

# The happy story of a “thingist”

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This essay is an ethnographic analysis of the life history of a middle-aged man living in a small town in southern Portugal during the “austerity” crisis. Pedro’s initial engagement with caring for older persons eventually led him to a fascination with “things”, to such an extent that his friends jokingly call him a *coisista* (a ‘thingist’). His life story, as that of someone who has become a specialist in dealing with what happens to domestic objects when households break down, can help us throw light on the complexities of the process of objectification. Taking recourse to a long tradition of phenomenological analyses, the essay focuses on the mysterious relation between things and objects attempting to relate it to contemporary developments in sociocultural anthropology of the notions of personhood, company, and transcendence.

KEYWORDS: things, objectification, participation, personhood, transcendence, company, mystery.

**A feliz história de um “coisista”** ♦ Este ensaio é uma análise etnográfica da história de vida de Pedro, um homem de meia idade que vivia numa pequena cidade do interior do Alentejo durante a década que se seguiu à crise da “austeridade”. A sua vocação para cuidar de pessoas idosas levou Pedro a adquirir um fascínio por “coisas”, ao ponto de os seus amigos lhe chamarem por piada um *coisista*. O ensaio propõe que a vida de Pedro, como alguém que se tornou um especialista em lidar com o que acontece aos objetos domésticos quando as casas terminam, pode ajudar-nos a fazer sentido das complexidades implícitas nos processos de objetificação. Recorrendo a uma longa tradição de análises fenomenológicas, o ensaio põe o enfoque sobre a natureza misteriosa da relação entre coisas e objetos, esforçando-se por dar sentido aos desenvolvimentos recentes que têm ocorrido na antropologia sociocultural em relação às noções de pessoa, companhia e transcendência.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: coisas, objetificação, participação, pessoa, transcendência, companhia, mistério.

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Estou muito grato aos meus colegas do Departamento de Antropologia do Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE) pela honra de ter sido convidado a dar a Aula Ernesto Veiga de Oliveira para 2020/2021. Num momento em que voltava a Portugal, após uma longa estadia no estrangeiro, senti imenso prazer em poder reencontrar esses espaços que tão importantes foram para mim no início da minha vida profissional. De facto, essa foi a segunda vez que tive tal distinção e, tal como na minha anterior aula,<sup>1</sup> faço-o com um sentimento de respeito pelo grande intelectual e etnógrafo que tive ainda a oportunidade de conhecer pessoalmente na década de 1980. Se, por um lado, a antropologia sociocultural mudou profundamente desde os anos 40 do século passado, quando Veiga de Oliveira criou o corpo principal da sua obra, por outro lado, os antropólogos de hoje continuam ainda presos às virtudes do engajamento direto e pessoal com o mundo dos humanos, que ele tão vigorosamente defendia. O amor e confiança no gesto etnográfico que essa geração nos legou não esmoreceram entre nós. Espero que o ensaio que ofereço de seguida possa demonstrar como a etnografia (agora novamente reinventada) é mais do que uma fonte de evidência, ela é um processo ativo de instituição sociocultural.

Permitam-me ainda uma segunda referência: em maio de 2020, faleceu o distinto diplomata José Cutileiro. Contrariamente a Veiga de Oliveira, para Cutileiro, o seu engajamento com a antropologia foi um gesto de juventude, que não o acompanhou durante o resto da sua vida. Contudo, o estudo que publicou em 1971,<sup>2</sup> assim como as traduções que mobilizou junto da Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian à época, constituem um marco miliário da renovação disciplinar das ciências sociais em Portugal no período pós-ditatorial. O ensaio que se segue, tratando de eventos que ocorreram no que Cutileiro chamava Vila Nova (muito perto da Vila Velha do seu famoso estudo), é aqui oferecido em marca do respeito por essa continuidade de engajamento etnográfico que, em momentos diferentes, estas duas figuras agora ausentes representaram.

A aula que proferi em novembro de 2020 no ISCTE/IUL intitulava-se “Company and the mysteries of a dougout canoe” e tinha sido já entregue para publicação no *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*.<sup>3</sup> Ela recorre a uma visão teórica próxima da que informa o texto publicado de seguida, mas usa material da minha investigação na Bahia (NE Brasil). Em vez desse, a Comissão Editorial da *Etnográfica* aceitou a minha

1 Pina-Cabral, João, 2007, “Aromas de urze e de lama: Reflexões sobre o gesto etnográfico”, *Etnográfica*, XI (1): 191-212.

2 Cutileiro, José, 1971, *A Portuguese Rural Society*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

3 *In print*, 2022, 28 (4).

proposta de apresentar aqui um texto que remete mais diretamente para a realidade portuguesa e que tive a honra de apresentar como palestra plenária na Conferência da Société Européenne de Ethnologie et Folklore em Göttingen em março 2017.

THIS ESSAY IS AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF THE LIFE HISTORY OF Pedro, a middle-aged man living in Vila Nova, a small agrotown in southern Portugal in the first half of the 2010s.<sup>4</sup> It is, on the one hand, an attempt to make sense of his life in terms of the personal features that structure it – in particular, his fascination with “things” and his vocation for “care”. On the other hand, the essay aims to situate his life story by relation to the emergent features of the socio-political conjuncture under which he lived. In order to make sense of the way in which “things” and “care” are intertwined in Pedro’s activities the essay examines the nature of objectification by relation to personhood. This is an area where anthropologists have been working for quite a long while and the influence of that tradition is duly acknowledged here.<sup>5</sup> I am, however, mainly inspired in writing this paper by the work of Remo Bodei (2015 [2009]) and the way the author draws out the distinction between things and objects, thus redirecting the analytical emphasis away from the subject/object and the immaterial/material polarities that have been so prominent in the works of the leading figures of the past two decades (e.g. Miller 2010: 54-78).

