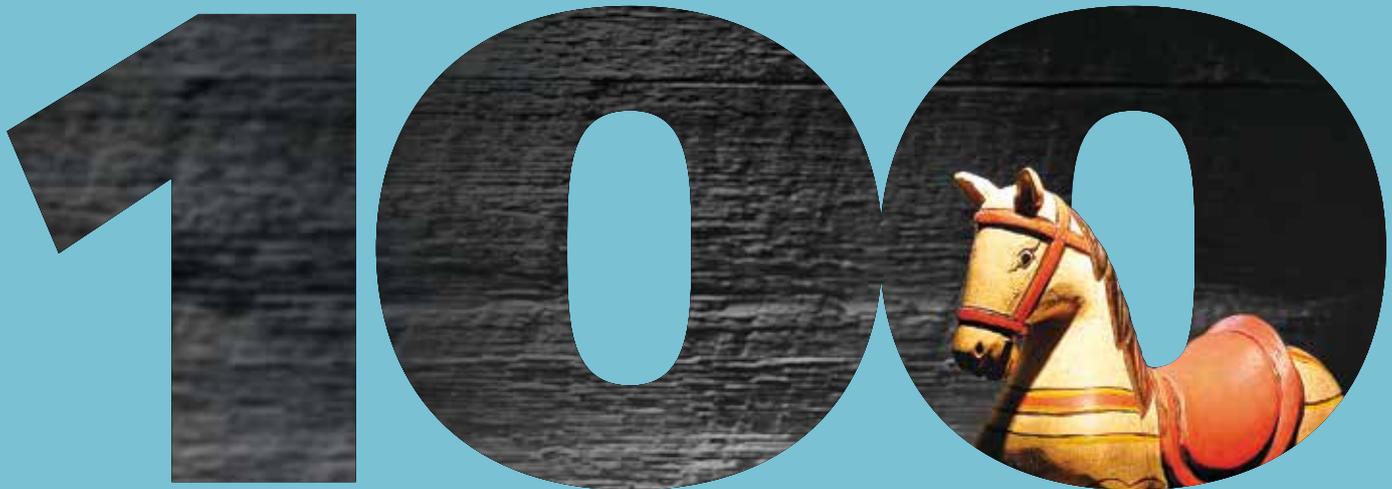




University of
Leicester

Social Worlds in



Objects

Social Worlds in 100 Objects

What do you see when you look into a mirror? Why is that glass of wine so expensive? What does the cotton bobbin symbolise?

Social scientists have been asking questions like these for over a century. This is because social objects like a mirror, a glass of wine and a cotton bobbin open up worlds of meaning – worlds that otherwise remain mysterious to those who take the object for granted or see it as mundane.

Social Worlds in 100 Objects is an innovative project at the University of Leicester that offers a fresh

perspective to objects in and out of the home. Drawing on their specialist research, social scientists at Leicester take a thought-provoking look at different objects through their short articles.

This booklet brings you just twelve of the objects. Reading about these might just change your perceptions on the things around us.

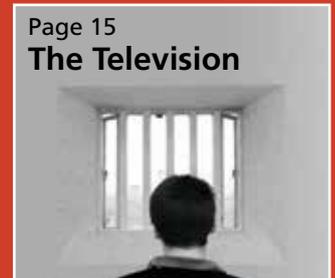
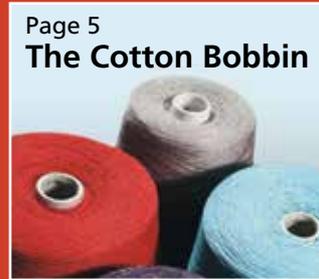
You can find out more and join in the discussion on the project website:

www.le.ac.uk/socialworlds



Dr Jane Pilcher
Initiator of The Project

“ I had seen the popularity of the British Museum/ BBC collaboration which presented a history of the world in 100 objects, and thought the social sciences would make for just as interesting a series. Through focusing on everyday familiar objects, the project will help people recognise the value of social sciences, whose contribution to our society is often overlooked.”

