

OBJECTS AS A FACTOR IN THE TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIAL REALITY**Oksana Nekhaenko**

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Summary

This article attempts to problematize objects in the context of changing social reality. An object is considered within the framework of the work, among other objects, as something with extension (i.e., the property of occupying a certain place in space), impenetrability, and the ability to resist external influences, which brings us to the possibility of considering an object as a subject.

The problems of interaction between objects and social agents in modern society are considered. The phenomenological approach and the theory of social constructivism were chosen as the methodological basis, putting forward a thesis. The authors pay special attention to the study of the influence of the transformation of material elements on the characteristics of social space through social interaction.

The authors analyze the process of adapting the operational potential of an object in the context of a game. The influence of objects on the social environment and interaction with agents is considered. The role of objects in communication and their social significance is determined.

The authors define objects through three aspects: activity, discursive and spatial levels. The main focus is on studying the influence of objects on social interactions and their symbolic structures. It is argued that objects determine the boundaries of a social act and influence the process of socialization, and also gives examples of their regulatory impact on communication. The work also examines the symbolic content of objects and their influence on the nature of interaction.

Key words: constructing social reality; Berger and Luckmann; phenomenology; post-structuralism; simulacrum; subjectivity; commodification; objects.

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1. Introduction

The problem of an object as a social phenomenon is updated with a change in sociocultural paradigms of society, which, in turn, are determined by the transformation of socio-economic and political-legal relations. This, for example, happened during the period of the collapse of the monarchy and the development of socialist society, then the collapse of the Soviet Union and the restoration of private property relations. This is what is happening now, when Ukraine finds itself in a state of military conflict. Of course, in different societies the consequences of such social changes are fundamentally different from each other, but in the conditions of capitalism one object remains stable – the relationship between man and the eternal world is elevated to an absolute, and objects are entrusted with the role of authorized exponents of human essence. This situation brings us to the ontological problem – the mutual influence of objects and social reality still remains unrevealed.

As for the epistemological side, the problems of materiality and social interpretation of objects in the research space have long been outlined, but are not exhausted. The merging of the field of economic production and the social field, which is expressed in the increasing commodification of the community, the spread of the ideology of consumerism, commodity fetishism in the media environment, as well as the increasing actualization of material elements in the process of social interpersonal and group interaction, force us to consider in more detail the specifics of including objects in various forms of social.

The study of objects through a sociological prism begins with the works of I. Goffman "Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of everyday experience" (Goffman, 1974), G. Simmel "Handle. Aesthetic Experience", "Picture Frame. Aesthetic Experience" (G. Simmel, 1999), B. Latour "Where are the missing masses? Sociology of one door" (Latour, 1992), "On inter-objectivity" (Latour, 1996), R. Harré "Material Objects in Social Worlds" (R. Harré, 2002). The understanding of objects as elements of symbolic, and not just physical systems as a full-fledged object of study can be observed in the philosophical works of Heidegger. Today, the tradition of sociological consideration of objects has acquired a specific angle of consideration – as an object, the central characteristic of which is its availability. Examples of such consideration of objects can be the works of Artemenko A. P. "Speech, object, topos in social topology" (Artemenko, 2012) or Zoska Y. V. "Social significance of external effects of speeches in marriage: institutional analysis" (Zoska, 2010). The instrumentalization of objects in social interaction is largely based on the Heidegger's tradition, and is more than justified, however, in our opinion, it is not exhaustive when it comes to representing an object in the social field. We concentrate on those characteristics of objects that make them similar to social subjects. This approach doesn't exclude the instrumentality of an object as its main characteristic, and doesn't imply the identification of objects with social agents in their fundamental properties, but allows us to expand the representation of objects in social space, thereby deepening the understanding of objects as a social phenomenon. Namely, to consider "subjectivity" as a trait, a specific characteristic, manifested in different ways in objects and agents, without excluding the recognition of agents (individuals, groups, organizations) as the subject of social interaction; we are only talking about similar traits in the manifestation that We will cover this in more detail in the next section of the work. This will allow us to consider in more detail the specifics of the transformation of the role and meaning of objects in social space, as well as to trace the influence of these transformations on social reality. The role and meaning of objects is determined by the idea of objects and the manifestation of objects, which is part of social interaction. As a consequence, we can assume that changes in social space can be caused, among other objects, by the reinterpretation of objects common in this social space.

