

## CHAPTER ONE

### Individuals and the Aesthetic of Order

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#### A STARTING POINT

This volume represents the collective construction of a specifically anthropological approach to a question at the heart of all social science. How should we simultaneously account for both society and for individuals? Unlike most social science books about the individual, this volume is not concerned with individualism nor with the way different societies conceptualise individuals. Because, irrespective of whether people live within a highly individualising or a highly socialised environment, we still have the task of understanding them as individuals. Furthermore Anthropologists, in particular, commonly convey their findings through the presentation of individuals who were encountered during fieldwork. So this volume is not especially concerned with the study of individualism, nor with the growth of individualism<sup>1</sup>. The understanding of the individual is something that should be part and parcel of the domain of anthropology even when we are working in a society which seems almost entirely opposed to individualism. We would repudiate an artificial disciplinary history, that left social science concerned with that aspect of society that transcended its composition by individuals and ceded to psychology the study of the individual per. se. This book creates an approach to people that is no more psychological, and no less anthropological, through a decision to concentrate on the individual as its primary unit of analysis.

The means by which this is accomplished is through a deliberate and systematic appropriation of anthropological models that were originally designed, not for the study of individuals, but as approaches to an encompassing view of society. Traditionally, in social science, these two have been opposed, as a rise of individualism in modern life was seen as the deposition of the larger social order represented by the terms society and culture. Our discovery was that approaches created by anthropologists for the purpose of contending with society, turn out to be singularly and unexpectedly appropriate for the study of the individual. So that instead of abandoning those perspectives, we can appropriate them and apply them to this other terrain. In doing so we employ what has become recently one of the vanguard elements in contemporary anthropology; the study of material culture.

This will by no means be a single or uniform appropriation. In this introduction I will take the most extreme view, suggesting that in a place such as London, the application of this perspective to the individual becomes tantamount to the study of culture as an aggregate of these micro units of society, at least with respect to some forms of behaviour. As befits a situation where all the other contributors have studied with me, the rest of the chapters in this volume all take issue, in some way or other, with my argument and contest it or transform it through its application to quite different circumstances, providing alternatives, and contrasting variants. Either because the situation they are confronted with is very different from that found in London, (as I also argue in

a further chapter within this volume, set in Jamaica) or because they remain unconvinced by particular aspects of my own argument. So the volume is constructed in dialectical tension between the introduction and the subsequent chapters.

The approach that will be used to illustrate this argument is derived from one of the most established and influential anthropological models of cultural order, that of Pierre Bourdieu and his concept of *habitus*. Students of material culture, which include all the contributors to this volume, are particularly beholden to Bourdieu, because in his book *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, (1977) the main process of socialisation into becoming a member of any given society was the everyday association with practical taxonomies embodied in the order of material culture. From Bourdieu we learnt how individuals become a typical Kwakiutl, Trobriand Islander or New Yorker through habits and expectations fostered in our everyday object world. Through catching salmon or catching taxis. The best known example employed by Bourdieu was the organisation of space in the houses of the Kabyle, a Berber community. The systematic oppositions found in the internal order of the house were seen as an underlying structure that gave people their unconscious expectations of the order they anticipate in many different aspects of their lives. These underlying structures of order became second nature, that is taken-for-granted habits, that could apply equally to agricultural tasks, meal times, the body or kinship.

This work carried the further implication that although patterns of objects were thereby central to constituting social order, equivalent in many respects to our entire educational system, their contribution was entirely unacknowledged. This corresponded to what I (Miller 1987) elsewhere called The Humility of Objects. The ability of material things to establish the frame for proper behaviour without us noticing that they inhabit this powerful role. I argued that objects performed a task central to what Goffman (1975) and Gombrich (1979) in different ways termed Framing; that which orders life and behaviour without our being aware of it.

For Bourdieu this process is effective because in each area of life this underlying structure of order remains homologous to the others. People are socialised into habitus through the habits of everyday life, and reproduce it in their own creations because culture is best understood as practice. So unlike its psychological equivalents, this does not need to be viewed as a cognitive model. It exists tangibly in the order of the material world people inhabit. While anthropologists were most influenced by Bourdieu's application of these ideas to the Kabyle, those in other disciplines were enthralled by his exemplification of these same processes in the book *Distinction*, (1979) which examined the order of French society in the 1960s. Bourdieu argued that there was a foundational structural opposition in French society that corresponded to class. At one end of the spectrum were those who preferred the taste of foods that were substantial, the opinions of particular newspapers and saw Holy Communion as the obvious subject for a painting. At the other end where those who had a more minimalist aestheticised approach to food and saw more artistic potential in a car crash. So, amongst both the Kabyle and the

French, there were structural oppositions that were productive, in the sense of basic, to the ordering of society.

*Distinction* neatly demonstrated Bourdieu's insistence upon the virtue of a larger structural understanding of French culture and society in opposition to starting from the perspective of the individual. As he noted, the very term taste, was taken colloquially to represent the specifics of an individual's preferences in the world. Yet, in his analysis, he shows how taste actually derives from the highly structured conditions of French class and hierarchy, and is anything but the mere quirky predilection of individuals. Aesthetic preferences thereby exemplify, not individualism, but its opposite, the original holistic tradition of anthropology. People are situated within a general cosmology, as much evident in their kinship and social structure, in the form of exchange and economic orders, as in their beliefs and religion<sup>2</sup>.