Over the past decade, Vila Nova experienced a crisis of challenged dwelling that conjoins rural abandonment with the destructive effects of neoliberal policies of “austerity”. In the course of his life, Pedro’s response to this challenge developed into a kind of personal, familial, and localist engagement where domestic life and the objects that surround it play a central role. His fascination with “things” is such that his friends jokingly say of him that he is a *coisista* (lit. “thingist”), implying that it is excessive.

In Portugal, domestic life takes place around the *casa* (house), a word that jointly describes a building, a dwelling environment, and the primary social unit (see Pina-Cabral 1989 and 1991). *Casas* are where you become a person, where you discover yourself as moving through the different stages of what a person’s life is expected to include. Houses are containers of personhood – not only as built spaces, but also in the “things” that cohabit there with the

4 Both Pedro’s name and the name of the town in question are pseudonyms.

5 E.g. Gell (1998), Myers (2001), and Miller (2005, 2010).

dwellers and which are such integral parts of their very personhood. Since being a person is so deeply related to having become one in a *casa*, when *casas* are broken for one reason or another, the lives of those who belong to them experience a moment of crisis. All events that correspond to the termination of *casas* are therefore deeply crisogenic. Pedro's life story, as that of someone who has become a specialist on the break-up of households, will help us throw light on the complexities and mysteries that such processes involve.

## A CARING VOCATION

Pedro is the sort of person who feels a compulsion to care for others (see Lima 2018). As a sickly young man, long before he even discovered that he was gay, he already shielded his mother from his father's violence. His mother died early, but Pedro continued to live at home with his younger sister and their ageing father. During the 1990s the coastal cities in Portugal were growing rapidly and small countryside towns like Vila Nova were being depopulated. This meant that there were a lot of old people who lacked familial support and had no one to look after them, as the public health system was in those days only incipient. At the time, the suicide rate among old women in Alentejo was alarmingly high. At first, Pedro started caring for a couple of ageing relatives for whom he had a natural empathy. Soon, however, he was earning his living by providing domestic care and daily dispensing medication to bedridden old people. As his clients died one after the other, their houses became vacant, since the heirs lived away. With some capital he had accumulated from a short-lived business venture raising milk cows together with his cousins, Pedro took to buying these abandoned houses – often little more than rustic shacks – renovating them and selling them again for a margin of profit. He soon was fed up with this, however; his real vocation was not in construction, but in caring for old people. So he managed to secure a job as a nurse in the municipality's retirement home.

When he got to know better what was going on there, however, he was deeply upset. The week after he obtained the job, responding to an uncontrollable urge, he marched into the mayor's office to vent his anger and demanded that the mayor should come with him immediately on an impromptu visit to see what went on in the home when nobody was looking. To everyone's surprise, the mayor took up the challenge and was indeed shocked by what he saw that day. He demanded that immediate major reforms be made. As a consequence, a number of employees who had been less than vigilant in their jobs were summarily dismissed and Pedro took on the job of thoroughly reforming the facility. He did so, but did not stay there for very long, as the remaining members of staff could not pardon his impulsive gesture, which they interpreted as treachery. He was soon led to look for another job.

As a young man, Pedro never went out into the fields with his father. As a result, he learnt how to perform the household tasks. When he left the retirement home in order to make some money, he started to sell to friends the sort of cakes that his mother had made on feast days. As it happens, in the mid 1990s, Portuguese economy was growing, women were going out to work away from home in larger numbers, and people were acquiring more refined “urban” (consumer) tastes. There was an insatiable demand for artisanal cakes. Supermarket chains were opening up branches in all the small towns of the interior, and Pedro was pressed to provide them with cakes. In no time, his little kitchen had turned into an artisanal pastry workshop employing two workers on a full-time basis.

But he soon got tired of making cakes to be consumed by people he did not even know. He was about to close shop when his twin sister decided she would take over. In the meantime, she had had a baby with a man who did not acknowledge paternity and, since she did not have a vocation for childcare, Pedro was the one who cared for the little niece during her childhood. Now a grown woman, the niece claims that she does not care to know who was her biological father. Pedro, she says, “was my real father, I need no other”.

Unlike Pedro, his sister knew nothing of household tasks, as she had always been the tomboy who accompanied the father to the fields every day to look after the animals. Her real love continues to this day to be animals, in particular the large collection of cats and dogs she lives with. As jobs went, however, the pastry workshop was probably as good as she would get, since she had refused to study, claiming she had no patience for wasting time. She hired her two best friends as employees. The workshop is situated two streets away from home, where she keeps her beloved animals. In time, having tried her luck as a salesperson in a health food shop in Lisbon, her daughter was also drawn into the business. Today, the pastry workshop is thriving.

## THING AND OBJECT

In order to make sense of Pedro’s dealings, I find it useful here to refer to the way in which Remo Bodei differentiates between “thing” and “object”. In his words,

“... the idea of *objectum* (or, in German, *Gegenstand* – what is before or against me) implies a challenge, a contraposition that prevents the subject’s immediate affirmation precisely because it “objects” to the subject’s pretensions to dominance. It presupposes a confrontation that concludes with a definitive overpowering of the object, which, after the struggle between subject and object, is made available to be possessed and manipulated by the subject. A thing, in contrast, is not an object, an indeterminate obstacle

that I find before me and that I have to conquer or circumvent – rather, it is a cluster of relationships in which I feel and know that I am implicated and of which I do not want to have exclusive control.” (Bodei 2015 [2009]: 19)

Things and the persons who approach them are in mutual participation in the sense of sharing of essences that Lucien Lévy-Bruhl famously attributed to the word (see Pina-Cabral 2018a). To the contrary, the nature of the object is that it is public, framed by a majority consensus; it does not involve participation in the nearness of the “this one” relation because it has been cleared of the immediacy of contact and presents itself as objective, that is, as providing a transpersonal perspective, not as emerging from a personal encounter – it exists “out there”, independently of our presence and can be approached from all sorts of angles other than the one we presently occupy. There is an immediate affective investment in things that is absent from our grasp of objects, which are as ready to be made into things by virtue of our accommodation, as to be simply bypassed in their solidness. Thus, in the contrary direction, a material object that reverts to its role as a thing goes “from [the] indifference or ignorance of something, to thinking about it, perceiving it, or imagining it as endowed with a plurality of meanings, capable of emitting its own implications” (Bodei 2015 [2009]: 20).