The relevance is due to the need to consider the mechanisms of change in social space in situations where objects act as a catalyst for transformation. First of all, this is necessary to understand the actual role of objects in social acts, which in the future will make it possible not only to conduct a detailed analysis of possible forms of relationship between people and objects, but also to determine possible representations of objects that are different in nature (goods, artifacts, objects of memory, symbols) in during interaction with them and in the process of how they mediate the interaction of social agents.

The purpose of the study is to characterize the influence of the transformation of material elements of social reality on the essential characteristics of social space, expressed in the process of social interaction.

The theoretical basis of our analysis is the phenomenological direction in sociology, as well as the theory of social constructivism in the version of P. Berger and T. Luckman (*Berger and Luckman, 1966*). Therefore, the starting point of the work is the thesis that social interaction at the micro level is not only determined by macro-level systemic transformations, but also determines changes in the social space itself at all its levels. We also, following Heidegger, consider materiality as an incomplete process, as a becoming, and not a state. In what follows we describe this in terms of adapting objects.

2. Results

2.1. Understanding objects and their roles

In its most general form, an object can be understood as any material or materialized object with which or through which social interaction is possible. Objects can be looked at from three aspects:

- 1) Activity level, at which the main characteristic of objects is their functionality and instrumentality.
- 2) The discursive level at which objects materially anchor symbolic structures.
- 3) The spatial level where the reification of the social takes place space in the physical (*Boiko, 2019, p.9*).

In this work, we are primarily interested in the characteristics of an object arising from the possible aspects of its representation. Namely:

- An object instrumentally mediates social interaction;
- An object can include symbolic content as a carrier and as the embodiment of the latter;
- The material environment is a complex configuration of elements, which is based on materiality.

The object is therefore considered precisely as an “Object” (not “thing” or “matter”), “something physical that is perceived by a person and becomes an agent of psychological identification” (“*Object*”). In addition, not only psychological, but also social identification, which emphasizes the possibility of its influence and activity-based nature as an element of social interaction.

Being permeated with materiality presupposes the need to consider the dual interaction of social subjects and material objects, as well as to justify the convention of their separation, to which we will return later. Included in almost all social interactions, initially as an intermediary, objects to some extent determine the process of socialization, at the same time they themselves are determined by it. The object included in this process determines the boundaries of a possible social act. For example, it creates the possibility of remote communication through a mobile

device, shapes the very material environment in which interaction or action takes place, in some cases the topic of communication, with the specific material content of the situation. Also, an object is capable of regulating communication, introducing into it an element of surprise with its “behavior”. Breakdown, what Heidegger described as the exit from the ready-to-handness of an object (*Heidegger, 1927*), can cause the end of interaction. For example, the breakdown of a mobile device can cause the interaction to end, and the thickness of the walls determines the level of acceptable volume). Filling the communication environment with objects can determine the nature of interaction in this environment by filling objects with meaning. In this case, meaning can also be understood as the inevitable endowment of an object with connotations, an expression of one’s own position (or neutrality) in relation to the object, its inclusion in the history created during the process of exploitation. There is also the possibility of prescribing objects of symbolic meaning in a number of cases. For example, sacralized objects like icons imply a ritual of entering the environment in which they are located, as well as the taboo of a number of linguistic expressions; in an everyday environment, the potential for regulation is preserved, although it becomes less obvious. The mere presence of objects already presupposes sociality, as opposed to things. The use of objects is also possible outside of social relations. Since reification – the subordination of objects to some semantic structures and their inclusion in communication as intended or currently used, is possible only in an already socialized consideration of reality. The presence of characteristic objects at the place of communication seems to call for their use: for example, tea and a cup located at the place of communication are likely to “force” tea drinking, even if it is not the originally intended format. The nature of a particular object or objects can adjust behavior in social space, which is not necessarily related to the physical properties of the object. For example, rarer and more expensive objects seem to “demand” more courteous behavior towards them. An object presupposes the need to take it into account, to “reckon” with its presence, thereby, by the very fact of its existence, it makes minor adjustments to specific social acts.