Bourdieu was by no means the only exemplar of this holistic tradition. It is implicit in the very notion and structure of the traditional anthropological monograph, and its long commitment to various forms of structural-functionalism. Similarly Clifford Geertz (1975, 1980) could discern a distinctive Balinese aesthetic disposition that could apply as much to statehood as to dance. A typical monograph on an African pastoral society or on Chinese lineage would often link relationships with food to ritual or demonstrate the homology between kinship and village, or indeed urban, planning. Sometimes the academic discerns a pattern that is one of a single and overall consistency within and across domains. At other times, as in the work of Levi-Strauss or Bourdieu's *Distinction*, it is a holism based on systematic opposition, inversion or contrast. Indeed so common is this trope within anthropology that when, in other disciplines, such as where the *Annales* school of French historical analysis treated past societies as quasi ethnographies to examine consistency between cosmology, economy and social order, then the analysis comes to feel anthropological to the degree that it is structurally holistic (e.g. Le Roy Ladurie 1978).

In this context, the study of the individual seems reduced to that of the microcosm that exemplifies the macrocosm, or alternatively the dualism that is society. We see the individual as exemplifying the precise position they hold in society and reproducing at this scale the same sense of order and expectation we recognise as that of the society as a whole. A person is their place in the overall picture, as is appropriate to their categorisation, for example, by gender or class. Almost as though they each generate and reproduce some larger societal DNA or cultural code. This academic tradition became so established and hegemonic that inevitably it led eventually to an almost violent repudiation. A new post-modernist perspective arose that denounced any implied structural analysis or holism. Post-modernism tried to blow apart this sense of order and refuse to see people as any more than the aggregation of fragments. The post-modern assault was generally coincidental with an ever more confident liberalism which saw itself as triumphant over older more holistic political traditions such as socialism. Post-modernism has therefore had a longer lasting impact in the US which remains far more deeply imbued with a spirit of liberalism and emphasis upon

individuals as compared to the more collectively orientated European tradition (Lindholm 1997).

The problem with this history of academic studies is that in many respects it neglects what should have been a core question from the very inception of scholarly interest in society. A question that is sidelined when we start from an opposition between the individual and society, or a subsumption of the individual as mere microcosm to society, or a refusal to accept the existence of either society or individuals as in post-modernism. Instead, we might take as our starting point the coincidence and compatibility of the individual and society, where society is understood as an entity that transcends its aggregate composition by individuals and remains irreducible to them. Individuals still live in society, society always included individuals. The more important question therefore was how these two exist in tandem. If the individual is more than the microcosm of the macrocosm then what is the precise relationship between these two entities? Where do we find evidence for this relationship and how may we reveal it? These are the questions the current volume seeks to investigate.

## LONDON

In this section I will represent the most extreme application of our ideas based on the specific conditions of working in London. In the subsequent section I will show how the other contributors contest and expand upon these observations and lead us towards a more generally applicable model for an anthropology of the individual. This initial extreme view corresponds to an appropriation of the word 'aesthetic' to the study of people in households.<sup>3</sup> On three occasions I have carried out studies based on London streets. The second of these was a study of how people use material culture to deal with loss. Since a street is effectively a juxtaposition of unrelated residencies, the unit of analysis has to start from each individual household, quite often simply an individual. While discussing these various cases I found that, in conversation with Fiona Parrott, the co-researcher on this project, I was making increasing use of the word *aesthetic* to describe the underlying order that seemed to pertain to each of the hundred cases that we researched.

Subsequently I wrote *The Comfort of Things* (Miller 2008) which tried to convey, through the portraits of thirty of these individuals and households, what the term aesthetic might mean in this context. One of the reasons for choosing to work on a street was my dissatisfaction with the way social science treated people as tokens of larger social descriptors, which is implied in the model of microcosm and macrocosm. In most urban research undertaken by social science a person is selected for study because they are, for example, a woman, or working class, or Somali. But a street in South London represented an unprecedented exemplification of an alternative modern condition. Only 23% of the hundred households we worked with were born in London, and in many cases the household itself consisted of people from entirely different backgrounds who had met and become partners in London. Bourdieu wrote books about the Kabyle and different books about the

French. But on this street it was entirely possible that one would encounter a Kabyle married to a Parisian.

The temptation would be to regard a Kabyle married to a Parisian as either a hybrid between two holistic forms, or as illustrative of post-modern fragmentation and the end of holistic order. But *The Comfort of Things* shows that these people did not appear as either fragmented or disordered. In many ways they were just as redolent of order and even holism as in previous researches I had been involved in, whether in India, the Solomon Islands or Trinidad. They also clearly lived in society with its cultural orders. Most prior studies of London streets by social scientists had refused to let go of the apparent requirement to see society only in larger entities. The street was judged by its relationship to the neighbourhood or community. But in London it is increasingly clear that this is false, as these households were radically unconnected with either community or neighbourhood. But, apart from some older isolated males, there was no particular sense of alienation or anomie; both presupposed by holistic traditions of social analysis, as conditions which follow in the absence of these wider relationships of belonging. Yet they also didn't particular identify with London or the United Kingdom, so that the more recent emphasis in social science upon identity seemed equally inappropriate.

The aim of *The Comfort of Things* was therefore not to examine what people no longer were, but to emphasis instead what they had become. These people presented with an internal logic and complex cultural order that still needed to be accounted for. In these studies of individuals and households, just as in traditional studies of societies, I could discern homologies between the underlying order present in different genres. Both material genres such as music, ornaments, clothing, cooking and photography, and also social genres such as parent-child relations, couple formation and break up, individual's relation to work or to pets. The term aesthetic emerged as a shorthand for describing this internal consistency and order. It had no pretension to any art terminology or judgement of beauty per. se. But it did imply that there were issues of harmony, balance and contrast in this order.

The argument can be briefly illustrated through a précis of two of the cases that appear in *The Comfort of Things*. Malcolm's work fluctuates between Australia and the UK, but what he understands as his permanent address is his email, and the nearest thing to home is his laptop. Both his friendships and his work are largely organized by email, a place he constantly orders, returns to, cares for and where in many respects 'his head is'. But to understand the intensity of this relationship to his laptop, we need to read the anthropologist Fred Myers (1986). Myers notes that for many Aboriginal groups there is a tradition of avoiding the physical possessions of the deceased. Malcolm's mother was Australian Aboriginal and most of her possessions were indeed destroyed at her death. But he inherited from her a mission to locate and preserve the history of his family, including those once taken away from their parents. As he sees it, too much Aboriginal history is viewed as lying in police records, he wants a proper archive he will deposit in an Australian state archive.