In early ontogeny, the child’s first encounter is with the world of things. This, then, as the child comes to control language and propositional thinking, gives way to a shared world of objects, where things no longer face the child as she encounters them, but they come to appear as independent of the encounter (see Toren 1999; Tomasello 2003). Objects, therefore, having been abstracted from immediate participation, are endowed with a general sociality. That is why they appear as separate from the person. They become “material culture” – a collective creation. This, however, is just one further way in which sociality is naturalized. One is reminded here of Merleau-Ponty’s warning concerning time. “Time”, he says, “presupposes a view of time. It is, therefore, not like a river, not a flowing substance. The fact that the metaphor based on this comparison has persisted from the time of Heraclitus to our own day is explained by our surreptitiously putting into the river a witness of its course” (1962 [1945]: 477-478). To objectify is “to put in a witness”; objects appear externally present to us, just as time appears to be flowing. In our acceptance of the externality of objects, there is a yielding to social dominance. The externality of objects is a function of the social condition of living beings.

In short, collaboration is a foundational condition for the constitution of the “material culture” that surrounds us. Superficially, we have the impression that objects that were previously in existence are then “subjectivized” by their closeness to persons. This is how the matter is implicitly assumed to occur

in most ethnographic reports. Note how, for example, in his introduction to a collection on native Amazonian attitudes to materiality and personhood, Santos-Granero describes the process: he says, “subjectivation through ensoulment entails a kind of embodiment by which the ensouled objects become a sort of ‘extension of their owners’ bodies” (2009b: 14).

On the contrary, however, in the history of the person as subject (ontogeny), things come first and objects later. At a more fundamental level, the original gesture involves a relation between persons and things that, through collective engagement, are concurrently in the process of becoming objects. We do, indeed, arise as persons within a collective history, which is marked by previously existing objects (see Pina-Cabral 2017). But, as singular persons, our original encounter is with “this one”, with things. In order to become a person, the child has had to live through a world of “things”. In short, in their nearness, things are a condition for the emergence of the human subject in participation with what is “at hand”, both other persons and things. Participation takes place both with persons and with non-persons – things or animals (see Pina-Cabral 2018a, 2019). What makes us see things as objects is the successive triangulations that result from the accumulation of participations over time, eventually leading to the emergence of self-awareness. Objectification and the reflexive self happen conjointly in personhood and they are both products of sociality. This is not a new topic in anthropology: the layered and complex relation between what Raymond Firth calls “ontogeny” and the familiar world of persons and things is one of the central themes of his classic ethnography, *We the Tikopia* (1957 [1936]).

Yet, this matter is characteristically presented the other way around in ethnographic writing. For example, Jonathan Hill declares that his paper is about “what, how and why things become subjectivized...” (2009: 235). By claiming that objects are subjectivized – rather than that things are objectified by our personal immersion in sociality – we are importing an objectivist and individualist view of the world as existing independently of the social beings that people it; we are “putting in a witness”, to use Merleau-Ponty’s expression. To the contrary, the constitution of objects out of things (that is, the process of objectification) involves a level of abstraction; it necessarily involves de-subjectivization. Santos-Granero highlights an aspect of this process that, as we will see, is relevant to accounting for Pedro’s activities: “Native Amazonians often refuse to sell used items unless they have undergone a process of de-subjectivization. Even new items may be manufactured in ways that will prevent their subjectivity from becoming manifest” (2009b: 19).

This supposed “ensoulment” of objects is presented by ethnographers as a peculiar and characteristic “belief” of the particular non-European people they happen to be studying, e.g.: “the widespread *native Amazonian belief* that, through intimate contact, objects of personal use become gradually ‘ensouled’



or infused with the soul substance of their owners, thus acquiring a certain degree of subjectivity” (Santos-Granero 2009b: 12, my emphasis). Yet, as Pedro’s example highlights, the way in which persons participate in things is a general feature of all human societies, even among peoples like modern Europeans who, unlike Amerindian people, do not have a ready language to express it.

Primitivism freed twentieth century anthropologists who studied non-European societies to observe aspects of human encounters which they might have also observed closer to home if they had not automatically assumed that their domestic social encounters “at home” conformed to the diktats of the ideology of modernity. Another notable example of this is the way in which personal dividuality/partibility was treated as a culturally specific aspect of South Asians and later of Melanesians before it was understood to be a far more generic aspect of human sociality (see Pina-Cabral 2009; Sahlins 2011). One is today tempted to propose that many of the aporias that so exercised twentieth century anthropology were less the result of the ethnographer’s supposed difficulty in understanding the Other than of our difficulty in coming to terms with the disturbing awareness of the observer’s own “otherness” (Chua and Mathur 2018).

Nonetheless, it is important to stress that objects – even when they have been de-subjectivized – are never quite silent, as they first appear to be. Objects retain traces of their previous lives as things and are open to becoming things again. Thus, they always transport “a surplus of signification”:<sup>6</sup> “The *summa divisio* of Roman law between *res* (thing) and *persona* (person) loses relevance in the realm of material culture since, when it is separated from its owners, the *res* maintains and transmits the traces of the meanings that had been attributed to it” (Bodei 2015 [2009]: 55). Christopher Pinney corroborates such an approach when he claims that materiality (a feature of objects) is a “(figural) excess, or supplementarity, which can never be encompassed by linguistic-philosophical closure” (Pinney 2005: 266).

