

Introduction

Reverse Engineering the Polity

Every modern election season seems to bring with it at least one episode where the pressing concerns of the public sphere collide with the absurdity of politics on the hustings. The 2008 U.S. presidential campaign was no exception, thanks in large measure to an extended national conversation on the relation between a single small object and the political community. The topic was introduced early in the primary campaign when a reporter for KCRG-TV in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, asked Barack Obama why he was not wearing a flag pin on his lapel. The reporter noted that these pins had become standard issue for politicians of all stripes since the attacks of 9/11 and so its absence was conspicuous. Obama answered:

Shortly after 9/11 . . . [a flag pin] became a substitute for, I think, true patriotism, which is speaking out on issues that are of importance to our national security. . . . I decided I won't wear that pin on my chest. . . . Instead I'm gonna' try to tell the American people what I believe will make this country great and hopefully that will be a testimony to my patriotism. (*New York Times*, 10/4/2007)

The episode was quickly picked up by a wide array of news outlets, and Obama's "refusal" to wear a flag pin became a matter of widespread speculation.

For pundits in the mainstream press, the absent flag pin served as a shorthand for concerns over Obama's shaky relationship with segments of the American public. Charles Gibson suggested in one democratic primary debate that Obama's absent flag pin represented "a major vulnerability" in his campaign for the White House insofar as it bore upon the "general theme of patriotism" and the candidate's commitment to a shared American political culture.¹ For right-wing media outlets, the flag pin was a stalking

¹ *New York Times* online transcript of Democratic debate in Philadelphia. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/16/us/politics/16text-debate.html?pagewanted=print>.

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horse for the far more libelous rumors that were circulating about Obama's personal history, which cast him as everything from a smug elitist to an agent of a foreign power.² For Obama supporters, the debate was simply witless: cheap trinkets, they retorted, are not indices of the deep sentiments at the heart of the public sphere.³

Obama initially held his ground in the media maelstrom, explaining, "I'm less concerned with what you're wearing on your lapel than what's in your heart" (quoted in *Time*, 5/14/2008). Such an argument for the salience of substantive sentiments over simple sensation would appear to have a great deal of intellectual force behind it, a mature retort to the Polonius-inspired superficiality of vesting political community in a "mere" trinket. But the assertion that there was no relationship between material culture and our attachment to the body politic failed to quell the controversy. On April 16, 2008, Obama appeared at a town hall meeting in Pennsylvania and rather dramatically, if a bit awkwardly, donned a flag pin given to him by a veteran in the audience. The charismatic candidate, his promises and policies, were eclipsed by a small \$1.35 pin on a black lapel. Indeed, the flag pin became an outsize presence in an election-year debate over patriotism, including a solo appearance on the cover of *Time* (July 7, 2008) above the headline "The Real Meaning of Patriotism."

Though widely lampooned as one of the strangest threads of the 2008 election cycle, the flag pin fuss nonetheless exposed a critical lacuna in both political theory and practice: we remain entirely uncertain as to how political communities are bound to—and bound by—the complex world of things. And yet, the intuition that an account of the ordering of political community must entail an understanding of the order of things lies at the very roots of Western political thought. Indeed, Obama's struggle with the flag pin reads rather astonishingly like a modern retelling—now as farce—of Plato's Allegory of the Cave.

At the opening of book 7 of the *Republic*, Socrates describes for Glaucon how the subjects of a political community are like prisoners in a cave with legs and necks chained so that they are able to see only the wall before them. Behind them, puppeteers carry "all sorts of vessels, and statues and figures of animals made of wood and stone and various materials" (Plat. *Rep.* 514b–c; this and other such translations by Jowett), which pass in front of a large fire and cast shadows on the wall. These shadows are but representations of the real—indeed, they are first- and second-order representations

² Right-wing pundit Sean Hannity weighed in on the matter, declaring, "Why do we wear flag pins? Because our country is under attack"; see also Brooks 2008; Limbaugh 2008.

³ Harshaw 2008; Linkins 2008; Mapes 2008.

because they are shadows cast by models and effigies—and yet the prisoners take them as authentic forms since they know no other phenomena.

In order to rule these subjects, one prisoner is freed from his bonds and compelled to see the fire and the marionettes and thus understand the shadows on the wall for what they truly are—simulacra. The prisoner is forced to journey out of the cave, an “ascent of the soul” to the “intellectual world” that imbues him with the knowledge that the objects known to us through sensation are merely shadows of the authentic world of universal Forms. Things are thus revealed to be epiphenomenal to ideas, sensation subservient to understanding. Material things, Socrates concludes, are thus not proper objects of examination in themselves but only as they provide a route to understanding the higher Forms. Obama initially seemed to concur, suggesting that flag pins were mere simulacra whose relation to the deep sentiments of patriotism was a matter of deep skepticism.⁴

When Plato’s former prisoner, now in a state of wakefulness, returns to the cave, it is no longer as subject but as ruler, made sovereign by his understanding of the capital *G* Good (the Form that makes all things intelligible) and by his suspicion of mere lowercase *g* goods. By ultimately donning the flag pin, Obama seemed less convinced of the efficacy of the flag pin in revealing sentiment than simply cognizant of the ghastly fate that Plato suggested awaits philosopher kings who try to free prisoners from mistaking simulacra for the real—death by mob violence (*Rep.* 517a). And yet the flag pin was remarkably efficacious. Once donned, it effectively ended the debate over the candidate’s patriotism. Throughout his two terms in office, the pin has been ever-present, a talisman able to ward off attacks on his affective commitment to the American public sphere.

The media furor over Obama’s flag pin was dominated by debates over sentiments of political attachment, but the real dissonance of the episode lay in the striking contrast between the exaggerated sense of the flag pin as public emblem and the underwhelming sensible qualities of the die-cast object itself. Although it would be analytically tempting to cleave the “mere” matter of the object from its representational capacity, such a move would obscure the wider assemblage that allowed the flag pin not only to passively mean but to operate within the field of U.S. electoral politics. That is, the flag pin was enmeshed in a complex assemblage that, in one dimension, extended across the sociotechnical systems of large-scale die-cast metal manufacturing, in another implicated a field of personal adornment deeply

⁴ Indeed, Obama seemed to echo Henry David Thoreau’s (1882: 27) thoroughly transcendentalist (indeed, material-world defying) admonition to “beware of all enterprises that require new clothes, and not rather a new wearer of clothes.”