The process of personal socialization has a number of similarities with the adaptation of an object. Socialization of the individual occurs, among other objects, with the use of objects, their instrumental or symbolic content. Adaptation of an object – adjusting it to a specific social situation with the disclosure of new functions, is carried out by a social agent or in the interaction of several agents. Therefore, it is necessary to consider separately the socialization of the individual (primarily the child), in relation to the object she is an agent, and the “socialization” of the object, while assuming the unity of the process.

The socialization of a person in some cases is associated with interaction with objects, as an object or mediator of social interaction, an instrument for playing roles, and playing out imaginary situations. The continuous connection between a person and an object, including at the earliest stages of life, is a reason to talk about the influence of objects on the process of socialization of individuals, about socialization through objects. This topic has been studied quite widely, from the psychoanalytic concept of S. Freud to the semiotics of toys by R. Barthes. Subsequently, we focused our attention on the reverse process – the “socialization” of objects. But consideration of the main works describing the role of objects in the process of socialization of a child is necessary for understanding how the connection between objects and social agents is realized in the learning process.

The socialization of a child, according to R. Barth, includes the process of projecting adult models and strategies onto childhood, “the child is provided with “reality” – a class of signified adults” (*Barth, 1972, p. 45*). Factory-made, industrial children’s toys primarily satisfy the needs of adults: “children comply with adult expectations, but do not experience or express

the need for a toy as such.” Based on a less radical position, we can only point out that the socialization of a child is based on bringing an unsocialized personality into conformity with an idealized image, a type, desirable for the specific community in which the child is socialized. Objects in this case serve as “transmitters” of this image, at the same time as an instrument for imitation of it. But the symbolic content of an object and its social role are more important than its actual properties (a teddy bear, a doll, or even a simple stick are suitable for performing a “mother-daughter” play), which still doesn’t contradict the possibility of its meaningful use in the process socialization of the individual. The value of a toy used in the process of its development by a child exceeds the properties intended by the manufacturer. Donald Ball identifies two functions of toys (*Ball 1967*):

1. Rehearsal tools (acting out situations, communications, imitation of processes).
2. Role model and object of personal identification at a certain stage (situational exclusion from communication with others).

As for the analysis of the process of adapting an object, in the presented work we proceed from the assumption that the use of an object is always carried out to a certain extent unpredictably, thereby expanding the functionality of the object. The operational potential (how the object was and can be used *de facto*) of an object always exceeds its production potential (what functionality was built into the object at the stage of its development and production).

However, this provision applies not only to the possibility of literal exploitation of a material object or the possibilities of handling it, but also extends to the realization of an object in symbolic space. This is expressed in its endowment with many semantic connotations, inclusion in various social and cultural relations: use in ritualized actions, implementation as a sign or symbol, projection of social systems into a material object, as well as inclusion in social interaction as not so much a tool as an intermediary. We can call the identification of the operational potential “socialization” of an object; this is where it is adapted to specific social conditions, which involves going beyond the production functionality of an object due to its symbolization (the inevitable endowment of an object with a character, depending on personal attitude and evaluation, as well as the inclusion objects into a system of signs and symbols).

Here it is important to point out that the socialization of an object and the socialization of an individual essentially have a single basis, but they also have a fundamental difference. Personal socialization is an institutionalized process, that is, it has a specific goal and is presented as a project in the sense of its ideological design, a model and image towards which the process is directed. While objects are “socialized” spontaneously, the design of an object in its socialization lies, on the contrary, in its incompleteness, the absence of final goal-setting in the process of realizing the operational potential (that is, determining the functionality and characteristics at the moment, but not completely), which is purely situational, also in the multiplicity of its representations. Behind every object there is the potential for its subsequent use in other contexts, with an emphasis on its other properties, as well as the possibility of identifying, or rather even forming (after all, we cannot talk about the presence of a function before its “discovery” and implementation).

