The social life of things

Commodities in cultural perspective

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CHAPTER 2

The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process

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For the economist, commodities simply are. That is, certain things and rights to things are produced, exist, and can be seen to circulate through the economic system as they are being exchanged for other things, usually in exchange for money. This view, of course, frames the commonsensical definition of a commodity: an item with use value that also has exchange value. I shall, for the moment, accept this definition, which should suffice for raising certain preliminary issues, and I shall expand on it as the argument warrants.

From a cultural perspective, the production of commodities is also a cultural and cognitive process: commodities must be not only produced materially as things, but also culturally marked as being a certain kind of thing. Out of the total range of things available in a society, only some of them are considered appropriate for marking as commodities. Moreover, the same thing may be treated as a commodity at one time and not at another. And finally, the same thing may, at the same time, be seen as a commodity by one person and as something else by another. Such shifts and differences in whether and when a thing is a commodity reveal a moral economy that stands behind the objective economy of visible transactions.

Of persons and things

In contemporary Western thought, we take it more or less for granted that things – physical objects and rights to them – represent the natural universe of commodities. At the opposite pole we place people, who represent the natural universe of individuation and singularization. This conceptual polarity of individualized persons and commoditized things is recent and, culturally speaking, exceptional. People can be and have been commoditized again and again, in innumerable societies throughout history, by way of those widespread institutions known under the blanket term "slavery." Hence, it may be suggestive to approach the notion of commodity by first looking at it in the context of slavery.

Slavery has often been defined, in the past, as the treatment of persons as property or, in some kindred definitions, as objects. More recently, there has been a shift away from this all-or-none view toward a processual perspective, in which marginality and ambiguity of status are at the core of the slave's social identity (see Meillassoux 1975, Vaughan 1977, Kopytoff and Miers 1977, Kopytoff 1982, Patterson 1982). From this perspective slavery is seen not as a fixed and unitary status, but as a process of social transformation that involves a succession of phases and changes in status, some of which merge with other statuses (for example, that of adoptee) that we in the West consider far removed from slavery.

Slavery begins with capture or sale, when the individual is stripped of his previous social identity and becomes a non-person, indeed an object and an actual or potential commodity. But the process continues. The slave is acquired by a person or group and is reinserted into the host group, within which he is resocialized and rehumanized by being given a new social identity. The commodity-slave becomes in effect reindividualized by acquiring new statuses (by no means always lowly ones) and a unique configuration of personal relationships. In brief, the process has moved the slave away from the simple status of exchangeable commodity and toward that of a singular individual occupying a particular social and personal niche. But the slave usually remains a potential commodity: he or she continues to have a potential exchange value that may be realized by resale. In many societies, this was also true of the "free," who were subject to sale under certain defined circumstances. To the extent that in such societies all persons possessed an exchange value and were commoditizable, commoditization in them was clearly not culturally confined to the world of things.

What we see in the career of a slave is a process of initial withdrawal from a given original social setting, his or her commoditization, followed by increasing singularization (that is, decommoditization) in the new setting, with the possibility of later recommoditization. As in most processes, the successive phases merge one into another. Effectively, the slave was unambiguously a commodity only during the relatively short period between capture or first sale and the acquisition of the new social identity; and the slave becomes less of a commodity and more of a singular individual in the process of gradual incorporation into the host society. This biographical consideration of enslavement as a process suggests that the commoditization of other things may usefully be seen in a similar light, namely, as part of the cultural shaping of biographies.

The biographical approach

Biographies have been approached in various ways in anthropology (for a survey, see Langness 1965). One may present an actual biography, or one may construct a typical biographical model from randomly assembled biographical data, as one does in the standard Life Cycle chapter in a general ethnography. A more theoretically aware biographical model is rather more demanding. It is based on a reasonable number of actual life histories. It presents the range of biographical possibilities that the society in question offers and examines the manner in which these possibilities are realized in the life stories of various categories of people. And it examines idealized biographies that are considered to be desirable models in the society and the way real-life departures from the models are perceived. As Margaret Mead remarked, one way to understand a culture is to see what sort of biography it regards as embodying a successful social career. Clearly, what is seen as a well-lived life in an African society is different in outline from what would be pronounced as a well-lived life along the Ganges, or in Brittany, or among the Eskimos.

It seems to me that we can profitably ask the same range and kinds of cultural questions to arrive at biographies of things. Early in this century, in an article entitled "The genealogical method of anthropological inquiry" (1910), W. H. R. Rivers offered what has since become a standard tool in ethnographic fieldwork. The thrust of the article – the aspect for which it is now mainly remembered – is to show how kinship terminology and relationships may be superimposed on a genealogical diagram and traced through the social-structure-in-time that the diagram mirrors. But Rivers also suggested something else: that, for example, when the anthropologist is in search of inheritance rules, he may compare the ideal statement of the rules with the actual movement of a particular object, such as a plot of land, through the genealogical diagram, noting concretely how it passes from hand to hand. What Rivers proposed was a kind of biography of things in terms of ownership. But a biography may concentrate on innumerable other matters and events.

In doing the biography of a thing, one would ask questions similar to those one asks about people: What, sociologically, are the biographical possibilities inherent in its "status" and in the period and culture, and how are these possibilities realized? Where does the thing come from and who made it? What has been its career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such things? What are the recognized "ages" or periods in the thing's "life," and what are the

cultural markers for them? How does the thing's use change with its age, and what happens to it when it reaches the end of its usefulness?

