

Commodification and its
consequences: Consumption
and authenticity

SAN266, week2, February 27, 2018

Group work

- What is commodity?
- What is commodification?
- Do you know any authors/works focusing on commodification or exchange of commodities? How they conceptualised commodities and exchange of commodities?

Gregory. Gifts and Commodities. 1982

Gift exchange (*gift societies/economies*):

- Transfer: obligatory, unlimited by time (relationships last in time)
- Transactors – mutually obliged and related or transfer creates relationship
- Objects – inalienable (taonga)

Commodity exchange (*commodity societies/economies*):

- Transfer: voluntary, time is limited by transaction
- Transactors – unrelated, relation is defined and motivated by transaction
- Objects – alienable, value is commercial

Gregory. Gifts and Commodities. 1982

- Ideal types of exchange and of societies -> Form of transaction is characteristic for a type of society and social relations
- Gift societies – clan-based, qualitative social relations, reproduction of social beings
- Commodity societies – class-based (production), quantitative social relations, social reproduction of things

Critiques/expansions

James Carrier. 1995. Gifts and Commodities: Exchange and Western Capitalism since 1700:

- *Commodities are gifts*

Arjun Appadurai. 1986. Social Life of Things; Kopytoff.1986. Cultural biography of things

- *The status of things changes in tournaments of value or during their biographies – things become commodities in the process of commodification and can be decomoditized.*

Nicolas Thomas. Entangled objects. 1991

Things are promiscuous: they change their meaning and status as they move from context to context

Group work two:

The movie Gods must be crazy shows usual European preconception about first contact of non-capitalist societies with consumer goods. Watch beginning of the movie and describe how it depicts effect of consumer goods on non-capitalist society.

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PdmpofujRmc&list=PLI8IGY1FbP5259LiXrPa38nPjxfBGBH_4&index=10

Consumer culture and modernity

- **Don Slater:** Consumer culture as the culture of modern West – related to activities, institutions and values defining western Modernity: choice, individualism, market relations
- Romantization of non-Europeans as authentic; romantization of Europeans as only real heirs of industrial revolutions

In SAN:

- Otherness (as object of the study of SAN) is constituted as unfragmented culture opposed to modernity
- Modernity and social change interpreted as a loss of authentic culture

Western myths on consumption

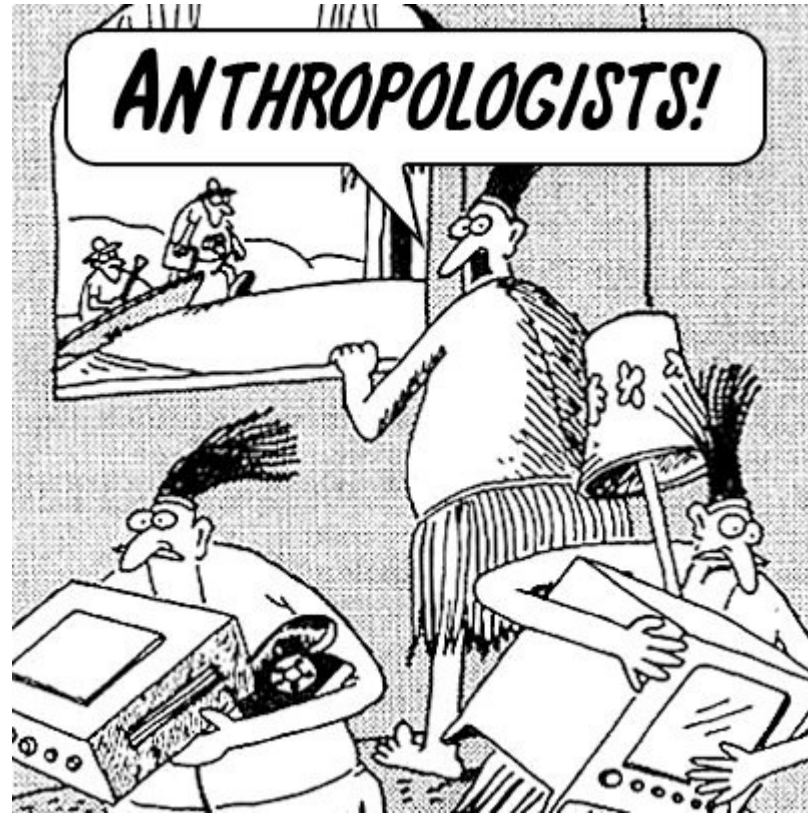
- Consumption means a loss of authenticity
- Consumption is an act of free choice
- People have different attitude to consumption than to production, attitude to production is more superficial
- Mass consumption related to increase in irrational desires replaced more utilitarian and rational relation to material culture
- consumption is in opposition to production

Consumer culture and modernity

In SAN:

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Anthropologists are coming, hide TVs!



Consumption as a threat to authenticity

- Anthropology until 1970's ignoring consumption – chapters on social change
- „social change“- consumption as a threat to the concept of culture

Interpretations of consumer goods:

1. Incorporation to cosmology, ideally through ritual (Carsten – money, Torren - Drinking cash, Miller – Christmas, Cargo cults)
2. Destruction of cosmology – (Bohannan and Bohannan – spheres of exchange at Tiv, Comaroff and Comaroff – Godly beasts, beastly goods)

Cargo

Cargo cults:

Millenarian movements first described in Melanesia, encompass a range of practices that will result in the appearance of material wealth, particularly highly desirable Western goods

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qmIYe2KS0-Y>

Cargo cults – Vanuatu, John Frum Army



Spheres of exchange

Bohannan and Bohannan. 1968. *Tiv Economy*.

Spheres of exchange: Goods and services belong to distinct value categories and can be exchanged only within the category (sphere of exchange) they belong to

Tiv: 3 spheres of exchange (subsistence goods, ritual and prestigious goods including slaves, people)

Important works

Marshall Sahlins. 1974. *Original Affluent society*

- There is no natural desire to own goods or to own a lot. Against evolutionist hypothesis that free time evolves with affluence in late stages of social evolution
- **Nancy Munn. 1986. *Fame of Gawa***
- Consumption is not utilitarian/functional

Marilyn Strathern. 1988. *Gender of Gift*.

- Property and production are not necessarily related

Daniel Miller

Daniel Miller. 1987. Material Culture and Mass Consumption

- Focus on modern western society and consumption, consumption as creation of culture in capitalism

Daniel Miller (ed.). 1995. Acknowledging Consumption.

- Research of consumption transforms anthropology as discipline
- Global mass consumption means that people define themselves and their culture through commodities

Miller, Mintz, Tambiah etc.

- Consumption is a means for creation of cultural forms. Creates modernity as heterogeneous praxis
- Comaroff 1996:20 „culture is constructed through consumption“