Malcolm has an antipathy to things. He has given most of his inherited or childhood objects away. In his devotion to immateriality he prefers anything digital. He is getting into digital photographs, he downloads music and immediately throws out the covers. Very unusually for the street, he even gives away his books after he has read them. One could relate this to his mobility, one could relate it to his interest in the potential of new technologies, one could relate it to this Aboriginal inheritance. There is more. His father sold antiques but the result was that as soon as he started becoming attached to things in his childhood, they would be sold, another possible source of his detachment from things. So his personal habitus could be described as overdetermined in the sense of multiply caused. Even he can't decide how much his mobility is cause or effect. But the overall result, as he puts it, is that 'I think I've set myself up to be out of touch with objects and things' He has a more ambiguous relation to less tangible things like documents, sorting both his mother's and his own things into neat box files. But his real identification is with digital forms. He constantly updates and sorts his emails, which becomes the updating of his social relationships. In going through them he recalls all those friends he owes emails to.

One could try and stretch the Aboriginal inheritance. The laptop as a kind of digital *dreamtime* that connects current relationships with those of the dead, a place he comes in and out of, as more real than merely real life. He retains this intense concern with lineage, devoting much of his time to creating order out of kinship history. He seems obsessed that if he were to die, that thanks to constantly sorting his emails, he would leave a legacy that was archived and up to date, so no one would have to do the work he did recovering and ordering his ancestral lives. But for my purpose what he typifies is first the multiple determination of his cosmology. Father, mother and his work come together as possible explanations. One could not claim to have predicted him, but given what we now know, this relationship to his laptop, that at first seemed so bizarre, can certainly make sense. It is an aesthetic, a material cosmology. We need to understand cosmological issues that pertain to Australian Aboriginal life, but this alone could hardly have given us Malcolm.

The second example Charlotte exemplifies the self-construction of the inalienable as a consistent material ontology. She has systematically carried out a very large number of piercings followed by a series of tattoos, and simultaneously developed a clear philosophy of how these acts of self-construction contribute to her understanding of, above all, her control over her own life. She exemplifies both the vertical and horizontal dimensions. The vertical dimension starts once again from her relationship to her mother. This is not a simple repudiation, it was her mother's friend who first introduced her to piercing at the age of eleven. But she then appropriates this as a means of distancing. For example, when her mother said, 'Oh, but you're just trying to be the same as everyone else', she responded by searching out the most extreme and different piercings that for her said (her words), 'I've got a piercing, but not because everyone else has that, but because nobody does, actually.'

From this came her desire to establish complete mastery over memory itself. She established a fictive relationship to her past. Although born in London, she associates herself completely with the country of origin of her lover. She has mastered the accent, had a flat built for her to move to when she has qualified, and was already tattooing designs from that country before ever visiting it. As a lesbian she also feels that her sexuality is something she chooses and controls. Control for her means objectifying memory as a thing one can choose to attach to or detach from the self. Every piercing represents a specific memory. Life consists of accumulating happy memories that are objectified in this way. So even if she is embarrassed by chasing boy bands as a teenager, the memorabilia is retained as something 'happy at the time'. Key piercings and then tattoos represent her best relationships.

With regard to the horizontal, Charlotte carefully considers the precise materiality of each genre within which memory can be objectified. There is clothing she can throw away. Piercings have a potential transience, for example, when she moved to another part of London she says 'I took out a lot of my bottom rings, so at that stage, and I think that was probably because I had left a lot of rubbish and a lot of people that were not doing me any good, like old memories behind, so I didn't need it any more.' Abandoned rings from piercings are kept in a box, photographs of piercings and tattoos on her back allow her to recall a memory, but can't be as easily accessed as those she can look at when on the move. The placing matters, as with nipple piercing – viewed as the position closest to her heart. Each material form is used to extend and complement the others.

It is the tattoos that establish the full possibilities of the inalienable. They ensure that memories of the best relationships can never be excised. These include her relationship to the tattooist, a close friend who is practising on Charlotte to obtain her professional qualification; and her relationship to her lover, through their having identical tattoos. The memory is precise. Unlike others she will never have supplementary tattooing, since this blurs the relationship to the particular time the tattoo was created. She thereby works out a material technology of inalienable memory. She can't understand people who tattoo for pattern itself rather than to establish the inalienable. She starts from an awareness of people such as her grandfather who lived to regret the tattoos of their youth, yet now has complete confidence in her current total leg tattooing. She does understand the logic of those who tattoo a cross for a deceased love one, but remains consistent to her own systematic accretion of happy memories and relationships.

Charlotte is not then just another person who does piercings and tattoos. In her early twenties she has a systematic cosmology of memory and objectification. This allows us to see the analogy between the study of the individual and society. I have used the term inalienable in my description of Charlotte, a term which is reminiscent of the centrality of inalienable material culture to the work of the anthropologist Annette Weiner. In her book *Inalienable Objects* (1991) Weiner studied the material culture of the Maori, and the famous Kula ring as participated in by the Trobriand Islands, best known from the work of Malinowski (1922). Weiner's starting point is that in

contrast to many previous anthropological studies of exchange, there are certain forms of material culture that are profound objectifications of society itself. Objects whose presence and constancy helps society to constitute itself as transcendent to individuals. These objects are inalienable because they cannot form part of exchange or be given away. Much of her interest is in the different capacity of objects to represent the inalienable, that bones, stones and cloaks lend themselves to different qualities. Cloth, for example, being ambiguous in its symbolism, as a second skin, is good for mediating the transition from human to larger cultural reproduction, as Henare (2005) has shown for the idea of Maori weaving ancestors together. These might contrast with, for example, stone.