For example, among the Suku of Zaire, among whom I worked, the life expectancy of a hut is about ten years. The typical biography of a hut begins with its housing a couple or, in a polygynous household, a wife with her children. As the hut ages, it is successively turned into a guest house or a house for a widow, a teenagers' hangout, kitchen, and, finally, goat or chicken house – until at last the termites win and the structure collapses. The physical state of the hut at each given age corresponds to a particular use. For a hut to be out of phase in its use makes a Suku uncomfortable, and it conveys a message. Thus, to house a visitor in a hut that should be a kitchen says something about the visitor's status; and if there is no visitors' hut available in a compound, it says something about the compound-head's character – he must be lazy, inhospitable, or poor. We have similar biographical expectations of things. To us, a biography of a painting by Renoir that ends up in an incinerator is as tragic, in its way, as the biography of a person who ends up murdered. That is obvious. But there are other events in the biography of objects that convey more subtle meanings. What of a Renoir ending up in a private and inaccessible collection? Of one lying neglected in a museum basement? How should we feel about yet another Renoir leaving France for the United States? Or for Nigeria? The cultural responses to such biographical details reveal a tangled mass of aesthetic, historical, and even political judgments, and of convictions and values that shape our attitudes to objects labeled "art."

Biographies of things can make salient what might otherwise remain obscure. For example, in situations of culture contact, they can show what anthropologists have so often stressed: that what is significant about the adoption of alien objects – as of alien ideas – is not the fact that they are adopted, but the way they are culturally redefined and put to use. The biography of a car in Africa would reveal a wealth of cultural data: the way it was acquired, how and from whom the money was assembled to pay for it, the relationship of the seller to the buyer, the uses to which the car is regularly put, the identity of its most frequent passengers and of those who borrow it, the frequency of borrowing, the garages to which it is taken and the owner's relation to the mechanics, the movement of the car from hand to hand over the years, and in the end, when the car collapses, the final disposition of its remains. All of these details would reveal an entirely different biography from that of a middle-class American, or Navajo, or French peasant car.

One brings to every biography some prior conception of what is to

be its focus. We accept that every person has many biographies – psychological, professional, political, familial, economic and so forth – each of which selects some aspects of the life history and discards others. Biographies of things cannot but be similarly partial. Obviously, the sheer physical biography of a car is quite different from its technical biography, known in the trade as its repair record. The car can also furnish an economic biography – its initial worth, its sale and resale price, the rate of decline in its value, its response to the recession, the patterning over several years of its maintenance costs. The car also offers several possible social biographies: one biography may concentrate on its place in the owner-family's economy, another may relate the history of its ownership to the society's class structure, and a third may focus on its role in the sociology of the family's kin relations, such as loosening family ties in America or strengthening them in Africa.

But all such biographies – economic, technical, social – may or may not be culturally informed. What would make a biography cultural is not what it deals with, but how and from what perspective. A culturally informed economic biography of an object would look at it as a culturally constructed entity, endowed with culturally specific meanings, and classified and reclassified into culturally constituted categories. It is from this point of view that I should like to propose a framework for looking at commodities – or rather, speaking processually, at commoditization. But first, what is a commodity?

The singular and the common

I assume commodities to be a universal cultural phenomenon. Their existence is a concomitant of the existence of transactions that involve the exchange of things (objects and services), exchange being a universal feature of human social life and, according to some theorists, at the very core of it (see, for example, Homans 1961; Ekeh 1974; and Kapferer 1976). Where societies differ is in the ways commoditization as a special expression of exchange is structured and related to the social system, in the factors that encourage or contain it, in the long-term tendencies for it to expand or stabilize, and in the cultural and ideological premises that suffuse its workings.

What, then, makes a thing a commodity? A commodity is a thing that has use value and that can be exchanged in a discrete transaction for a counterpart, the very fact of exchange indicating that the counterpart has, in the immediate context, an equivalent value. The coun-

terpart is by the same token also a commodity at the time of exchange. The exchange can be direct or it can be achieved indirectly by way of money, one of whose functions is as a means of exchange. Hence, anything that can be bought for money is at that point a commodity, whatever the fate that is reserved for it after the transaction has been made (it may, thereafter, be decommoditized). Hence, in the West, as a matter of cultural shorthand, we usually take saleability to be the unmistakable indicator of commodity status, while non-saleability imparts to a thing a special aura of apartness from the mundane and the common. In fact, of course, saleability for money is not a necessary feature of commodity status, given the existence of commodity exchange in non-monetary economies.

I refer to the transaction involving commodities as discrete in order to stress that the primary and immediate purpose of the transaction is to obtain the counterpart value (and that, for the economist, is also its economic function). The purpose of the transaction is not, for example, to open the way for some other kind of transaction, as in the case of gifts given to initiate marriage negotiations or to secure patronage; each of these cases is a partial transaction that should be considered in the context of the entire transaction. While exchanges of things usually involve commodities, a notable exception is the exchanges that mark relations of reciprocity, as these have been classically defined in anthropology. Here, gifts are given in order to evoke an obligation to give back a gift, which in turn will evoke a similar obligation – a never-ending chain of gifts and obligations. The gifts themselves may be things that are normally used as commodities (food, feasts, luxury goods, services), but each transaction is not discrete and none, in principle, is terminal.

To be saleable for money or to be exchangeable for a wide array of other things is to have something in common with a large number of exchangeable things that, taken together, partake of a single universe of comparable values. To use an appropriately loaded even if archaic term, to be saleable or widely exchangeable is to be "common" – the opposite of being uncommon, incomparable, unique, singular, and therefore not exchangeable for anything else. The perfect commodity would be one that is exchangeable with anything and everything else, as the perfectly commoditized world would be one in which everything is exchangeable or for sale. By the same token, the perfectly decommoditized world would be one in which everything is singular, unique, and unexchangeable.

