



# I

## Objects from the Past

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WE ARE, COLLECTIVELY SPEAKING, SURROUNDED BY “THINGS,” many billions if not trillions of material objects of every kind. The number of these things is so great, in fact, that it is difficult to gain a conceptual hold on the almost infinite multiplicity of objects that constitute our world. One way to begin mentally ordering what we encounter, though, is to establish a rough taxonomy that distinguishes between what might be called “natural things,” on the one hand (trees, rocks, plants, etc.), and humanly made or humanly fashioned things, on the other hand (shoes, chairs, books, etc.). My concern in what follows is only with the second order of things, which from now on I will call “objects.”

Objects are always products of human intentionality, even when they are made by machines. Because they are shaped by human will, usually to meet some need or want, they are social products from the beginning. And they are social, too, because once they are created, they exist and circulate in a social world. (It is true, of course, that natural things also can be brought into the social world. They can be given a certain amount of value—for example, rocks can become “precious stones”—and then be made to circulate as commodities. Nevertheless, because they are not products of human labor or design, I exclude them from my discussion here.) We interact with these man-made objects and become socialized through them, and they in turn become humanized through us as a result of the social uses we give them. Objects, for instance, become “goods.” They are utilized and exchanged; they are “owned” by someone; they become possessions, commodities, gifts—and all of these kinds of things that

happen to objects tend to humanize them, but more importantly, they also socialize us as we interact with them.

Now with regard to these humanly made objects, it is important to make yet another distinction, this one between objects made in the present and those made in the past. By objects made in the present, I mean those produced during the last few years, perhaps the last ten or fifteen years at most. These would include a great number of the objects we encounter in any given day, including the clothes we are wearing at the moment, the pencil and paper lying on our desk, or the newspaper we read this morning. By objects from the past, I mean those made a generation or more ago that still survive into the present and continue to be used and valued (e.g., furniture passed down from our parents or grandparents, old tools that remain functional, and the like). What is particularly interesting about the latter kind of object is that they were present and part of the everyday experiences of people living in, say, 1940, or 1900, or even earlier, and they are at the same time present and able to be experienced by us today as well. Someone in 1900 could say of a chair or desk in their home, "This object is contemporaneous with me," and someone in 2002 could say the same thing of the same object, even if, by 2002, the object becomes visibly more time-worn than it was before.

My concern here is only with objects from the past, not objects made in the present. And, as just indicated, the past will mean for our purposes that long span of time beginning about two or three decades ago (i.e., about a generation) and stretching back from there, if we want to go that far, to the Paleolithic Age or even earlier, when human beings first began to fashion objects for their own use. Obviously, there are very few objects more than several centuries old that have survived, and those that have are likely to be found in a museum. Most of the objects from the past that I will refer to in what follows would fall into the range of being perhaps thirty or forty to about 150 or 200 years old. The farther back one goes, the fewer the number of objects that have persisted intact into the present.

In approaching objects that have survived from earlier times, one of the first things to be noted is that some of these objects are said to be valuable, while others are not. Whole classes of objects from the past, in other words, have come to be described as "worth something," while whole other classes of objects that survive are designated as "worth-less"—as junk. The valuable objects, such as antiques, heirlooms, or certain works of art, are likely to be displayed in a prominent place in one's home, while the things deemed to be without value are usually confined to one's attic or basement, and from there they are periodically gathered up and thrown out as trash. Though we need not pursue this point here, it should be noted that the differences in value do not necessarily have to do with the condition the object is in, for an antique can be in fairly bad shape and still be an antique, while an old hat or a suit from the attic can be in

good condition and yet be considered almost rubbish. Rather, the worth of an object is determined primarily by either the market value that the object has or the sentimental value that it holds for some particular individual. In the latter case, some things, such as mementos or souvenirs, could have virtually no market value and yet still be deemed valuable for personal reasons, that is, because of nostalgic feelings that they might evoke when one comes into contact with them.<sup>1</sup> But though it might be important to understand how an object's market worth is determined, as compared to its merely subjective or sentimental worth, it would take us too far afield to pursue this line of thought here. Instead, I want to focus on the apparent opposites that I have just set up between those objects from the past that are said to have value and integrity and those that are said to "lack value." The former are cherished and treasured, while the latter are dismissed as waste or rubbish.

