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Of Bricks and Freight Containers: Notes on the Genealogy of Symbols in the Experience of the Moderns

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Abstract

This paper is an exploration of the multiple meanings that the invention of the *brick* – this simple artefact that has permitted the raising of complex and durable buildings – has brought to civilisation and to humans in their relationship with the world. I suggest that bricks may have brought a number of novel experiences to society, whose meanings are important for the understanding of the modern condition and its emphasis on rationalism, replicability, precision, standardisation and modularity among other principles. I also point out that bricks, along with rectangular types of packaging, are eminently liminal objects that entail a peculiar form of violence.

Keywords

Technology; symbolic experience; building; walling; bricks; Babel; philosophical anthropology; modernity; violence; political anthropology; liminality

Introduction

If one sees human faculties as an anthropological *donnée*, which transcends history, geography and culture, it is nevertheless fit to inquire into the genealogical effects that the major changes in material practices and technology have imposed upon the actualisation of such faculties in the form of symbolic experience.

In particular, in this short reflexive-historical essay, I explore the relationship between the actualisation and shaping of the symbolic faculty – which is a large umbrella for a diversity of modes of thinking, such as using symbols, logical inferences, and numbers – in the context of the major liminal “moments” of prehistoric society.

The first two major shifts in the early history of humankind must have been, firstly, the process of settlement – when humans gave up their life as nomadic hunter-gatherers and settled on a more stable land which they called *home* – and, secondly, the invention of the city as a walled-in type of community with higher population density and different types of social relations. Both “moments” are related to the development of agriculture, to the improvement of tools and techniques that permitted increased efficiency and productivity and to the building of houses, walls, pillars, temples and fortresses. The way these shifts have changed society are numerous, and much has been written on their impact upon the division of labour, social structure and political organisation. Here, I only focus on the impact of the basic engineering discoveries that permitted the raising of smaller or larger stable physical structures: the piling up of stones, the use of stone cutting and cement for enhancing stability and precision and, eventually, the invention of bricks and mortar.

As trivial, rough and “unphilosophic” as it may appear, I argue that the problem of these basic technologies shows a profound connection with the development of the symbolic faculty when contemplated from the perspectives of experiential anthropology

and phenomenological sociology. I intend to explore the connection between the experience of building as physical, manual labour and symbolic experience in general. The relevance of such an investigation is by no means merely historical; rather, it is anthropological and sociological, for I see this reflective exercise as part of the larger scholarly enterprise of understanding the roots of modernity and the *constitution* (if I am permitted to use this word with phenomenological connotations) of the modern experience.

A few explanatory notes are necessary at this point before proceeding.

Thematically, I intend to explore a connection whose nature is metaphorical, i.e., it appears in the form of an experiential metaphor in the sense of Turner or as a sociological generalisation of Lakoff and Johnson's "conceptual metaphors" (Lakoff and Johnson 1980).

Methodologically and using the phenomenological terminology of Alfred Schutz, I place the reference of my investigation within the limits of the natural attitude (Schutz 2011, p. 293).

Epistemologically, it is obviously risky to speak of connections between "phenomena" that extend over extremely large spans of time, such as prehistorical cities and 20th century technologies of transportation and shipping. However, I see this not as an epistemological problem in itself, but rather a dogmatic limitation imposed by modern scientific rationalism, the observance of which is a matter of personal choice. I assume that philosophical reflection gives us the necessary freedom and that the risk is worth taking.

Formulated shortly, the basic question of this essay is: Do we owe anything, as far as our symbolic experience is concerned, to the invention of the *brick*? Was the brick a crucial discovery or just "another brick in the wall" of our civilisation? My allusion to Pink Floyd's *The Wall* here is, of course, not accidental, because it hints at the "Orwellian" dimension of technology in modernity, which today, in the summer of 2022, appears to be carried along by a large project that implies the raising of new walls between people and communities and, at the same time, the demolishing of some of the fundamental values of our civilisation under the imperatives of a "Great Reset" (Schwab 2018) whose alchemical overtones (Horvath 2021) can hardly go unnoticed.

