

OXFORD UNIVERSITY ANTHROPOLOGY SOCIETY  
REPORT ON CENTENARY CONFERENCE  
“WHAT’S THE MATTER” IN ANTHROPOLOGY?

The year 2009 was the centenary of the Oxford University Anthropology Society. Although in abeyance from 1989 to 2001, it can claim to be the oldest such society still in existence in the University at the present day.<sup>1</sup> The major event organized by the Society to celebrate this important centenary was the above conference, held at St Hugh’s College, Oxford, on 13 May 2009. The conference was chaired by Professor Penny Harvey (University of Manchester), and the invited speakers were Professor Tim Ingold (University of Aberdeen), Professor Daniel Miller (University College London), Dr Dan Hicks (University of Oxford) and Professor Stephen Woolgar (University of Oxford). An introductory address was given by Dr Robert Parkin (University of Oxford and sometime Secretary of the Society), and Professor Harvey also chaired a discussion panel following the main presentations. The theme of the conference was as set out below:<sup>2</sup>

Social scientists are developing ways of thinking about relationships to take into account our interaction with everyday objects. Expressions of sociality are being extended beyond the individual, to include aspects of personality cultivated by the experience of living in the material world around us. But how does the material world catalyse relationships and how do those relationships create the person? Are we enskilled by materiality, or governed by it? How do the properties of objects impose aspects of their ‘personality’ onto us? How can we characterise those relations if they aren’t simply ‘social’? And how far can anthropology take these ideas and provide culturally informed theories which may be useful to the social sciences generally?

The event was conceived following a series of discussion groups, run by the OUAS, on ‘The Philosophy of Science’. This is where the main organisers—the former OUAS President, Kate Fayers-Kerr, and Ian Ewart—met and decided to try to invite some of

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1 A brief history of the Society was produced to coincide with the centenary of the teaching of anthropology in Oxford in 2005. See Robert Parkin, ‘Oxford Anthropology as an Extra-curricular Activity’, in Peter Rivièrè (ed.), *A history of Oxford anthropology*, Oxford: Berghahn 2007.

2 Reproduced from the [Society website](#), (accessed 31 December 2009).

the speakers to discuss many of the issues raised. However, the members of the OUAS committee all contributed, as well as a fleet of volunteers. The OUAS treasurer, Adam Gilbertson, was especially forbearing. The OUAS would also like to thank Sarah Raine and Nick Shapiro for introducing two of our speakers. Finally, Melody Cox and the undergraduate representatives—Joseph King, Inese Smidre, Matthew Ball and Vererie Mocker—all contributed a great deal to the running of the event on the day.

Kate Fayers-Kerr  
Robert Parkin

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