The two situations are ideal polar types, and no real economic

system could conform to either. In no system is everything so singular as to preclude even the hint of exchange. And in no system, except in some extravagant Marxian image of an utterly commoditized capitalism, is everything a commodity and exchangeable for everything else within a unitary sphere of exchange. Such a construction of the world – in the first case as totally heterogeneous in terms of valuation and, in the second, as totally homogeneous – would be humanly and culturally impossible. But they are two extremes between which every real economy occupies its own peculiar place.

We can accept, with most philosophers, linguists, and psychologists, that the human mind has an inherent tendency to impose order upon the chaos of its environment by classifying its contents, and without this classification knowledge of the world and adjustment to it would not be possible. Culture serves the mind by imposing a collectively shared cognitive order upon the world which, objectively, is totally heterogeneous and presents an endless array of singular things. Culture achieves order by carving out, through discrimination and classification, distinct areas of homogeneity within the overall heterogeneity. Yet, if the homogenizing process is carried too far and the perceived world begins to approach too closely the other pole – in the case of goods, that of utter commoditization – culture's function of cognitive discrimination is undermined. Both individuals and cultural collectivities must navigate somewhere between the polar extremes by classifying things into categories that are simultaneously neither too many nor too embracing. In brief, what we usually refer to as "structure" lies between the heterogeneity of too much splitting and the homogeneity of too much lumping.

In the realm of exchange values, this means that the natural world of singular things must be arranged into several manageable value classes – that is, different things must be selected and made cognitively similar when put together within each category and dissimilar when put into different categories. This is the basis for a well-known economic phenomenon – that of several spheres of exchange values, which operate more or less independently of one another. The phenomenon is found in every society, though Westerners are most apt to perceive it in uncommercialized and unmonetized economies. The nature and structure of these spheres of exchange varies among societies because, as we can expect with Durkheim and Mauss (1963; original publication 1903), the cultural systems of classification reflect the structure and the cultural resources of the societies in question. And beyond that, as we may expect with Dumont (1972), there's also some tendency to impose a hierarchy upon the categories.

Spheres of exchange

A concrete example of an economy with clearly distinct spheres of exchange will help the discussion. In what is a classic analysis of a "multi-centric economy," Bohannan (1959) describes three such spheres of exchange as they operated before the colonial period among the Tiv of central Nigeria: (a) the sphere of subsistence items – yams, cereals, condiments, chickens, goats, utensils, tools, and the like; (b) the sphere of prestige items – mainly cattle, slaves, ritual offices, special cloth, medicines, and brass rods; and (c) the sphere of rights-in-people, which included rights in wives, wards, and offspring.

The three spheres represent three separate universes of exchange values, that is, three commodity spheres. Items within each were exchangeable, and each was ruled by its own kind of morality. Moreover, there was a moral hierarchy among the spheres: the subsistence sphere, with its untrammeled market morality, was the lowest, and the rights-in-people sphere, related to the world of kin and kin-group relations, was the highest. In the Tiv case (in contrast to that of many other similar systems), it was possible to move – even if in a rather cumbersome manner – between the spheres. Brass rods provided the link. In exceptional circumstances, people relinquished, unwillingly, rods for subsistence items; and, at the other end, one could also initiate with rods some transactions in the rights-in-people sphere. The Tiv considered it satisfying and morally appropriate to convert "upward," from subsistence to prestige and from prestige to rights-in-people, whereas converting "downward" was shameful and done only under extreme duress.

The problem of value and value equivalence has always been a philosophical conundrum in economics. It involves the mysterious process by which things that are patently unlike are somehow made to be alike with respect to value, making yams, for example, somehow comparable to and exchangeable with a mortar or a pot. In the terms we have been using here, this involves taking the patently singular and inserting it into a uniform category of value with other patently singular things. For all the difficulties that the labor theory of value presents, it at least suggests that while yams and pots can conceivably be compared by the labor required to produce them (even while allowing for the different investment in training that the labor represents in each case), no such common standard is available in comparing yams to ritual offices or pots to wives and offspring. Hence, the immense difficulty, indeed impossibility, of lumping all such disparate items into a single commodity sphere. This difficulty provides

the natural basis for the cultural construction of separate spheres of exchange. The culture takes on the less sweeping task of making value-equivalence by creating several discrete commodity spheres – in the Tiv case, palpable items of subsistence created by physical labor, as opposed to the prestige items of social maneuvering, as opposed to the more intimate domain of the rights and obligations of kinship.

The drive to commoditization

From this perspective, a multi-centric economy such as that of the Tiv is not an exotically complicated rendering of a straightforward exchange system. It is rather the opposite – a feat of simplification of what is naturally an unmanageable mass of singular items. But why only three spheres and not, say, a dozen? The commoditization seems to be pushed to the limits permitted by the Tiv exchange technology, which lacked a common denominator of value more convenient than brass rods. One perceives in this a drive inherent in every exchange system toward optimum commoditization – the drive to extend the fundamentally seductive idea of exchange to as many items as the existing exchange technology will comfortably allow. Hence the universal acceptance of money whenever it has been introduced into non-monetized societies and its inexorable conquest of the internal economy of these societies, regardless of initial rejection and of individual unhappiness about it – an unhappiness well illustrated by the modern Tiv. Hence also the uniform results of the introduction of money in a wide range of otherwise different societies: more extensive commoditization and the merger of the separate spheres of exchange. It is as if the internal logic of exchange itself pre-adapts all economies to seize upon the new opportunities that wide commoditization so obviously brings with it.