Stones and bricks

Every novel experience in the history of humankind must have been an opportunity to meditate on a specific dimension of the human condition and must have shifted, fractured, problematised or enriched a certain corner of people's life-world. The experience of walls – first natural, later artificial – has invited humans to meditate on such qualities of things as being hidden or being revealed, on essence and appearance, on being inside or outside, on creating windows in walls or on passing through gates and so on. Building walls must have inaugurated our grand enterprise of reorganising space and imposing our own order upon the world. Initially, walls must have been built from raw stones taken from the natural environment, then, as technology progressed, from chopped stones that proved to be more efficient and eventually from "artificial stones" invented in muddy areas, i.e. bricks.

What are the novelties that the invention of *the brick* has brought to the human *Lebenswelt* and which are still here with us? What is the meaningful experience that humanity

has received along with the appearance of this technological artefact for our way of construing and using symbols and for our relationship with the world?

Apart from durability, a time-altering property that comes with the technology of burning clay, the essential feature of these solid objects, *modularity*, comes from their simple and peculiar shape.

Before bricks, other natural materials, such as stones, timber or raw clay must have been used for constructions. To raise structures, such as a sign-post in the forest, people could pile up raw stones they found in the environment. To raise taller structures, people had to use mortar or another bonding agent. Because of their irregular shapes, natural stones do not offer high stability and efficiency. Being identical in shape and size, bricks are optimal for maximising the use of space and minimising the amount of mortar needed. This is achieved by imposing straight lines upon the shape of building blocks or rather *straight surfaces*. Perhaps it should be no coincidence that the emergence of “planarity” in constructions came with the settlement in the *flat* lands, as the first cities of humanity can be traced back to Mesopotamian flatlands (Szakolczai 2018: 35–53: 40–41). The invention of the brick is associated in the region with the emergence of large and densely populated cities and the raising of tall temples and palaces (e.g. Uruk and Arslantepe) and coincided with the development of metallurgy and also the rise of the first state bureaucracy (Szakolczai 2016:446-9).

The identical shape and size of bricks makes them *replaceable*. Each one is the mimetic double of the other, which means it makes no difference if you have one copy or another. They produce *repetition* both in terms of *repetitive movement* – in the process of construction – and *repetitive patterns* – i.e. the pattern of a wall (Szakolczai 2018: 35–53: 44).

Arguably, the utilitarian value that has been added to a brick through technology does not come as an enrichment, but, quite the opposite, as a reduction. Compared to a natural stone, a chopped stone or a brick *lacks* something: it is no longer *this stone* or *that stone*; it has lost its *identity* and uniqueness and is no longer recognisable from *another chopped stone* or *another brick*. As they are *identical*, bricks have no proper *identity* or, to use a phenomenological term, their identity is *bracketed*. For this reason they can work as carriers or “containers”: they can *carry* a potential identity based on their relational property, just as a sign can carry a meaning. Even better, one may say that they become the elementary units of a *medium* in the sense of communication theory. Bricks can serve as units for the construction for *any* structure or shape: the *same* bricks can be used to raise the Tower of Babel, the walls of Babel city, a sanctuary, a shopping mall or a prison. In other words, bricks are project-independent and, thus, axiologically neutral.

These properties of bricks make it possible for them to fill the three-dimensional space in an efficient way. They are neutral by respect to each other and carry no meaning in themselves, yet they can work as elementary units in the structures they are part of. Bricks don't have an up-down or a left-right orientation; they can be rotated by 180 degrees around any of their three axes, and they remain the same while being able to be used anywhere in the structure. Thus, a brick is orientation-independent and lacks a particular, natural form of its own; in a sense, it is dis-oriented, dis-formed and dis-placed from the order of the world, which, in theological reading, is akin to *tobu vabobu*, the earth's state of being “unformed and void” described in the Biblical creation story (Berlin et al. 2004: 12).

Precisely because of being de-void of any natural form and content, the brick permits the mason to produce through multiplicative and combinatorial schemes an indefinite number of forms and sizes in the same way toys can be built using the popular Lego bricks, in the same way letters – which do not carry any meaning in themselves as they are just elementary symbols – allow one to form meaningful words or in the same way digits – which are mere symbols, too – allow one to represent numbers and meaningful measures.

