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Incidental Things in Historiography

Jutta Wimmler

There are some obvious differences between an archaeological and a historiographical approach to things. Put crudely, archaeologists study material 'things' while historians study texts. If historians are confronted with things, it is usually through descriptions of them (texts)—thus through the medium of the written word. In the introduction to this issue, the authors propose that the concept of *Beiläufigkeit* can help us 'to discuss the conditions and processes that are responsible for the variable status of things in a world of objects'. They also propose that a way of approaching the subject is by studying things 'that were made to be incidental'. One way of applying this to historical scholarship is to look at the way things appear—and disappear—in the historiographical narrative. If *Beiläufigkeit* is a fundamental phenomenon of socialization, as they suggest, then it is also a consequence of historical learning: we are taught when things are historically relevant and when they are not. It seems important to question this, especially if we think of historiography as part of a larger discourse that stabilizes and perpetuates hegemonic narratives—such as the narrative of the emergence of the modern West.

As an historian of the early modern Atlantic world, I will use the narrative of the rise of globalization and consumption that gave birth to modernity as an example to illustrate how the concept of *Beiläufigkeit* can help us to re-evaluate the meaning we attribute to 'things' in historical scholarship. The field called 'Atlantic history' focuses on European expansion from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries, looking at the 'birth' of globalization, consumption and their connection to exploitative labour structures. Curiously, Atlantic history has created a wealth of knowledge about certain materials while at the same time ignoring others. Scholars have written books on sugar, chocolate, coffee, tobacco and cotton—the so-called 'colonial staples' that were to shape the modern world.[1] Produced on large-scale plantations through African forced labour, these products have become known as catalysts for the early modern European 'consumer revolution'. They created new social practices (e.g. 'sociability' in coffee houses) that eventually encompassed all segments of society and led to a democratization of consumption.

This dominant narrative has at the same time marginalized other materials—it has quite literally made them *beiläufig*, in that they usually only appear in passing in the literature, either as 'other products' or in half-sentences that could easily read: 'Ginger and cassia were also produced on plantations, by the way.' The interesting thing is that, if you look closely, you will find that many of these 'by the way' products were in fact not all that 'by the way' to contemporaries. Their incidental nature is a product of scholarship: they have not been in focus so far. The question is why they have been marginalized in scholarship—why and how did they become *beiläufig*?

One way of approaching this issue is through Achim Landwehr's notion of 'forgotten history'. Forgotten, in

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Landwehr's understanding, means that a story that could have been told was previously not found worthy of being part of the historical narrative (Landwehr 2016, 234). For example, the story of the Senegambian resin gum arabic and its vital role for early modern European textile industries has been forgotten by mainstream historiography, despite the fact that the written sources allow us to tell this story and Africanist historiography has long been aware of it (e.g. Curtin 1975; Delcourt 1952; Webb 1985; 1995; Wimmler 2019). The fact that this particular story has been forgotten while others have not (for example, the story of cotton or sugar) is not irrelevant—and it is not a coincidence, either. It is, however, the result of a struggle about the meaning of the past. In other words, it results from a struggle over dominant discourse.

To Michel Foucault, the purpose of historical scholarship should be to make ourselves uncomfortable with our own assumptions: historical writings should lead to counter-memory and counter-narratives that upset our understanding of the present state of affairs (Andersen 2003, 19). He also advocated the revolt (or, in less radical terms, 'return') of subdued knowledge. Subdued knowledge, for Foucault, meant two things: first, historical contents that had been either buried or obscured and were now resurfacing through historical scholarship (Landwehr's 'forgotten history'); and second, subdued knowledge is unlearned knowledge—knowledge that is frowned upon by scholars because they believe it to be unscientific, naïve or only marginally relevant (if at all). According to Foucault, both versions of subdued knowledge originate with the same issue, the 'comprehensive tyranny of discourse' (Foucault 2003a, 219). Foucault suggests that subdued knowledge is a source of power—it is the place of origin of counter-discourses or counter-narratives (see, e.g., Foucault 2003b, 165). So, following Foucault, we can ask how the subjects of historical research become relevant and how this relevance relates to power. Understanding the story of gum arabic as subdued knowledge makes it possible to explain why something that is available in the source material and in a niche of historiography is not part of the larger discourse. It also makes it possible to think about the story of gum arabic as a source of counter-discourse or counter-narratives.

