

*Commentary*

## Rethinking Old Thoughts

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Rick and I are grateful to the editors of JBA, and a bit bemused to have been given the opportunity to publish this cabinet castaway of a paper. In his commentary and in good archaeological fashion, Rick resurrects more of the institutional context in which this paper was embedded than I, although I have discussed these issues somewhat elsewhere (Arnould and Thomson 2014). But, like Rick, I think it is likely that our academic trajectories might have been different had some version of this essay been published in an anthropology journal when we wrote it, but in ways I cannot imagine now. Perhaps the most enduring effect is that the absence of an anthropology of consumption in the early 1980s thrust me into the arms of the most adventurous and in some ways most scholarly colleagues in the consumer research community in marketing. And in that university milieu, after working as a development anthropologist like Rick, and despite a brief sojourn in the anthropology department at University of Colorado, Denver, I labored for some years.

### **Looking back**

Thirty five years on a paper primarily about consumer acculturation would compete for space among a crowded field of such papers, and even special issues of journals devoted to the explication of market mediated consumer cultures. The idea of consumption practices as significant carriers of culture, and of consumer goods as deeply impregnated with

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malleable, even ambiguous or contradictory, meanings is hardly news. Thus, that people's identities become the mobile product of social interactions mediated by mass produced consumer goods is recognized. Indeed the proposition that object worlds and cultural worlds, and what we take to be agents enmeshed within them, are co-constituting would hardly raise an eyebrow now, but it was not so then.

When Rick and I wrote this awkward, fumbling text, we were working with limited primary and secondary source material. We drew on our own fieldwork in Niger and Belize respectively. In the Nigerien case—then and still one of the more marginal cultural environments of the global economy—I was thunderstruck by two undeniable mega trends. On the one hand, there was the evident disappearance of a host of locally or regionally organized systems of production and consumption. In Niger, this included spinning, weaving, tanning, hunting, leather working, pottery production, jewelry making, shoemaking, saddlery, and so on. At the same time, one could observe their replacements arriving from factories in nearby Nigeria and, incredibly, from far away China, then hardly the industrial behemoth it is today. And accompanying these trends, new sortings of people occurred—according to the constellations of things they increasingly chose in the markets, rather than were allocated through systems of kinship, patronage, and institutionalized gifting.

Thus, the paper constituted an attempt to make sense of processes which I was ill prepared to apprehend—a point Rick also makes in his commentary. My head was filled with ideas about Levi Straussian cold societies, Leachian and Turnerian steady state ecosystems and ritual processes, respectively; and precapitalist modes of production reinforcing the instituted economic processes, as laid out by Meillassoux and other French Marxist anthropologists.

At the same time, anthropology had little to tell me about the consumption phenomena I observed. Grant McCracken, Danny Miller, and even Marshall Sahlins' work on consumption did not yet exist, or was not yet widely diffused in 1980. And Jean Baudrillard's masterful interpretations of the consumer society had not been translated into English. Indeed, Baudrillard himself was hardly embraced by French academia at the time. As we pointed out in the paper, economic anthropology focused on production or exchange, and fought a well-intentioned, but ultimately ill framed, battle about the universality of economic rationality. But it had nothing to say about consumption, save for Mary Douglas' limited structural-semiotic work. And indeed we found that our efforts to take these kinds of phenomena seriously were ill received among the "real" anthropologists and archaeologists who advised us at the University of Arizona in those days.

Rereading the paper now, it seems that our first question—asking about the relative receptivity of different cultural systems to novel

consumer goods—is both ill-framed and off point, not to mention the fact that we don’t answer it. Ill-framed because a better grasp of the archaeology of ancient trade and a better consideration of political anthropology would have shown important linkages between political differentiation and “luxury,” without resolving the issue of selectivity of particular material manifestations of political differentiation. Perhaps we could have built more on Flannery’s (1968) text. At the same time, such considerations would have helped us better understand the cultural specificity of the “conspicuous consumption” about which Veblen wrote. This might have helped us offer real alternatives to the emulationist model of diffusion that we did indeed criticize in our failed article. Rereading Weber, and reading Colin Campbell’s somewhat later book on the Romantic ethos in Western Protestantism, could have unlocked some thinking about ideology’s culturally specific role in framing consumption as well. Viewed from another angle, it seems like issues of relative globalization across time and space and a more thoroughgoing cultural ecology might have provided the tools to frame the first question we asked in a more sophisticated way.