Weiner was unusual though in that she also conceded the role of similar processes of objectification to individuals as well as society. The term society here may indicate the greater authority of social hierarchy, that is *taonga* the power of this inalienability that enhances chiefly power, or the authority of the sacred; what Weiner calls cosmological authentication. But it can also connote a commitment to one relationship (Weiner 1991: 54). Because in some cases there is quite a bit of contingency and personalisation surrounding this *taonga* of objects. They may represent a particular chief or warrior, have individual names, be inherited by individual recipients, or be buried with a particular person. So in Weiner's work we come to recognise a quality of a material object - its potential inalienability. This may be employed to give sacred power to a sense of society that transcends individuals. But that same quality of inalienability can also be employed as the means by which an objects personalises an individual.

Weiner thereby provides a route from more traditional anthropology to the study of Charlotte, who has seen for herself that it is possible to exploit the different capacities of genres of material culture to represent inalienability and used this to constitute herself. It is hardly surprising that people show the same creative capacity in forming new processes of objectification that we see in our comparative study of societies. Objects too transcend these different registers from the more general to more specific. In another house, there lies on a bookshelf, grandfather's tin from the First World War. By now though this tin simultaneously represents, the specific grandfather, England and history itself.

It follows from these observations that instead of seeing individuals in opposition to society, there was a possibility of regarding each individual or household as somehow analogous to that of a society. That we could appropriate those methods, developed over decades for the study of societies, and now employ them in the study of the individual. That both the holism and order once assumed to be properties of society might also be found at this level, and not necessarily because the individual was the microcosm to a larger macrocosm. In the vast majority of households there was very little sense that their aesthetic, that is the internal integrity of order within material culture and other relationships, owed very much at all to anything one could recognise as cultural traditions such as Kabyle or French.



I don't wish to exaggerate. In some cases there was evidence for the kinds of cultural transmission familiar from more conventional anthropology. The way an Irish couple organised their lives in a manner that corresponded to older Irish traditions. Even in their case, however, the result had an unprecedented and particular character as a result of living in London. A similar point could be made about family and parental influence. Often important - whether through systematic rejection or systematic reproduction - but rarely entirely determinant. Parental and cultural traditions joined with many other influences to produce what emerge as relatively unique configurations. This occurs under conditions within London that may be unprecedented, where households are granted a degree of privacy to more or less make themselves up as they go along. As I have argued elsewhere, they may also be subject to astonishing generalisations that transcend these differences (e.g. Miller 1998) but in *The Comfort of Things* it was the combination of internal holism and order set against the overall diversity of London that was emphasised.

## **CONTRA LONDON**

The other contributors of this volume either did not work in London, or as in the case of Bajić and Botticello, who worked with diaspora populations, saw London from a very different perspective. Yet all of them share other concerns which lead to us a common focus on the issue of the individual in society. Firstly, all the chapters derive from ethnography carried out in accordance with the traditions of anthropological research. Most have a commitment to the study of material culture specifically through ethnographic methods. Although the chapters by Pertierra and Hosein are not employing this perspective, they share the underlying influence of Bourdieu's approach to the role of external forms of cultural order as socialisation, which is at the core of this volume's contribution. All the chapters other than Olesen are also marked by an increasing use of individuals in the reportage of ethnography. While we retain our attachment to theory, there is desire to rescue this from the more obfuscating accretions to which it became subject over the last two decades and which tended to obscure our relationship to the people we work with. While this volume is committed to theoretical developments in the analysis of individuals, we also want to place in the foreground the role of informants in our ethnography and in our desire to convey these ethnographic experiences and results. Many of these chapters concentrate on one or two key informants who have played a major role in our ethnographic work. We hope there is an integrity implied in acknowledging this, and in turn giving them a more prominent role in the presentation of our work.

While the emphasis upon a key informant may arise as a desire to respect the realities of ethnography when writing up a thesis or article, it leads to the same set of issues. We are still confronted with questions about how the presentation of an individual stands for generalizations about a society within an ethnographic monograph. Hockey (2002) recently argued that, in situations such as urban Britain, the interview should not to be regarded as a poor second best to participant observation, or a microcosm of society as a bounded unit. In some respects the interview comes closer to the occasional and disembodied partial presences that are the reality of modern urban life.

This observation rings true for the research used in *The Comfort of Things* which is probably more interview based than any of the ethnographies presented here. But the other chapters represent different situations which may have different consequences.

Typically, in their more extensive writings, such as the PhD thesis, the contributors to this volume start some of their chapters with an extended example of one individual who stands for those generalisations with which the chapter is concerned. They then follow this with shorter extracts from other individuals that represent different possibilities, or caveats to emergent generalisations. This is a heuristic device that attempts to address the same contradiction which occurs when we are simultaneously trying to convey something about society and the individuals who live within them. But this is generally implicit. In this volume we make the relationship explicit.

We achieve this goal by concentrating on a middle ground between the extremes of specificity and generality. This may be found in the order that is discernible both for individuals and external to them. What has been introduced as the concept of an aesthetic. The point is that we are not simply telling a story about a person. The individual is used analytically to display a pattern of relationships that convey a sense of the cultural order they live by. The inferred relationship is between that order and the analytical order we implicate in presenting a society as a cultural formation. We can see the mediation between these two when that order is also apparent in external forms. In these chapters it may appear as the way a house is decorated, a cloth is designed, a person is expected to dress for a party or as a Pentecostal Christian, or behave in relation to gaining a livelihood or going out into the city at night. When the order is found in genres of objects we come close to Bourdieu's original observations on the way an individual inculcates that order through practical taxonomies of action. But we do not restrict ourselves to conventional material culture, because this order may be located in other relationships. These may be relationships to place, to persons, to the state and to discourse. They are the mechanisms that, in practice, bring alignment between the order we discern at the level of the individual and the order we discern at the level of society. What becomes evident in this volume is that in each setting different sources of order come to stand out as more or less significant in the formation also of individuals.