There is without a doubt a political dimension to this. If Atlantic history—currently one of the dominant historical discourses explaining the emergence of modernity and globalization—has marginalized the inconspicuous west African resin, it is because it does not sit well with established notions of said modernity. We are dealing with an African product that had a big impact on European textile manufacturing. The idea that Africa 'developed' the West has tended to evoke resistance amongst historians—the controversies created by Joseph Inikori's *Africans and the Industrial Revolution in England* (2002) as well as Judith Carney's *Black Rice* (2001) illustrate this—and both focus on the role of African slave labour in the Americas, and not on Africa itself. Gum arabic is also a product that creates a more ambivalent picture of the trading practices on west African soil. Although slaves cultivated, harvested and carried the gum from the interior to the coast, Europeans were not in control of this process, but depended on local traders and local political authorities in order to access the sought-after product. Gum arabic thus also has the potential of de-emphasizing the power of Europeans to control cultural contact with non-Europeans. In this way, the story of gum arabic can give rise to a variety of counter-memories: this and other materials can crack our well-established narratives of modernity and globalization.

As Andreas Ludwig (2015, 444) stresses, materiality 'provokes mental detours'.[2] Paraphrasing Alf Lüdtke, he describes the 'productive disturbance' created by things in a decidedly positive light. Things can challenge the way we write history. John Thornton made a similar point 27 years ago in his *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World* (1992). Thornton argued that the commonly held idea of Africa as a 'deficient' economy that was underdeveloped in comparison with that of Europe already at the initial point of contact stems largely from the fact that this was the case in the twentieth century. According to Thornton, current economic and political characteristics were simply 'read back' into the early modern period. Thornton opposes the common view that Africans were forced into commerce with Europeans because of this pre-existing deficiency, namely that they needed Europe's manufactured products because they did not produce any themselves. This characterized the Afro-European relationship in the twentieth century, but it was not the case in the early modern period, according to Thornton. Thornton's argument is essentially that the idea of African backwardness, observed by historians in their own time, has led to a misrepresentation of pre-colonial African societies and their economic potential. Interestingly, Thornton argues his counter-narrative by taking a closer look at pre-colonial West African material culture—where the dominant narrative of triangular trade had emphasized certain materials, Thornton now re-evaluated them and emphasized others.

The connection between the past and the present problematized by Thornton is also one of Achim Landwehr's main themes. Landwehr stresses that the questions we ask (and the things we consider 'relevant') derive from the time in which we ask them. As several scholars have noted, the fact that the history of consumption emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, when the western world experienced an upsurge of consumption, is certainly no coincidence (e.g. Trentmann 2009, 189, 195). The same argument can be made for the history of globalization. This relates directly to the curious finding that we know much more about certain materials than we do about others. The products that appear in every description of the 'Atlantic system' are constitutive of modernity. Who can imagine a world without sugar, chocolate, tobacco, cotton and coffee? The 'other' products, the 'invisible' ones, on the other hand, are the antithesis to modernity: natural dyestuffs, gum arabic and natural medicinals were done away with by the development of the chemical and pharmaceutical industries.

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Yet sugar, tobacco, chocolate, coffee and tea are not only constitutive of modernity as we understand it—they were also the subject of debate in the early modern period. Discussions about these products' impact on health or about the implications of new practices of sociability connected to these materials and their impact on morality are legion. The by-the-way products (like gum arabic or ginger) were not subject to such heated discussions at the time; they were not controversial. At the workshop, we discussed the visibility of things that disturb the perceived order in contrast to things that support it: this works quite well to explain the discursive prominence of coffee or cocoa as opposed to ginger or gum arabic. Lack of controversy is one of the reasons we have less information on certain things, because this means that we do not have as many written sources. In other words, historiography has tended to follow that which is described in the available written sources. Things that have no prominent place in those sources have been marginalized. For this and other reasons, African history is a discipline that has long recognized the deficiency of written records and has relied on archaeology in particular to fill in the blanks. Material remains provided the kind of access to the African past that texts could not. But what if there are no remains because the things in question are perishable, or have disappeared for other reasons? There is a point where the past escapes both the historian and the archaeologist: things can become lost. Although this seems self-evident, scholars should reflect on the implications more frequently than they usually do.

