

# Materiality and Social Life

**Titulaire**

Alexander NEWELL (Coordonnateur)

**Mnémonique du cours**

SOCA-D4990

**Crédits ECTS**

5 crédits

**Langue(s) d'enseignement**

Anglais

**Période du cours**

Deuxième quadrimestre

**Campus**

Solbosch

## Contenu du cours

Human sociality would be impossible without the mediation of material things through which consciousness is shared and "culture" is formed, and such collective immaterial worlds are deeply embedded within the production and perception of material reality. This course examines the way we produce social relationality, social forms, cultural schemas, and structures of power and hierarchy by consuming, exchanging, making, and inhabiting the things around us. We will investigate the relationship between materiality and meaning both in the historical development of the human species and across a wide variety of contemporary societies, from hunter-gatherers to the high consumerism of contemporary capitalism. In the anthropological tradition of problematizing the opposition between persons and things, the course considers hybrids such as fetishes, masks, relics, art objects, historical antiquities and other sacred objects for what they can tell us about more quotidian interactions between humans and their possessions. Consumer culture, fashion, and self-construction through the display of things are all social activities at the core of sociality in capitalist societies, materializing and fixing cultural categories such as gender, ethnicity, class, and generation. Through ethnographic exploration of cognitive and social consequences of tools, technological transformation, and rampant accumulation of possessions we will discover the agency of material things and the ways in which materiality often exceeds our efforts to culturally constrain matter within social expectations. Finally, we will explore the environmental consequences of contemporary practices around materiality, the sheer excess of human production, and what social alternatives might produce alternative material realities.

## Objectifs (et/ou acquis d'apprentissages spécifiques)

Students will learn anthropological approaches, debates, and methods surrounding material culture and their close relation to the history of the discipline. Skills in critical thinking, comprehending and analyzing anthropological theory, and applying theory to concrete social situations will be practiced and honed.

## Pré-requis et co-requis

### Connaissances et compétences pré-requises

Students who are interested in the course but do not meet prerequisites should ask permission of the professor.

## Méthodes d'enseignement et activités d'apprentissages

The course is a hybrid between ex cathedra teaching and seminar. Students are always encouraged to break into the lecture and to respond to one another, and at times the professor will ask students for their perspective or interpretation of the readings. The smaller the number of students taking the course, the more the course will tend towards seminar style teaching. Attendance will be important to learning though not directly related to grade. If attendance is impossible, reading the and responding to readings according to the course calendar is a key component of the grade.

### Références, bibliographie et lectures recommandées

These are provided in the course plan available on UV

### Support(s) de cours

Université virtuelle

## Autres renseignements

### Lieu(x) d'enseignement

Solbosch

### Contact(s)

alexander.newell@ulb.be

## Méthode(s) d'évaluation

Portfolio

### Méthode(s) d'évaluation (complément)

Students must turn in weekly reader reports on our readings, from 1-2 pages long. Reports are not summaries but critical discussions that bring the reading into relation with other readings from the class. Passing the course requires a sufficient number of reader reports. If a student can provide a valid reason that they are incapable of following these criteria, they must arrange with the professor at the beginning of the class for another form of evaluation.

### Construction de la note (en ce compris, la pondération des notes partielles)

Evaluation is progressive: 10 reader reports worth 0-2 points each.

Up to 5 bonus points can be achieved by a 10 minutes research presentation on an independent research project about the themes of the course in the last 2 sessions of class. The presentation may be in French or English.

### Langue(s) d'évaluation principale(s)

Anglais et Français

## Programmes

### Programmes proposant ce cours à la faculté de Philosophie et Sciences sociales

MA-ANTR | **Master en anthropologie** | finalité Spécialisée/bloc 1  
et MA-SOCO | **Master en sociologie** | finalité Spécialisée/bloc 1 et  
finalité Spécialisée/bloc 2