In this way, objects afford a set of potentials for persons who encounter them anew. This is why they so often surprise us by their capacity for action, their animate condition. They appear to “have a soul” independent of the will of the one who approaches them; a will of their own that challenges the inner presence of the person who faces them. There is a kind of universal animism implicit in the potential for engagement that objects afford those who approach them (see Bodei 2015 [2009]: 26, quoting Lévi-Strauss and Augé). This is because objects are not as they seem independent of life. For them to be present as objects to persons in sociality they have had to have been

6 Bodei takes the expression from Lévi-Strauss’ (1987) discussion of Mauss’ work.



present to someone else before. The intentionality of life, which is the root of communication, is a condition for objects to exist. Objects are only apparently passive and disconnected. They are a result of historically continuing sociality – a sociality of persons. By having been de-subjectivized, objects mobilize us as persons and, at the same time, they overtake each one of us in our singularity. For this reason, Pinney maintains, objects possess a kind of “uncontemporaneity” because they hold within them the history of their own constitution as objects: “‘the complex’ identity of the visual and material will always ‘exceed’ the present” (Bodey 2015 [2009]: 268).

## ANTIQUES

In the late 1990s, credit for housing became widely available, so Pedro took out a mortgage on a fancy house in a new quarter of town. When his uncle died, he took his aunt to live with him, so the problem was what to do with the furnishings of their old home. When he was working for the municipality, one of the patients of the retirement home died and Pedro discovered to his surprise that she had left him all that she owned, which amounted to a fully operational rural household. He renovated the house and rented it out to a young couple, but what to do with the furnishings? Faced with all of these household items, Pedro decided to take a lease on a disused warehouse, so as to have time to find a solution for all this “stuff” (*tralha*): while the English word carries an implication of excess substance (see Miller 2010), the Portuguese word stresses rather the random collection of unrelated things.

It was not long, however, before another pensioner, who was approaching death, offered Pedro the furnishings of his home on condition that he would sell the building and send the money to the man’s children, who had moved to Switzerland many years before and did not care to return to Portugal. Without having planned it, Pedro soon found himself the owner of a vast collection of household items (furniture, sofas, crockery, carpets, clothes, candelabra, cooking implements, etc.). Clothes were easy to give away to charities, but as for the rest no one wanted it. Yet he just could not face throwing all this stuff in the municipal rubbish dump, as he saw value in these objects. He started taking friends to his warehouse and selling informally to them whatever they needed for their homes at very low prices. Soon, the warehouse was paying for itself handsomely. In short, the personal items he received evinced a propensity for being re-directed as commodities once they had gone past his warehouse. Pedro decided to open up a shop. This was also a good time for him to employ his other sister (the eldest) as storekeeper, as her husband was sick and their business had gone bankrupt. This afforded her a small income and allowed him to be free to go around his various activities during the morning.

The shop is locally described as a *loja de antiguidades*, literally “antiquities shop” or “antiques”. Needless to say, there is almost nothing there that might be properly classified as an antique, since everything there is still available for purchase in shops or was so no longer than twenty years ago. I assume that the reason for having chosen this word (is it a euphemism or a metaphor?) lays in the realization that historicity inheres in these objects. The things in the houses that Pedro clears out were often originally produced as multiples (consumables), but when he picks them up they are “things”; they are “ensouled” or “haunted” in that they still stick to the people who made them their own and dwelt in their midst for so long. Even as, once in his shop, they become dissociated from their previous owners, they are unique because they have a history, that is, they do not become multiples again. For us as consumers, objects are marked by time in characteristically indelible ways both through fashion (which makes their time of design identifiable) and through signs of wear. The mark of time makes it obvious to everyone that these objects were once associated to someone else as things, even though we know not whom.

The moment these things go into Pedro’s shop, they acquire a kind of social generality and lose the earlier participations with people’s particular lives. They become again commodities – that is, they are objectified, ready for a new “ensoulment” in a new home. Pedro approaches aspects of the world that, to him, are closely associated to particular persons, but then he transforms these things into objects, so they can survive the death of the domestic environments where they were things. Thus, the shop is a tool for transforming things into objects to the extent that past moments of love and moments of trauma, past successes and defeats, past honor and dishonor, events of survival or death are shaded off, are expunged from these now-again-objects.

As their personal link to their previous owners vanishes, these things become generic; they are depersonalized, even if they never recover the pristineness they had when they were unwrapped from their cellophane covers as they left the supermarket. Pedro’s mediation washes away the personhood from these now-again-objects and, thus, both safeguards the dignity of the old people’s existence that would have remained attached to them as things, and frees the old people’s things to become again objects that can re-enter the cycle of consumption. In Pedro’s shop, the objects become commodities to the extent that they acquire again a potential for exchangeability. Pedro, therefore, is undertaking a gesture of “diversion” in that he is moving them from a domestic pathway of circulation (where objects would be possessed as heritage, as gifts, or recycled as rubbish) to a commodity pathway (where they no longer bear the mark of participation and can now be repurchased – see Appadurai 1986: 26-27).

Pedro is prosperous today and he owes that to this business. But his engagement with homes and their furnishings goes way beyond what might be

considered a simple means of livelihood; many neighbors consider it plainly obsessive and even mildly odd, a kind of “thingism” (*coisismo*). Indeed, as I observed his comings and goings, Pedro’s activities revealed themselves to me as going way beyond merely the clearing of abandoned homes and the moving of their furnishings in boxes. His task is to efface from things the participations of the persons who dwelt in their midst and, thus, to make them into generic affordances that can be approached from a public angle and transformed into commodities (objects).