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indebted to European traditions of military dress and decoration, and in still another reached into a historically deep field of national heraldry and representation. Each of these assemblages is embedded in the matter of the pin, inseparably binding the material and the representational.⁵ Obama's flag pin was thus merely a singular instantiation of a spatially and historically complex material assemblage.

Unfortunately, modern political philosophy offers us distressingly few tools for understanding the object matter of political life, and hence the episode of the flag pin seems at first glance to be merely an electoral grotesquerie. The traditional modern understanding of political association, from Thomas Hobbes to Jean-Jacques Rousseau to John Rawls, has centered resolutely, perhaps obsessively, on the person of the citizen, whose interactions with other members of the body politic establish and reproduce the possibilities and limits of sovereignty. However, the flag pin debate underlined the fact that rarely do we interact with one another directly as citizens. Rather, a vast assemblage of things incessantly intrudes upon our civic practices, from ballots and bullets to licenses, currency, furnishings, robes, and regalia. What does an archaeology of the physical matter of sovereignty reveal about political life and the historical formation of the polity? Moreover, the inverse question is at present no less pressing: What do the relations of authority reveal about the operations of objects? As we shall see in chapter 1, although the emerging wave of materiality theory has keenly focused our attention on things, it has provided less direction in how we should theorize their capacity to shape the relations between sovereigns and subjects that lie at the heart of the political. This book is an effort to address these two overlapping lacunae in our understanding of material assemblages and political association by attending to the machinery that works to reproduce conditions fundamental to sovereignty.

THE CONDITIONS OF SOVEREIGNTY

Our constant and enduring interaction with things poses challenging questions for the human relationships that we traditionally position at the center of our wider social and political worlds. Modern democracies are typically presumed to cohere thanks to the shared interactions of members with one another, defined by the rights and obligations of citizenship en-

⁵ A point that Webb Keane (2005) makes quite elegantly, working outward from the semiotic tradition.

shrined in constitutions and customary law. However, rarely do citizens encounter one another in forums not mediated by a panoply of things. When we participate in elections—the *sine qua non* of participatory democracy—we enter a booth that explicitly shields us from one another so that we may have an intimate, private encounter with a voting machine. When citizens of modern mass democratic polities attend public rallies, their encounters with those who govern are mediated by televisions, radios, microphones, public address systems, TelePrompTers, newspapers, stretch limos, flags, red, white, and blue bunting, bumper stickers, lawn signs, and a prodigious array of things that enable and constrain relations to one another and to political leaders. What is the impact of all this stuff on political life? Is it possible to define the polity as “we the people” to the exclusion of the things that form, bind, and order? Furthermore, if we include the object world in our understanding of political association, how does this alter traditional understandings of the relationship between subjects and sovereigns?

I should be clear at the outset that to speak of the sovereign is to address not simply a titular figurehead of government but the apparatus of supreme authority *in toto*; not just king, chancellor, or president, but the entire institutional order upon which they rely. The body of the sovereign ruler is often a matter of deep concern as a metonym of the wider political order. To declare in the classical phrasing that “the king is dead, long live the king” is to confirm the uninterrupted reproduction of the polity as a whole (Kantorowicz 1957: 412). The bodies of heads of state are only one element in a wider assemblage, one that embraces not only other official bodies but, central to this discussion, a myriad of things.

In its Hobbesian (Hobbes 1991) sense, sovereignty describes an ultimate authority, an apparatus of supremacy within a delimited territory that insinuates itself into all other domains of association—the home, the workplace, and elsewhere. Michel Foucault (2003: 35–36) consigned Hobbes’s account of sovereignty to the premodern era, a form of political power staked on a homology between the body of the monarch and the body politic, in contrast to modern forms of biopolitics that inscribe authority directly on the “docile bodies” of subjects. However, as Giorgio Agamben (1998: 6) has pointed out, modern techniques of authorization and technologies of subjection that draw “bare life” into the political sphere do not represent historical ruptures in a new age of “governmentality.” To the contrary, the twinning of life and politics is “the original activity of sovereign power” (*ibid.*). Thus, the study of sovereignty is not an investigation of a historically restricted formal type of political order, as Foucault suggested, but rather an inquiry into a “tentative and always emergent form of author-

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ity grounded in violence that is performed and designed to generate loyalty, fear, and legitimacy from the neighborhood to the summit of the state” (Hansen and Stepputat 2006: 297).

Agamben (1998: 39) locates sovereignty in the articulation of “constituting power” (i.e., the principles that authorize the polity as an association) and “constituted power” (i.e., the practices of governance). Both powers ultimately rest upon forms of violence: an originary revolutionary violence of political foundation and an ordering violence of enforcement and political reproduction (a distinction derived from Benjamin’s [1978: 287] distinction between law-making and law-preserving violence). Sovereignty thus resides simultaneously both within and outside of a constituted order, a dual positioning rendered most apparent in the capacity to decide upon exceptions to the enforcement of other claims, whether traditional, juridical, or bureaucratic (Schmitt 1985). Sovereignty, in sum, is not a substantive quality to be possessed but rather a *condition* of political interactions, embedded in the “actualities of relations” (Humphrey 2004: 420) that define both the interiors and exteriors of associations. Specifically, in the chapters that follow, I argue that sovereignty requires the continual reproduction of (at least) three conditions:

1. Establishment of a coherent public defined by relations of inclusion and exclusion that are materially marked and regulated
2. Definition of a sovereign figure (whether individual or corporate), cut away from the community by instruments of social and martial violence
3. Manufacture of an apparatus capable of formalizing governance by transforming the polity itself into an object of desire, of care, and of devotion

The archaeological studies of the three phases of the Bronze Age in the South Caucasus presented in chapters 3, 4, and 5 are organized as investigations into the role of certain highly efficacious assemblages in reproducing these three conditions.

