

The British Society for the History of Science

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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With* by Sherry Turkle; *Falling for Science: Objects in Mind* by Sherry Turkle; *The Inner History of Devices* by Sherry Turkle

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fourth chapter, Alexander turns to how efficiency was measured and defined in the United States during the Progressive Era, tracing the ever-widening application of the concept to industrial management and personal discipline. She then moves to late Weimar Germany, where managers tried to control human movements in order to eliminate waste in industrial production, designing seating configurations to keep workers as fixed in their motions as the machines they serviced. Finally, Alexander turns to the scholarly controversy over Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman's 1974 *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery*, in which they argued that slaves were more efficient farm workers than free agricultural labourers in the north. She uses the dispute to untangle the links between efficiency, moral probity and violent social control in the academic discourse of late twentieth-century America.

Alexander's cases collectively demonstrate how the concept of efficiency emerged from the relative obscurity of philosophical discourse in the early modern period (alluded to but not described fully in this book) into energetic application during the Industrial Revolution and finally into bland ubiquity by the early twentieth century, when 'efficiency' became a marketing catchphrase used to advertise domestic appliances and cosmetics. The variety of cases, and their often quite detailed technical content, can make for demanding reading, as the narrative shifts quite abruptly from chapter to chapter, with relatively little attention given to drawing material together across cases. Nevertheless, this very range supports Alexander's central claim that the concept of efficiency, in its many guises, came increasingly to be the ground upon which debates over the social meaning of both technological and managerial innovations took place. The variety of meanings attached to it, and its own internal contradictions, are evidence of its increasing centrality in a world where men and machines labour ever more intimately together.

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SHERRY TURKLE (ed.), *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With*. Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2007. Pp. ix + 385. ISBN 978-0-262-20168-1. £19.95 (hardback).

SHERRY TURKLE (ed.), *Falling for Science: Objects in Mind*. Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2008. Pp. xii + 318. ISBN 978-0-262-20172-8. £19.95 (hardback).

SHERRY TURKLE (ed.), *The Inner History of Devices*. Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2008. Pp. x + 208. ISBN 978-0-262-20176-6. £19.95 (hardback).

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A 'material turn' is currently being added to the seemingly never-ending row of 'turns' in the humanities and social sciences: an increasing number of scholars are switching their attention to materiality, material objects and material artefacts. History, philosophy and social studies of science and technology are no exception to this trend. Forty years ago, the classic interest in the theoretical and conceptual development of science and technology was supplemented by studies of changing social practices; twenty years ago, studies of visualization and images in science and technology came to the forefront; now, intellectual interest is increasingly invested in material objects.

If the notion of a 'material turn' in the history, philosophy and social studies of science and technology is supposed to be more than a superficial terminological redressing, however, it needs to take the material properties of objects 'as such' seriously. This is in fact more radical than it sounds, because much of what has so far been understood as studies of material objects in science and technology has been by proxy only, i.e. textual description of objects or images of objects or, even worse, textual descriptions of images of objects. Rarely, however, have the physical objects themselves been put into the centre of immediate scholarly attention; furthermore, the emerging

ubiquity of digitalized texts and images has added to the tendency of an ever-increasing decentering of material objects 'as such'; it is only museum curators that have insisted on the direct handling and investigation of scientific and technological objects, unmediated by digital textualization and visualization.

Sherry Turkle is one of those scholars who does not want to reduce material objects to what is googlifable. In this series of three small books, published in 2007 and 2008, Turkle summarizes decades of interest in her own and others' emotional fascination with and attachment to objects. She argues that we are far too distracted by our digital dreams and that we should instead pay more attention to developing our passionate relationship with material things, be they everyday, scientific or technological objects – not least for educational reasons. Turkle suggests that we have gone too far in believing that digitalization and simulations will help solve the crisis in science and technology education, and advocates interaction with pre-digital physical objects as an alternative route for recruiting science and technology students – playing with real physical things rather than playing computer games.

To many, this may sound nostalgic, even reactionary. But Turkle is not a romantic anti-digitalization freak. As professor in social studies of science and technology at MIT, having decades of research into computer interaction and Internet identity behind her, Turkle is eminently placed to evaluate the pros and cons of interacting with scientific and technological objects via the screen versus by means of close-up and personal inspection.

