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Autor(en): **Jost, Susanne C.**

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Objects and the Making(s) of Scotland

Susanne C. Jost

During the last two decades there has been a revival of interest in material culture studies within social anthropology. This emerging trend shows that the investigation of the interrelationship between people and things can add an important perspective to the enterprise of understanding and explaining culture and society. In line with this trend, the main focus of my doctoral research is on the ways in which material objects (monumental and ordinary) are implicated in the construction, transmission, maintenance and transformation of social identity(ies) in contemporary Scotland[1].

In my research, I investigate objects as multivocal forms of expression, as manifestations, contact or transition zones and as locations of contestation of different ideas, meanings and representations. The central research questions are thus concerned with the ways in which objects provide points of reference regarding «the making(s) of Scotland». As such, my research attempts to unravel the complex intersection of many contemporary representations present in the objects as well as in the resulting concept(s) of «Scotland». Discourse, imagination, narrative and the manufacture of meaning in every day life are central to the study. Although this indicates a discourse-oriented approach, I also aim to take the aspect of the physical existence of objects into full account. I argue that dealing with objects means considering both their materiality and the various ascriptions and interpretations attached to them. An investigation of objects as material things, perceivable by the human senses, must accompany a discourse-oriented approach because only by taking into account *both* aspects may we define the object as a (re)cognised entity (see Jost 1997)[2].

In terms of the regional aspect of my study, the emphasis is on resisting the still widespread tendency to trace Scotland through its «merchandised images». The image of Scotland embroidered by kilts, tartans, heather, thistles, bagpipes, monuments, castles and the Highland scenery is a very powerful one, but forms

[1] This research is currently funded by an Overseas Research Student Award of the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals of the Universities of the United Kingdom, and by a Faculty Group Studentship of the Faculty of Law and Social Sciences of the University of Edinburgh. The project is framed by the PhD programme of the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Edinburgh. Living in Scotland and attending a Scottish university in order to prepare fieldwork in Scotland hence somewhat blurs a clear cut distinction between the preparatory months and «the field». As I write this article, I am in my second year in Scotland, in the midst of the first encounters in the field while simultaneously pretheorising my object of empirical investigation.

just one piece in a much more complex puzzle. There is more to Scotland than the versions created by the Scottish Tourist Board, by the romantic literary imagery of Robert Burns, Sir Walter Scott and others, by Hollywood's «Braveheartery» or Welsh's «Trainspotting». «Scotland» survived the Union of Parliaments with England in 1707 as a «civil society» and a nation, and its feeling of difference and identity has developed rather than diminished[3]. «A Nation Again» was accordingly not just a newspaper headline following the referendum in September 1997, but a reflection of the (re)surfacing of a strong sense of revival which defines contemporary «Scottish identity(ies)». In the wake of the new Scottish parliament, the steady rise of support for the Scottish National Party (SNP) with «independence» written on its banner, the arrival of the new millennium, and Blair's «cool Britannia», discussions concerning national identity and Scottishness can be heard and read in many locations (the media, political platforms, the artistic and literary scene, museums, pubs, the street, etc.). These discussions reflect a criss-crossing of manifold discourses where issues of power, identity, nationalism, dominance and resistance as well as a broad range of actors, strategies and means come into play in order to manifest one or another version of «Scotland» and «Scottishness». Despite the many differing Scotlands and Scottishnesses, there is one key element that most «Scots» share: the feeling that they are, indeed, «Scottish». However strongly based on an identifiable, physical territory called «Scotland», Scottish identity can only be examined within a pluralistic project (Hague 1996: 125).

My general research framework is thus influenced by an array of theories surrounding the term «social constructivism». I attempt to break away from a spatially defined locality as the «field» for ethnographic investigation[4]. The ethnographic focus shifts from a spatial locality to locations of cultural production. Understood as a concept, «Scotland» is constructed, reconstructed, envisioned, transmitted, lived, formed and reformed by people taking part in interactions. In these interactions, they cause Hannerz's (1992) «massive flows of meaning». I have decided therefore to adopt a form of ethnographic research recently discussed by Marcus (1995). In line with his paradigm of «multi-sited ethnography», my research is located at different sites chosen by mapping the potential nodes within a network of cultural production. I treat objects as primary material; it is the object that defines the «map» for my ethnography. I follow the objects literally as they move, appear and reappear in different places, but also follow the discourses surrounding them in order to gain a better understanding of the object as a culturally and socially constructed entity in time and space.

