I. Abstract
Current debates concerning social and cultural phenomena have led to what has come to be called the “material turn” in the social sciences, by which things are moving into the focus of attention; but neither the role of things in historical processes nor the history of thinking about human-thing relations have hitherto been explored sufficiently (For the purpose of this project a thing is defined as a material object transcending its exchange or utility value as tool, commodity or something to be consumed).

The aim of this project is to add a historical dimension to the current focus on human-thing relations by exploring three interrelated questions:

1. How did modern German philosophers, from the 19th century to today conceptualize the role of things in human affairs?
2. How may awareness of the role of things impact on the writing of history?
3. What role can things be said to play in the development and diffusion of historical memory?

While this project suggests a novel look at each of these three questions, it also proposes an innovative integrated framework for thinking about humans as historical creatures, the study of historical events and processes, as well as for the understanding of how historical memory is shaped, maintained and transmitted.

II. Objectives
Most will agree that history is about the actions of humans – as individuals and in groups – their consciousness and intentions, hopes, dreams and suffering, the processes, structures and contexts in which these actions were embedded, as well as the consequences they had on other individuals, communities and entire societies. Although
current debates concerning social and cultural phenomena have led to what has come to be called the “material turn” in the social sciences, neither the role of things in historical processes nor the history of thinking about human-thing relations have hitherto been explored sufficiently.

For the purpose of this project, a “thing” (“Ding”) is defined as a material object transcending its exchange or utility value as tool, commodity or something to be consumed. A thing may be a personal or family possession, a book, letter, toy, photograph or gadget; a device, such as a pair of glasses, a walking stick or a kitchen utensil; an article expressing one's talent or taste, such as a musical instrument, garment, piece of furniture or painting; an item issued by an official authority, such as a form, document, passport or identity card; as well as an object on public display in a gallery, memorial or museum. In other words, the thing is a durable artifact endowed with meaning – as trace or relic of the past, because it represents or defines its owner's social status and distinction, enables a person to grasp the world and expressing her- or himself in it, provides orientation and mirrors one's identity, or for a plethora of other emotional, social or cognitive reasons.

Assuming that the role of things in the life of humans deserves attention, this project endeavors to explore three interrelated questions:

A. How did modern German philosophers conceptualize the role of things in human affairs?
B. How may awareness of the role of things impact on the writing of history?
C. What role can things be said to play in the development and diffusion of social memory?

Accordingly, the project is divided into three interrelated parts, dealing with

A. philosophy,
B. historiography and
C. historical memory.

While this project suggests a novel look at each of these components, it also proposes an innovative integrated framework for thinking about humans as historical creatures, the study of historical events and processes, as well as for the understanding of how historical memory is shaped, maintained and transmitted.
This is an endeavor, whose full elaboration will take more than the year to be budgeted in response to this call for proposals. However, if granted, the funds offered by the Minerva Foundation will make it possible to get this project off the ground. It will allow both to undertake a significant step toward its further development and to produce tangible results in the course of this year, in form of three international events that will take place at Tel Aviv University, as well as the publication of a selection of essays in German, detailing and illustrating the research agenda proposed here.

Thus, the result of this project will be a volume of essays, divided into three parts and introduced by a conceptual opening statement written by the Principal Investigator. The aim of the three events and the volume resulting from them is to have a double impact on debates on the writing of history: first, by offering a series of philosophical, historical and interdisciplinary case studies on a theme that has not yet been sufficiently explored, and second, by offering an innovative methodological approach and raising far-reaching historiographical questions.1

A. Philosophical Things
In the second half of the 19th century Karl Marx initiated a particular type of materialist thinking about history. He argued that in order to understand historical processes one had to examine the relations of production, that is, the changing social relations humans enter in order to produce their means of subsistence. Under the impact of accelerated industrialization, this form of materialism regarded artifacts primarily as commodities, examining humans above all in their role as producers of goods. However, even in this economic context Marx attributed to humans the tendency to endow “goods” ("Waren") with transcendent powers, fetishizing them, and thus turning them into “things” ("Dinge").2 While the notion of “commodity fetishism” is well-known and has been widely commented upon,3 other conceptions of human-thing relations developed by German philosophers have not received the comprehensive and profound consideration they deserve.