*Evocative Objects* contains thirty-four short autobiographical essays by scientists, artists, designers and humanities scholars, who tell stories about how everyday, scientific and technological objects have been powerful companions in their daily life experience. For example, technology writer Annalee Newitz writes about her laptop (her 'irreplaceable ... brain prosthesis' (p. 86)) and philosopher Robert P. Crease pays homage to Foucault's pendulum, which he calls a 'deep object', a thing that 'guides and disciplines curiosity and fascination into interaction and self-transformation' (p. 294). Turkle concludes that 'we live our lives in the middle of things' (p. 6) and indicates that true cross-disciplinarity between scientists, philosophers and artists becomes possible by focusing on objects, something which allows us 'to find common ground in everyday experience' (p. 8).

The major part of the second book in the series (*Falling for Science*) is devoted to fifty-one even shorter autobiographical essays written by Turkle's MIT students over the last twenty-five years, spanning everyday things like radios, stuffed bunnies and sand castles to lasers, computers and vacuum tubes. The former student writings are supplemented by eight essays by senior researchers and designers, who were asked to look back to their childhood years to identify an object of ultimate importance for their future careers.

*The Inner History of Devices*, finally, is a collection of twelve reports written by scholars associated with MIT's Initiative on Technology and Self, led by Turkle. Based on interviews with people about how they feel about important objects, like prosthetic eyes, cardiac defibrillators and dialysis machines, they are seen by Turkle as 'intimate ethnographies' infused with the self-reflective 'sensibilities of the clinician and the memoirist' (p. 3).

Together these over a hundred essays give a rich insight into the wide range of possibilities for how scientific, and especially technological, objects enter into our emotional lives and help us think. In Turkle's understanding, objects bring together intellect and emotion: 'We think with the objects we love; we love the objects we think with' (*Evocative Objects*, p. 5).

By focusing on how scientists, engineers and designers engage concretely, personally and affectively with objects, Turkle introduces a healthy common-sensical approach to the 'material turn' in the history, philosophy and social studies of science and technology. She carries her assorted theoretical background (some French structuralism, some Piaget, a pinch of Freud, and especially Lacanian psychoanalytical thinking) lightly: the many concrete cases largely speak for

themselves, giving the reader a feeling of being close to the authors' actual cognitive and emotional experience.

I have two problems with these otherwise delightful and edifying collections. First, one of the consequences of Turkle's psychoanalytic leanings is that the material objects tend to be reduced to mere props in the narrative unity of the subjects, whereas the particular materiality of the objects themselves tends to be underexamined. These books are, then, slightly paradoxically, better at explaining the life of the inquiring mind than they are at examining the materiality of life. Second – although I devoured the nine hundred pages in one long uninterrupted reading session – I ended asking myself whether the immediate experiential feel reflects the authors' actual experiences or whether the latter are to some extent post hoc reconstructions. For example, in her essay 'Microscope' (*Falling for Science*, pp. 220–226), neurobiologist Susan Hockfield (presently MIT president) claims that, from an early age, she 'wanted to see inside things', magnified them and took them apart. But I cannot see how this 'memory' gives the reader (or Hockfield herself) any clues to understanding her later scientific career. It is either banal (what kid does not like taking things apart to see what is inside?) or a standard trope for scientific autobiographies (a neuromicroscopist ought to have such a childhood).

This points to a pervasive problem in the three volumes under review. Autobiographical memories and witness reports are notoriously unreliable. It is difficult to say whether all these delightful stories about childhoods full of Lego (the popular toy bricks loom large in these retrospective accounts), bubbles, card decks and Atari computers stem from memories generated in childhood or whether they are the result of later fantasies, free associations and cultural expectations. But maybe it does not really matter. The question of their veracity does not add to or subtract from the charm and power of seduction inherent in these stories. So even if there were not any evocative objects in the childhoods of the authors of these essays, they and their editor have surely produced a great set of evocative stories, which may help historians of science and technology to intensify the current 'material turn'.

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