One may interpret Braudel's recent work (1983) in this light – as showing how the development in early modern Europe of a range of new institutions shaped what might be called a new exchange technology and how this, in turn, led to the explosion of commoditization that was at the root of capitalism. The extensive commoditization we associate with capitalism is thus not a feature of capitalism per se, but of the exchange technology that, historically, was associated with it and that set dramatically wider limits to maximum feasible commoditization. Modern state-ordered, noncapitalist economies certainly show no signs of being systematically exempt from this tendency, even though they may try to control it by political means. Indeed, given their endemic shortages and ubiquitous black markets, commoditi-

zation in them expands into novel areas, in which the consumer, in order to purchase goods and services, must first purchase access to the transaction.

Commoditization, then, is best looked upon as a process of becoming rather than as an all-or-none state of being. Its expansion takes place in two ways: (a) with respect to each thing, by making it exchangeable for more and more other things, and (b) with respect to the system as a whole, by making more and more different things more widely exchangeable.

Singularization: cultural and individual

The counterdrive to this potential onrush of commoditization is culture. In the sense that commoditization homogenizes value, while the essence of culture is discrimination, excessive commoditization is anticultural – as indeed so many have perceived it or sensed it to be. And if, as Durkheim (1915; original publication 1912) saw it, societies need to set apart a certain portion of their environment, marking it as "sacred," singularization is one means to this end. Culture ensures that some things remain unambigiously singular, it resists the commoditization of others; and it sometimes resingularizes what has been commoditized.

In every society, there are things that are publicly precluded from being commoditized. Some of the prohibitions are cultural and upheld collectively. In state societies, many of these prohibitions are the handwork of the state, with the usual intertwining between what serves the society at large, what serves the state, and what serves the specific groups in control. This applies to much of what one thinks of as the symbolic inventory of a society: public lands, monuments, state art collections, the paraphernalia of political power, royal residences, chiefly insignia, ritual objects, and so on. Power often asserts itself symbolically precisely by insisting on its right to singularize an object, or a set or class of objects. African chiefs and kings reserve to themselves the right to certain animals and animal products, such as the skins and teeth of spotted wild cats. The kings of Siam monopolized albino elephants. And British monarchs have kept their right to dead whales washed ashore. There may be some practical side to these royal pretensions, which ecological and cultural materialists will no doubt diligently discover. What these monopolies clearly do, however, is to expand the visible reach of sacred power by projecting it onto additional sacralized objects.

Such singularization is sometimes extended to things that are nor-

mally commodities – in effect, commodities are singularized by being pulled out of their usual commodity sphere. Thus, in the ritual paraphernalia of the British monarchy, we find a Star of India that, contrary to what would normally have happened, was prevented from becoming a commodity and eventually singularized into a "crown jewel." Similarly, the ritual paraphernalia of the kings of the Suku of Zaire included standard trade items from the past, such as eighteenth-century European ceramic drinking mugs brought by the Portuguese, carried by the Suku to their present area, and sacralized in the process.

Another way to singularize objects is through restricted commoditization, in which some things are confined to a very narrow sphere of exchange. The Tiv system illustrates the principle. The few items in the prestige sphere (slaves, cattle, ritual offices, a special cloth, and brass rods), though commodities by virtue of being exchangeable one for the other, were less commoditized than the far more numerous items of the subsistence sphere, ranging widely from yams to pots. A sphere consisting of but two kinds of items – as in the classic model of the Trobriand kula exchange sphere of arm bands and bracelets – represents an even greater degree of singularization. The Tiv exchange sphere of rights-in-person achieved a singular integrity by a different though related principle, that of the homogeneity of its components. The two upper Tiv spheres, it may be noted, were more singular, more special, and hence more sacred than the lowest sphere, containing the many objects of mundance subsistence. Thus the moral hierarchy of the Tiv exchange spheres corresponded to a gradient of singularity.

If sacralization can be achieved by singularity, singularity does not guarantee sacralization. Being a non-commodity does not by itself assure high regard, and many singular things (that is, non-exchangeable things) may be worth very little. Among the Aghem of western Cameroon, with exchange spheres not unlike those of the Tiv, one could detect yet another and lower sphere, one below that of marketable subsistence items. Once, when trying to find out the precolonial exchange value of various items, I asked about the barter value of manioc. The response was indignant scoffing at the very idea that such a lowly thing as manioc should have been exchangeable for anything: "One eats it, that's all. Or one gives it away if one wants to. Women may help out one another with it and other such food. But one doesn't *trade* it." Lest the outburst be misunderstood and sentimentalized, let me stress that the indignation was not about a suggested commercial corruption of a symbolically supercharged staple, on the order, say, of bread among Eastern European peasants. The

Aghem are and were a commercially minded people, with no disdain for trade. The scoffing was rather like what an Aghem would get from a Westerner whom he asked about the exchange value of a match he proffers to light a stranger's cigarette. Manioc was part of a class of singular things of so little worth as to have no publicly recognized exchange value. To be a non-commodity is to be "priceless" in the full possible sense of the term, ranging from the uniquely valuable to the uniquely worthless.

In addition to things being classified as more or less singular, there is also what might be called terminal commoditization, in which further exchange is precluded by fiat. In many societies, medicines are so treated: the medicine man makes and sells a medicine that is utterly singular since it is efficacious only for the intended patient. Terminal commoditization also marked the sale of indulgences in the Roman Catholic Church of half a millennium ago: the sinner could buy them but not resell them. In modern Western medicine, such terminal commoditization is achieved legally; it rests on the prohibition against reselling a prescribed drug and against selling any medicine without proper licensing. There are other examples of legal attempts to restrict recommoditization: paperbound books published in Great Britain often carry a bewildering note forbidding the buyer to resell it in any but the original covers; and in America, an equally mystifying label is attached to mattresses and cushions, forbidding their resale.