Every brick creates a place that needs, or “invites”, another brick. Its shape entails, thus, an ambivalence: a brick is both a *thing* and a placeholder (Horvath 2018: 11–34: 28); it has the appearance of a *one* (a presence), but it is a *zero* (an absence) at the same time, for it is empty of form and meaning; a brick seems to be both the product and the producer of a *matrix*.

Bricks must have been among the first injections of *regularity* and *standardisation* into the world, which must be seen as a key element in the project of mastering and “rationalising” the world. There are several reasons the invention of the brick must be recognised as particularly important:

- (1) It problematises identity and difference, as suggested above.
- (2) It accounts for a new stage in the use of the symbolic and arithmetic faculties, which was essential in the appearance of money and the development of writing systems: *measuring* and *counting* (Benta 2018: 54–71) – i.e. placing identical elements in a row, one after another, up to a *limit* – as well as *re-presenting* and *coding* (i.e. producing a meaningful structure out of replaceable elements). As old as the invention of bricks may be, it may be seen as the first step in the “digital re-construction of reality”, which today seems to have reached an unimaginable peak.
- (3) It is the epitome of the inherent *mimesis* of technology (which leads one to the replicability of actions through procedures, methods, recipes and scripts in order to reach *similar* results). In fact, the mimetic character of technology was hinted at in the ancient Babel story, which points out that the masons of Shinar have come up with a clever substitution *trick* to fill the lack of stones and mortar, as the flatland was not generous in terms of construction materials as opposed to the mountains where they had migrated from: “Brick served them as stone, and bitumen served them as mortar”.¹ In other words, the builders found a way to “imitate” stones and mortar using available materials.
- (4) Bricks provide a strong metaphor for a particular attitude of being-in-the-world that goes back to Ancient Greek philosophy and to the alchemical tradition and now dominates the realms of science and technology. This attitude translates into seeing *complex* structures as being “constructed” out of *simple* elements, which can be isolated using technological means and then recombined, allowing us to reorder the world according to our interests.

Philo of Alexandria, a Jewish scholar from the ancient Hellenistic world, interpreted (Philo 1985: 4) the work of brick fabrication by moulding mud and baking it with fire found in the Babel story (“Come, let us make bricks and burn them hard”²) as a symbol for evil-minded thoughts and the sophistication of rhetorical arguments, which reminds one of the Sophist and Cynic techniques of manipulating truth. The Babel story is presented as a *hubris* in the Biblical narrative, because it is seen as a “symphony” of evil and a solidarity of vice.

Ancient civilisations, such as those of Sumer and the Indus Valley, discovered technologies that permitted multiplying identical objects (i.e. fired clay bricks) and combining them into structures according to their desires, and also imposed a similar order based on measuring, counting, de-contextualisation and disorientation on their landscapes and populations to construct the “mega-machine” in the sense of Lewis Mumford (1961).³ Wall-building is an act that mimics creation and the brick is the element that the engineering/magical/alchemical mindset devised in a programmatic step to adjust the order of the world according to human interests.

Another reason why the ancients saw wall building as a hubris may have been the fact that material processing technology required the use of some form of *violence*, which, to this day, may be roughly and primarily of two kinds: by cutting or by moulding.

The production of bricks involves abilities of replicability and precision, which can only be put into practice by violence with respect to nature and the environment. Obviously, bricks cannot be produced in the absence of a *matrix* (Horvath 2018: 11–34), which reminds one of lattice-type structures – so common in contemporary industrial landscapes – as well as mathematical matrices, tables and spreadsheets.

One way of bringing the raw material (e.g. stone or timber) to the desired shape is by the use of cutting tools, such as knives, swords, axes, chisels, drills etc. Another way of achieving the desired form is by moulding the material (e.g. clay or metal) into a matrix that has its negative form. The first type, which one may associate with a masculine form of violence, alters the macro-level of the object’s structure, whereas the second type of processing, which one may associate with a feminine form of violence that involves pressure and heat, force the structure of the object to break at the micro, even molecular, level and squeezes it into the matrix until it reaches the desired shape. It was the same civilisations that were also marked by the first mass-production workshops, especially for pottery, used to store the surplus extracted from the population and used to feed the labourers of the “mega-machine”.