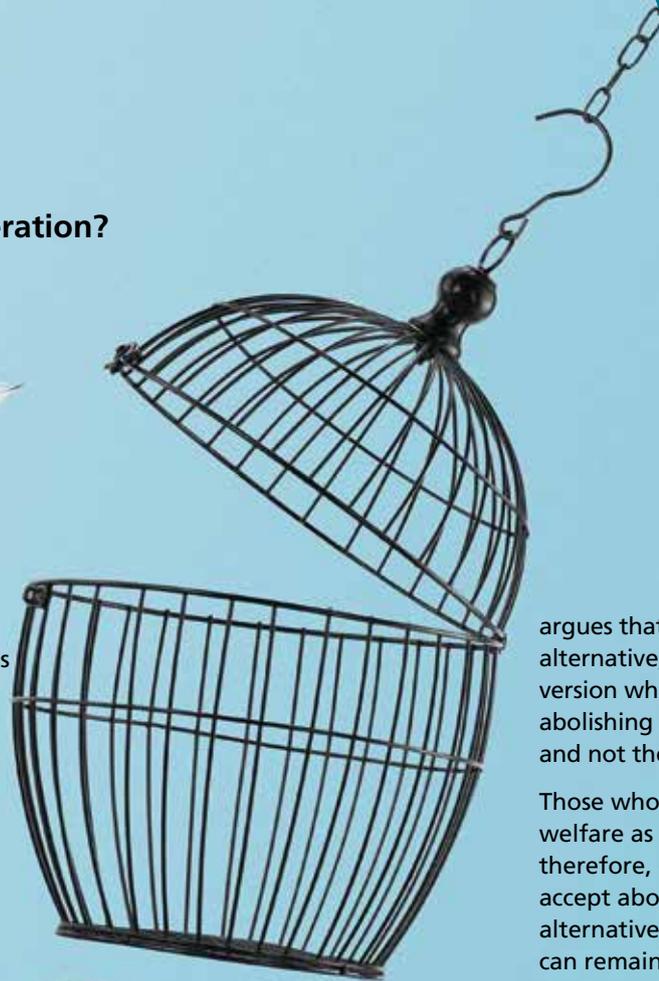


The Cage

Protecting animals from liberation?

A cage usually holds negative connotations; it is an agent of oppression where freedom is either limited or unobtainable. The image of an open cage is stereotypically representative of animal rights activists and philosophers who are commonly thought to believe that there should be a complete abolition of animal exploitation in every sense; no animals should be used or killed for food or medical purposes.

But Professor Robert Garner from the Department of Politics and International Relations argues that animal rights need not necessarily be synonymous with the abolition of all animal uses. It is seen as such in many accounts – such as the one by Tom Regan, an American moral philosopher – but Professor Garner



Professor Robert Garner
Department of Politics and
International Relations

argues that there is an alternative, more credible, version which focuses on abolishing animal suffering and not their use.

Those who reject animal welfare as ethically flawed, therefore, do not have to accept abolitionism as the only alternative. In other words, cages can remain closed whilst at the same time the rights of animals can be upheld.

The Cotton Bobbin

Symbolic of a lost heritage?

Boxes of cotton bobbins lie in derelict factories across the country, forgotten and unwanted; reflective of the loss of a significant manufacturing industry in the UK.

Companies such as Corah, one of the largest factories in Leicester in its day, employed thousands of people and supplied a large proportion, if not all, of the textiles and hosiery for retailers such as Marks and Spencer. However, the rise of globalisation saw retailers shipping their production and purchasing overseas in a drive to obtain cheaper goods.

So what happened to the workers who entered this labour market fresh from school with

expectations of a job for life?

Dr John Goodwin from the Centre for Labour Market Studies uses his expertise to answer this question through the Young Workers to Older Workers project.

The now chequered job histories of these workers are a direct impact of the end of the manufacturing industry. Some of them still cling to their identities as highly skilled workers, although they have been in other jobs for years, by keeping hold of the machinery that once lay in the factories in which they worked.

Thus, the cotton bobbin has now come to represent the radically changed lives of those who once worked in these huge companies and who have found it difficult to find secure work since. Ultimately, the cotton bobbin is now a symbol of deindustrialisation and globalisation.

Dr John Goodwin
Centre for Labour
Market Studies
at the School of
Management



The Fish

Motivating children to learn?

How many fish are there in this picture? Finding the answer to that simple question is much more complex for young children than many adults realise.