Somewhere between Mauss and Marx I think we had more tools to apprehend the evolution of consumption in capitalist market-mediated society than we understood at the time. This approach could have been linked to an appreciation for what existing studies of totemism and animism taught about materiality. The discussion of the *hau* in Best, Mauss, Sahlins, and others, and of totemism (Levi-Strauss 1962; Descola 2014)—not to mention the classic discussion of potlatch and kula in Boas and Malinowski—respectively should have alerted us to the radical alterity of concepts of self and object in non-Western societies of previous epochs. Understanding the ontologies linking things and men among such societies—that is, the idea of shared substances found in both animist and totemic ontologies—should have helped us understand more about the sticky linkages between things and roles than we did. Thus men of value and women of renown (Weiner 1976) in such societies, the relationships that recognized them as such, and the things that circulated between them as emblems of their groups, could have been seen as analytic wholes. There was far less “freedom” to transact roles and prestige than we recognized in our paper, which really failed to grasp how much freedom is an outcome of market capitalism rather than a general condition of it. Such worldviews figure were not at all in mainstream western thought, which makes them hard even for anthropologists to understand. Of course, the global proliferation of the brand, which is so clearly an entry in the category of analogic ontological entities, should perhaps makes us reconsider this assertion (Arnould and Cayla 2016; Latour 2010). But to return to Marx, his discussion of the separation of producer, product, labor, use value, and exchange value wrought by capitalism, and especially his ideas of the alienation between producer and product, should have been more central to our discussion of the

origin of demand as such in non-Western societies. The massive appearance of such alienated things is truly fantastical. Things without a soul, free-floating signifieds, as it were, seemed amenable to new attachments and associations in ways that totemic and animistic things are not.

### **Interesting questions**

Still, it strikes me that understanding “how classes of prestige goods are defined or limited, and how and why they change over time” (as we wrote), the micro and meso-sociology of shifts in consumer preferences, or—viewed the other way around—the processes by which things become recognized and valued—and in particular how this occurs with novel things—continues to merit attention. Our model tried to frame this in an abstract fashion. It’s both not enough and, in fact, erroneous to attribute the adoption of differentiated products ranging from soap (1996) to blue jeans (Miller and Woodward 2012) and botox (Giesler 2012) to “marketing,” as we others (Arnould 1989; Izberk-Bilgin 2012) have shown. Indeed, complicated ideological shaping processes are at stake in which marketing is only one institutional mechanism. Holt’s (2004) work has shown that marketed objects are enmeshed in myth and history, are buffeted by cultural disruptions, and are semiotically differentiated, thus carrying indexical or iconic associations by turns. Back then, we sort of recognized this, but I think there is anthropology to be done on the sources of expectations, the emergence of taste regimes that make one’s first experience of something novel, with uncertain symbolic associations, nonetheless acceptable, even pleasurable rather than distasteful (Wilk 1997).

I encounter work on globalization today that elaborates on the mechanisms that bring in to relationship specific locales and specific cultural logics, in which reflexive contrasts in the meanings of things come into focus. We were right, I think, in arguing for the importance of paying careful attention to the articulation between the within-culture circulation of objects and the between-culture circulation, but in more detailed terms. The omnivorous capability of global marketing channels enabled by global techno and ideoscapes produces a plethora of examples. Anthropologists, among others, recognize that cultural meanings and signs are generated by a series of constituting structures, such as political and social institutions, which produce and reproduce certain ideologies that express normative constructions of the relationship of material things (Thompson and Haytko 1997; Cherrier and Murray 2007). Thus, Smart’s (2004) concise account shows how French cognac could become a major item of consumption without being very much drunk during a particular historical moment in Honk Kong’s rise to economic prominence. But more work on the global structures of common difference in consumption practice and meaning, mentioned by

Rick—work that moves beyond simple descriptive terms, like glocalization or creolization, is still needed.

It is rather a pity that we developed our process elements so little. The ideas we connected to terms like competition, displacement, promotion, identification, appropriation, escalation, and so on are still kind of interesting, although I think some of the terms are rather whimsically defined. The sticky, yet fluid, circulation of meanings and the factors and processes that structure this circulation have captured the attention of consumer culture theorists—as is evident in texts ranging from Holt’s (2004) genealogical method, to Thompson’s (Thompson, Rindfleisch and Arsel 2006) idea of the doppelganger, and Giesler’s (2014) idea of marketplace drama, but our ideas about process were kind of still born. We lacked the tools of practice or performance theory. Moreover, recent work has really taken up the role of cultural intermediaries who orchestrate, manage, and take pleasure in what we termed the “symbolic competition” involved in consumption (Kerrigan; et al: 2011). But it might be useful to have more of such work, incorporating nowadays the effects of social media.