There are two key corollaries to this definition of sovereignty that I want to highlight. First, each condition depends upon the reproduction of specific material assemblages that do critical political work. Second, sovereignty emerges in the historical coalescence of interdigitated assemblages. Sovereignty in this sense is a quintessentially archaeological category, reproduced in the domain of things over the *longue durée*.

An archaeological account of sovereignty necessarily demands an analytical framework that allows us to conceptualize objects at work within a social field defined by power, where objects do not simply mean but oper-

ate to enable and constrain social possibilities and historical trajectories. The intuition that civic affairs might be shaped as profoundly by goods as by the Good has been most succinctly captured by the familiar trope of the “political machine.”

MACHINE POLITICS

The phrase “political machine” today is largely reserved to describe the urban patronage systems that supported enduring municipal regimes in U.S. cities from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries. This use of the term to describe a disciplined, hierarchical organization that mobilizes voting blocks in support of autocratic rule is most familiar from Boss Tweed’s Tammany Hall in New York City or Richard J. Daley’s Cook County Democratic Party. But the trope reaches back to at least the late eighteenth century, when the philosopher John Millar (1796: 87) wrote a letter to the *Scots Chronicle* with this lament:

No minister can now hope to remain in office, or to be permitted to execute even the most beneficial measures, unless, as it has been emphatically expressed, he greases the wheels of the political machine. For this purpose, pensions are bestowed, sinecure places are instituted.

In this pejorative sense, a political machine is an apparatus for manufacturing authority through a clientelist system run by a boss who secures authority through potentially corrupt *quid pro quo* exchanges of money or other material goods. The term denotes a practical, highly experiential relationship between things and political authority as the former provide the “grease” that ensures the reproduction of the latter. However, the term has a far deeper history, and more richly varied denotation, than current usage typically allows.

The use of mechanical metaphors for political activity has an obscure origin in the rhetorical recruitment of the Latin *machina*—a device of war or siege craft—into political oratory.⁶ For Virgil, the Trojan Horse was a particularly sinister *machina*, and for Tacitus, siege engines and war machines were critical to countless Roman victories. It is thus not surprising that such formidable things would percolate into the political lexicon. Cicero drew the military sense of a “machine” into the political arena in his second speech against proposed changes to the agrarian laws, warning, “I

⁶ E.g., Tacitus *Historiae* 2.34; Livy 1.43.3, 44.9.2.

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perceive that nearly the whole of this law is made ready, as if it were a machine [*machinam*], for the object of overthrowing [Pompey's] power" (Cicero *Agr.* 2.18). Here, the political sense of the mechanical trope is intended quite narrowly to highlight the ability of law to serve as an instrument of legislative combat.

Only at the end of the Middle Ages was the trope of the machine pulled into more substantive terrain, thanks in large measure to its adoption by an emerging scientific literature to describe the physical operation of the earth and solar system. The thirteenth-century astronomer John of Sacrobosco described the earth as a *machina mundi*, an observation that would later reverberate among Enlightenment deists, such as Gottfried Leibniz, who sought to imagine the world as a "great Machine going on without the Interposition of God, as a Clock continues to go without the assistance of a Clockmaker."⁷ Ironically, it was the mendicant Augustinus Triumphus who, anxious to defend the powers of the papacy, drew Sacrobosco's divinity-less machinic metaphor into affairs of state less than a century after it was first articulated, arguing that because the "machine of the world is but one realm . . . there should therefore be but one ruler" (quoted in Ockham 1992: 18).

But if the machine of the world can run smoothly, it can also break down, an observation made most powerfully by Montaigne. Reflecting on the fragility of political community during France's wars of religion of the sixteenth century, Montaigne (1965: 101) fretted with palpable anxiety: "Who is it that, seeing the havoc of these civil wars of ours, does not cry out, that the machine of the world is near dissolution." Early usages of the mechanical metaphor thus centered on the interdependence of moving parts within a global, as opposed to expressly political, system, so the thrust of the analogy was purely formal—like the ancient *machina*, the world too relies on the smooth integration of component parts, but if those parts are disrupted, catastrophe and misery result.

Rousseau adopted the machine analogy to describe the mechanical interdependence of subjects and authorities that legitimates political authority within the social contract:

The social pact is of a particular and unique nature, in that the people contracts only with itself—that is to say, the people as sovereign body contracts

⁷ Clarke's first reply to Leibniz (1989: 677). The metaphor of the machine of the world occupied a critical point of disagreement between Leibniz and Newtonian natural philosophy. Leibniz criticized the Newtonians for assuming that God, like a good clockmaker, might need to intervene in the world to ensure its proper running. For Leibniz, the workings of nature were so well engineered that they did not require maintenance.

with the individuals as subjects. This condition constitutes the whole artifice of the political machine and sets it in motion. It alone renders legitimate, reasonable, and free from danger commitments that would otherwise be absurd, tyrannical, and subject to the most enormous abuses. (Rousseau 1979: 461)

Once set into a political frame, tropes of mechanical harmony and disintegration became powerful imaginaries of governmental sustenance and subversion. Hegel, committed to the State as the setting for the realization of freedom, described a critical moment in the formation of the early polity when individual interests were lashed to the collective: “But in a State many institutions must be adopted, much political machinery invented, accompanied by appropriate political arrangements . . . involving, moreover, contentions with private interest and passions, and a tedious discipline of these latter, in order to bring about the desired harmony” (Hegel 2011: 23). In contrast, Herbert Spencer, a nineteenth-century proto-libertarian and critic of the state, argued:

When we devise a machine we take care that its parts are as few as possible; that they are adapted to their respective ends; that they are properly joined with one another; and that they work smoothly to their common purpose. Our political machine, however, is constructed upon directly opposite principles. Its parts are extremely numerous: multiplied, indeed, beyond all reason. They are not severally chosen as specially qualified for particular functions. No care is taken that they shall fit well together: on the contrary, our arrangements are such that they are certain not to fit. And that, as a consequence, they do not and cannot act in harmony. (Spencer 1981: 333)

Both Hegel and Spencer set the political machine within the traditional tropic field of the mechanical analogy, defined narrowly by harmonious operation or catastrophic failure. Its power is thus largely descriptive.