In this sense, the spontaneity of “socialization” of an object means that the desired image of an object is constructed at the moment of its achievement, but not as a meaningful plan, since the functionality is not defined as final. An object as a socialization project is closer to Sartre’s understanding of a person as a project than a person in his socialization, in whom variability (deviation from the modeled image) is presented as something not expected, not desirable. Adaptation of objects is based on the conceptualization of a task that needs to be realized with the help of an object (which does not always happen meaningfully, and the goal can also be procedural), and which does not determine its essential properties. One task can be implemented by

different objects and different properties of one object; at the same time, one object can implement several tasks with one or its different properties. The character of the individual and the task (socialization at a certain level) are “fused” in the process of socialization, in the sense that a specific personality is initially included in a specific process of socialization (the upbringing of one specific child is only his upbringing, immersed in a social context, but including others only as external elements). From which emerges a number of properties of the socialization process that apply only to objects. This is a desirable, in a strict sense inevitable, variability in the situation of the absence of the final desired image, which is at the basis of the process. In this sense, an object in its “socialization” doesn’t undergo identification. The identification that a child performs in the process of socialization would be more accurately called imitation; it is focused on an imaginary or existing model. While any definition of an objects separates from its actual properties (productive potential), since it presupposes the possibility of another definition, it doesn’t include it in a relationship with a certain model, but rather remains a theatrical performance, a performance that doesn’t imply a model.

A form of socialization of an object is play. The game also determines the nature of the interaction between objects and social subjects in the process of socialization of the latter. Incorporating a game into a system requires us to think conceptually. Based on the works of Johan Huizinga, we can identify two specific characteristics of the game that are not typical for typical social interactions:

1. The game masks seriousness, although in essence it presupposes it. The binary opposition of play/serious action is essentially formal, and rather refers to a way of expressing the nature of the action ("serious" or "game").

2. The game itself is beyond binary oppositions and is built on the principles of unity (Huizinga, 2016). This doesn’t mean that binary oppositions cannot be included in the game as its element, or that the activity that concerns the game excludes opposition, but the game itself does not imply polarity in its implementation, only an inseparable single process of “playing”, where form and content are not separated.

The presented vague description of the game in our work will be specified as follows: a game is a form of realization of reality, and not just a situational activity that doesn’t act as an opposition with other forms. The essential characteristics of the game may therefore differ situationally, but inevitably include a procedural orientation and incompleteness (any game can be replayed, continued, repeated, changed and re-implemented).

The game can also be included in the process of social interaction and shape it. In such cases, play can also be described as a specific form of realization of the social, although it is not necessarily embodied in every moment of time, and is not the only form. Game elements in interaction can be organically combined with “serious” models, without defining the interaction, but introducing a number of properties into it. Initially, the game manifests itself in language, myth, cult (which in our time is embodied in commodity, that is, material, fetishism), and is gradually embodied in an increasing number of cultural forms. Cult and fetish are ways of understanding the real, it is a play out of the order of objects, in this sense the game is natural, as is the presence of objects in a social context. Huizinga derives a definition of a game based on its characteristics:

- Freedom (free activity).
- Repeatability.
- Conventionality (this is going beyond the ordinary framework of life).
- Disinterest (secondary benefit is not fundamental, it is secondary, it is not a goal.

The game is not pragmatic in nature).

- Isolation (every game has its own space: time, place)
- Aesthetics (unique for each game).
- Tension Rules Consolidation of players.

«... we can call the game a free activity, which is recognized as “not really” and an activity performed outside of everyday life, but it can completely take over the player, without pursuing any direct material interest, doesn’t seek benefit – a free activity that takes place within a deliberately limited space and time, proceeds in an orderly manner, according to certain rules and gives rise to social groups that prefer to surround themselves with mystery or emphasize their difference from the rest of the world with all kinds of disguises» (*Huizinga, 2016, p. 17*). However, we are interested in the subtler features of play in its definition as Huizinga describes them: “Play is not ordinary or real life. This is a way out of such a life into a transitory sphere of activity with its own aspiration <...>”, “game is the specific character of everything that surrounds us in the world,” that is, a game is precisely a form, a character, not a specific action, “a game, whatever its essence, is not something material” (*Huizinga, 2016, p. 17*) Evgeniy Fink defined play as a fundamental feature of existence: “although play as playing is an impulsively mobile being, it is aloof from any restless aspiration arising from the nature of human existence as a “task”: it has no goal, its purpose and meaning lie in herself. Play is not for the sake of future bliss; it is already “happiness” in itself, devoid of universality” (*Fink, 1982*). This allows us to expand our understanding of the game to more fully reveal the relationship between the game and objects in the future.