A quick judgment suggests that these two very different kinds of objects from the past are so unlike one another that they have to be considered for all practical purposes incommensurable. But in fact both types of objects exist on a single continuum. They are not dichotomous, but rather over time they can and often do merge and meld into one another, sometimes being deemed valuable and at other times valueless. This is so because every humanly made object, no matter how grand or trivial—and regardless of what happens to it at some later point in its life history—starts out as something "genuine," something possessing at least a minimal degree of worth. Every object, for example, has its own form, its own aesthetic, its own integrity, and its own identity, and every one contains some amount of human expressivity, even if mediated by a machine. Furthermore, when objects of any sort are produced socially, they necessarily contain some degree of value simply by virtue of the labor that went into fashioning them. Nevertheless, every genuine object that enters the world is subject to the same natural depredations, the same ravages of time, that befall all material things. Objects get used or used up, worn or worn out. Usually their fate is to move steadily and inexorably from the status of objects to the status of waste *unless* or until something intervenes to slow or even reverse this process, in which case the object does not become junk but rather just the opposite: it retains or even increases in value.

What intervenes? Nothing intrinsic to the object itself, but always something outside of it, for instance, the increasing *rarity* of the object, which will normally lead its owner to take special care to preserve it and in this way hinder or halt the usual processes of deterioration. Of course, every object simply is what it is, and no more. It is what happens to *other objects* of the same type or genus that determines whether or not an object becomes rare and hence suddenly increases in value for no other reasons than extraneous ones. Another factor that could intervene, as already mentioned, is sentiment, the sentiment that is

sometimes attached to objects in such a manner as to instantly increase their personal value, thereby preventing them from being treated as waste. Or finally, the vagaries of the market could intervene, causing some things to increase in worth not despite but because they survived long enough to be recycled or refunctioned in the present.

But these examples of objects keeping their value or increasing in value over time do not represent the norm. The norm for perhaps 95 percent of the objects made is to move relentlessly from being things that initially contain value to being things emptied of value—in other words, rubbish, or what Louis Aragon aptly called “fallen matter.”<sup>2</sup> To be sure, different objects have different life expectancies, just as people do. Some things deteriorate relatively quickly, while others endure for a long time. A finely crafted desk would be expected to last longer than a well-made pencil, so it should take several decades or even several generations before it is ready to be scrapped as junk (unless, as I say, some other process intervenes), but only some weeks before a pencil loses its use or exchange value and is finally disposed of as worthless.

Put briefly, some things have relatively short and others relatively long natural lives: the natural life of a loaf of bread is about three or four days before it becomes waste; the natural life of a pair of shoes might be two or three years; an overcoat maybe ten years; a house 100 years or more; a church or a castle possibly several centuries. But in time these objects wear out, erode, or become degraded, and when this happens they lose their status as useful or worthwhile things. In so many words, they become waste, which is a handy term to describe the normal terminal state of an object.

Now I want to take this point and *historicize* it. In premodern times, most objects were made to last as long as possible. When objects approached the point where they were on the verge of disintegrating into waste, great care usually was taken to repair or refurbish them to sustain their existence and keep them available for use. For an ordinary individual living centuries ago, to discard something, which in effect was to declare it of no value, was not only a difficult act to perform, it also was considered a destructive act, because it was disrespectful of the person or persons in the past who had originally made the object. Unnecessarily jettisoning something that someone had fashioned amounted to a kind of dismissal of the time, energy, and skill that went into the making of the object in the first place.

If, however, the decline or disintegration of an object was unavoidable, then it often happened that a particular social function was given to each stage of its decline. By this strategy, the object continued to retain some value, even though the value attributed to it as it neared its end was different than the one attributed to it at the beginning of its existence. The idea that an object, as it aged, had to be assessed on a sliding scale of value appears to have been a widely

accepted one in premodern times, and it is an idea that persists as well among primitive peoples today. For the Suku of Zaire, for instance, a newly built hut is expected to last, on average, about ten years. At first the hut's value lies in the function for which it was initially built, namely, to provide housing for a couple or an extended family. After a while, when the hut has endured a certain amount of wear and tear, it changes its function and assumes a different value: it then becomes in turn a guest house, a gathering place for teenagers, a kitchen, and finally, when it has exhausted all of the human uses to which it can be put, it is turned into a goat or chicken house.<sup>3</sup> In this particular case it is not only the function of the hut that changes with its changing physical state but also its personal and social value. Only when the hut loses its last bit of utility does it finally lose its last bit of value.