A more analytic deployment of the machinic trope attends not only to the integration of parts but also the automotility of the resulting automaton. Most notably, Adam Smith called attention to the political consequences of the aesthetics of machines in motion and the ability to thus implicate human subjects in tending to their operation:

The same principle, the same love of system, the same regard to the beauty of order, of art and contrivance, frequently serves to recommend those institutions which tend to promote the public welfare. . . . The contemplation of them pleases us, and we are interested in whatever can tend to advance them. They make part of the great system of government, and the wheels of the *political machine* seem to move with more harmony and ease by means of them.

We take pleasure in beholding the perfection of so beautiful and grand a system, and we are uneasy till we remove any obstruction that can in the least disturb or encumber the regularity of its motions. (Smith 1976: 185)

Smith's political machine is thus not simply a descriptive analogy but a powerful analytic that locates an account of political reproduction in our aesthetic commitments to an apparatus of rule.⁸

But although Smith understood the political machine as an engine for inculcating civic virtues, by the nineteenth century the grim aesthetics of industrial technology had wrapped an analytic sense of the term less in pleasure than in terror. As a result, the operation of political machines came to be centered not on producing virtue but on manufacturing subjection. This understanding of the political machine is most acutely described in the work of Marx⁹ and, still more perceptively, in that of Engels: "The central link in civilized society is the state, which in all typical periods is without exception the state of the ruling class, and in all cases continues to be essentially a machine for holding down the oppressed, exploited class" (Engels 1990: 274–75). Engels's tyrannical machine is the antithesis of Smith's object of beauty, a terrifying monstrosity that uses technology as a weapon of domination. Most significantly, however, a Marxian conception of the machine is not metaphorical because it points directly to the things—the real machinery (MacKenzie 1984)—that stand in tension with the humans who invent, tend, repair, and utilize them. Acts of spoliation targeting new technologies, such as the riots that greeted the ribbon loom and the wool-shearing machine during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries or the Luddite movement of the early nineteenth century, were, according to Marx, acts of resistance to the displacement of labor encouraged by mechanization (Marx 1906: 468–69). As a result, Marx presumed that attacks on the machinery of industry were sadly misdirected.

As the analytic of the machine entered into twentieth-century critical theory, however, there was a wider sense that material things possessed not only motility but also autonomy and thus the potential for mastery. Georges Bataille's (1988: 136) argument that capitalist modernity presumes an "unreserved surrender to things," a new politics of human servitude to the independent logics of a world of objects, draws the machine not only into an

⁸ Smith makes a similar argument in *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Smith 1982: 316), namely, that our associations to one another are bound most strongly not by naked interest but by the aesthetic pleasure of the "beautiful and noble machine" of human society, whose smooth operation pleases and disrupted workings vex.

⁹ See especially the discussion of "Machinery and Modern Industry" in volume 1 of *Capital*.

analytical field but also into a critical one. Thereafter, the image of the tyrannical machine shambles through the modern imaginary, exposing the roots of a deep ambivalence over the political work that things do. On the one hand, Bataille's vision thrives in a scholarly and popular imaginary of things at work to subdue humanity, ranging from the demonic *Maschinenmensch* of Fritz Lang's (1927) *Metropolis* to the digital enslavement of *The Matrix* (1999), from Oswald Spengler's (1932) dire warnings of impending doom in *Man and Technics* to Herbert Marcuse's (1964) anticonsumerism in *One-Dimensional Man*. On the other hand, Smith's sense of a machine capable of cultivating civic virtue—updated and grounded in specific technologies by Lewis Mumford (1934) in *Technics and Civilization*—reverberates in the contemporary desire to understand information technologies (from Twitter and Facebook to WikiLeaks and Wikipedia) as inherently democratizing technologies, able to dismantle tyranny and empower democracy through the power of a smartphone (Faris 2012; Gerbaudo 2012; O'Connor 2012). What is intriguing about the intellectual history of the political machine is how it highlights both our awareness of the object matter of the polity and our consistent failure to take seriously the political work that things *actually* do, as opposed to the work that we fear, or hope, they do. In chapter 1, I work to develop an analytic of the political machine that does just that.

To forward an analytic of the political machine requires inverting the form of (mis)recognition that Marx described as “fetishism.” Where commodity fetishism emerges from laborers mistaking their own action for the action of things, “which rule the producers instead of being ruled by them” (Marx 1906: 86), attending to the political machine means locating socio-historical forces in the logics of material assemblages *in addition to* (not as a substitution for) the agency of humans. This move entails not only a recuperative project attentive to the motility of objects, but also an effort to theorize the points of articulation that join the organic human body to the inorganic thing. How can we define such heterogeneous points of encounter that stretch from the physical engagement of hands and tools to the imagined vitality of the traditional fetish?

BODIES AND THINGS

On May 15, 1591, the church bell in the Russian town of Uglich sounded the death knell (fig. 1). The young Tsarevitch Dmitri, exiled epileptic third son of Ivan the Terrible, was dead, found stabbed in a courtyard, lying in a



Fig. 1. Detail of Tsarevich Dmitry Icon showing the sainted prince and the church of the Uglich (eighteenth century, in the collections of the State Museum of the History of Religion, Saint Petersburg). (Source: Wikimedia Commons.)

pool of blood. As the bell tolled, rumors flew through the town that Boris Gudonov, the ambitious regent for Tsar Fyodor, had killed Dmitri in order to remove a potential rival to the throne. Riots followed, leading to the lynching of several local Gudonov agents. In the aftermath, a special commission concluded that the tsarevich had stabbed himself when he suffered a seizure during a game. Gudonov exiled the leaders of the riots, but

a special punishment was reserved for the instigator of the riots: the bell of Uglich. Its tongue (clapper) was cut out, its ear torn off, and it was publicly flogged. The bell was then exiled to Tobolsk, Siberia, where on arrival it was registered as the town's first "inanimate exile" (Batuman 2009: 24). In exile, the bell was treated with reverence as an amulet for the protection of children. The people of Tobolsk refitted it with a clapper and hung it in the church belfry in defiance of Gudonov's orders. Subsequently, it came to be widely believed that water poured over the bell's clapper—the first tongue to mourn the dead tsarevitch—was a powerful elixir for curing sick children.

