

13.1 Introduction

Several decades were needed for anthropologists to realize that objects produced by humans in society are a social production. Indeed, any given object, be it a battleship, a hammer, or a stone picked up from the ground, is always a product of its fabrication or use, through gestures, skills, and knowledge which may vary from one culture to another. As Mauss stated in his paper on ‘the techniques of the body’ (2006[1935]: 77–95), this is true of every possible action on the material world. Here he demonstrated that even the most ‘natural’ actions we perform on *matter* (like walking, swimming, or giving birth) are, always and everywhere, cultural productions. At the same time as it has a physical function, a technique or an object is a component in a system of thought and action which is not particularly ‘technical’ itself. In effect, the material use to which a given technique or object is put, or the ideas one has about it, may well be related to social strategies, actions, or domains that have nothing to do with a transformation of the material world. Rather, this object or technique may be simultaneously related to non-technical activities. As we shall see, a New Guinea garden fence is by no means only to keep pigs away from sweet potatoes. Similarly, people would agree that, today, sport shoes are as much related to identity and social interaction as designed for jogging.

p. 299 In other words, techniques are as responsible for producing social ties and types of information as they are for transforming the material world. As sociologists of science and modern technology put it when they refer to a ‘seamless sociotechnical network’ (Hughes 1986), techniques and objects are embedded in other realms of social actions which we arbitrarily define and name for the sake of social sciences. And because techniques occur in all social actions, it may be incorrect to isolate a domain in human life and production as merely ‘technical’. However, while not belittling or forgetting the bulk of human material productions, we can at least loosely decide where techniques start, or how they are conveyed in an action—and, by definition, by an action on matter.

The anthropology of techniques (‘technologie culturelle’ in the French tradition, and ‘material culture studies’ in the British tradition) is therefore merely one point of view among others on objects and techniques. It is the one that *not only* asks if an object is an element of a set of ‘political’, ‘religious’, ‘economic’, ‘artistic’, or other practices and representations, but *also* asks in what way its conception and its material production are characteristic of the human group that manufactures or uses it. Paying attention to the most physical dimension of technical actions is a way to reveal fundamental information about a culture and its social organization or system of thought that is provided by no other anthropological approach.

13.2 Techniques as Actions on the Material World: Some Key Ideas

For anyone interested in action on matter, the purpose of an object cannot be understood without the gestures and knowledge needed to put it to use. The term ‘operational sequence’ (the series of operations to be performed) designates the overall process that leads from a given state of matter to its transformed state. Usually, there is nothing to indicate where an operational sequence begins or ends. Why separate the felling of the trees from the manufacture of the adze making the felling possible; or the making of the drum fashioned from the section of the tree trunk being cut up? These arbitrary divisions depend on the questions asked, but are certainly no reason not to tackle the problem.

The expression ‘technical system’ is used by Mauss (2007[1947]) in his *Manuel d'ethnographie*, in which, for the purposes of his analysis, the technical system is presented as an isolated aspect of social reality. The notion of a technical system was further developed by the historian Gille, who made it the fundamental concept of his *Histoire des techniques* (1978). As far as ethnographic description is concerned, techniques