The game creates a new reality without being guided by imitation of a standard. In this sense, the game is a form of realization of reality, from which the above-mentioned properties emerge. In this sense, the game is not a material object or a system of signs, but rather a system of relations between a social agent, an object and social reality.

However, we can also understand a game as a completed form (idea), which can ultimately be materialized, perceived as an object. A game is therefore both a computer program, an object figure for the game (for example, a doll), and yard action systems (for example, games of “hopscotch” or “tag”). In this sense, a game is a specific (often subject-specific) system of algorithms and signs. However, in this work we are interested in the first understanding of the object, which allows us to consider the process of socialization and interaction.

2.2. Characteristics of subjectivity in objects and agents

Returning to the consideration of the process of adaptation of the operational potential of an object, realized in the process of socialization in the form of a game, it is worth revealing in more detail the formation of the object itself in social terms. An object, acquiring its functionality (representation) during the process of operation, presupposes a specific attitude to the environment – the possibility of its reshaping, adjustment, thereby securing transformational potential. One of the key (not without exceptions, of course) properties of the game is the possibility of a lack of goal setting, procedural self-worth, which also extends to the process of socialization of an object. We are talking about play as a form of action, but not about specific games, which are a prescribed system of actions. The operational potential of the item is also realized in the game. During the same game, an inverse relationship can be observed – an object, “socializing”, with the variety of its options, forces a diverse consideration of the social environment itself from the position of “how and where can this object be applied?”. Being included in a social relationship, an object ultimately exerts its influence both on the environment and on social relations: specific or typified interactions. This understanding allows us to talk about the possible existence of a connection between changes in objects (their

manifestations: roles and meanings, and ideas about objects) and individual elements of social reality. As a result, a change in individual elements of social reality (in the context of objects, this primarily refers to the interaction of agents, environment and objects) makes adjustments to social reality itself, introducing into it new qualitatively different characteristics. The very presence of objects with not fully defined functionality at the theoretical level introduces an additional element of uncertainty into social reality. At the level of practices, objects formalize interactions and form the potential of relationships (by defining the means and boundaries of communication, the context and subject of communication, in some cases – the possibilities of action for specific agents due to the presence or absence of certain objects). Which, as a result, introduces into social reality new variants of practices implemented in it, as well as a new logic of interaction of subjects with social reality itself – through dependence on material mediation. Since a change in one of the components (objects) leads to a change in the entire system, and objects change (“socialize”) continuously, a change in objects (their manifestations and ideas about them) becomes a catalyst for the transformation of social reality.

An object, not being initially completed, is determined in the process of interaction and as a result determines the interaction itself. By mediating communication between social subjects (agents, groups, person and environment, environment/person and other object), it acquires its own social validity. Validity, in the sense that it becomes an irreducible element of communication that must be taken into account, and which can cause change in interaction, by forcing the change in behavior that we discussed above. This brings an object closer in its characteristics to the characteristics of social subjects, but doesn't like them. We can only talk about the similarity on the basis of which social interaction is carried out, including interaction with the use of objects. Namely, an object, being an object, that is, a socially meaningful object, in interaction is assumed to be inevitable, exactly as the social subject assumes. Also, a change in the characteristics of an object (for example, the same breakdown or the discovery of new functions) provokes a change in communication. Since it is not completely possible to control, we can metaphorically say objects are “willful”. More strictly – about her active, although not meaningful and not purposeful, involvement in interaction. The object acquires features similar to the subject – the possibility of giving in interaction and the initial inclusion as a change. By surpassing the property of ready-to-hand (*Heidegger, 1927*), an object is separated from its production potential, differentiated from a materially justified operational potential, and is determined to a greater extent by its symbolic content (in some cases, iconic and symbolic). Therefore, in the operation of an object, it rejects the boundaries of its definition, presuming a not yet realized possibility of exploitation (a new function or representation of an object).