As an episode of sovereignty both challenged and reproduced by the workings of things, the incitements of the Uglich assemblage—from the tsarevitch's knife to the bell to the ropes that lynched Gudonov's agents to the Tobolsk elixir—provide a succinct schematic of the points of encounter between material things and human bodies. The dramatic tangibility of the plunging dagger and clanging bell demands attention most immediately to the domain of the sensible—the point of articulation between the somatic capacities of human bodies and the physical affordances of material forms. The sensible here refers neither to bodily perception nor to the inherent properties of materials but to the point of experiential encounter between them as they shape and reshape one another. Yet clearly the encounter between the Uglich community and its assemblage cannot be contained by the boundaries of the sensible.

Perhaps most critical to the episode was the sensual quality of the peal of the bell, which Orthodox tradition had long described as the voice of God on earth. To hear Uglich's bell was not simply an aural experience, but a moment of sense perception situated within regimes of sociocultural value. Gudonov's punishment of the bell was a mercilessly physical one—an intervention in sensible technology that rendered it mute—and yet its full violence is most palpable in the domain of sense as an act of iconoclasm, a desecration of the resistive values circulating within an assemblage of resistive things.

Lastly, the episode as a whole, and particularly the Tobolsk epilogue, suggests a field of sentiment that articulated imaginations of the efficacy of things with everyday healing practices that challenged the commands of the sovereign. The prevailing sentiment that a bell might defend a child accords matter a unique capacity to intervene in human affairs. That the bell's actions were understood as defense of legitimate political authority against usurpation suggests that the material world was enveloped within the project of political reproduction.

The riotous assemblage of Uglich thus articulated with the town's denizens across a series of analytically distinct (although experientially simultaneous) human–object confrontations that implicated one another at every turn. The first, *sensibility*, refers most immediately to the physicality of things as they flow amidst relations of power and to their transubstantiation from one state to another as they move: ores become ingots, clays becomes pots, stones becomes sickles. *Sense*, in contrast, is a domain of semiosis, of signs and signification where the encounter of humans and material assemblages possesses not only functional capacities, but evocative potencies. If sensibility is the domain of fact, sense is the domain of value. Whereas the sensible embraces the alteration of material states and distributions, the sensual describes metamorphoses in values—debris become relics, discard becomes art, crafts become commodities. Furthermore, sense also encompasses the transfigurations worked upon our human bodies as our things reposition us within shifting aesthetic terrain. Alfred Gell (1992) described this phenomenon as the “technology of enchantment,” the capacity of objects to secure our bodily acquiescence to their demands. Furthermore, Gell grounded the technology of enchantment in what he reciprocally called the “enchantment of technology,” the construal of material techniques of production as not simply technical skill, but magical prowess. The magical “halo” that surrounds certain things establishes a social field of *sentiment* that embeds the capacities of things within the objects themselves rather than within our senses. Thus, where sense and sensibility are linked to the direct human encounter with objects, sentiment describes the imagined capacities of things.

The regimes of sentiment within which things are situated are potentially quite expansive, ranging from tropes of maintenance and care that Hodder (2012) describes as “entrapment” to themes of contagion, perhaps best known ethnographically from proscriptions that circulate around the activities of smiths and potters (Gosselain 1999). These represent imaginations of the needs and capacities of things, their potential not just to function, but to take part in social life. To describe these as sentiments is not to argue that they are not also profoundly physical relationships. Sentiments of care clearly entail obligations to constantly attend to the sensible qualities of things. However, maintenance requirements that bind humans to things can be located within a wide array of affective registers, ranging from loving devotion (e.g., the carefully tended model train of the hobbyist, the meticulously cleaned firearm of the gun enthusiast) to tyrannical oppression (e.g., the same firearm to those antithetical to “gun culture”). In the studies of the Bronze Age Caucasus that preoccupy this book, I am

most interested in sentiments of captivation that subjugate human action to the operation of objects. Fetishes, talismans, charms, and amulets are all objects of captivation that rely upon the attribution of an inherent power to things. But as we shall see, captivation is more consequentially the power of things to constrain our imagination of alternative lives and sociopolitical orders.

In sum, three key points of intersection between human bodies and material objects provide a basic conceptual platform for an inquiry into their articulation:

- Sensibility: the physical, experiential elements of object form and assemblage distribution that establish the facts of material order;
- Sense: the perceptual, ideological qualities of things that articulate objects with social, political, and cultural values;
- Sentiment: the imaginative domain of affect in which representations place objects within affective regimes.

These three concepts structure the analyses of the Bronze Age Caucasus that I undertake in chapters 3, 4, and 5.

There are clear similarities between this tripartite rubric and the triad of experience/perception/imagination that I explored in *The Political Landscape*, based on conceptual schemas defined by Henri Lefebvre (1991) and David Harvey (1989). Both of these triads proceed from the immediate physicality of encounter (sensibility and experience), to the apprehension of an exteriority (sense and perception), to representations of the order of things (sentiment and imagination) that embed the material world within dense layers of meaning and action. Both triads are heuristic devices that necessarily partition our mutually penetrating points of contact with the material world in order to muster the distinct epistemologies and analytical tools that each component of the triad demands. A study of commodity desire necessarily utilizes different tools than, say, an account of the techniques of craft production. But both are clearly integral to a holistic relational ontology of the material world.