In search for possible objects to deploy and test this conceptual framework, I kept on stumbling upon a stone. While talking with people about my research interests, annoyingly, this stone always came up as kind of a reference point in conversations about other objects. The stone that people talked about is a 152 kg coarse-grained, pinkish-buff lump of sandstone, measuring 670 x 420 x 265 mm. Its sides are roughly dressed. Each end face of the stone contains an iron staple connected to an iron ring by a figure-of-eight link. The rings match scoop-like sinks cut into the sides and top of the stone. All in all the stone's appearance is not very impressive. However, there is no other stone of its kind to be found in Scotland, and the stone can only be seen if one pays the entrance fee to visit Edinburgh Castle, climbs the stairs, passes the halls where the history of the nation is told, and finally enters the high security room where the dimmed light creates an atmosphere of mystery, worship and dignity, even when filled with a crowd of tip-toeing folks curious about what they will discover next. There, in the glass cage lined with blue velvet, equipped with carefully adjusted halogen-lighting in the centre of the so-called Crown Room, the stone silently rests, together with the Honours of Scotland. It has been there only since St. Andrews Day 1996.

[2] At the heart of my proposed approach to objects are thus a phenomenological definition of «the thing» (Merleau-Ponty, Schütz, Heidegger), Maurice Halbwachs' theory of memory', and social interactionist theory (Goffman, Giddens).

[3] The fact that Scotland, despite the Union of Parliaments, has maintained control of the areas of education, law and monetary institutions has certainly supported this «survival» of its strong civic identity.

[4] Since traditional ethnography asks for a spatially defined «field», I felt confronted with a dissonance between my research interest and such a local (i.e. spatial) research site, caught between «Scotland» and «the making(s) of it» (see also Cohen 1978, 1996; Nadel-Klein 1997: 89ff.). The present stock of ethnographies features little attempt to talk about this something called «Scotland»; indeed most ethnographic work is based on small-scale community studies in the Highlands. Up to now «Scotland» was left to neighbouring disciplines, especially history and sociology (e.g. Beveridge /Turnbull 1989; Donnachie/Whatley 1992; Gold 1995; McCrone et al. 1995). I argue that our discipline has the means (theoretical, analytical and methodological) to account for something like «the making(s) of Scotland» in a more appropriate way than by continuously increasing the stock of highly specific local studies.

The hows and whys of the stone's location are as controversial as are the stone itself and its biography(ies). What can be said for sure is that the stone is a very particular object, or rather has been *made* particular. Although the Stone's biography reaches much further back[5], the Stone was reportedly used at the coronation of ancient Scottish kings. In 1296, King Edward I marched North and took the stone as a sign of Scotland's subjugation. The Stone was placed under the Coronation Chair in Westminster Abbey, and ever since all Monarchs have been crowned sitting on the Chair with the Stone underneath. The Stone will travel South for the coronation of the next king, if there is one. While the border crossing of the Stone in 1296 was anything but glamorous, initiating the end of one of the most cruel invasions Scotland encountered in its history, the return in 1996, staged along the same route Edward's soldiers supposedly chose, was framed by a considerable number of ceremonial acts. Although the return of the Stone as announced by the Prime Minister in agreement with the Queen in July 1996 was celebrated as «the end of 700 years of custody in Westminster Abbey», this «custody» was not purely continuous, for there was another border crossing between 1296 and 1996. On Christmas eve 1950, the Stone disappeared. «Not unnaturally», Scotland was suspected[6]. In fact, the Stone was removed by four Scottish students, who later revealed it at the Abbey of Arbroath. It was nobody less than Sir Winston Churchill himself who brought the whole episode to a close by deciding that the Stone should be reinstalled at Westminster Abbey and thus remain down South. While emotions were running high during the Stone's temporary return in the 1950s, Joyce MacMillan commented on the arrival of the Stone on St. Andrews Day 1996 by writing in her column in the Scotsman: «Edinburgh stood and watched and thought its thoughts in silence».