Something that we only began to appreciate in this paper is the role of consumer goods in the creation of new templates for action and interpretation. Our paper limited itself to talking about the ways in which unstable semiotic regimes produce space for innovation, and we drew attention to this as an aspect of what we now call globalization. But we under-appreciated the creative potential of market dynamics itself—like some of the early studies of brands in post-socialist eastern Europe, which looked at brand meaning in a way not entirely unlike our failed paper (Strizhakova, Coulter and Price 2008). But it seems that this culturally generative capacity is lurking in Wengrow’s (2008) study of product marking in the prehistoric Mideast. The recognition of the fuller creative potential of glocalized market dynamics is made explicit in some recent research in cultural branding for instance:

Brands do not only draw upon meaning resources from particular cultures and histories, but...new cultural meanings and practices emerge and develop in relationship to brands. Indeed, there are many ways in which branding processes and practices—and brands themselves—go beyond a subsidiary role and co-create culture.

(Schroeder, Borgerson and Wu 2015: 262)

Importantly, such studies show that the idea of tension and contradiction, evoked if not fully developed in our paper, is integral to the dynamics of cultural reproduction through which marketer-produced resources both come to establish or rejuvenate cultural categories like “Chineseness” (in the Schroeder et al. [2015] example), not merely to provide new symbolic expressions of them. This seems entirely consistent with the Hegelian take on materiality developed by Miller (1987). Similarly, some

colleagues and I have explored the creative emergence of glocalized cultural templates in the context of the development of Greenlandic foodways as a new cuisine—a process involving both global templates for gourmet food, and local systems of resource procurement, preparation, and circulation. This process revalorizes local food while also appropriating it into global market processes.

### **What this fostered**

After this aborted paper, my research in processes of materiality evolved from an interest in what makes things favored to what makes them inalienable, and from a phenomenological to a more meso level systemic perspective than we took in our paper. Thus another rather naïve study looked into the why of favored things in a North American and Nigerian context and discovered the not unsurprising links to personal and social identity respectively, although the idea of linking value (Cova 1997) eluded us in that study. On the other hand, a certain interest in religious texts among Nigerians was perhaps an early indicator of the wave of religiosity that has washed subsequently over the Sahel and not only in the extreme variants featured in the global infoscapes. I missed an opportunity to inquire more deeply into the resurgent Islamization that others examined (Masquelier 2001). But another element that went largely unmentioned in that work was the impact of the erosion of the material landscape rooted in local traditions of production—not only on cultural propriety, but also on images of success and interethnic relationships, and on how this was wrought by Niger's tighter insertion into global circuits of exchange. Desertification and impoverishment realized in slackened social ties between ethnically specialized producers and consumers, and a progressive disappearance of a catalogue of objects, were part and parcel of the global financescape of advanced market capitalism.

This study led to a consideration of inalienable possessions among elderly North American consumers, who were so much more interested in discussing the fate of family heirlooms than their putative vulnerability to the come-ons of unscrupulous sellers of deals of a lifetime. The capitalist captains of consciousness excoriated by the Frankfurt School and their inheritors were far from central to these consumers concerns. It appeared that seniors were interested not merely in securing some form of secular immortality through transfer of their own legacy possessions, but also in reinforcing familial legacies. Thus, there was real keeping-through-giving in the strategizing of elderly consumers with regards to the indexical symbols many of their things had become. And this, in turn, led inevitably to the relatively banal assertion of actor network theory that objects have agency, as consumer durables asserted all sorts of organizing dispositifs over generations of curators (Curasi, Price and Arnould 2004).

## Conclusion

In sum, it is both personally gratifying and mortifying to resurrect this paper: gratifying because, though the paper itself is no great shakes, the idea that an anthropology of consumption, of consumer behavior, and consumable things has surely proven its merits; mortifying, because of the immaturity of the ideas, the missed opportunities to build on available anthropological theory, and the underdeveloped potential of some potentially useful ideas. While there is much scope for developing further material culture studies, as some prefer to term this domain, it is also clear, as we did not imagine then, that we need a theory of liquid things, digital things, human-object hybrids, and, above all, a non-apocalyptic consumer culture. While Rick and I have pursued parallel rather than conjoined paths, I notice that, once again, our mutual interests in the latter were nascent in the passionate discussions that gave rise to this manuscript.

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