I conceptually distinguish our encounters with things and landscapes for one fundamental reason, namely, that our bodies move across and within landscapes, but things circulate around us. This real and potential motility suggests the possibility of substantial divergences in our relation to such very different elements of our material world, even though the line between landscape and object is by no means stark. A hillock of tuff can be cut into portable building blocks that move long distances before settling

into the walls of a building, which when it falls into ruins is itself quarried, setting the stones in motion once again. Hence, although things and landscapes may be analytically distinct vis-à-vis human sociality, they are clearly mutually implicated elements of the expansive material world.

INTO THE CAUCASUS

There are few places more mythologically well suited for an inquiry into the object matter of sovereignty than the Caucasus (fig. 2), the land of Prometheus. Having stolen fire from Olympus and bequeathed it to humanity, the fate of Prometheus (which I discuss at greater length in chapter 1) was to be shackled and nailed to the bare slopes of the windswept Caucasus for eternity; humanity's fate was thereafter to be lashed inextricably to the devices and contrivances that followed from their newly acquired skills in the pyrotechnic arts. The Great Caucasus range traverses over 1,100 kilometers along the northern end of the isthmus that divides the Eurasian steppes from southwest Asia. The slopes and foothills north of the Great Caucasus ridge are generally referred to as the North Caucasus, a region that incorporates the southern provinces of the Russian Federation. The South Caucasus, the primary focus of the archaeological studies in this book, comprises the territory south of the Great Caucasus ridge to the Araks River, including the three independent states of Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia, along with the disputed regions of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh. Although today defined by modern political boundaries, in topographic terms the South Caucasus flows uninterrupted into the Armenian Highland, the highest of the uplands that make up the northern sectors of the Near East.

Two major river systems drain the South Caucasus: the Kura, which cuts through the Lesser Caucasus before dropping into the Shirvan Steppe, and the Araks, which rolls through the Ararat Plain before joining the Kura for a short sprint to the Caspian Sea. The South Caucasus can be divided into four basic geographic provinces based on climate and land cover. The highlands of northern Caucasia are defined by the middle Kura River and its associated drainages, including the Pambak/Debed system and the Agstef (Akstafa) River. The province is characterized climatically by hot, dry summers and mild, dry winters, and the vegetation consists primarily of temperate grasslands. Western Caucasia consists of the Colchian Plain, drained by the westward-flowing Rioni and Inguri rivers. The climate tends toward mild summers and damp winters, supporting mixed deciduous and conif-

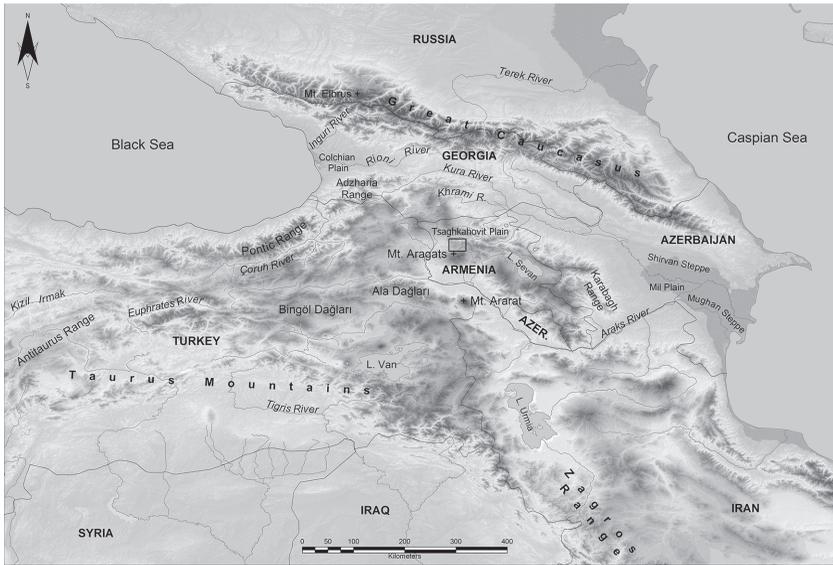


Fig. 2. Map of the North and South Caucasus, including major river drainages and geographic provinces; box identifies the Tsaghkahovit Plain. (Map Credit: Adam T. Smith.)

erous forests. Annual rainfall averages approximately 2,500 millimeters, making it the wettest province of the South Caucasus. Eastern Caucasia (the steppes of Azerbaijan, crossed by the lower Araks and Kura) is a similarly low-lying area characterized by broad open steppe terrain with riverine vegetation. Summers tend to be mild and winters humid, though little rain falls throughout the year (in general, less than 200 mm) in this, the driest of Caucasia's provinces (Cole and German 1961; Dewdney 1979; Plashchev and Chekmarev 1978).

Southern Caucasia includes the highland middle Araks River and its drainages. Average elevation is between 1,200 and 1,800 meters above sea level, dipping below 1,000 meters only in the Ararat Plain. Summers are hot, dry, and short, but winters tend to be long and harsh, with moderate accumulations of snow (Hewsen 1997, 2001). The vegetation tends to steppe/prairie but varies significantly with elevation from the salt marshes of the Ararat Plain to the deciduous forests of Syunik, to the alpine regimes of the upper mountain slopes. Cultivation is difficult in the region without irrigation because rainfall is generally light (between 150 and 300 mm annual precipitation in the Ararat Plain) and concentrated in the spring (Tardzhumanian 1984). Irrigation historically has concentrated as much on



Fig. 3. Photo of the Tsaghkahovit Plain and the north slope of Mt. Aragats. (Photo Credit: Adam T. Smith.)

the capture and storing of snowmelt as the exploitation of river systems, since the latter tend to rest at the bottoms of deep gorges.