Other factors besides legal or cultural fiat may create terminal commodities. Most consumer goods are, after all, destined to be terminal – or so, at least, it is hoped by the manufacturer. The expectation is easily enough fulfilled with such things as canned peas, though even here external circumstances can intrude; in times of war shortages, all sorts of normally consumable goods begin to serve as a store of wealth and, instead of being consumed, circulate endlessly in the market. With durable goods, a second-hand market normally develops, and the idea that it does may be fostered by the sellers. There is an area of our economy in which the selling strategy rests on stressing that the commoditization of goods bought for consumption need not be terminal: thus, the promise that oriental carpets, though bought for use, are a "good investment," or that certain expensive cars have a "high resale value."

The existence of terminal commoditization raises a point that is central to the analysis of slavery, where the fact that a person has been bought does not in itself tell us anything about the uses to which the person may then be put (Kopytoff 1982:223ff). Some purchased people ended up in the mines, on plantations, or on galleys; others

became Grand Viziers or Imperial Roman Admirals. In the same way, the fact that an object is bought or exchanged says nothing about its subsequent status and whether it will remain a commodity or not. But unless formally decommoditized, commoditized things remain potential commodities – they continue to have an exchange value, even if they have been effectively withdrawn from their exchange sphere and deactivated, so to speak, as commodities. This deactivation leaves them open not only to the various kinds of singularization I have mentioned so far, but also to individual, as opposed to collective, redefinitions.

In the Bamenda area of western Cameroon, people prized large decorated calabashes that came over the border from Nigeria. The conduit for them was the Aku, a pastoral group whose women used them extensively and normally were willing to sell them. I had acquired several in this way. Yet one day I failed completely to convince an Aku woman to sell me a standard calabash to which she had added some minor decorations of her own. Her friends told her that she was being silly, arguing that for the money she could get a far better and prettier calabash. But she would not budge, no more than does that ever-newsworthy man in our society – part hero, part fool – who refuses to sell his house for a million dollars and forces the skyscraper to be built around it. And there is also the opposite phenomenon: the ideological commoditizer, advocating, say, the sale of public lands as a way of balancing the budget, or, as I have seen in Africa, calling for the sale of some piece of chiefly paraphernalia in order to provide a tin roof for the schoolhouse.

What these mundane examples show is that, in any society, the individual is often caught between the cultural structure of commoditization and his own personal attempts to bring a value order to the universe of things. Some of this clash between culture and individual is inevitable, at least at the cognitive level. The world of things lends itself to an endless number of classifications, rooted in natural features and cultural and idiosyncratic perceptions. The individual mind can play with them all, constructing innumerable classes, different universes of common value, and changing spheres of exchange. Culture, by contrast, cannot be so exuberant, least so in the economy, where its classifications must provide unambiguous guidance to pragmatic and coordinated action. But if the clash is inevitable, the social structures within which it takes place vary, giving it different intensities. In a society like the precolonial Tiv or Aghem, the culture and the economy were in relative harmony; the economy followed the cultural classifications, and these catered successfully to the individual cognitive need for discrimination. By contrast, in a commercialized, mo-

netized, and highly commoditized society, the value-homogenizing drive of the exchange system has an enormous momentum, producing results that both culture and individual cognition often oppose, but in inconsistent and even contradictory ways.

Complex societies

I said above that the exchange spheres are, to us, more visible in non-commercial, non-monetized societies like the Tiv than in commercial, monetized ones like our own. Partly this is a matter of noticing the exotic and taking the familiar for granted. But it is more than that.

Certainly, in our society, some discrete spheres of exchange exist and are nearly unanimously accepted and approved. Thus, we are adamant about keeping separate the spheres of material objects and persons (a matter I shall elaborate on later). We also exchange dinners and keep that sphere discrete. We blandly accept the existence of an exchange sphere of political or academic favors, but would be as shocked at the idea of monetizing this sphere as the Tiv were at first at the idea of monetizing their marriage transactions. Like the Tiv, who carefully moved from the sphere of mundane pots to that of prestigeful titles by using the mediation of brass rods, so do our financiers cautiously navigate between exchange spheres in such matters as gift-giving to universities. A straight money donation in general funds, if it is of any size, is suspect because it looks too much like purchasing influence, and such donations, when made, are normally anonymous or posthumous. A money donation in installments would be particularly suspect, implying the donor's power to withhold the next check. But converting a large donation into a building moves the money into a nearly decommoditized sphere, freezes the gift into visible irrevocability, and shields the donor from suspicion of continuous undue influence on the university. Putting the donor's name on the building thus honors not simply the donor but also the university, which declares in doing so that it is free of any lingering obligations to the specific donor. The values underlying such transactions are, on the whole, societywide, or at least are held by the groups who wield cultural hegemony in our society and define much of what we are apt to call our public culture. "Everyone" is against commoditizing what has been publicly marked as singular and made sacred: public parks, national landmarks, the Lincoln Memorial, George Washington's false teeth at Mount Vernon.

Other singularizing values are held by more restricted groups. We have explicit exchange spheres recognized only by segments of society,

such as professional and occupational groups, which subscribe to a common cultural code and a specially focused morality. Such groups constitute the networks of mechanical solidarity that tie together the parts of the organic structure of the wider society, the latter being ruled in most of its activities by commodity principles. Let me lead into my discussion by looking at an activity in one such group: the collection of African art among American Africanists.