Learning to count takes a great deal of practice, and whenever we need to repeat a task over and over again to become fluent, it helps a great deal to be interested in the materials we are using. These fish are attractive objects; children want to know how many there are.

One group of children who are vulnerable to underachievement in mathematics and reading are children in public care. Rose Griffiths from the School of Education created the Letterbox Club, an intervention for looked-after children aged 7-13 that has had a demonstrable impact. When a child becomes a member, they receive a brightly colored parcel

once a month for six months, which typically includes a letter to the child, two books, two number games, and some items of stationery.

At the beginning of Rose's research into children's difficulties in counting and early arithmetic, there were twenty toy fish. Now there are only twelve, as participating children have asked to keep one – a measure of their appeal to the children, motivating them to learn.



Rose Griffiths
School of Education



The Glass of Wine

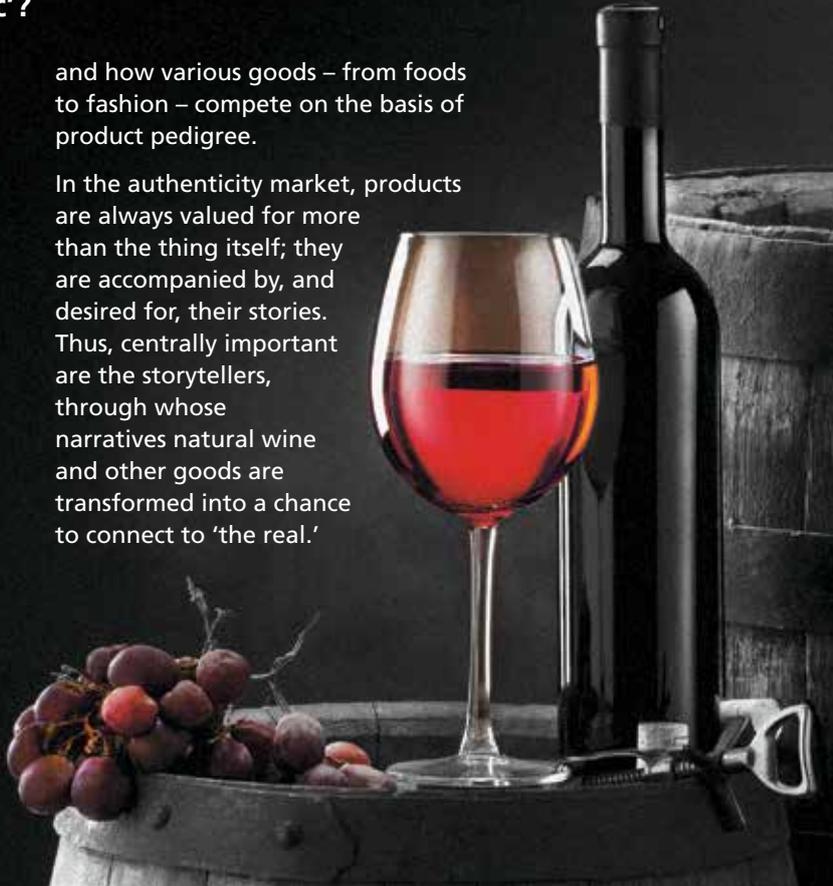
What makes wine 'authentic'?

All wine has natural properties, in that it begins as a crop in a vineyard. But unlike most mass market wines, 'natural' wine is produced at a small scale, using traditional methods that minimise intervention between grape and glass. Such characteristics are often associated with authenticity – a quality that distances an object from mass-produced, standardised, commercial alternatives.

Dr Jennifer Smith Maguire from the School of Management examines the role of intermediaries in the wine market, such as wine writers and sommeliers, who appeal to consumers through reference to a wine's provenance: how, where and by whom it was made. Such research helps us to understand how authenticity is strategically constructed as a highly-prized value in today's marketplace,

and how various goods – from foods to fashion – compete on the basis of product pedigree.

In the authenticity market, products are always valued for more than the thing itself; they are accompanied by, and desired for, their stories. Thus, centrally important are the storytellers, through whose narratives natural wine and other goods are transformed into a chance to connect to 'the real.'



**Dr Jennifer
Smith Maguire**
School of
Management



The Hoodie

A symbol of all that is wrong with youths today?