Yet, as Appadurai noted, “the diversion of commodities from their customary paths always carries a risky and morally ambiguous aura” (1986: 27). Pedro’s trajectory has a contradictory aspect to it. He went from a rejection of domestic violence to a vocation for care and from there to a love of the things that mark personhood in domesticity. As things are tied to persons, they challenge those who would re-possess them; so, in order to be possessed again, and given life again, they first have to be made into public objects, they have to be generalized. But that is a hard and dangerous task to undertake because it involves taking into oneself the participations that stick to the things.

#### A CRISIS OF CHALLENGED DWELLING

As in all of the peripheral regions of Europe, economic growth was arrested in Portugal in 2002, after the onset of the euro. The prosperous days of the 1990s and early 2000s came to an end before anyone even noticed. By 2008, the international financial crisis meant that the interest on Portugal’s reasonably small sovereign debt was raised so high that the country was no longer able to pay it. As the country became increasingly insolvent, the financial crash had rapid repercussions for people of all conditions. The first response from the banks and the soon to be elected right-wing government (PSD) was to increase interest on mortgages, to increase taxation on real estate, and to pass new legislation that allowed for subcontracting of debt-collecting to small private firms, thus transforming a previously notoriously inefficient judicial system into a simplified and quick process of expropriation. It took a while for it to become clear that economic collapse would be inevitable due to the scandalous behavior of the national and international banking sectors.

In the peripheries of metropolitan areas where migrants from Vila Nova had settled in the 1980s and 1990s (Lisbon and Setúbal), consumers had been encouraged to buy cheap housing in newly built apartment blocks. The effects in those areas of the measures listed above were immediate, disastrous, and prolonged. By 2011, banks were foreclosing on an average of 19 houses a day. But the rate of foreclosures continued to increase rapidly until 2016, when a new left-leaning government finally changed the law to prevent people from

being evicted from their family homes. From 2013 to 2014, the number of houses the banks were repossessing and selling off increased by 75%.<sup>7</sup>

According to an officer of the main Portuguese consumer-protection agency (DECO), “People stop paying their personal credit, then their credit cards, then the installments on the cars, often even basic things like water and electricity. But the installment on the house is that very last thing that people would stop paying”.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, she explained, on foreclosure, “Usually people return to their parents’ home, but often they have no other alternative than just going to ask for social support from the State”.

In sum, a problematic break occurs in one’s expected life: that is, on losing one’s home, one becomes again a dependent, abdicating from one’s hard won independence. This takes place, however, at a time in the family life cycle when the expected life pattern of the defaulter’s parents and relatives can no longer cope with a rise in dependents. This means that the defaulter’s proximate people become onerously taxed by the default, and they too enter into crisis. One’s relatives, even if they did not lend one any money, can no longer afford to treat one as an equal partner in the “family enterprise”. This is how mutuality operates to spread the crisis between institutional levels (see Narotzky 2016). By getting into debt and losing one’s home, one creates a series of waves of familial disempowerment. Story after story were being reported in the newspapers repeating the same crisogenic pattern that I have just outlined.

Between 2008 and 2016, as the collapse of the earlier financial and political system took place, suicides doubled,<sup>9</sup> marriage rates decreased by half,<sup>10</sup> divorces increased,<sup>11</sup> fertility rates collapsed,<sup>12</sup> domestic violence became endemic,<sup>13</sup> emigration became hemorrhagic (Pires *et al.* 2014). This was not only a population problem at national and European level; this was a crisis of social belonging at all institutional levels. Homes were collapsing all around. As the people around him saw their personal and familial projects challenged, Pedro was increasingly being called to help resolve the collapse of homes, no

7 Cf. <<http://sicnoticias.sapo.pt/economia/2014-08-07-numero-de-casas-penhoradas-aumenta-75>> (last accessed October 2021).

8 Interview (Lisbon 2014) attended by myself and Ana Luísa Micaelo.

9 The rhythm duplicated after 2002. From 1991 to 2001, 706 cases were recorded per annum; from 2002 to 2012, 1,501 p.a. See <<https://www.pordata.pt/Portugal/Óbitos+de+residentes+em+Portugal+por+algumas+causas+de+morte-156>> (last accessed October 2021).

10 From 6.0 in 2000 to 3.1 in 2013. See <<http://www.pordata.pt/Portugal/Taxa+bruta+de+nupcialidade-530>> (last accessed October 2021).

11 From 14,420 p.a. in 1995-1999 to 25,553 p.a. in 2010-2013. See <<http://www.pordata.pt/Portugal/Ambiente+de+Consulta/Tabela>> (last accessed October 2021).

12 National fertility rate was at 40.8 in 2008, it was 33.9 in 2013. See <<http://www.pordata.pt/Portugal/Taxa+de+fecundidade+geral-618>> (last accessed October 2021).

13 Associação Portuguesa de Apoio às Vítimas, Relatório 2014. See <[https://apav.pt/apav\\_v3/images/pdf/Estatisticas\\_APAV\\_Relatorio\\_Anual\\_2014.pdf](https://apav.pt/apav_v3/images/pdf/Estatisticas_APAV_Relatorio_Anual_2014.pdf)> (last accessed October 2021).

longer only of dying people. According to him, since then, his clients come mostly in three kinds.

Firstly, and predominantly, they are aging persons who, having been abandoned by relatives who have migrated, do not have anyone to look after their personal possessions and to care for their beloved homes in the furnishing of which they had invested so much of their resources in the course of their active lives. As they move to retirement homes and then die, they welcome a small financial compensation that facilitates the end of their life and their burial. In any case, they hate the idea of leaving their abandoned homes to rot and Pedro's services are in great demand.