This allows us to discern a relationship between the individual and society that does not rest on an opposition between the two, or on being seen as mere microcosm of the macrocosm. Rather we see that individuals themselves represent a form of order in the world, and this emerges out of a creative and partial appropriation of the possibilities in the wider order around them. But what is very clear in these chapters is that the term appropriation should not be reduced to some simple act of free will. It has almost always just as much to do with constraint, as with choice, with lack of power, as with creativity. The following chapters are organised in a sequence that starts with an emphasis upon objects, then moves to relationships to place, to persons and finally to the state. Even within the first section that concentrates on relationships to objects, we find considerable variation between relatively free appropriation

as in Crăciun's chapter and considerable constraint in Olesen's chapter. Similar issues and comparable variations in the way people respond to the order and authority embodied in the state are noted in the chapters by Pertierra and Hosein. Even in Horst's paper on Californian youth the context is one of authority and constraint.

There is one final relationship between the individual and collective to be considered. This volume, as several precedents, arises out of a tradition in which we all took part. This comprises a monthly 'drinking group'<sup>4</sup> during which pre-circulated draft chapters are read and commented upon by all those represented here. So, unlike many edited volumes, there is an organic process behind this volume that arises from a conversation between participating academics over several years. The connotations of a 'drinking group' is one that favours critical dialogue rather than mere adherence to a common position. This in turn produces the diversity of these contributions; each concerned ultimately to use any insights from this conversation in the further understanding of the particular conditions of their own research project.

The first chapter by Crăciun concerns Firlama a trader in the Istanbul bazaar. An individual whose life only makes sense when we appreciate the way he uses a specific genre of material culture - the fake brand – as his primary instrument for self-objectification. It is the fake brand that allows him to construct a life devoted to the play between respectability and subterfuge, conformity and illegality. From her close reading of this relationship comes an observation echoed in many subsequent chapters. The roots to this trajectory lie in treating his life as a whole, especially his early relationship to his parents and to his schooling. These create the causes of his ambivalence, but it is his personal discovery of a propensity in this particular form of material culture, the fake brand, that provides him with an ideal mirror through which he comes to see and understand the contradictions of his own life. This is not some dry metaphor. Firlama constantly celebrates the exhilaration and fullness of life that has been generated by this commitment to a small disruption in the overarching landscape of capitalism. As in many cases in *The Comfort of Things*, one might never have predicted Firlama, but in retrospect one can make sense of his personal aesthetic. The word is appropriate because this life is a play: part tragic, part comic, part glorious insistency, upon what a life devoted to fake brands can come to represent within the modern world. The result is a sense of balance that occurs at many points, in many chapters in this volume. All the way through to the final chapter by Hosein who makes balance the subject of her contribution. Only in her case the balance between legality and illegality is that represented, not by an individual, so much as the consensual construction of 'fairness'.

There is a clear and striking contrast between Crăciun and Olesen despite the fact that they are both concerned with cloth. This contrast forms a parameter along which the other chapters find their niche. Firlama crafts his life as a form of individualised creativity. But in the much more tightly socialised environment of Mali, people see creativity not as a simple expression of the individual, but as precisely that which determines the constraints on the

degree to which individuals are permitted to interpret normative order. Again this is a common theme to many of the subsequent chapters. Olesen shows that none of our terms, such as *originality*, or even *design*, translate easily into a context where things are categorised in very different ways. We have a very clear idea of what copying means in relation to originality and design. The trouble is that the people Olesen studied have entirely different ideas about the meaning and implication of a copy. They see difference where we might see sameness and sameness where we might assume significant difference. But what matters more, is how, just as the fake brand objectifies a particular individual in Istanbul, so here the process of motif creation objectifies what these people understand by the very concept of an individual. Olesen thereby shows clearly how it is possible to have alternatives to the usual opposition between individual and society. For her, as in the work of Strathern (1988), and in Bajic's chapter, both individual and society are formed out of an aesthetic of relationships or relational ontology. But this is most clearly seen through detailed observation of this cloth and its associated innovation-through-copying.

The chapter by Dalakoglou neatly bridges between this emphasis upon the object as objectification and the source of order in space and place. Taking as his starting point the situation of mobility, he finds that the same object, the house, has to confront its differentiation by context. Since a *Greek* house in Albania is quite different from a Greek house in Greece. One of the commonalities between these three chapters, which we can link back to Bourdieu, is the emphasis upon practice. Objects work as objectifications best when they are constantly being constructed. Each of these three chapters is also about people making a living - out of fake goods, out of designs on cloth, out of building houses. It is this which makes such objects central to their lives. In this case Fatos, Dalakoglou's informant, works out the permutations of his own identity around a house where the very terminology becomes an instrument in this task. A *Greek* house in Albania is a symbol of mobility of several kinds, aspirational as much as spatial. Again, a point common to many of these contributions, is that material culture is rarely merely a reflection of contradictions. It is much more often an attempt at their resolution into something that a person can effectively live with and through. The aesthetic of order they feel is legitimate, a term that is later explored by Hosein. The house is not a fake brand, since this is an informal material culture that is not branded. But it is a hybrid creation that serves, as with Firlama, to help an individual feel at home in the contradictory and complex world of modern mobility. The fact that the house Fatos doesn't live in, does more work to resolve these contradictions of place, than the one he does live in, is typical of these little ironies, these plays of the comic and tragic that are found in these brave new worlds of self-creation.