The use of technology as a peculiar form of violence upon nature, life, and society is a hubris and may relate to the obsessive and excessive use of *straight lines* in the engineering mindset of modernity, ranging from artefact production to architecture and city planning. This hubris translates, in the words of James C. Scott (2020, p. 57-9), into the reshaping of the world so as to look ordered when seen from above, to be more “legible from outside”, and to be easily turned into a “standard commodity for the market”. Building, processing, buying and selling things is the constant drive of a society centred upon “the market” and driven by the desire to maximise profit; the ancient hubris of technology is not only is still here with us today, but has acquired new levels and forms of expression, as I will discuss in the next section.

Bricks and freight containers

There is something disturbing in the resemblance of bricks and packed food, such as boxes of milk or vacuum-packed coffee. Why do they look similar? Does this mean anything? In fact, many things are brick-shaped among those that we have in our fridge, shopping cart, store room, closet or anywhere in our house, such as fresh juice, cheese, butter, cereals, cigarettes, soap, perfume, detergent, aspirin, rat poison etc. Obviously, the list of things of

that particular shape is indefinite, and it comprises the fridge itself, the drawer, the closet, the wardrobe, the room, the flat, the block of flats, the bus, the retail pack, the parcel, the freight container and so on.

At a conference in Rome a few years ago, the French political scientist Thomas Richard mentioned the surprising idea that the freight container should be seen as *the* emblematic invention of the 20th century (Richard 2018). The invention of the freight container was related to the great increase in European trade operations with the colonies, which took place to a large extent in the ports of Rotterdam (today the largest container port in Europe, yet much smaller than many Asian ports), Amsterdam and Antwerp, as well as the development of the stock market in Antwerp, which was a key turning point in the emergence of modern capitalism (Szakolczai 2020).

Freight containers can be easily transported by sea ships, trains or trucks, which is why they are also called “intermodal containers” (a term that contains an implicit reference to liminality, “inter”) – i.e. they can be transferred from one type of vehicle to another. They are not bound to a particular type of content, but are “open” to any sort of ware in the same way bricks are “open” to any type of structure and Lego bricks to any shape.

Perhaps it should be no surprise that the first standardisation of freight containers and the founding of the Lego company took place at about the same time in 1932-1934 (Lewandowski 2014: 1–7; Wiencek 1987: 16). To denote this peculiar property of bricks, freight containers and Lego bricks, one may need to seek better words than “openness”. *Modularity* is a good candidate, as it refers to “structuration” (Giddens 1984) and to that principle related to the “rational” and efficient management of space that has become quite important today in architecture and, by metaphorical induction, in many other realms, such as business (the management of tasks and workforce), education (the management of courses, *modules*, study programmes, transferable course credits), media production (arranging story-blocks on a newspaper page or in a broadcast news bulletin) and so on.

A brick is meant to fill the space with its own solidity, while containers are supposed to *be filled* with content. Both bricks and containers impose separation and de-limitation of matter and give value to a region of the space while devaluing its complementary region. With containers, it is important what they have *inside*; with bricks, it is important what they separate on their *outside*. Bricks are “negative containers” or “inverse containers”: their “content” is outside their surface, i.e. it is the building they are part of.

Freight containers can be arranged like bricks: they can be placed one upon the other and one next to another in rows and stacks regardless of order or content. They can contain anything, thus they can be temporarily stored *alongside* each other by minimising waste space and maximising storage efficiency, e.g. stuffing into your car trunk milk boxes, soap, a toolbox, meat, anti-rodent poison etc. – a situation that would be forbidden in traditional society by the laws of purity (Douglas 1984). To traditional societies, the order of the world requires each object to be in its place, as cleanliness is synonymous with order or proper arrangement.