By contrast, incidental things are necessarily potentially visible—and that is what accounts for their dynamic nature. We certainly *can* cast the spotlight on them, so the question becomes *if* we do so or not—and why. In their introduction, the authors ask when and how things become *beiläufig* and when they 'move out of that status'. Maybe the question should be when they are being moved out of that status through discourse, scholarly or otherwise. If we understand historiography as part of a larger discourse, then we might think about the current fair-trade movement and the growing interest of Western consumers in the way things are made. It is not difficult to see how this may connect to the growing interest of historians in things, incidental or otherwise. For the current state of historical scholarship, however, one can hardly proclaim a democracy of things, as some archaeologists have apparently postulated. Instead, it may be more prudent to speak of a hierarchy of things. Certain things are considered more relevant than others, to have more meaning. This meaning is certainly not inherent in the things, but is attributed to them from the outside.

The authors also suggest that the focus on single things 'creates an exceptional attention that does not correspond to daily routines'. I would argue that this statement should be applied to 'traditional' plantation products like sugar. Studies concerned with individual products tend to isolate them from the whole. When focusing attention on previously marginalized things, the goal is not to replace those things that have previously been found relevant (meaning: it is not to argue that sugar or coffee were not actually relevant, while ginger or gum Arabic were). Instead, the goal should be to place them together within one or more thing-worlds, e.g. the American plantation complex or the European household. In order to do this, however, the *beiläufige* things first have to be put into focus, and thus be 'freed' from their *beiläufige* state, at least for the moment.

We should indeed move beyond binaries in order to make the concept of *Beiläufigkeit* relevant to both historiography and archaeology. Things are not either one thing or the other, either incidental or not. For one thing, this certainly depends on the setting. The slaves who harvested the gum from the acacia trees probably would have attributed a different meaning to this product than the European textile printer working with the material. At the same time, the average European consumer probably would have ascribed no meaning whatsoever to the gum, ignorant of its role in producing his or her garment. And the meaning of a thing in scholarship can change as well. I would argue that the strength of the concept lies exactly in the discussions we are having about it: thinking about *Beiläufigkeit* makes us question the meaning we attribute to things in general—and it makes us aware of the 'tyranny of discourse' that guides (historical) narratives.

Notes

1. The literature is vast—let me just name a few often-quoted works: Beckert (2014); Harwich-Vallenilla (1992); Menard (2006); Menninger (2004); Norton (2008); Schwartz (2004).
2. Original German: '[…] *die „Stofflichkeit"* […] *provoziert gedankliche Umwege*'.

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Talking Trash and the Politics of Disregard

Shannon Lee Dawdy

One of my favourite photos of my son is him as an overtired, dishevelled and very disgruntled five-year-old. He stands, holding out two globs of unidentifiable rusted metal, and looks at the camera (at me), with an accusing, penetrating glare (Fig. 1). As a distracted, overextended parent trying to run an archaeological field project (the Rising Sun Hotel in New Orleans), I had sent him to play in the dirt—the back dirt of our discard pile. I thought that's where he couldn't get into any trouble. I didn't imagine that it would get *me* into trouble. He was mad because we had overlooked these obvious artefacts (he had already grasped the subtle nature/culture distinction of the archaeological sorting process). We had disregarded them. We had attempted to make them unworthy of notice. What my son, in his innocence, was enunciating is the intentionality of ignoring something—and with intentionality, there is always a potential politics. That is what I would like to focus on here: how can we approach *Beiläufigkeit*—the incidental and taken-for-granted—as indexical of politics?

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