In the chapters by Murray and Miller we confront the other end of the dialectic between the way a person is constructed as an objectification of place and yet has to be seen simultaneously as an individual. While the discontinuities of migration place the emphasis upon Fatos' own creativity through house decoration, these chapters have to deal with space that remains in place. In some ways my portrayal of the individual in Jamaica is the precise opposite of

those I have presented within London. The presentation of Jamaica is based on a structuralist opposition, closer to the original work of Bourdieu. The two individuals described in this chapter objectify the opposing qualities of Pentecostalism and the highly amoral world of taxi drivers; an opposition which constitutes the landscape of Orange Valley itself. Here we almost retreat to the older anthropological trope of the individual-as-microcosm to society-as-macrocosm, which is common to structural anthropology. But not entirely. There is such a powerful aesthetic in the ability of these two persons to creatively embrace and convey the values that are inculcated by their respective and opposed cultural positions that inevitably we also come to an appreciation of them as specific persons in this structured landscape. They are not just a Christian and a taxi driver; they do Christianity and taxi driving with extraordinary aplomb. The chapter also looks backwards to the previous contributions in its emphasis on the capacity of the things themselves, the mobile phone and the taxi, to act as objectifications of these wider aesthetic orders.

Murray's chapter provides the perfect complement to Miller in that she tackles directly what is only alluded to by him. How, given this condition, by which a person exemplifies a place, does that person simultaneously gain their sense of themselves in their specificity as a creative agent? Murray's paper starts in a highly socialised environment comparable to Olesen and ends with the self-crafting of an individual closer to Crăciun. This chapter shows clearly, along with every chapter in this volume, that we progress best by refusing to see this as merely some kind of opposition between constraint and creativity. Being original is not opposed to conformity when it is something that is expected of you. As Olesen has already demonstrated, this dialectic works in particular ways in particular places. In the case of Murray the attention to material culture has made visible an entity we can call Madrid, that goes well beyond anything previously designated by the term. This is a cosmological Madrid that exists in an aesthetic of order which a true Madrilenian seeks to convey in their way of life. It is there in their relationship to going out in the city in the evening, to setting up home and to having friends. So the individual Madrilenian has a clear consciousness of this burden of objectifying Madrid itself. As a result, perhaps more than the other chapters, Murray has to consider the place of individualism itself. Because as the chapter unfolds, this devotion to conformity provides a kind of foundation of security and identity. But once this bedrock is established, her subject Manuel then constructs an elaborate expression of individual difference, first in his hobbies and his clothing and then as perfected in his blog. But even this creativity and its associated individualism is one that at the same time becomes an expression of conformity. Manuel is only exploiting what have become collectively designated sites for individualism that, as Murray shows, can be understood best in terms of the long history which lies behind this creation of Madrid as practice.

If Manuel ends with his blog, then Horst's informants more or less start their search for individual creativity with their own presentation of the self in a virtual world. What is remarkable is that we have just been presented with the extraordinary conformity of Madrid and expect to see quite the opposite in the

youth of California. California is the very seat of our notion of individualised self expression as a kind of cult or ideology. The expectation here is that a youth will create an aesthetic form as an individual, if anything in repudiation of the collective. Yet in practice we encounter a remarkably similar issue of the tension between conformity and specificity. Horst's informant Ann seeks to ground her externalised representation of herself in social networking sites within her given relationships. These may be relationships to objects, such as the aesthetics of her bedroom, or later on in her relationship to her college roommate. But so far from being an expression of free 'Californian' choice, these actions are tightly constrained. Sometimes this is an expression of the technology itself. As when she moves from MySpace which, relatively speaking, encourages personalisation, to Facebook, which keeps originality within tightly controlled genres of presentation. Sometimes the constraint comes from wider relationships. So far from being autonomous from wider social control, Ann confronts a parental pressure that manifests concerns with danger circulating in public discourse. This power seeks to close down her efforts again and again. The situation in California is thereby in some ways closer to that of the authoritarian state in Cuba portrayed by Pertierra.

The conflicting imaginations of mother and child are central also to the following paper by Bajić. Both her and Botticello's chapters focus on relationships to persons, but, as in all the previous chapters, there is also the clear influence of place and of objects in this creation of the aesthetic of the self. Both also engage with a particular context – the consequences of Diaspora. Bajić presents, with some compassion, the opposed perspectives of a mother in Serbia and her son Vladamir, now settled in London. The material culture of Vladamir's London home express his desire to maintain as much distance as possible from his place of origin. Not surprisingly his mother is unable to reconcile herself to this, and is therefore constantly looking for strategies to regain a foothold in her relationship with her son. He rejects all objects from his past, except a battery charger, while she, in good Maussian style, employs this in gifting to try and reengage this relationship. Her conclusion looks appropriately to the work of Strathern (1988) who focuses upon the individual as constituted by relationships which only become apparent in the external aestheticised form of material culture and its exchanges. There is one important additional contribution. A reader cannot but be struck by the poignancy and nuances of Bajić's portrayal. What this, as also Crăciun's chapter, successfully convey are the contradictions of generality and specificity that emerge when anthropologists use extended portraits of individuals. Partly because this is not just analytical, they are also deeply meaningful to the people being discussed. These are contradictions experienced as tragic, in the case of Bajić, or as liberation, in the case of Crăciun.