In the simpler days of thirty or more years ago, African art picked up randomly in the course of fieldwork was placed entirely in a closed sphere with a sacred cast. The objects collected were greatly singularized; they were held to have for their collector a personal sentimental value, or a purely aesthetic one, or a scientific one, the last supported by the collector's supposed knowledge of the object's cultural context. It was not considered entirely proper to acquire an art object from African market traders or, worse, from European traders in Africa, or worse still, from dealers in Europe or America. Such an object, acquired at second hand, had little scientific value, and it was vaguely contaminated by having circulated in a monetized commodity-sphere – a contamination that was not entirely removed by keeping it thereafter in the same category as the objects "legitimately" acquired in the field. The exchange sphere to which African art objects belonged was extremely homogeneous in content. It was permissible to exchange them for other African (or other "primitive art") objects. One could also give them as gifts. Students returning from the field usually brought one or two as gifts to their supervisors, thus inserting them into another circumscribed sphere, that of academic patron-client relationships. The morality governing the sphere did not allow for them to be sold, except at cost to a museum. Nevertheless, as among the Tiv, for whom it was permissible though shameful to sell a brass rod for food, so here extreme need justified "liquidation" on the commercial art market, but it had to be done with appropriate discretion and it was certainly seen as converting "downward."

As Douglas and Isherwood (1980) show, the public culture in complex societies does provide broadly discriminating value markings of goods and services. That is, the public culture offers discriminating classifications here no less than it does in small-scale societies. But these must constantly compete with classifications by individuals and by small networks, whose members also belong to other networks expounding yet other value systems. The discriminating criteria that each individual or network can bring to the task of classification are extremely varied. Not only is every individual's or network's version of exchange spheres idiosyncratic and different from those of others,

but it also shifts contextually and biographically as the originators' perspectives, affiliations and interests shift. The result is a debate not only between people and groups, but within each person as well. To be sure, the seeds for such debates also exist in societies like the precolonial Tiv, but there the culture and the economy joined hands to provide an approved model of classification. In a commercialized, heterogenous, and liberal society, the public culture defers most of the time to pluralism and relativism and provides no firm guidance, while the only lesson the economy can teach is that of the freedom and dynamism that ever-wider commoditization clearly brings with it.

The results can be partly glimpsed in what has happened to African art collecting over the past quarter century. The rules have been loosened in some of the same ways that monetization, according to Bohannan, loosened the rules among the Tiv – namely, by merging the previously distinct exchange spheres. There are, for example, no strictures now on buying an African art object at an auction in America, let alone from an African trader in Africa. Monetization in itself has become less contaminating as it has become more seductive, for no one can remain unaware that these objects are what every newspaper and magazine calls "collectibles." But the most noticeable change has been, quite simply, to make the rules less clear and more open to individual interpretations and to idiosyncratic systems of values. Where before the professional culture decreed that the value of these objects was sentimental when it was not scientific, now sentimental value is conferred as a matter of individual choice, perhaps more sincerely but also less widely. At the same time, puritans have arisen, thundering about the immorality of any kind of circulation of these objects and calling for their complete singularization and sacralization within the closed boundaries of the society that produced them. In brief, the rules of the professional culture have become less tight and the rules of propriety have become more idiosyncratic. The widespread rejection, since the 1960's, of the very idea of cultural restraints has, here as elsewhere, opened the door to a great variety of definitions by individuals and small groups.

What I am arguing here is that the crucial difference between complex and small-scale societies does not lie simply in the extensive commoditization in the former. There have been, we must not forget, small-scale societies in which commoditization (helped by indigenous money) was very extensive, such as the Yurok of northern California (Kroeber 1925) or the Kapauku of western New Guinea (Pospisil 1963). The peculiarity of complex societies is that their publicly recognized commoditization operates side by side with innumerable

schemes of valuation and singularization devised by individuals, social categories, and groups, and these schemes stand in unresolvable conflict with public commoditization as well as with one another.

The dynamics of informal singularization in complex societies

There is clearly a yearning for singularization in complex societies. Much of it is satisfied individually, by private singularization, often on principles as mundane as the one that governs the fate of heirlooms and old slippers alike – the longevity of the relation assimilates them in some sense to the person and makes parting from them unthinkable.

Sometimes the yearning assumes the proportions of a collective hunger, apparent in the widespread response to ever-new kinds of singularizations. Old beer cans, matchbooks, and comic books suddenly become worthy of being collected, moved from the sphere of the singularly worthless to that of the expensive singular. And there is a continuing appeal in stamp collecting – where, one may note, the stamps are preferably cancelled ones so there is no doubt about their worthlessness in the circle of commodities for which they were originally intended. As among individuals, much of the collective singularization is achieved by reference to the passage of time. Cars as commodities lose value as they age, but at about the age of thirty they begin to move into the category of antiques and rise in value with every receding year. Old furniture, of course, does the same at a more sedate pace – the period that begins to usher in sacralization is approximately equal to the span of time separating one from one's grandparents' generation (in the past, with less mobility and more stylistic continuity, more time was required). There is also the modern and appropriately unhistorical adaptation of the antiquing process so perceptively analyzed by Thompson (1979) – the instant singularization of objects in the trash-pile-to-living-room decor of the upwardly mobile young professionals, bored with the homogeneous Scandinavian aridity preferred by the previous generation of their class.

As with African art, however, these are all processes within small groups and social networks. What to me is an heirloom is, of course, a commodity to the jeweler, and the fact that I am not divorced from the jeweler's culture is apparent in my willingness to price my priceless heirloom (and invariably overestimate its commodity value). To the jeweler, I am confusing two different systems of values: that of the marketplace and that of the closed sphere of personally singularized things, both of which happen to converge on the object at hand. Many

of the new "collectibles" of the beer can variety are similarly caught in this paradox: as one makes them more singular and worthy of being collected, one makes them valuable; and if they are valuable, they acquire a price and become a commodity and their singularity is to that extent undermined. This interpenetration within the same object of commodity principles and singularization principles is played upon by firms specializing in manufacturing what might be called "future collectibles," such as leather-bound editions of Emerson, bas-relief renditions of Norman Rockwell's paintings on sculptured plates, or silver medals commemorating unmemorable events. The appeal to greed in their advertising is complex: buy this plate now while it is still a commodity, because later it will become a singular "collectible" whose very singularity will make it into a higher-priced commodity. I can think of no analogy to such possibilities among the Tiv exchange spheres.