Secondly, in the 1980s and 1990s, people had bought new homes with credit. Some were primary homes; some were secondary homes bought by urban migrants as a sign of prestige. They looked forward to the possibility of displaying their newly acquired urban manners in their hometown in the interior. After 2008, however, as the population became impoverished due to reduced salaries and unemployment, a significant number of these people could no longer afford to pay the interest on their mortgages. Their homes were being repossessed by the banks or by the state (in compensation for unpaid taxes). Before the houses simply disappear, Pedro provides their challenged owners with a small but significant payment for the furnishings that they had so lovingly accumulated over the years and for which they no longer have any use.

Finally, due to the crisis, problems with mental health and addiction increased and the divorce rate shot through the roof. According both to the local priest and to a clinical psychologist whom I interviewed in Vila Nova, this was a response to people's sense of failure (either their own or their partner's, who could no longer respond to the expectations placed on them). As a result, a considerable number of broken homes started to come onto the market. Many of these divorced people moved away, either to the Lisbon area or, more likely, to Germany, the UK, or Switzerland (which has been Vila Nova's locally favored migration destination ever since the days of the previous emigration crisis in the 1960s). Female divorcees with young children generally opt to return to their parental homes in Vila Nova. Whatever the case, the furnishings had to be disposed of and whatever money they might get from selling them was eagerly divided between the separated spouses.

Pedro found his hands full responding to these three crises of challenged dwelling. Homes require care; our things, that carry within them so much of us, will become a challenge to our own integrity if they are not looked after. But that is precisely what is most difficult for so many people – they cannot afford to provide the care that their homes demand, either because they are too old or because they have moved away and are doing jobs that leave no time for care. It is not only that they are incapable of caring for the old people

who are so dear to them, but also that they have no opportunity to care for the environments where they were raised to personhood.

#### PEDRO'S TASK

Pedro provides a service both to those whose dwelling environments are no longer viable and to those who, wanting to build up a new dwelling environment, find that they do not have the required funds to respond to the needs that are considered obligatory. As was the case earlier on with the cakes, Pedro was surprised less by the nature of the offer (he always knew his mother made fabulous cakes; he always knew dead people's things had to be cleared away) than by the intensity of the demand. His response is a form of collective engagement (see Appadurai 1986: 29-30). He sits in the middle, between the people whose dwelling environments collapsed, and those who need to build up their dwelling environments. He is contacted either by the old people whose proximate death makes them concerned about what will happen to their beloved "things" or by the distant heirs who need to resolve the problem in a quick and efficient manner and transform the domestic environments where they were raised as children into transportable cash. Pedro's service is to free people of the things they owned, so these things can re-enter as objects into the circuit of consumption.

It is this process of dissociation that Pedro and his associates undertake each time they walk into a newly abandoned home. They sort things into categories that do not have to do with daily use but with market use (clothes to one side, crockery to the other, books and records, bedsteads and furnishings, kitchen appliances and utensils, etc.); they clean and wash them, taking away the marks of use; they separate off all the personal images and names that function as marks of belonging (photographs, personal paintings and drawings, dedications, inscriptions, etc.); they empty the house of everything and take it all elsewhere.

I went into one of these newly-cleared houses and I could see that their work had indeed been thorough. In the yard, I could tell that the former owners had been prone to rushed do-it-yourself solutions, but that was just about all that I could tell of their tastes. The house had not yet been painted over, but only the holes in the walls, where the pictures had once been hanging, gave away a sign of former presence. There were sheep pens in the back yard, a dog house, a chicken coop, and even a hook that looked like it might have had a bird cage hanging from it, but the silence was total – not a living animal. On the one hand, the house had been emptied of any narrative content and, on the other hand, the things that had been taken away no longer carried any fantasy in them. The love, the hate, the boredom, the fascination, the dreams, the sloth, had all been peeled off of these objects the moment they left that door



packed into boxes according to functional categories and no longer according to the logic of dwelling. What Pedro had done, so to speak, was to clear away the “household gods”, freeing the house for new occupation. In this way, it was not only the things that were dissociated from their previous owners; it was the house itself that was cleared of the ambivalent binds of company – what the Nyakyusa famously called “the chilling breath of men” (see Monica Wilson 1951).

By the time they find their place in the warehouse, these objects bear no sign of the participations they had formerly carried. Looking over the objects in the shop, I kept asking Pedro and his elder sister where this one and that one had come from; to whom they had belonged. He did not answer me once. She – kindly but regretfully – answered once or twice, but always in vague terms. Theirs is not the job of attributing faces to objects, thus transforming them back into things that carry in them the participations of previous owners. Their job is precisely the contrary.



*Figure 1 – Pedro’s living room. Source: Author, 2018.*

#### A BROADER SENSE OF CARE

The process is one that involves a considerable affective investment on the part of Pedro. When he goes into these soon-to-be-abandoned homes, Pedro enters into the owners’ lives. He encounters lived environments; he confronts “things”, not “objects”, as he can distinctly see the persons who are inscribed in them. At that point, he stands for those persons in a kind of substitution.



His love and respect for the old people – as well as his acute sense of irony – mixes with a surrogate participation in a normality of family life that he himself cannot achieve. A kind of continuity is established between him and the people whose end of life he shelters.<sup>14</sup> As he clears these homes, and particularly in the cases where he looked after their owners in their old age, Pedro comes to know a lot about the secrets of the lives inscribed in the things he moves. Yet he does not divulge or even admit openly to this problematic aspect of his form of making a living.

Pedro's principal drive is that of preservation. He looks after old people, refusing to let them be discarded, as much as he looks after their things, refusing to cast them into the rubbish dump. In this sense, there is a political side to his activities, as he manipulates demand by engaging people's capacity to relate to things. Of course, he does not phrase matters in these terms. He is most likely to make jokey comments about "throwing old people into the municipal tip where they deserve to be", rather than to state openly that his fight to revalue people's things is part of a fight to revalue people and, ultimately, part of revaluing those few who, like himself, stuck to the local life in Vila Nova instead of escaping to the big wide world of modernity.