For Botticello the tension is not between separated persons representing homeland and Diaspora, but a tension that now exists within the community of the Diaspora itself. While the Sebian Vladamir seeks to evade any identification with Diaspora, in the case of the Yoruba community there remains a powerful commitment to this collectivity. An individual might wish to creatively express their own version of the hybridity and cosmopolitanism that

comes with Diaspora life, on a par with Dalakoglou's Fatos. But as Botticello's chapter shows, there remain vocal and effective constraints to the degree to which this is something that can be delegated down to the level of individuals. This is especially the case for public events. There is a forty year old woman who wants to wear unconventional dress to her own birthday, and other women who strive to assert their own balance between traditional forms and those she feels more appropriate to a London context. These both threaten the normative order of the London Yoruba community. But it is not so much constraint and disapproval that determine their practice, but the way in which that practice actively objectifies a wide range of social relations and commitments. As in several of the other chapters in this volume, what we learn is that while there may be a general acceptance that change is required to fit the dynamics of the world, there can still be passionate conflict over what is the acceptable unit which facilitates that change. As in the chapter by Murray, the individual is not simply the expression of individualism. The individual is better understood as the vehicle by which a larger social aesthetic achieves its dynamic.

One of the dangers of concentrating upon individuals, rather than society, for social science, is that it implies a turning of the lens. What was out of focus, invisible behind society, is now in focus. But potentially what was in focus, now becomes the fuzzy and ignored background. Specifically it is the macro forces such as political economy and the state that can disappear from view when we focus down on the individual. This can be just as distorting a lens as that which previously ignored the consequences of such forces for specific individuals. The intention of this volume is to create a new kind of lens that can remain in focus when we look both at macro forces and at individuals, so we can inspect in detail the relationship between these two. Liberalism and humanism both claim to focus upon the ethics of the individual and thereby claim to enhance our understanding of individuals. But as many critical traditions within social science have pointed out, this can leave the individual detached from their wider context, and blind us to the forces that both create and constrain individuals, such as political economy or the state. In which case so far from enhancing, such perspectives actually diminish that understanding. Fortunately none of the chapters in this volume fall into that trap. None of them feel it is possible to appreciate persons without also colouring in the background context. This may be migration as in Dalakoglou and Bajić, commerce for Crăciun, Miller or Horst and in the final two chapters that of the state.

For the chapters by Perierra and Hosein the materialism that is pertinent, is not the material culture of objects, but an external force that creates the material conditions within which people live. What these chapters achieve is precisely what is lost in those approaches that either turn the lens inwards to people or outwards to macro-sociological perspectives. Both Perierra and Hosein start from the very evident simultaneity of these two aspects of the same conditions. Their ethnography was based on individuals, who they came to know very well, but in doing so they also came to understand the effect of an order that is based on authority. Indeed right from the first chapter by

Crăciun we see that an individual who is quirky and eccentric may be just as good an exemplification of social order as a conformist.

Given this task, there is a fascinating contrast between Pertierra and Hosein, who work from two very different Caribbean islands. In the case of Pertierra, based in Cuba, we have one of the most controlling states in the world, one that seeks to order almost every aspect of every day life. And yet it is one which seeks legitimacy partly by using the rhetoric of struggle by which an individual understands their task of getting by on a daily basis. In this discourse of *struggle* the state tries to link directly to the individual through a common aesthetic. What Pertierra reveals is how individuals are nevertheless able to assert themselves through quite different relationships to this concept of struggle. These may align with or against the state's own discourse. She concludes on a point central to all these chapters. 'The relative inability to become a "pure" individual in contemporary Cuba in no way curtails the capacity for individual Cubans to engage in ordering their sense of self.' Individuals still find ways of seeing themselves reflected in agency, even in the absence of much by way of individualism.

The conditions of Trinidad are very different from Cuba and allow Hosein to deliver on the promise with which this introduction started. I implied that this volume would address the issue that is posed when we transcend oppositions between society and the individual; that we would not just treat the individual as the microcosm of a macrocosm which is society. The intriguing thing about Hosein's concept of authority is that this is as much a product of persons as of institutions, because effective authority in Trinidad is based on legitimacy. So what comes to matter in the creation of social order, is not just what institutions claim, or indeed what individuals claim, but what emerges from the grounds that each cedes to the other. This form of legitimate authority is an objectification of the constant and dynamic relationship that exists between them by virtue of their simultaneity.

As Hosein notes, these are structures of feelings as much as of materiality. The boundaries of where people can trade beyond the market are determined by what the market traders feel to be the limits of appropriate police authority. Something very different from the legal definition of their authority. As we progress through her examples, whether the organisation of a Mosque, or the allocation of patronage, or the production of Carnival costumes, we see that morality itself has a shape and substance that either looks legitimate or has evidently gone beyond its accepted place in the world. Together these amount to what she calls aesthetic authority. Because they constitute ultimately the order that people feel bound to live by and judge others by. People constantly compare the way things appear to be with the way they feel they ought to be.

This is the lesson of our volume. That people come to sense an order in the world which feels right, which looks right, and which comes to be taken for granted as the source of the normative. This is true whether the origins of that order are in states, in history or in their own creativity. To call it an *aesthetic* is to recognise that it has properties of balance and form and contrast. These may be in areas otherwise considered of the arts, as in Olesen's study of



design or Horst on the webpages of social networking sites. But they may equally be found in the struggle to get by on a budget, the identity of one's house, the oscillation of legality and illegality objectified in fake goods, trying to be a true Madrilenian or Yoruba, or compassion in relationships between mothers and children. This aesthetic may make create an order homologous across different domains at the level of the individual, the family, traders in a market or the Yoruba diaspora. But the very cohesion of this order and its points of identification for some may also alienate, harm or disempower others, who are excluded from or do not share this experience of the world. In some cases as the Jamaican Pentecostal and taxi-driver they may define each other by their opposition. Anthropology is the study of the normative; what comes to be accepted as the appropriate order of the world, and why people accept or reject this.