However, boxing and the whole logistical rationalisation implicit in containers make it possible for us to place together, at least temporarily, objects that do not *belong* together in the order of the world, make it possible for them to lie next to each other in a random proximity with no risk of contamination and make it possible to use the same distribution channel for products that otherwise would be mutually exclusive. In other words, they are a *smart trick* for

evading the conditionings of the traditional life-world. What makes this possible is the rectangular shape (the parallelepiped) as well as the *skin* of the pack: the wall that is impermeable to specific substances and prevents the touching of adjoint elements.

Conclusion

Form, shape, number, and symbol dominate the contemporary world of the digital machine (O'Connor and Bença, 2021), yet the invention of the digital is not a unique, rootless moment of modernity. In this paper I have explored a number of ideas that link the invention of the digital to the ancient experience of *techné* in one of its most elementary forms, the brick, which is also an elementary experience of violence and, as such is related to liminality, too. Bricks and freight containers are essentially liminal objects, and their liminal character is manifold. To raise a building, bricks alone are not enough. Mortar, cement or bonding agent is needed. A pile of stones is devoid of order and durability. The structure acquires permanency once the stones are ordered and glued together using that thin layer made of a foreign substance, which tends to go unnoticed when the building is ready. This substance has a liminal character in a double sense: first, it lies *in-between* bricks, uniting them and holding them together; second, it has the ability to *transition* from a viscous state into a solid state.

Any act of storing, building, and transporting anything bears a liminal character. Transporting involves a physical passage of things from one place to another. Being on the road is a liminal condition, which is naturally associated with the suspension of order. Storing (itself an invention of settlement with the new practices of agriculture) is liminal, too, because it is synonymous to “setting aside”, which is the origin of the meaning of the word “sacred”: it is the act of creating a stock that becomes untouchable and is taken out of ordinary usage in order to be kept for sale, for trade, for being offered to someone or for later use. Boxes and freight containers freeze life in the same way a seed packs a germ of life together with a concentrated reserve of nutrients in order to permit transportation.

Freight containers can be loaded and unloaded onto larger packs of similar shapes, and so on, giving the whole structure a fractal character. What is inside a freight container? A freight box contains other boxes, which, in turn, contain other boxes and so on in a fractal progression that may instill the same infinity vertigo that watching self-reflecting mirrors does. The fractal structure related to the human abilities of *packing* (Giddens 1984) is optimal because unloading is not just a *serialisation* along a linear channel, which would be strongly inefficient (like having a queue of people who each receive one milk carton then another queue for fresh juice cartons and so on), but *cross-scale distribution* along a tree-like channel.

The development of the practical science of logistics, with its rational maximisation of storage space, the development of transportation techniques and the precise operational knowledge about needs and surpluses of wares, was indeed a major invention of modernity that permitted the highly efficient movement of commodities from one place of the globe to another. This is one of the ways the modern economy has turned into a fight against the natural, *given* conditionings of space and time, which it sees rather as *problems* that need to be solved. It is a constant fight against the rationality of nature, which is based on irregularity, fluctuation, abundance and scarcity, health and disease, life and death, growth

and decay and so on. Brick-shaped objects are a symptom of the modern world's discontentment with the irregularities of natural material things in terms of *form* and *space*.

Technologies of warehousing, packing and transporting objects are above all technologies of fighting against the natural demands of space and time and, as such, they displace the natural order of life. There is a link between these technologies and the development of cities and civilisation on the one hand and the origin of the brick and the emergence of the symbolic faculties on the other hand; among other things, it refers to ways of seeing, controlling, substituting, and trading not only resources but even life and society, too. In spite of the apparent sense of rationality, precision, efficiency, regularity and cleanness, they are technologies of dis-order and are one of the main vectors of that pathological dimension of modernity which is permanent liminality (Szokolczai 2017: 231–248).

Notes

¹ Genesis 11:3 in (Berlin et al. 2004: 29)

² Genesis 11:3 in (Berlin et al. 2004: 29)

³ I am very grateful to Paul O'Connor, the editor of this IPA issue, and to Arpad Szokolczai for their very valuable comments and suggestions on this paper, which integrates some of their ideas.

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