Singularization of objects by groups within the society poses a special problem. Because it is done by groups, it bears the stamp of collective approval, channels the individual drive for singularization, and takes on the weight of cultural sacredness. Thus, a community of a few city blocks can suddenly be mobilized by a common outrage at the proposed removal and sale of scrap metal of the rusting Victorian fountain in the neighborhood. Such public conflicts are often more than mere matters of style. Behind the extraordinarily vehement assertions of aesthetic values may stand conflicts of culture, class, and ethnic identity, and the struggle over the power of what one might label the "public institutions of singularization."[1] In liberal societies, these institutions are higher nongovernmental agencies or only quasi–governmental ones – historical commissions, panels deciding on public monuments, neighborhood organizations concerned with "beautification," and so on; who controls them and how says much about who controls the society's presentation of itself to itself.

A few years ago, there was a public controversy in Philadelphia about a proposal to install a statue of the cinematic boxing hero Rocky on the Parkway in front of the Art Museum – an institution that happens simultaneously to serve as a public monument to the local social establishment and to satisfy the artistic needs of the professional intelligentsia. The statue came directly from the movie set of "Rocky," the success story of an Italian-American boxing champion from South Philadelphia. To the "ethnic" working-class sector of the Philadelphia population, the statue was a singular object of ethnic, class, and regional pride – in brief, a worthy public monument. To the groups whose social identities were vested in the museum, it was a piece of

junk, deserving instant recommoditization as scrap metal. Here, the issues of singularization and commoditization were directly linked into disparate and morally charged systems. But the opponents of the statue were in a position to clothe their argument in the garb of public aesthetics, a field in which they held cultural hegemony. The statue was not installed at the Art Museum but in South Philadelphia, next to a stadium.

Most of the conflict, however, between commoditization and singularization in complex societies takes place within individuals, leading to what appear to be anomalies in cognition, inconsistencies in values, and uncertainties in action. People in these societies all maintain some private vision of a hierarchy of exchange spheres, but the justification for this hierarchy is not, as it was among the Tiv, integrally tied to the exchange structure itself; rather, the justification must be imported from outside the system of exchange, from such autonomous and usually parochial systems as that of aesthetics, or morality, or religion, or specialized professional concerns. When we feel that selling a Rembrandt or an heirloom is trading downward, the explanation for our attitude is that things called "art" or "historical objects" are superior to the world of commerce. This is the reason why the high value of the singular in complex societies becomes so easily embroiled in snobbery. The high value does not visibly reside in the exchange system itself – as it traditionally did among the Tiv, when, for example, the superiority in prestige (rather than mere exchange) of brass rods over pots was palpably confirmed by the ability of the brass rods to bring in ritual cloth or slaves. In a complex society, the absence of such visible confirmation of prestige, of what exactly is an "upward" conversion, makes it necessary to attribute high but nonmonetary value to aesthetic, stylistic, ethnic, class, or genealogical esoterica.

When things participate simultaneously in cognitively distinct yet effectively intermeshed exchange spheres, one is constantly confronted with seeming paradoxes of value. A Picasso, though possessing a monetary value, is priceless in another, higher scheme. Hence, we feel uneasy, even offended, when a newspaper declares the Picasso to be worth $690,000, for one should not be pricing the priceless. But in a pluralistic society, the "objective" pricelessness of the Picasso can only be unambiguously confirmed to us by its immense market price. Yet, the pricelessness still makes the Picasso in some sense more valuable than the pile of dollars it can fetch – as will be duly pointed out by the newspapers if the Picasso is stolen. Singularity, in brief, is confirmed not by the object's structural position in an exchange sys-

tem, but by intermittent forays into the commodity sphere, quickly followed by reentries into the closed sphere of singular "art." But the two worlds cannot be kept separate for very long; for one thing, museums must insure their holdings. So museums and art dealers will name prices, be accused of the sin of transforming art into a commodity, and, in response, defend themselves by blaming each other for creating and maintaining a commodity market. It would, however, be missing the point of this analysis to conclude that the talk about singular art is merely an ideological camouflage for an interest in merchandising. What is culturally significant here is precisely that there is an inner compulsion to defend oneself, to others and to oneself, against the charge of "merchandising" art.

The only time when the commodity status of a thing is beyond question is the moment of actual exchange. Most of the time, when the commodity is effectively out of the commodity sphere, its status is inevitably ambiguous and open to the push and pull of events and desires, as it is shuffled about in the flux of social life. This is the time when it is exposed to the well-nigh-infinite variety of attempts to singularize it. Thus, singularizations of various kinds, many of them fleeting, are a constant accompaniment of commoditization, all the more so when it becomes excessive. There is a kind of singularizing black market here that is the mirror-image of, and as inevitable as, the more familiar commoditizing black market that accompanies regulated singularizing economies. Thus, even things that unambiguously carry an exchange value – formally speaking, therefore, commodities – do absorb the other kind of worth, one that is non-monetary and goes beyond exchange worth. We may take this to be the missing non-economic side of what Marx called commodity fetishism. For Marx, the worth of commodities is determined by the social relations of their production; but the existence of the exchange system makes the production process remote and misperceived, and it "masks" the commodity's true worth (as, say, in the case of diamonds). This allows the commodity to be socially endowed with a fetishlike "power" that is unrelated to its true worth. Our analysis suggests, however, that some of that power is attributed to commodities after they are produced, and this by way of an autonomous cognitive and cultural process of singularization.