With this lively biography, enriched by several versions and additional myths surrounding it[7], the Stone counts, or at least is displayed today, as a symbol of Scottish nationhood. The Stone and all it represents, however, did not and do not really affect people's daily lives; indeed it is probably the other way round. However, thanks to the events in 1950 and 1996, most people know about the Stone. Furthermore, on display as «one of the most important Scottish national icons» (Breeze/Munro 1997: 3) the Stone is inextricably linked with the making(s) of Scotland.

Being a symbol of nationhood and power, the Stone as well as the histories and stories around it, are still strongly connected to various political debates. Independence, or at least Home Rule, was on the political agenda in the 1950s as well as today, and the Stone attracts and evokes a variety of interpretative accounts of national identity and self-government. As the latter change and exist in different versions, so does the symbolic content of the Stone[8]. Consequently, the symbolic power of the Stone should be associated with change rather than with continuity. In the past and the present, the question of the «proper» location for the Stone, the motivation(s) for its border crossings and last but not least the ongoing debate about its «authenticity» have a strong impact on what people think and say about the Stone and its (in)significance. It is not easy to disentangle fact from fiction and although authorities sought and seek to provide as much «proof» of the Stone's authenticity as possible (through the interpretation of historical records, geological and archaeological findings), people have their own point of view and still engage in often heated and complex controversies about the matter.

Furthermore it appears rather striking how persistently and continuously the Stone – besides the attention it still gets from the academic, museum as well as the tourist «worlds» – reoccurs in all kinds of popular culture. There are novels, jokes, songs, poems, short stories, films and documentaries of past and more recent ages where the Stone gets its part. Even Hamish Macbeth, the main character of a popular Scottish BBC soap opera

[5] The official («displayed») version of its biography reaches as far back as Biblical times and the legend of Jacob's Pillow. The legend has it that the Stone was brought to Scotland by the descendants of Scota, daughter of the Pharao of Egypt, by way of Spain and Ireland. Used to install Dalriadic monarchs at Iona, Dunadd and Dunstaffnage, the Stone was then transferred to Scone by Kenneth MacAlpin, the king who traditionally united the kingdoms of the Picts and the Scots in about 843. From then the Stone was reportedly used at the inauguration and later coronation of ancient Scottish kings (c.f. Barrow 1997; Gerber 1997).

[6] Although for weeks there was no proof for this «natural» suspect, presented as such by newspapers, media and Scotland Yard, nobody seemed to have any doubts that the Stone was taken by Scots.

[7] The most lively ones being: (1) That the Stone taken by Edward I was a fake. These tales have it that the original is made of marble, carved with decorative figures – in no way resembling the plain slab on display. While Edward I was provided with a fake, the Scots hid the original coronation stone (i.e. Stone of Destiny) where it would never be found. Only a few chosen people know where it is and the saying goes that the Stone will reveal itself the day Scotland rules itself again. (2) That the Stone the students returned in 1951 was a fake.

located in a Highland village, found himself hunting the «true» Stone of Destiny throughout the length of two episodes. While these popular accounts play different instruments in the concerto of the Stone's makings, they all reveal the Stone's persistent potential to evoke imagination, irony and humour, always intertwined with a certain point of view about Scotland, what it is, was, should be or might become.

The above discussion illustrates how I understand my working title «Caution – Stone Crossing Scotland». The title hints at the different crossings my research seeks to incorporate. Accordingly, I «follow the Stone» to detect an initial choice of sites. On the one hand, the Stone's materiality calls for an investigation of the Stone «on the move», as removed, placed, replaced, (in)visible, touched, installed and reinstalled at different places, in different (physical / spatial / temporal) contexts. On the other hand, turning to the Stone as a potential symbol, these moves mark moments where the controversy about its meaning surface. As Cohen states, «symbols are effective because they are imprecise. Though obviously not contentless, part of their meaning is "subjective"». Indeed, most of the time we are quite unaware that we attach meanings to them which differ from those which others might attach (Cohen 1985: 21). I am arguing that this counts particularly for objects, where a lot «goes without saying» because the object is *there*, present. Hence, without being an object that affects people's lives greatly, they still do account for the Stone, and put their feet down «when the time comes»[9].

