

# Biographies of things; things and human biographies: Social lives of things

SOC562, Week 2, 27. 2. 2019

# Definitions of commodity:

- Essentialist: defined as a **type of object**: a thing with use and exchange value; object produced for exchange (Marx)
- Analytical: defined **by form and function of exchange**: An alienable object exchanged for its counter-value between otherwise unrelated people (Gregory, Carrier)
- Kopytoff suggests processual definition. **Summarize Kopytoff's approach to commodity. What is the role of cultural biography of things in this approach?**

# Kopytoff – processual approach to commodification

- if we want to understand whether when and how a thing becomes commodity, we have to look beyond individual transactions and beyond the Marxist thinking about use and exchange value.
- Objects are immersed in cognitive and cultural processes (moral economy defining their value and status) and their (non)commodity status is not stable
- Methodological necessity to follow objects and their movement – things move in and out of various phases of being commodities and noncommodities in the process of commodification – decommodification - recommodification

# Kopytoff – cultural biography of things

- Methodological necessity to follow objects and their movement: As people, things have social lives and biographies

## **Sources and inspirations:**

- Inspired by biographical research in social sciences:
- Based on a reasonable amount of actual life-histories of people, it presents the range of biographical possibilities in the given society and examines how these possibilities are realised.
- Mead: What is a successful social career of person? What is well-lived life? What departures of the ideal model are possible?
- Genealogical models (e.g. Rivers) – kinship represented in ideal models of kinship diagrams. Rivers examines inheritance – rules and actual passing of objects

# Kopytoff – cultural biography of things

Cultural biography of a Zulu hats



## Cultural biography of things as a method:

- What are biographical possibilities inherent in the status of a thing in a particular period and culture? What does the thing come from? Who made it? What has been its career so far?
- What is ideal career for such a thing? What are appropriate ages?
- Paths and diversions

# Biography of a car: a path



# Biography of a car: a path



# Biography of a car: a path





# Biography of a car: diversions



# Kopytoff – cultural biography of things

- Enables us to understand commodification as a process (commodification – decommodification - recommodification)
- Makes visible otherwise obscure meanings – redefinition of the meaning with the change of the context
- Illuminating particular social context
- Illuminating human biographies

# Cultural biography of thing

- Hebdige, Dick (1979) *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London: Methuen & Co.
- Hebdige, Dick (1988) *Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things*. New York: Routledge.



# Cultural biography of thing



# Biographies and things

## **Hoskins. J. 1998. Biographical objects.**

- Kodi, Western Sumba, Indonesia
- It is not polite to ask about one's life
- Without the concept of telling the story of one's life, but they do talk a lot about their material possessions
- Biographical objects are personal possessions that serve as metaphors around which tellers organize their stories about the self.
- Objects are biographical, she says, because they help
- organize personal identity, giving it some of their unity and coherence.

# Biographies and things

**Jean Sébastien Marcoux. 2001. The Refurbishment of Memory. In Miller (ed.) Home Possessions.**

- what people bring with them when they move, what are the things that matter when the time to move comes, why they matter and how they come to matter
- the things that people move with them are at the heart of the constitution of a memory which often resists displacements.
- this memory is constituted *throughout* those displacements and how it is often transformed, altered and refurbished by the same token.

# Biographies and things

**Makovicky, Nicolette. 2007. Closet and Cabinet: Clutter as Cosmology. *Home Cultures*.**

- interiors as personal collections of objects and of memories, a space that was created by the members of the family
- collection, ordering, display, and storage
- The display speaks both of family propriety and domesticity, as well as the commemoration of past generations by mediating a generalized sense of past through the topological ordering of objects