So what we have discovered is ultimately that the same issue confronts us irrespective of whether we are located at the extreme represented by Londoners who make up for themselves much of this order, almost as they go along, in their very private households. Or, at the other extreme, in Cuba, where the creation of order remains very much under the control of a state. This is why this is not a book about individualism or the concept of the individual; the two topics which dominate social science approaches to the individual. It is a book about individuals who have to be accounted for, whatever the nature and extent of individualism and its encompassing ideologies. Rather than an opposition between the order by which a person lives and orders created by institutions, we have discovered an aesthetic which may be understood as a balance between these two by Hosein, an alignment with dominant social orders as in Olesen, or a selective and contested co-option of order from various sources as Botticello, Crăciun, Dalakoglou, Murray and Pertierra.

We have found a means to study and understand this normativity through a specifically anthropological perspective. Approaches to order originally created by anthropologists, such as Bourdieu, to account for society, are here applied to individuals. We give full acknowledgement to an individual's sense of order, which may be partly derived from parents and other social relationships, from their sense of place, and from their alignment with, opposition to, or compromise with the authority of the state. This order may represent a socialised *habitus*, their own personal *habitus*, or most often *habiti*. But for individuals, just as for Kabyle society, much of this order is constructed in and taken from material culture, rather than as a cognitive model. Order exists external to ourselves. People are found in this volume to have an endless creative capacity to explore the propensities of various genres of objects to create their understanding of themselves in the world. Though they are constantly constrained and often frustrated both by the limits of these media and by the authority of others. Indeed the very concept of the creative person is found again and again to be a highly socialised construction that determines which media are permitted for individualised appropriation. Unlike phenomenology, we do not presume to emphasise any particular medium of things, whether the body or the landscape. Often it is objects we would not have anticipated highlighting - taxis, fake brands or mobile phones.

A final advantage of this direct confrontation with individuals, is that it reflects also the integrity of anthropological fieldwork. That one starts with the empathy of ethnography, immersed in the lives of specific people, often friends, as much as informants. Many of us are touched by this encounter and wish to convey them; even as analytically we have to encompass the wider forces that we must also understand in order to account for those people as individuals. So this new application of traditional anthropological perspectives to the study of individuals, is surely an extension, rather than a reduction, of the significance of the discipline itself. It stands as respect for the forces that create individuals as well as for the individuals that live with and through such constraints and potentials. In focusing upon individuals we enhance, rather than detract, from our appreciation of that premise for anthropology - the creative capacity of society.

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<sup>1</sup> The approach outlined in this introduction contrasts with most anthropological approaches to individuals, though some run parallel to the ideas explored here. There is probably little overlap with anthropological approaches to individuals that have derived from various rapprochements with psychology that arise from time to time (e.g. Benedict 1974, Schwartz, White and Lutz 1992) through to more recent interest in cognitive approaches (e.g. Bloch 1998), psychoanalysis (e.g. Moore 2007), or psychology itself (e.g. Holland 1999). The most sustained concern in anthropology has probably been its relativist stance to our understanding of what we mean by the terms individual and the self. Extensive discussions follow from the work of Mauss, for example, Carrithers Collins and Lukes (1985), and of Dumont (1992), for example Celtel (2004). This relativism has also been applied to the concept of the individual in industrial societies (e.g. Kusserow 1999). Brian Morris (1994) provides a useful summary of many such discussions. More recent approaches include the extensive impact of Strathern (e.g. 1979 1988, 1992) both on the self in Melanesia and England. Also the work of Rapport (1997) building on that of Cohen (1994). There is an obvious analogy between this volume and Rapport's aspiration 'to give a comparative account of individual's meaningful experience' 2002: 9. The approach taken here is complementary and different but not necessarily a critique of their perspective. Finally there have also been anthropological approaches to the individual which arose either from methodological and philosophical issues or which followed a more biographical imperative such as Freeman (1979) or Shostack (1981). All anthropological contributions run parallel to many sociological rapprochements which include methodological individualism, the influence of economists such as Becker (e.g. 1996) and recent work on the rise of the individualism associated with Beck (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002) Giddens (1991) and Putnam (2001). Within material culture, relevant approaches range from Hoskins *Biographical Objects* (1998) to Gell (1998) on agency and, although not usually categorised in this way, I would suggest also Sennett (1992)

<sup>2</sup> Bourdieu was not averse to the analysis of individuals, the best examples being his discussion of Flaubert (Bourdieu 1996a, Eastwood 2007) and Heidegger (Bourdieu 1996b). But this did not proceed through the direct analogy with his analysis of society as proposed here.

<sup>3</sup> The use of the term aesthetic here is not intended to connote its usual employment within the specific field of the arts, especially not contemporary art. It is also far removed from more philosophical concerns with the role of the aesthetic in the evolution of Western thought and ideology (Eagleton 1990). Many anthropological approaches evoke the relation of fragments to the whole (see Simmel 1968) as with the aesthetic of the microcosm implicated in Geertz or Bourdieu. But my use implies almost the opposite. Not the individual as a fragment, but the way an individual builds for themselves something that creates a sense of order which may or may not feel holistic for themselves. It may be based on their creativity, on the orders imposed upon them. More commonly it derives from their selective co-opting of the orders they find in their world, whether from family traditions, cultural traditions, institutions or others. As in all material culture approaches the concern is as much how these orders make people as how people make orders. What makes the word aesthetic appropriate was rather a throw back to the pre-modern use of the term as expressing qualities that people wished to see reproduced in the arts, as they were assumed to have a bearing on the sense of beauty. Principles such as harmony, balance and symmetry, but in the light of modernism, we could also add dissonance, contradiction and even edgy.

<sup>4</sup> All the contributors to this volume were students for whom I was the primary supervisor of their PhD except Botticello and Dalakoglou for whom I was the second supervisor and Olesen who was formally supervised in Denmark but then settled in the Department at UCL as an Honorary Research Associate. We are all grateful to the comments on these papers over the years by other PhD students who overlapped with this 'generation' of students. We would also acknowledge the contribution of many visiting students from various countries who typically came to work with me for a few months and joined the drinking group for that duration proving comments on these papers and indeed drinks.