Such preliminary considerations not only point to the massive amount of data which must be investigated, together with the people involved, they also suggest that a new book of questions might be opened by each data set that is collected and brought together. For now, I can thus only point to some aspects I seek to investigate further throughout fieldwork and analysis.

Focusing on the «politics of identity», for example, raises the question whether the «authenticity» one is talking about today is the same as that of the 1950s. «Authenticity» itself must be seen as a construct dependent on context and the purposes for which it is brought to the fore[10]. The voluntary and spontaneous return of the Stone by the English seemed to threaten that part of Scottishness built upon «grievance» and «oppression» (e.g. Ascherson 1998). Seeing the whole act primarily as a hypocritical political move staged by Michael Forsyth, former Scottish Secretary of State and then Tory Westminster was one (and probably not a very farfetched) way «to put things straight» again. Another was provided by the whole scenario at St. Andrews Day 1996, particularly in Edinburgh with the impressively staged presence of the military, as well as by the place, right under the high flying Union jack, where the Stone went to rest. Finally, and to close the circle, the questioning of the Stone's «authenticity» can be seen as a further strategy to «deal» with the return of the Stone in order not to allow it to be seen as a glorious and generous act by the English.

Linking these «politics of identity» back to the Stone's (in)significance, we must ask another question, one which would probably be greeted with sympathy by Lévi-Strauss. Since England portrayed the return as a sacrifice in tribute to Scotland, it is worth investigating the symbolic change, not to say reversal, the meaning and power of the Stone underwent with its border crossings. On the one hand, through its use in the coronation ceremonies as well as its stay in Westminster Abbey, for a rather long time it was supposedly the English who charged it with symbolic, ritual and religious force[11]. From the «Scots' perspective», the meaning of the Stone was perhaps also derived from its location down South. The Stone was a vital symbol because and as long as it was kept «down there».

For lack of space, I now leave these preliminary thoughts, sketches and observations to the reader's own contemplation.

[8] What has not changed though is the potential of the Stone to serve as a highly controversial political symbol. While the available material speaks for itself, I am often confronted with the struggles a researcher encounters as soon as (s)he is entering, or is regarded as entering, a politically sensitive area.

[9] Consequently, many accounts at the most general level aim to explain, justify (or judge), and finally define what happened on either Christmas eve 1950 or St. Andrew's Day 1996, and, needless to say, vary widely in their conclusions (e.g. the range of labels for the removal of the Stone in the 1950s go from «apish prank», «theft» and «sacrilege» to «recovery», «bold, courageous and skilful achievement» and the like). As an ongoing discourse, both from a synchronic as well as diachronic point of view, the accounts feature and display how past, present and future all seem to fall into one another, and get (re)arranged in order to promote such and such a version. As such, the discourse rather accurately demonstrates what is meant by «discursive construction and constitution» of social reality. A thorough of record of such accounts thus provides the base to which further analysis can be anchored.

[10] I am convinced that an investigation based on ethnographic fieldwork can explain the ways in which «authenticity» is indeed not about factuality or reality, but about authority. And objects by themselves have no authority; people do (Crew/Sims 1991: 163). Therefore, during my

fieldwork I attempt to acknowledge that «it is the event that is primary, not the things or even our directed thoughts about them. And it is in the place/time of the event that the audience takes part, becoming co-creators of social meaning. Authenticity is located in the event» (Crew / Sims 1991: 174).

[11] A point which calls for an investigation of the point of view of the English. Furthermore, and in regard to the objects involved: what can be say about the establishment and break up of the Coronation Chair with the Stone underneath as a symbol for the United Kingdom? And last but not least what about the Chair, once designed and built to hold the Stone, left empty at Westminster Abbey?

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Author

Susanne C. Jost, Social Anthropologist (Lic.Phil., MSc by Research).
Department of Social Anthropology, The University of Edinburgh, Adam Ferguson Building, George Square, Edinburgh EH8 9LL. Email: <susanne.jost@ed.ac.uk>.