When we come to the modern period, especially the industrialized West in the twentieth century, what I have just been describing changes considerably. Most objects produced now are not only not expected to last very long, but many are actually designed to become waste as rapidly as possible—so rapidly that often there is virtually no time for an object to go through the kinds of value stages I mentioned with reference to the Suku hut. Today, the process of value making has been enormously accelerated, because there is now a greatly foreshortened time span between an object's initial entry into the world and its exit as trash. At times it seems that some objects become waste almost immediately after coming into being, and hence they have no life history to speak of. One can see, even at the moment the object comes into being, the approaching end state that is never far off. In fact, what we have in the present age is not only shoddily made things, which quickly become waste, we also have *premature waste*, that is, the discarding of things when they are only about halfway through their natural life spans, or in some instances, even less than halfway. The act of discarding objects today is nowhere near as difficult to do as it was in earlier times, for our culture now encourages—even actively promotes—the rapid consumption or using up of objects. It does so for reasons with which we are all by now acquainted: as soon as one object becomes waste, there is another allegedly “better” one that can be made to step in and take its place, and when that better object eventually becomes waste, there are still more “new and improved” ones waiting in the wings to replace it as well.

Today, then, most objects produced become junk very quickly, including those objects which, in premodern times, were made on the assumption that they would be kept in existence for as long as possible. Not only is the phenomenon of planned obsolescence new in our era, but we also have something else that seems not to have been present before, namely, the tendency to regard waste as not always and under all circumstances a negative thing but rather as something that can have positive aspects as well.

What is there that can conceivably be positive about waste? Briefly, I think, two things. The first is that it can reveal something about the nature of the society that both defines *what waste is* and determines just when and why and how certain objects come to be declared worthless. Just as a study of what is considered deviant can help illuminate what a particular society might think is normal or healthy, so too the study of what is called waste can reveal a great deal about what that same society views as valuable and therefore worth preserving from the corrosive effects of time. Archaeologists, of course, understand how to approach waste in this way. For them, the refuse of the past—including both the things that were deemed to be waste at some earlier point in time *and* the things that have unavoidably *become* waste by being buried for centuries (e.g., broken shards of formerly valuable pottery)—is the chief medium through which they gain insight into the life conditions of some distant historical or prehistorical period.

The second positive function that waste can have goes well beyond its role in providing clues to the norms, codes, or categories of some previous epoch. If deciphered correctly, waste may also make visible certain larger “truths” that transcend any particular era of the past and consequently have the capacity to shed some light even on our own present and possibly our future as well. For this higher order of understanding to occur, waste has to undergo a metamorphosis. It has to become not simply rubbish (though it may still be that on *one* interpretive register) but also a new kind of object and hence valuable once again, though now for reasons that were *not* present in the minds of those who originally made or consumed these objects in the past (that is, *before* they became the “fallen matter” they seem to be to us today).

This second, and to me more interesting, conception of what makes waste valuable was most thoroughly articulated by German critic Walter Benjamin. For Benjamin, writing in the 1930s, waste was important not just because there is something about it that propels the mind backward, leading one to reflect on certain earlier points in time when the object was fully what it was intended to be and not the meaningless historical debris it eventually became for later generations. Rather, waste also was important for Benjamin because it gives one a glimpse of something that shoots beyond the past as such and calls out to be recognized and responded to in the present. To get a clearer picture of what this something is, we need to look more closely at a notion that informed Benjamin’s massive *Arcades Project*, which occupied him on and off for the last thirteen years of his life.

According to Benjamin, when someone in the past made an object, that object expressed at least three things. First, it expressed (as Marx had said as well) a part of the worker’s human essence, for in fashioning an object either in a preindustrial or an industrial setting, the worker drew on his or her own skill and creative energy and then externalized these in the thing produced. Second,

and without this being any single individual's conscious intention, the object expressed something of the historical character of the age in which the object was made. Hence, objects produced in the fourteenth century unavoidably reflected certain aspects of that period due to the peculiarities of their form, style, or design, just as objects made in, say, the early or mid-nineteenth century, which was the period that most interested Benjamin by the time he undertook to write his *Arcades Project*, reflected a very different tone and style. Third, and hardest of all to see, Benjamin also believed that objects contained something he called "wish images" (*Wunschbilder*). These images were projected into objects by the people who made them, but this was done more at the unconscious than the conscious level of awareness, for according to Benjamin, the true source of wish images lay not in an individual's mind or even in his or her expressive will-to-form but instead in a much deeper mental substratum (something close to but distinguishable from Jung's "collective unconscious") that has been present in the psyche of all human beings since virtually the beginning of the species. This substratum, he thought, contains some of the deepest and most profound longings and dreams of humankind—for example, the yearning to be in harmony with nature or to overcome the subject-object split, or to at last achieve real happiness and wholeness here on earth. These longings stemming from the "primal past" have, according to Benjamin, always lingered in a dormant state, but they also can sometimes emerge and become externalized in material objects as a result of the creative activities of *homo faber*. When this externalization takes place, the wish images are attached to, or fused with, the things created. The result is that objects become something more than mere physical artifacts; they also become things suffused with utopian visions and "dream images" (*Traumbilder*) of a "better world," which had long been imagined but had not yet come to be.