At the same time, the totality of material objects represents the conceptual unity of space, that is, the environment. Environment – the external design of communication, its contextual design in space; it can be described as a set of objects, the activity of which is characterized by the possibility of impact, making a reverse impact on social subjects, whose sociality is the starting point of their definition. This allows us to talk about subjectivity as a characteristic, and not just as the essence of an inherent object in the context of social interaction. Meaningful goal setting is the lot of social subjects in their fundamental definition, whose activity potential is beyond doubt. The similarity of agents and objects is manifested in the ability to have a reverse effect, which is a specific characteristic of an object, in the conditions of actual typified forms of interaction between persons and objects. In this case, objects mediate social interaction, not as actors, but as elements that go beyond the environment, and therefore occupy a separate place in the subject- objects-environment system.

2.3. The influence of objects on changing social reality

The simulation potential of the object is immediately revealed. An object in its subjectivity can force the adjustment of social space in the process of interaction, while in a playful form, constructed at the symbolic level in the same space, the object can reconstruct the initially imitated reality. Game as a form in which an object acquires social meaning subsequently extends to all elements of social space in the interaction of which and with which the object is included. At the same time, it turns not into a Baudrillard's simulacrum (since it is not excluded from communication and is not divorced from the primary meaning due to its initial absence), but only into a variable that determines a new way of constructing the social. The simulation potential of an object lies in its ability to be constructed not as feedback, but as an initial impact on social reality and/or its subjects. One more option for the relationship between game and object should be added: game as a completed form (game is a specific system of actions) is rather presented as an object, rather than as a form, which doesn't deprive its design of a playful character. Using such an object in social interaction also leads to its "playing out." Thus, reassembling the entire social space.

From which it follows that social reality, filled with objects, can be adjusted with the help of objects purposefully, but is also constructed at the moment in the process of adapting an object to specific conditions due to the presence within it of an element with "fluid" functionality (that is, a representation not as complete, and how possible). This process includes not only agents, but also willful objects that correct the system of connections between agents. Here we are faced with the inconsistency of the mechanism for constructing social reality between the materiality of form and the symbolic designation of specific objects. However, this contradiction is purely formal; the functionality of an object is realized, among other objects, in its symbolic meaning.

Thus, we can say that objects included in social interaction primarily on the basis of their operational potential, having subjective potential, determine the transformation of social reality by introducing into it a new variable – the incompleteness of its materialized elements. The transformation of social reality occurs at several levels simultaneously (material, symbolic, and also at the level of interaction), and at each level objects are included in it, which ultimately leads to a change in the mechanisms of interaction between individuals, between individuals and the environment, between individuals and objects, between objects and environment.

3. Conclusions

The article analyzed the connection between the transformation of social systems and the reinterpretation of objects. In the context of social interaction, where objects realize their manifestation, a rethinking of the role and meaning of objects occurs, which as a result lead to a change in the special space where interaction occurs. Materiality becomes an inevitable characteristic included in social space, on the basis of which we can talk about two-way influence – objects acquire their meaning in the process of interaction with them and through them, at the same time, objects mediate the interaction itself. The article also offered a more comprehensive consideration of the matter. Representation of it in the properties of extension, incompleteness. This made it possible to compare the essential nature of objects with the characteristics of social subjects, and to identify similar features. In the future, this can become the basis for a more detailed consideration of the subjectivity of objects. And also, to determine possible forms of representing objects in social space. In this work, it was proposed to consider an object as an

element of social reality that has a specific impact on this environment. By the very fact of their presence, as well as the need to exploit objects on the part of social agents, objects make adjustments to social interaction, and as a result, to the structure of social reality. An object, mediating communication, can thereby reveal new possible forms of interaction. As a result, we can observe more generalized changes in social space, for example, notice a transformation of the very logic of considering materiality in everyday practices, as well as new options for the execution of objects. The description of the influence of objects on a social act made it possible to determine their role and significance in the transformation of specific and typified forms of interaction. Thus, we can talk about the complication of the structure of social space as a result of the inclusion of objects in it and the influence they have on social interaction.

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