Like so many gay men of his generation, Pedro might have opted for escaping the stigma by moving away to the big city, there to remake his life among people who do not care enough to bother to discriminate against gay men (Meneses 2000). But, emphatically, this is not what he did. To the contrary, Pedro took the courageous decision of making his life the way he wanted it to be, confronting the old prejudice amidst those who might have been the bearers of such prejudice (the old people) and winning them over with his care. In doing so, Pedro found his path as the preserver of these very same old people. There is both love and vengeance in it all. He was the one who protected them by giving new life to their things, the things in which they continued to live. His is a struggle for a conception of life.

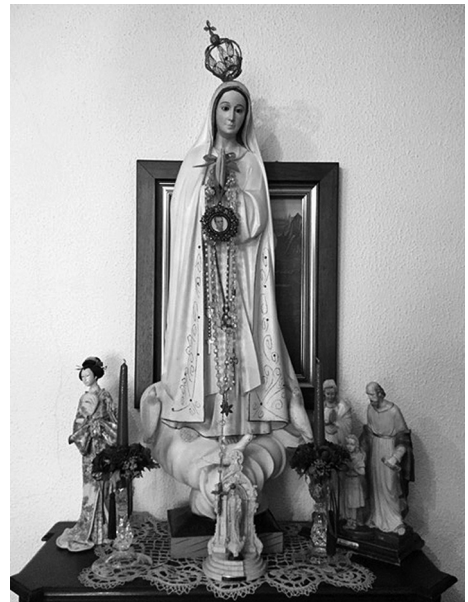
As he reprocesses these things, Pedro undertakes to take on himself the participations that they transported: what allows him to clear people from things is a kind of dramatic performance in which he takes their position. Thus, he shoulders the co-responsibility resulting from the participations existing in the things; he keeps their thingness to himself, like the priest who holds in himself the pollution in Indian funerary rites (Parry 1985). As he does so, Pedro not only protects the people whose domesticity was shattered, but he also safeguards their world, an ordered environment of which they were a part of but are no longer. The things that were particular and imbued with specific participations do not lose their history, they remain inscribed by a past. Only

14 On substitution and care, see Svendsen, Navne and Gjødsbøl (2018); on surrogacy and personal identity, see Pina-Cabral (2013).

it is no longer a particular past; things that go through Pedro’s hands become generalized; their sociality is now generic; they become objectified. They thus acquire an “excess”; that is, they alert us to the fact that they mean more than they meant to us then.

The excessive decoration of his own home is perhaps the clearest sign of that vicariousness of experience; it comes from a need to overstate. The house is stuffed full with objects no one uses and that his nieces are not allowed to touch: the over-decorated sofas, the row upon row of ceramic figurines, the patterned carpets that you are not allowed to walk on, the overly elaborate bedsteads where no one sleeps, etc. It is all experienced by him as an accumulation of value, perhaps even as a safeguard against his own uncertain (ultimately lonely) domesticity. In his home, one of the most noticeable pieces is an altar to the Lady of Fátima with a very large statue: “It was given to me by a couple I looked after to their end”, he says with a shaking voice (see figure 2).

As he reprocesses these things, Pedro also counters the destiny of social marginalization of Vila Nova that contemporary modes of financial oppression dictate: an abandoned world oppresses people whose things are discarded; the saving of these things as objects that others might use both safeguards their previous owners’ value and grants them a modicum of financial compensation; this, then, allows local life to continue and reconstitute itself. There is a scale shift: what was a personal matter (the value people give to things) now becomes a collective enterprise (the rejection of the marginalization of local lives). The process operates semi-otically in much the same way as the pastry business: faced with the end of traditional modes of cooking and eating, the providing of traditionally produced cakes for supermarkets operates as a mode of salvaging traditional ways of life. Pedro empowers people and places by means of making things into objects. His vocation for care, which is a person-to-person encounter, is generalized by his manipulation of things. Retrospectively, as things, objects contained their owners’ lives and validated these lives; prospectively, as objects, they mobilize life as worthwhile by reducing suffering,



*Figure 2 – The shrine to Our Lady of Fátima in his bedroom. Source: Author, 2018.*

poverty and misery in the face of “austerity”. Pedro both earns an income and saves his world (including the persons and things that people it).

There is, therefore, a kind of broader social engagement in Pedro’s efforts to prevent waste. In short, his countering of consumerist waste is a personal gesture and a political gesture at the same time: Pedro’s broader sense of contributing towards the safeguarding of his town’s life echoes with his vocation for care – as when he forced the mayor to visit the retirement home on a day when nobody was waiting for him. As Svendsen, Navne and Gjødsbøl put it by relation to activities of care: ‘facilitating personhood involves caring for the future of both the person *and* the collectivity.’ (2018: 30, my emphasis). Pedro’s manipulation of consumerism is not unrelated to his attempt at safeguarding Vila Nova. His enterprise is an exercise in life-saving by means of saving the things of life.<sup>15</sup>

## THE MYSTERY OF OBJECTS

Pedro does his job well, but there are limits to what can be done. Contrary to what modernity would have us believe, items in the world were not originally abstract “objects” that then became “things” by being associated with people. Rather, originally, objects were “things”, in that they were present to someone who, in their nearness, participated in them. It is the task of mediation undertaken by the collectivity over time that then makes them into “objects”, that can be seen by all from a variety of angles, as if they did not depend on being present to anyone in particular. In short, ontogenetically, objectification is secondary; it succeeds upon the participatory encounter with things in dwelling. According to Remo Bodei, this is the principal lesson to take from the long line of phenomenological thinkers who worked on the topic.