Resting atop the watershed between the Kura and Araks drainages sits a region known today as the Tsaghkahovit Plain (fig. 3), bounded by the north slope of Mt. Aragats, Mt. Kolgat, and the southwestern flanks of the Pambak range. I call attention to this small intermontane plateau because its prehistory will play an outsize role in the discussions in chapters 3, 4, and 5. Since 1998, I have co-directed a collaborative archaeological program in the region known as Project ArAGATS or, more expansively, the Joint American-Armenian Project for the Archaeology and Geography of Ancient Transcaucasian Societies. Our continuing program of field research has provided a view of this single region of unprecedented detail (Avetisyan et al. 2000; Badalyan et al. 2003, 2008, in press; Khatchadourian 2008a, 2014; Lindsay 2006, Lindsay et al. 2007, 2010, 2014; Smith et al. 2004, 2005, 2009; Smith and Leon 2014). Throughout this book, I contextualize regional developments in the South Caucasus in reference to changes in the Tsaghkahovit Plain. In addition, for the sake of simplicity, I utilize the Project ArAGATS chronology for the Bronze Age (fig. 4) and refer the reader elsewhere for a wider discussion of chronological issues in the region and its neighbors (Badalyan and Avetisyan 2007; Badalyan 1996; Smith et al. 2009).

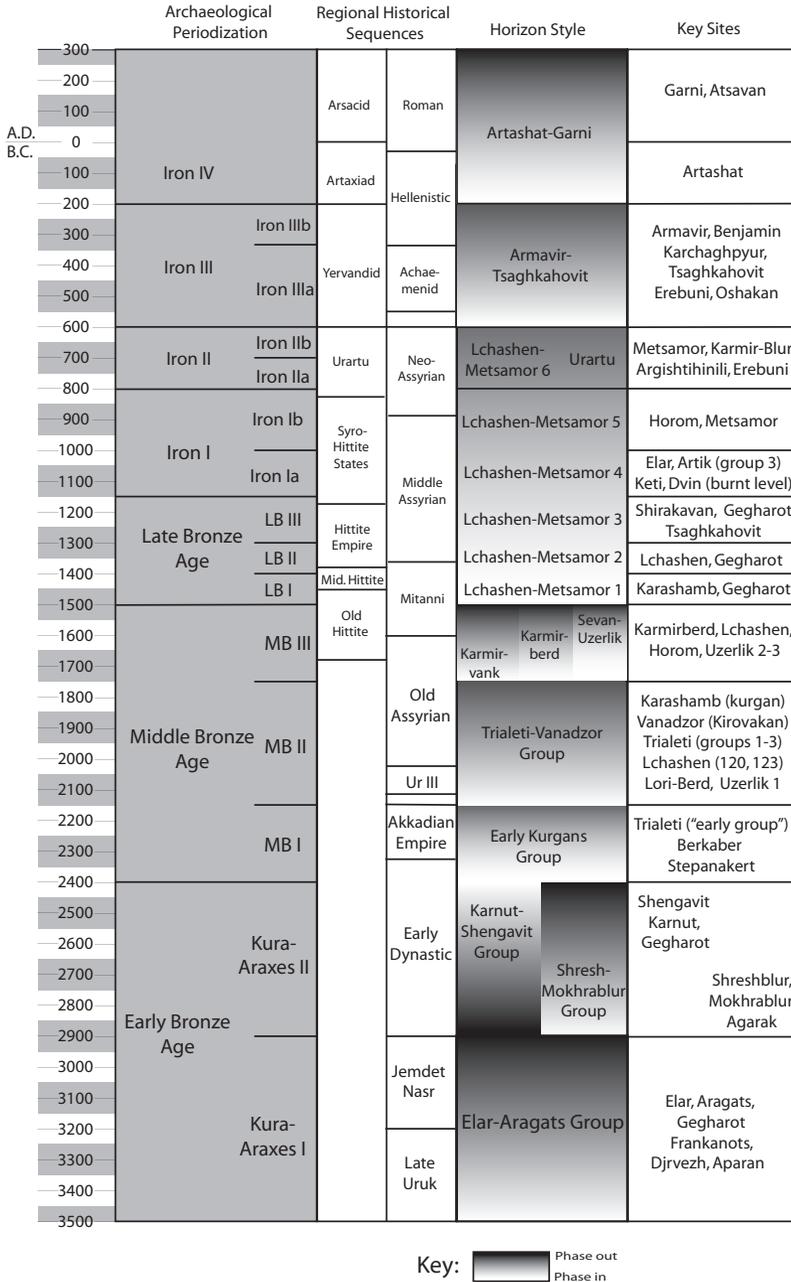


Fig. 4. The Project ARAGATS chronology for the Bronze and Iron Ages in the South Caucasus. (Figure Credit: Adam T. Smith.)

SCHEMATIC

In the chapters that follow, I draw on sources from political thought to aesthetic theory to anthropological studies of materiality in order to develop the conceptual tools vital to an inquiry into the machinery of sovereignty. In part 1, I advance two intersecting lines of argumentation on the politics of things, and in part 2, I flesh out the analytic in relation to the archaeology of the Bronze Age South Caucasus. Taken together, the empirical studies provide a historical survey of how the conditions of sovereignty were assembled over the course of two millennia.

The first theoretical intervention of the book, taken up in chapter 1, examines modernity's effort to banish objects from the production of social life alongside a series of counterprojects that have consistently smuggled things back into our thinking. The current "material" (Hicks 2010) or "archaeological" (Boelhower 2005) turn in the human sciences represents only the most recent of these counterprojects, embracing multiple perspectives from the abstract philosophies of speculative materialism (e.g., Meillassoux 2008) and object-oriented philosophy (e.g., Harman 2010) to grassroots social movements, such as permaculture (e.g., Mollison 1990) and transition towns (Hopkins 2008).¹⁰ My intention in situating the archaeological turn within a wider genealogy of our struggle to understand the world of things is not to provide an intellectual history of materialism (cf. Frow 2010) or even a detailed map of the current state of thinking (cf. Miller 2005b). Rather, my goal is to develop a conceptual repertoire that will allow us to accord objects a presumption of difference—an analytical stance that neither anthropomorphizes their operation nor dismisses them as unknowable. It is critical that we attend not just to the qualities of things in themselves (what Ingold [2007] calls "materials") or to our interior reflection on the "thingly" character of things (what Latour [2007] calls "idealized materialism"; cf. Heidegger 2001: 26) but to the points of human-object encounter where the political, and indeed the social world *in toto*, is forged and reproduced. Three orienting theses emerge from this avowedly relational ontology of things:¹¹

1. Objects are not sociologically meaningful as isolated singularities, but only relationally, set within heterogeneous assemblages whose encounters with human bodies define the social field.

