

Our 2.5-million-year obsession with stuff

5 February 2019, by Alex Shashkevich



Stanford anthropologist Ian Hodder examines humans' relationship with the material world in his new book. Credit: Jason Quinlan

Decluttering, spring cleaning or watching an episode of a home makeover television show often leads to the question: Why do we have so much junk? According to Stanford archaeologist Ian Hodder, our love for stuff dates back to our ancestors.

Hodder argues that when people picked up their first tool 2.5 million years ago and started making things, they kicked off a cycle of people depending

on objects and the materials needed to make them. Hodder, the Dunlevie Family Professor in the School of Humanities and Sciences, said these dependencies are at the heart of humanity's history and at the center of humans' impact on the global climate today.

Hodder's latest book, *Where Are We Heading? The Evolution of Humans and Things*, describes how the relationship between people and their things developed over time and what it means for the future of humanity.

Stanford News Service recently talked with Hodder about his research.

Why did you decide to examine the relationship between people and things?

I was largely inspired by the data from excavations of the 9,000-year-old Neolithic city of Çatalhöyük in central Turkey, the project I've been in charge of for the past 25 years.

This ancient village was located in the middle of a large flat plain, which only really consisted of various types of clay. The Çatalhöyük society became very dependent on this clay for nearly everything, from its pots to its houses to its art and sculpture.

But the particular type of clay in that region was smectite clay, which expands rapidly with even small presence of water. So, when it rained, the houses the Çatalhöyük people built slumped over and cracked.

To make the clay more stable, Çatalhöyük people tried a number of efforts. One intervention was to get wood, which they had to travel a long way into the highlands to get. But the wooden frameworks they made did not provide enough stability. They then tried to build the houses against each other, so it would be harder for rain to get through and affect the walls. This idea appears to be the reason why Çatalhöyük became a very dense

conglomerate settlement, where people lived nearly on top of each other.

But the main way they tried to make the clay stable was to add sand to it. In order to get the sand, they had to dig deeply into the surrounding landscape. These deep ditches collected water and created more wetness in an already wet area, contributing to an expansion of an invasive type of reed and clogging up the landscape. The people then had to cut down the reeds, grazing their sheep farther and farther away.

So, what you're beginning to see is how a small issue – the clay bricks are not very good – leads to many other human efforts that end up affecting how people live as well as changing their surrounding environment.

What is the main takeaway from your research?

Many people blame [global warming](#) on recent history, pointing to the rise of capitalism and industrialism over the last 200 years as being the major factor that has contributed to [climate change](#). Of course, it's true that capitalism and the overuse of the environment it caused have had an enormous importance.

But I argue that if you look at the history of humanity as whole, you see that there is something more basic about humans. Our relationship with the environment has always been extractive in nature.

If you recognize that impacting the environment is something that humans have always done, then solving it is not just a matter of dealing with current economic systems. It's a matter of dealing much more deeply with who we are and how we relate to our world.

What is entanglement?

Entanglement is the idea that describes a dependency in our relationship with the things we make. We, as humans, depend on things in all sorts of ways, as tools to keep warm and gather food or as a way to show our social status. In my view, being dependent on things is what makes us human. We cannot be without things.

My theory of entanglement says that things we make also depend on other things. In addition, things made by humans will only continue to exist if humans continue to look after them.

For example, a car contains thousands of parts that come from all over the world. Someone needs to make each part, that then someone needs to assemble. Cars also depend on roads, and someone has to maintain those roads, and so on.

Entanglement describes this circle of dependency – humans depending on things, things dependent on other things, and things being dependent on humans. And this entanglement seems to inevitably lead to environmental change and increased inequalities between different parts of the world.

Do you think it's possible for us to untangle ourselves from our things?

Our dependence on things is not completely negative. It's clear that our ability to invent new technologies and tools has been important in helping people live longer lives and have less disease.

When it comes to dealing with current climate change, I think the effort to develop cheaper renewable sources of energy is important to curb the effects our societies are having on the Earth.

But coming up with new technologies to solve our problems is not enough. Archaeological evidence shows that [new technologies](#) for the most part lead to greater entanglements with our surrounding environment. A recent example of this is solar panel waste. While solar panels are a great technology that provides us with renewable energy, many experts are now becoming worried about how to dispose of some of the toxic materials the panels are made of.

So it seems to me that we have to do something about our core way of being. Minimalism, the lifestyle of living with less, and other recent movements that criticize consumerism are an important step in the right direction.

But we need to do more at a global scale to bring

about significant change. We need to seek social, economic and political solutions that lessen our headlong drive toward material accumulation.

More information:

[yalebooks.yale.edu/book/978030 ... where-are-we-heading](https://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/978030...where-are-we-heading)

Provided by Stanford University

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