Yet, precisely for this reason, anyone who goes into Pedro’s shop cannot avoid the curiosity that I myself always experience when I go there: these “objects”, generically positioned as they now are, still announce themselves as former “things”. If they now are objects, it is because earlier on they had been socially present to someone else in a very close manner. There is nothing mechanical or not-human in the life of these objects – as there is, for example, in a plastic bowl that I buy in a supermarket, which comes from a factory where it might never even have been touched by human hands. Of the *tralha* (stuff) in Pedro’s shop (as much as of that in his house) it is not possible to clear off the marks of previous participation. Other ethnographers have noted this, namely in contexts where an ambivalent modernity is underlined by poverty.

15 For a discussion of the concept of life and its role in ethnographic theory, see Pina-Cabral (2018c).

When you visit Pedro's warehouse you cannot fail to wonder who chose this particular jug and what did that say about them. And these colored pillows? Who bought that leather jacket and where? Who could possibly have liked such frilly curtains? Secretly, Pedro's nieces are full of stories that he and his sister in the shop would never divulge. Laughing, I share with them accounts of old ladies who bought sofas in the 1960s, only to cover them in plastic and not allow anyone to sit on them for the following fifty years; couples who brashly spent borrowed money on useless renovations, only to have to confront foreclosure by the bank even before they occupied the house; valuable things that were found within things that were seemingly valueless; stories of people who hid away photographs and jewels in trunks, only to discover decades later that they had been stolen by neighbors who entered during day-time through the backyard.

The people who buy them in Pedro's shop take these objects into their homes. At that moment, they are things again, in the sense that they now participate in the new owners: they reflect their new owners to themselves (by means of taste); they interact with the new owners' world in intimate ways (as happens with cooking utensils, or pieces of furniture); they become inheritable again, thus becoming vehicles for the familiarity of persons (Pina-Cabral 2018b). Yet, at least for a while, they carry the indelible mark of pastness. As Bodei puts it, "by becoming transformed into a thing after a long interregnum of oblivion, an object manifests not only the traces of the natural and social processes that have produced it but also the prejudices, the trends, and the tastes of an entire society" (Pina-Cabral 2015: 31). In their new role as "antiques" in the buyers' homes, these objects-now-again-things are invested with a past that raises them above the immediate directness of unique ownership.

To that extent, Pedro's job is different from that of our normal suppliers of consumable commodities. The items purchased in his shop play a role in our homes that is more akin to the role of works of art than to that of things like new computers – to that extent they are "antiques". There is an "excess" in them, for they communicate things that we cannot immediately identify; these objects announce the presence of persons we cannot trace – they "emanate an effluvium of melancholy" (Bodei 2015: 29), what Santos-Granero calls "ensoulment" (2009). Let it be noted, however, that not all mystery is frightening. Things can be mysterious in a positive way – as when, for instance, mothers wear on a golden chain their child's first tooth. A marvellous example of this is provided by Raymond Firth's photograph of "Pa Ranifuri wearing a tooth of his father, the Ariki Tafua" that the author tells us represents "a token of filial sentiment" (1957 [1936]: loc 13677). By such means, the actual participatory nature of embodiment is made present to the viewer – who, as it were, becomes a witness to the open door that exists between the wearer of the object and the one who originally grew the tooth.

Encountering the mysterious side of things, however, is always troubling emotionally, even in the case of benevolent encounters. This is because objects alert us to the unknowable – the incompleteness of objectification, “the residual intractability of phenomena” (see Pina-Cabral 2022). Pedro’s shop clears the presences from commodities that were once personalized things but that, in order to re-enter the pathway of consumption, need to become objects without personal binds. Pedro operates a diversion from an expected pathway of use. Nevertheless, such objects are “mysterious” because they never fully lose their history as things.

Pedro’s example teaches us that, as a result, activities of care and the management of the things that they involve are deeply intertwined in a process that is ultimately transcendental (see Svendsen, Navne and Gjødsbøl 2018). As objects are mysterious, so too persons come to be made mysterious by the entities (objects and persons) that they participate in – their presence is evoked beyond themselves, making them present as metapersons (see Sahlins 2017; Pina-Cabral 2019). Thus, the object becomes “mystical” in the way that Lévy-Bruhl identified – that is, it is both emotionally challenging and transcendental (*e.g.* 1951 [1910]: 28-29). This being said, it is important to remember that, due to the role played by participation (both person-person and person-object) in the temporal constitution of our social worlds, transcendence is a function of personal ontogeny (see Pina-Cabral 2019). That means that the condition of possibility for this shift from things into objects (and back again) is the institution of transcendence by live persons. Personal transcendence (both in early ontogeny and throughout life) is the condition for persons and objects to be made mysterious, for “ensoulment” to occur.

In Ernst Cassirer’s words,

“The world is pervaded by a magical force that may be thought equally well as corporeal or spiritual and that is totally indifferent toward this separation. It inheres in ‘things’ as well as in ‘persons’, in the ‘material’ as well as in the ‘immaterial’, the inanimate as well as the animated. It is, so to speak, quite simply the mystery of efficacy [*Wirken*] that is apprehended and mythically objectified – without there being within this mystery a boundary between the particular modes of ‘psychic’ [*seelisch*] and ‘corporeal’ efficacy [*Wirken*].” (2021 [1929]: 119-120)

To conclude, objects acquire their mysterious quality when they are made to mediate between our personal existence and an always underdetermined social embracement. The objectification that sets up the mystery is a function both of the singularity of each one of us and of the need of company for each one of us to exist at all. To each one of us as persons, rooted as we are in

our present conjuncture, this mysterious “excess” inherent in the objects that surround us necessarily appears as calling on us from the outside, as being transcendent.

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