¹⁰ My thanks to Charis Boke for calling my attention to these movements.

¹¹ On relational ontology, see Smith 2003: 69.

2. Assemblages are not agentive, but they do have what I will call, following Jane Bennett (2010), “efficacy.” This efficacy lends synchronic assemblages a diachronic motility, a capacity to define the logics of transformation that constitute “machines.”
3. These machines operate simultaneously along multiple points of encounter with human bodies that I describe as sensibility, sense, and sentiment. This heuristic rubric seeks not to partition the human–object encounter, but to allow a multimodal epistemology that can grapple as sensitively with materials as with “materiality” (Crossland 2010; Meskell 2005b).

The second theoretical intervention of the book, presented in chapter 2, examines the sources and consequences of traditional political theory’s exile of objects. The reduction of things to inert property, an innovation of Enlightenment liberal thought, provided a critical foundation for a modern politics that staked governance on resolving problems attendant to material distributions (e.g., distributions of capital, of tax revenues, of the means of production). The governance of human communities was thus closely elided with the regulation of a sensible world of things bereft of sensuality or sentiment. This account of the distributive state relied upon an ethical narrative of the origins of political association grounded in either the consent of the governed or the coercion of recalcitrant subjects. However, this severely limited understanding of the origins of political community gave rise to a fundamental paradox, what has traditionally been referred to as the “*aporia* of the one and the many” (Quillet 1988: 528). This *aporia* worries the puzzling solidarity of political communities despite the fragmentation and social fissures at the heart of their operation, the peculiar unity of the “world-machine” (Mueller 1944: 47) that rests upon the simultaneous integrity and sublimation of individual parts. In chapter 2, I argue that the relation of the one to the many is only aporetic if we ignore the operation of our human-built machines in the reproduction of the polity, discrete assemblages that work continuously to reproduce both the one and the many and mediate their relations.

In part 2, I examine the operation of three intricately related machines of sociopolitical reproduction that were forged during the Bronze Age in the mountainous South Caucasus, attending to their efficacy in securing the reproduction of sovereignty. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 pull apart the apparatus of sovereignty by distending the emergence of its conditions across two and a half millennia. In doing so, I do not intend to suggest that any kind of teleology inheres in the manufacture of the political machine. Quite the contrary, I hope to demonstrate through this distinctly archaeological analytic

how the machinery of sovereign conditions works not only to enable but also stall, frustrate, and undermine the reproduction of the polity.

The first of these machines, what I call the civilization machine, encompasses an assemblage of objects that manufactures distinction and polices boundaries between those who are members and those who are not. Although Ernst Cassirer was certainly correct that the state's first aim is to "create the sort of subjects to whom it can address its call" (Cassirer and Gay 1954: 62–63), it does not begin with a blank slate. Rather, aspiring sovereigns must work with communities whose collective formation is already in process in both the short term and *longue durée*. In particular, subjects must first recognize one another as real or potential associates. What is particularly intriguing about the civilization machine is how it establishes a mode of reckoning based on the qualities of materials—the distinctive shape of a house, the unique decoration of a cooking pot—and their imbrication in social practices. However, the civilization machine does not simply sort members of different communities through an array of material cues. It also polices social boundaries, elevating formal and aesthetic differences into moral and political privileges. In chapter 3, I investigate the making of a civilization machine in the Early Bronze Age Caucasus, when the region became part of a material culture horizon known as the Kura-Araxes, a distinctive assemblage that at its height united communities across an extensive territory, from southern Russia in the north to the Levant in the south, from central Anatolia in the west to the central Zagros Mountains in the east.

In chapter 4, I examine the breakdown and redevelopment of the civilization machine during the Middle Bronze Age alongside a fearsome new assemblage that (following Deleuze and Guattari 1986) is best described as a "war machine." The operation of the war machine entailed not only the reproduction of political violence but also the dissection of social orders, severing a sovereign body from the bodies of subjects—those who command from those who obey. Through the conspicuous consumption of Middle Bronze Age mortuary ritual, the war machine reproduced the terms on which social order was predicated—charisma, violence, and distinction. However, built into the conjoined operations of the civilization and war machines was a contradiction. As the one (the erstwhile sovereign) pulled away from the many (the constituted public), demands upon material resources exceeded capacities. Moreover, territorial fragmentation and military stalemate—consequences of the war machine's proliferation—threatened to undermine the workings of the civilization machine, dissecting a previously expansive public into smaller and smaller segments. As a result,

the central principle of charismatic authority was put at risk insofar as political power flowed from the provision of needs through conflicts successfully waged.

Trapped in a paradoxical state of contradiction, as the operation of the war machine eroded the integrity of the public assembled by the civilization machine, polities in the South Caucasus during the Late Bronze Age developed a new assemblage directed toward transforming charismatic authority into formal sovereignty. In chapter 5, I examine the assembling of this political machine, which drew the civilization and war machines into an extensive apparatus of rule, one that resolved the paradox at the heart of the joint operation of both. This novel political machine did not supersede the war and civilization machines—those continued to operate and indeed remain critical to political reproduction today. Rather, the political machine cloaked their contradictions, allowing the relation of the one to the many to persist as a “mystery” of sovereignty. The political machine not only provided the instruments of judicial ordering and bureaucratic regulation—instruments vital to containing state violence and regularizing the demands of a political economy—but it also transformed the polity itself into an object of devotion, securing not simply the surrender of subjects but their active commitment to the reproduction of sovereignty.

The final chapter of the book returns to the overarching question that opened this introduction—how do objects shape our political lives?—by drawing insights gained from the Bronze Age Caucasus into a wider reflection on the political work of things in contemporary moments of revolution and reproduction. However, before confronting the political, it is critical that we come to an understanding of what exactly objects are and how we can conceptualize them at work. It is to this problem that I turn in the next chapter.