Writing from the perspective of the twentieth century, however, Benjamin believed that these images had either been forgotten or else radically distorted, almost beyond recognition, by the processes of capitalist commodification. For Benjamin, capitalism is driven by its very nature to turn objects into commodities and then to fetishize these commodities by associating them with magic qualities that capitalism promises each individual can acquire by consumption. But by commodifying and fetishizing objects to serve the end of profit, capitalism simultaneously strips away the *true* wish images in things. The utopian element in objects is thus obscured or even apparently replaced by fake and glitzy "magic images," which falsely reenchant the objects of modern life. As a consequence, material things acquire a new aura, one devised by the newly emerging advertising and marketing industries to mystify and delude a population rather than point the way toward fulfillment. Hence, in the process of buying and consuming objects, people mainly see only the phantasmagoric side of things, which is that side

conjured up by the bewitching power of commodity fetishism. Commodities, due to their dazzling and mesmerizing effect, ingeniously hide from people the authentic “dreaming forward” that objects do in fact contain, all the while indicating that no loss, no forgetting, has taken place.

It was just because of this deception that Benjamin thought the masses in the modern era had fallen into a deep “dream sleep” (*Traumschlaf*), the dream sleep of false consciousness. But since, as Marx had pointed out, capitalism does not stand still but on the contrary moves forward only by revolutionizing its own means of production, it cannot help but undermine the value of the very things it creates, thereby making its own commodities obsolete. Sooner or later almost all of the objects that capitalism touts as “purchasable” or “worth something” fall in status, becoming second-class or third-class objects that are then said to be both unusable and uninteresting. In other words, capitalism produces a plethora of things that have some amount of exchange value for a while but then become junk. Benjamin was fascinated by this “junk,” especially by an assortment of early nineteenth-century gadgets, toys, out-of-date illustrated magazines, and the like, some of which he collected himself, that had become *passé* by the 1920s and 1930s. But in becoming *passé*, these objects also lost the aura previously invested in them by the market forces of capitalism. As a result, the spell cast by fetishization fades, and as it does, the original wish images contained in those same objects can begin to come forward and make their presence felt. Paradoxically, objects have to be deserted by capitalism; they have to fall into desuetude at one level in order to come more fully into their own at another. Only when they are degraded or discardable (in market terms) do objects at last begin to reveal their true nature: a nature that is not only richer and deeper than anything imagined by those who merely fetishize commodities, but also, according to Benjamin, one that is at the same time potentially subversive of everything false in modern life.<sup>4</sup>

It would be hard to conceive of a more positive evaluation of waste than that offered by Benjamin in his *Arcades Project*. For most people today, waste is simply waste. It contains no hidden dimension. There is nothing in it that can be or deserves to be rescued. It is not surprising then that it has become so easy to throw things away, and to do so in a quantity and volume that would have been unimaginable to our forbearers. The loss that accompanies this flat, one-dimensional view of things is that we perhaps never see (or see through) objects in the way we might, nor do we allow most objects to stay with us long enough to establish a fraternal relationship with them. In this respect, our world may be more empty than it was in earlier times, for even though we have far more material objects around us than our ancestors did, most of these things live shorter lives and then disappear forever, whereas in the past, objects lingered long enough to become familiar to and cherished by those who used or interacted with them.



## NOTES

1. See Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984); Jonathan Culler, "Junk and Rubbish: A Semiotic Approach," in *Diacritics* 15 (1985): 2–12.
2. Louis Aragon, *Treatise on Style*, translated by Alyson Waters (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 89.
3. See Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commodities As Process," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, edited by Arjun Appadurai (London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 66–67.
4. On Benjamin's view of objects from the past, see the material collected in, *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 1999). Also see Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991); Max Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Mourning* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), esp. pp. 211–39.