Hoodies are just an item of clothing and yet are often associated with deviant behaviour and trouble. Youths that are Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) signify all that is seen to be 'wrong' with young people.

The negative public image of NEETs assumes that most have voluntarily withdrawn from education, employment and training and that there is a significant correlation to deviant and criminal behaviour. Yet Dr Vanessa Beck from the Centre for Labour Market Studies explains that there are many questions to be raised about this assumption.

The underlying causes for NEETs are related to labour market, education and social or welfare policies. There has been an increase in youth unemployment with the recession-related squeeze of the labour market

and there have been cuts in benefits and services such as Connexions which further complicate the situation.

Other obvious indicators include education or qualification attained, locality, living in or providing care, ethnicity, disability, homelessness, offending and substance abuse. Whilst some of these characteristics might conform to the stereotype of the hooded youth, there are far broader issues at stake here that require governmental and societal attention.



Dr Vanessa Beck
Centre for Labour Market
Studies at the School of
Management



The House

An object of human resilience to environmental disasters?



the ways people recover from these shocks and build their precious object; their house, repeatedly.

When disaster affects houses it also destroys homes and homesteads. But not all houses are equally affected by disasters. This varies depending on their make, material, place, intensity of the hazard and context, all of which are underpinned by class, gender and caste dimensions.

Dr Nibedita Ray Bennett from the Institute of Lifelong Learning understands that the house is, in many countries, an object that requires adaptation. Floating houses (or panshi ghor) can be seen on the river Dhonagoda in Bangladesh and not only depict destroyed homes, but most importantly, represent human resilience.

A house is a classic object to promote human civilisation. It symbolises home, security and livelihood.

However, the house is also the most vulnerable object to environmental hazards such as floods, cyclones, tsunamis, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. The visual impact of broken and inundated houses is often captured widely and emotively by the media. However, lesser known are

**Dr Nibedita Ray
Bennett**
Institute of Lifelong
Learning



The Mirror

Do others see us the way in which we see ourselves?

A mirror is an object we use to look at ourselves and ensure we are presentable. But what if other people look at us differently? And what if they don't like what they see? What if, to others, we are an object of hate?

When someone expresses prejudice towards another because of their identity or their perceived 'difference', then this is a hate crime. Hate crimes include extreme acts of violence as well as the more 'everyday' forms of harassment, bullying and threatening behaviour, which causes huge damage to victims, to their families and to wider communities. Pioneering research undertaken by Dr Neil Chakraborti from the Department of Criminology is highlighting the nature, extent and impact of hate crime and how victims' needs can be addressed.

No one wants to look into a mirror and see someone whom others hate because of something they cannot change. They want to see someone who is accepted and respected for who they are.



Dr Neil Chakraborti
Department of
Criminology

The Mobile Phone

A tool for sousveillance?

The mobile phone has become one of the most global communication devices in history. It enables multiple forms of interpersonal communication, ranging from voice calls to the sharing of pictures and videos on social media sites.

The Arab Spring, the series of popular uprisings in the Middle East that began with the self-immolation of Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi in December 2010 and spread later to countries such as Egypt, Bahrain and Syria, has demonstrated the extent to which social media sites

such as Facebook and Twitter have transformed the relationship between political elites and their citizens.

Dr Paul Reilly from the Department of Media and Communication explains how social media has allowed protesters to bypass mainstream media censorship and share first hand experiences of police oppression in these countries with a global audience in real-time. This demonstrates how sites such as Facebook and Twitter can be used for 'inverse surveillance', or 'sousveillance', raising questions about the conduct of authority figures during periods of civil unrest.

Dr Paul Reilly
Department
of Media and
Communication



The Muslim Veil

A symbol of terror?

In a post 9/11 society, the Muslim veil has become demonised; a symbol of terror in Western Society. European countries have even begun to ban the veil.

Over ten years after 9/11, it seems that an unexplained link has been made between the terrorist attacks in 2001, and the women who walk our streets wearing the Muslim veil. They are to be feared, to be scared of; perhaps they even ought to be attacked.

Irene Zempi from the Department of Criminology has uncovered an alarming amount of prejudice suffered by veiled Muslim women and believes it is time to challenge these prejudices by helping to increase an understanding of this problem.