The first part of the project re-examines the history of modern German thought, focusing on the way in which attempts to develop philosophical approaches to history include the changing relations of humans to things. The goal of this part is to establish that there is a tradition of German thought distinguishing the thing ("das Ding") as object
transcending its utility and exchange function, from other material objects. On closer examination, this tradition (whose members would not necessarily define themselves as materialists or as belonging to a single tradition) presents a series of varied and often highly sophisticated perspectives on the multifaceted and changing relations of humans to things. To reveal the richness of this thought, historical inquiries into German philosophy will be conducted and solicited, focusing on the diverse ways in which modern German thinkers ranging from Kant, Hegel, Feuerbach\(^4\) and Marx and Engels, through Nietzsche, Heidegger,\(^5\) Scheler\(^6\) and Gehlen,\(^7\) to Horkheimer and Adorno,\(^8\) Arendt,\(^9\) Benjamin,\(^10\) Bloch\(^11\) and Fromm,\(^12\) have conceptualized a) things, b) the way humans relate to them, and c) the impact of human-thing relations on historical consciousness.

A conference entitled “Philosophical Things,” to be organized in cooperation with the Philosophy Department of Tel Aviv University in fall 2012, will bring together young and established German and Israeli scholars dealing with this theme.

**B. Historical Things**

Approaches deployed since the late 1990s in the field of science studies, such as the Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) developed by Paul Latour and Michel Callon,\(^13\) suggest considering the interrelation of things and humans from a new perspective. Investigating primarily the way scientific research is conducted, they accord material objects of all kinds the dignity of actors in their own right, endowed with the power to transform the status and consciousness of humans. Drawing on this approach, but broadening its scope significantly, the second part of this project focuses on the fruitfulness of a historical perspective that highlights the fact that humans are embedded in a network of both human and non-human actors. Thus this part examines the role and significance of things for the definition, stabilization or alteration of social roles and structures.

These issues will be explored within the particular context of modern German history. Hence the second part of the project will be composed of a number of case studies illustrating both how the role of things in German history can be researched, as well as depicting the way in which things actually can be said to be historical actors, that is, impacting on the actions and fate of humans. To give just one example, one of the topics to be explored in this part is the effect of forms, signs and other material markers of identity on various groups in German society.\(^14\)
An international conference, to be held at Tel Aviv University in summer 2012, will not only constitute a venue of the presentation and discussion of case studies, but also create an opportunity for a historiographical discussion on how to conceptualize things as actors, both in general and more specifically, in German history.

C. Memorable Things
The third part of the project proceeds to some extent under the impact of the concept “postmemory” introduced by literary scholar Marianne Hirsch. Hirsch has stressed the importance of meaningful material objects, such as photographs, in the development and transmission – some might say, construction – of historical memory. Inspired by Hirsch’s work, but also aiming to reflect upon it critically, an international and interdisciplinary conference will be held at Tel Aviv University in spring 2012. Its purpose is to examine the way in which the Holocaust memory has been maintained or modified within a lifespan and across generations. Entitled “Memorable Things”, the conference will include Israeli, German and Austrian scholars from history, psychology and anthropology, focusing on the role of photographs and documentary films in triggering, shaping and transmitting Holocaust memory and on the way displays in historical museums and memorials impact on historical memory.

In addition to the papers to be presented at the conference, scholars will be approached for papers dealing with the role of things in German memory in contexts unrelated to the Holocaust. Thus an attempt will be made to provide a new impetus into the debate on collective memory and memorial culture, their origins, dynamics and effects.

1 Marx uses the expressions “fetish” and “fetishism” already in his early writings, but only in his later work does he fully integrate them into his critique of political economy, commenting for instance: “Daß ein gesellschaftliches Produktionsverhältnis sich als ein außer den Individuen vorhandener Gegenstand und die bestimmten Beziehungen, die sie im Produktionsprozeß ihres gesellschaftlichen Lebens einleiten, sich als spezifische Eigenschaft eines Dings darstellen, diese Verkehrung und nicht eingebildete, sondern prosaisch reelle Mystifikation charakterisiert alle gesellschaftlichen Formen der Tauschwert setzenden Arbeit.” Marx-Engels Werke [MEW], vol. 13, p. 35; “Fetischismus [verwandelt] den gesellschaftlichen, ökonomischen Charakter, welchen Dinge im gesellschaftlichen Produktionsprozeß aufgeprägt erhalten, in einen natürlichen, aus der stofflichen Natur dieser Dinge entspringenden Charakter (...).” MEW, vol. 24, p. 228.


5 Max Scheler, The Human Place in the Cosmos, Evanston 2009 (1928).
12 Erich Fromm, To Have or to Be?, London 1979.