
**Reviewed by** Roxana Coman (Royal Historical Society, London)

**Published on** H-Material-Culture (February, 2024)

**Commissioned by** Jennifer M. Black (Misericordia University)

Setting the scene in its introduction, *The Revolution of Things*, by Kusha Sefat, seeks to bridge the gap between cultural history and material culture studies by “bringing the cultural and material turns into conversation” (p. 1). The author puts forward an analysis of the 1979 Iranian revolution and the dynamics of the Islamic Republic of Iran, providing readers with a cross-disciplinary take on language and materiality not just as products of human agency but also as catalysts for revolution with an agency of their own, operating outside of an a priori discourse of power. Deftly operating with concepts and methods stemming from material culture, sociology, psychology, phenomenology, semiotics, and postcolonial studies (such as affordances/disaffordances and form/social structure), Sefat’s introduction is not a simplistic literature review combined with the methods, sources, and objectives of the book. Instead, the author offers an argument building up to the applied examples of post-1979 Iran in which the interconnectedness of language and materiality is explored on an ontological and religious level.

The book is organized chronologically to map out a crescendo of the revolution, beginning with Iran during the last years of the shah’s regime as the events were being set in motion by various interested parties. The red twine connecting the first three chapters is the life narrative of “Reza,” a participant in the revolution whose identity has been changed to preserve anonymity. The author intertwines this first-hand account, taken from interviews, with the historical progression of events post-1979 taken from a multitude of sources, such as technical media, papers, clothing, jewelry, and street posters.

The first chapter, “Khomeini’s Things: A Revolutionary Discourse of Stuff,” places material culture and materiality within the linguistic and political framework of Ayatollah Khomeini’s discourse of revolution, starting with a celestial body, the moon. Through Reza’s account, Sefat introduces a peculiar interconnectedness between the
positionality and materiality of the moon as it becomes a symbol of Khomeini's transcendence as a revolutionary figure. The author's anthropological approach to what he calls a “biography of objects” builds on the significant scholarship focused on objects as mutable and with a trajectory akin to that of a human being, including how they shape the environment via the senses. Sefat's take is one that once again outlines the linguistic apparatus that comes with this process, the ideology of traditional “modernity” striking a balance reflected to the extent of the human body via clothes, jewelry, makeup. Material culture becomes, for Sefat, an embodiment of the affordance/disaffordances binary, which also entails a translation of the religious and political infused terms of oppressed (mazlum) and tyrant (zalem) into something tangible, as well as socially and materially charged.

Chapter 2, “Domination: The Stability of Things and Terms,” builds on the fluidity of meaning assigned to objects explored in the previous chapter and engages with how the revolution reached the plateau/stabilization phase, as evinced in materiality and discourse. This particular section of the book goes even further into the importance of materiality and material culture as filling in the gaps of the scholarship concerning the revolution and their centrality in the “conceptualization of politics in the Islamic Republic” and its domination (p. 53). Rather than seeing objects and language as consequences of a certain type of political Islam, Sefat argues that the already extant public materiality and terminology shaped the ideological content of the Islamic Republic. Moving beyond the cultural turn’s emphasis on a priori power and discourse and using the example of the dead bodies from the Iran-Iraq war as directly involved in the creation of the culture of martyrdom, the hypothesis is that the materiality of the body was directly responsible for the Islamism of the republic.

The third chapter, “Rupture: The Substitution of Things and Terms,” once again reiterates the centrality of objects in the political transformation of Iran in the 1990s, with Sefat arguing that the circulation of objects on a global scale imprinted a new political vocabulary for the population of Iran. The positionality of the material world in relation to the political discourse, therefore, is constructed in a way that the objects act as a system of reference for the linguistic transformation that makes up for the liberal policies adopted in the 1990s. One intriguing example is that of the silk scarf, which served as a replacement for the traditional hijab. An unintentional slip owed to the fabric (silk) could have been justified to the morality police as a mere accident and brushed over.

With the fourth and final chapter, “War: The Resignification of Things and Terms,” Sefat brings us to the closing episode of The Revolution of Things in what he calls a “resignification of things and terms” during the green movement of 2009. While laying the groundwork in the previous chapter with the rising new tensions between Hezbollahes and the reformists, signaling a growing economic divide in the population, he also leads us to have the sensation of a déjà vu. This divide is further marked by objects, which lead to marking a certain aesthetic, both personal and political, to the point of a regularization of both sides. The two sides were also replicating the pre-1979 geographies of Tehran: the posh, reformist, westernized north of the city, while the southern part remained impoverished and deeply Islamist. Both the geographical and ideological divide are marked by the author with certain sartorial choices, such as the use of import goods versus items made in Iran or good quality materials versus cheap fabric.

The Revolution of Things aims to bring about its own revolution with a discussion of the 1979 Iranian revolution using objects as signifiers and a system of reference for the political and linguistic landscape. The book is a new and provocative understanding of repressive political systems, within a cross-disciplinary analysis that also includes the
materiality of the human body (e.g., bodies of soldiers and the cult of martyrdom, silk scarves, expensive jeans, Keffiyeh, jewelry, facial hair, cars, VHS tapes, CDs, and satellite dishes) and the linguistic apparatus developed in connection with it. However, while the author outlines materiality as central to this study, his analysis of the objects mentioned throughout the text is rather shallow. Readers not familiar with the object examples may feel the need to resort to further inquiries. Moreover, the objects’ circulation is brushed over and explained in simplified terms, and the routes of imported objects are not mentioned. In conclusion, while material culture historians would likely wish for more in-depth analysis of the materiality of these particular things, the book still brings to the fore a novel perspective on the Iranian revolution and the interconnectedness of materiality and linguistics.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-material-culture


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=59797

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.