Is the Muslim veil a symbol of terror? Or is it simply an expression of religion? And do these women deserve the abuse they receive, when all they do to provoke it is wear a different piece of clothing?



Irene Zempi
Department of
Criminology

The Payslip

What are the effects of the minimum wage?

Dr Sara Lemos
Department of
Economics



PAY ADVICE
EMPLOYEE NAME
JOHN SMITH
BASIC SALARY

PAYMENTS

NUMBER

6430

2385

12

When the monthly payslip arrives it is a time of joy for those who can see their shopping sprees on the horizon, and perhaps a time of relief for those whose bills are overdue. In the UK, the minimum wage for an adult over 21 years of age is £6.19.

When the minimum wage changes, workers do not often spare a thought for how this might affect the British economy, let alone how minimum wage figures affect overseas countries. But this is what Dr Sara Lemos from the Department of Economics focuses on in her research.

It seems that there is much more to the payslip, which many people see as a simple piece of paper indicating how much money they have earned that month, than meets the eye.

The Rocking Horse

A classic object of childhood?

For many people in Western industrialised countries, a wooden rocking horse is a classic toy of childhood. It's an object symbolising a time of life that is regarded as being naturally happy and innocent.

However, Dr Jane Pilcher from the Department of Sociology has analysed this idea of childhood and found that it is far from being universal and natural.

For example, once children in medieval European societies reached the age of five or thereabouts, they were treated as small adults and integrated into the adult world.

What are children's lives like in societies around the globe? Cross-cultural evidence from developing countries shows that children can be subject to minimal adult control and often have important and responsible

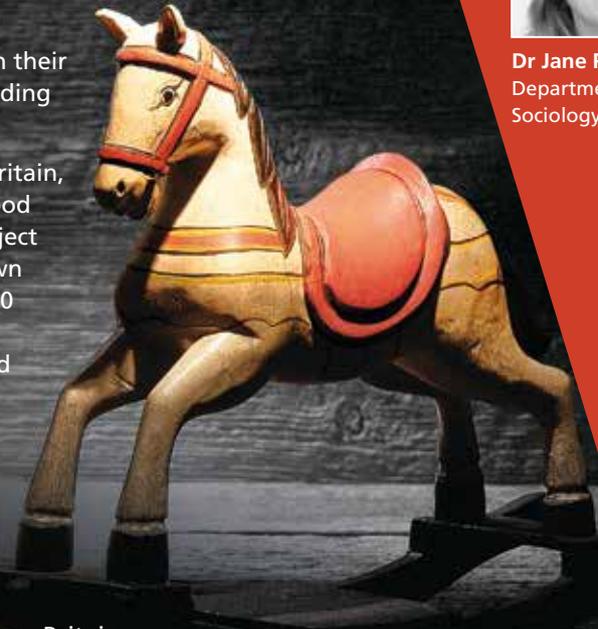
roles to play within their communities, including economically.

In contemporary Britain, changes to childhood mean that it is subject to scrutiny, as shown by the summit at 10 Downing Street in 2011 which focused on tackling the commercialisation and sexualisation of childhood.

The idea behind such campaigns is that children's lives in contemporary Britain have changed for the worse, and that action is needed to protect childhood, so as to make it more like the ideal represented by the object of a rocking horse.



Dr Jane Pilcher
Department of
Sociology



The Television

An electronic babysitter for the incarcerated?

Professor Yvonne
Jewkes
Department of
Criminology



Whatever meanings we all attach to television – to entertain us, learn something new, fill time, relieve boredom, evoke memories or simply to ‘tune out’ of our everyday lives – are magnified in prison.

For years, personal TV sets in prison was a politically sensitive issue, with some critics claiming it pandered to an anti-social population who had forfeited the right to such ‘perks’. However, the benefits to the prison service were considerable. Fewer prison officers were required now that inmates could be locked in their cells with the ‘electronic babysitter’ to keep them quiet and ensure their compliance.

However, criminologists such as Professor Yvonne Jewkes from the Department of Criminology have found that the introduction of in-cell TV also has significant downsides. Prisoners are locked up in their cells for longer, education has been curtailed, limits on personal property have been tightened and opportunities for social interaction have been curbed.

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