

Review - Making Things International 1: Circuits and Motion

Written by Daniel Møller Ølgaard

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Edited by Mark B. Salter
University of Minnesota Press, 2015

Making Things International 1: Circuits and Motion is one of those rare books that presents a simple idea and rigorously pursues it to the very last page. Taken together, the ambition of *Making Things International* is, first, to flatten our ontology of the international by deemphasizing human agents while emphasizing the prediscursive agency of objects and, second, to show how certain objects, encompassing everything from corpses, garbage and even microbes, move in particular patterns and how the international is constituted by these movements. Taken together, *Making Things International* provides a plethora of provocations that should dare even the most seasoned constructivists and realists in International Relations (IR) to start thinking about not if but *how* things matter.

The issue of 'materialism' has become increasingly prominent in IR and scholars such as Schouten (2013) and Grove (2016) have recently introduced New Materialism to the study of international politics. Editor Mark B. Salter is clear that the aim of the book is to contribute to this emerging turn. Keeping in line with Bennett's (2010) influential work, the editor's definition of materiality is neither static nor deterministic but rather vibrant, relational and, at some points, even wholly immaterial in any traditional sense. In spite of the book's strict conceptual framework, its engagement with both technologies, artifacts and devices is eclectic rather than schematic. With chapter titles ranging from 'Passport Photos', 'Symptoms', 'Breathless' and 'MemeLife' the book challenges mainstream conceptions of what 'things' actually are from the very first encounter. And while the selection criteria behind the book are not immediately apparent, *assemblage theory* serves nicely as the glue that binds its pages together.

Overall, the short chapters provide for an encouraging and rewarding reading experience. Read individually, each chapter presents meticulously researched and illuminating accounts. Read together, they form a patchwork of objects neatly knitted into the formation of the international. A few chapters stand out in this regard. Jairus Grove provides a surprising account of blood that places it at the heart of international lines of division, tracing it from Carl Schmitt's thoughts on land, state and people through to the 1924 US Racial Integrity Act that formed the backbone of Pentagon's racist blood transfusion policies during the Second World War and to the biopolitical forms of power that we are currently governed by. According to Grove it is the evasive material attributes of blood that has helped to both fuel and challenge nationalist discourses throughout history and blood has thus been central in the racialized formation of the nation state and its subjects. In a different example, Lauren Wilcox zooms out from the inside of our organs and unveils the peculiar internationalization of 'bodies' that takes place in drone warfare; a process that challenges our dominant idea of the body as singular and replaces it with the concept of 'embodied assemblage'. Thus, Wilcox provides a phenomenological perspective similar to Holmqvist's (2013) that forces us to consider the bodies we are becoming in the age of remotely controlled killer machines and blurs the line between subject and object in the process. Last but not least, Rune Saugmann Andersen's chapter traces the development of video technology from a private medium in the 1980's to today where the digital video revolution has enabled us not just to become referees vis-a-vis global events, but to mediate injustices and localized political violence to an increasingly

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global audience. In this way, Andersen cleverly shows how new technologies are enabling changes in hierarchies of knowledge and power on a global scale.

The underlying premise of the book is that New Materialism (NM) has a bearing on our understanding of the 'international' while, on the other hand, a distinctly international level of analysis – as opposed to a local, national or global one – has something to say with regards to how certain flows and movements of things are either enabled or restricted. However, this is the one aspect in which the book fails to live up to its own expectations as the book never arrives at a truly productive encounter between IR and NM. While *Making Things International* provides fresh perspectives for IR scholars, it fails to develop how an engagement with IR would contribute to NM, as explored elsewhere by scholars such as Barry (2013). Furthermore the book misses the wider philosophical and theoretical debates around new materialism pursued on the pages of authors such as Harman (2016) and Bryant (2011). One could argue that this is the price the book pays for making itself accessible to students and scholars that have yet to appreciate the *thingliness* of international politics.

Leaving my limited reservations aside and providing an overall assessment, the book is successful in unveiling the agentic capacity of 'things' and presents a timely challenge to the discursive frameworks of analysis that define much of contemporary critical IR. It speaks in favor of the book that the authors avoid any signs of techno-determinism and stay true to the dogmas of assemblage theory, meticulously describing the encounters, caveats, and complexities encountered when unveiling how objects are always, already deeply entangled with international political phenomena. Even though 'Making Things International' is not the first to attempt this, it represents the most ambitious and coherent attempt yet. For these reasons alone, it should be on the reading list of anyone with an interest in the continued dialogue between New Materialism and International Relations.

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Daniel Møller Ølgaard is a doctoral candidate at the Department of Political Science, Lund University. His research analyses the technopolitics of digital humanitarianism, examining the various ways in which technologies such as Virtual Reality, social media interfaces and algorithms participate in the governance and management of the emotional engagement of distant spectators in humanitarian disasters.

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