can also be preserved through the reproduction of rules and belief systems (*mythologizing*, *valourizing* and *routinizing*) (Lawrence, Suddaby 2006). "Public exemplary conducts" and symbolic events related to "moral" or "theoretical" foundations of the original institution concern, for example, the role of the historian as public narrator par excellence and spokesperson of the messages that civilizations decide to leave through the objects they create. In this case, it comes to recognizing the procedural aspects and rituals of the historical discourse, in which the celebration by the "historian-priest", the participation of the "believers" in the "hunt for one's own treasures", and "reciting a role in person" within the same ritual, help to regenerate its collective meaning and to protect its role within the society (de Groot 2009). Finally, the habit to the collection of biographies (including artifacts) and the daily proximity to the ancient objects may seem reasonable practices to reinvent the historical narrative/discourse (*routinizing*). On the other hand, it may be more unexpected to perpetuate the normative bases of the historical representation by renewing traditional tools and within the same institutional contexts in which it usually develops (*valourizing*) (Lawrence, Suddaby 2006). On closer inspection, the *(re)turn of things* can reinvent the museum areas (in turn, considered as *BOs* and not simply as "spectacular stages") and simultaneously assign an unexpected role to different historical sources, unpublished archives or "old devices" used in a new way (de Groot 2009).

*Implications for Consumer Research*. Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) recall that the perspective of IW is intrinsically linked to the concept of change, "that is, in order to maintain institutions, actors must cope with the entrance of new members into the

organization or the field, the evolution of the field in new unexpected directions, and changes in pan-institutional factors such as technology and demographics" (p. 234). Thus, understanding the institutional dynamics in the markets shifts the focus towards endogenous changes that involve more complex forms of *agency* (markets as social systems: Araujo *et al.* 2010; Dolbec, Fischer 2013; Scaraboto 2015); consumer immaterial labor plays a decisive role (actors, institutions and culture interact to shape market reality: Cova, Dalli 2009a, 2009b); and, as underlined by Martin and Schouten (2014), "consumers mobilize human and non-human actors to co-constitute products, practices, and infrastructures" (p. 855).

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