Two Western exchange spheres: people vs. objects

I have so far emphasized the sweeping nature of commoditization in Western society as representative of an ideal type of highly commer-

cialized and monetized society. But the West is also a unique cultural entity, with a historically conditioned set of predispositions to see the world in certain ways.

One of these predispositions I have referred to before: that of conceptually separating people from things, and of seeing people as the natural preserve for individuation (that is singularization) and things as the natural preserve for commoditization. The separation, though intellectually rooted in classical antiquity and Christianity, becomes culturally salient with the onset of European modernity. Its most glaring denial lay, of course, in the practice of slavery. Yet its cultural significance can be gauged precisely by the fact that slavery did present an intellectual and moral problem in the West (see Davis 1966, 1975), but almost nowhere else. Whatever the complex reasons, the conceptual distinction between the universe of people and the universe of objects had become culturally axiomatic in the West by the mid-twentieth century. It is therefore not surprising that the cultural clash over abortion should be more fierce in the twentieth century than it ever was in the nineteenth, and that this clash should be phrased by both sides in terms of the precise location of the line that divides persons from things and the point at which "personhood" begins. For both anti-abortion and pro-abortion forces agree on one point: that "things" but not "persons" can be aborted. Hence the occasional court battles when pro-abortionists seek court injunctions against anti-abortionists' attempts to ritualize the disposal of aborted fetuses, since ritual disposal presumes personhood. In terms of underlying conceptions, both sides here stand together in striking cultural contrast to the Japanese. The latter have few misgivings about abortion but acknowledge the personhood of aborted children, giving them the special status of *misogo*, lost souls, and commemorating them by special shrines (see Miura 1984).

There is, therefore, a perennial moral concern in Western thought, whatever the ideological position of the thinker, about the commoditization of human attributes such as labor, intellect, or creativity, or, more recently, human organs, female reproductive capacity, and ova. The moral load in these matters comes partly from the long debates on slavery and the victory of abolition. Hence the tendency to resort to slavery as the readiest metaphor when commoditization threatens to invade the human sphere, slavery being the extreme case in which the totality of a person is seen as having been commoditized. The moral indictments of capitalism by both Marx and Pope Leo XIII derived their force from the notion that human labor should not be a mere commodity – hence the rhetorical power of such terms as "wage

slavery." The conceptual unease of conjoining person and commodity renders, in most modern Western liberal societies, the adoption of a baby illegal if it involves monetary compensation to the natural parent – something that most societies have seen as satisfying the obvious demands of equity. In the modern West, however, adoption through compensation is viewed as child-selling and therefore akin to slavery because of the implicit commoditization of the child, regardless of how loving the adoptive parents may be. Thus, the law specifically punishes such compensation in Britain, in most Canadian provinces, and in almost all states in the United States.

The hallmark of commoditization is exchange. But exchange opens the way to trafficking, and trafficking in human attributes carries with it a special opprobrium. For example, we do not – we cannot at this point – object to the commoditization and sale of labor (by its nature, a terminal commodity). But we do object to the trafficking in labor that a complete commoditization of labor would imply. We have abolished indentured labor, and the courts have struck down the commoditization of the contracts of athletes and actors. The cultural argument against a team's or a film studio's "selling" a ballplayer or an actor to another employer is cast in the idiom of slavery. The transfer of a contract forces the worker to work for someone whom he had not chosen himself, hence forces him to work involuntarily. We see here a significant cultural detail in the Western commoditization of labor – the commoditization must be controlled by the laborer himself. By contrast, contractual obligations to pay, as in promissory notes or installment buying, and rent contracts are legally negotiable; they can be and are regularly sold and resold. By the same cultural logic, the idea of nearly confiscatory taxation is far less shocking to us than even a modest amount of corvée labor. As with trafficking in labor, we find the direct commoditization of sexual services (also a terminal commodity) by the immediate supplier less objectionable than the trafficking in them by pimps. And so also we find the imminent possibility of terminal sales of human ova somewhat more morally acceptable than the idea of a commercial traffic in them.

The question remains, however: how secure are the Western cultural ramparts that defend the human sphere against commoditization, especially in a secularized society that finds it increasingly difficult to appeal to any transcendental sanctions for cultural discrimination and classification? I have suggested that economies are inherently responsive to the pressures of commoditization and that they tend to commoditize as widely as the exchange technology allows. What then, we may ask, are the effects, on the divide between the human and

the commodity spheres, of the developing technology of transfer of human attributes? I am speaking here of recent medical advances in the transfer of organs and ova and the development of surrogate motherhood. The realm of human reproduction is one in which the difference between persons and things is particularly difficult to define, defying all attempts at drawing a simple line where there is a natural continuum.

The idea of direct surrogate motherhood – in which a woman simply bears a child for the future legal mother – required, of course, a legal more than a technical innovation. The idea had taken hold at the same time that technical advances in coping with female infertility had begun to raise the hopes of childless couples but without, in fact, helping many of them. It also came in response to the shrinkage in the supply of babies for adoption that occurred in the 1960's with the pill and the 1970's with the wider legalization of abortions. More recently, the picture has been complicated by the development of technical means for the actual transplantation of ova, opening the possibility of trading in the physical means of reproduction. The popular objections to surrogate motherhood are usually phrased in the idiom of the impropriety of commoditization. In the words of a Canadian provincial minister of social services, expressing his opposition: "You can't buy a baby in Ontario." It is, however, more acceptable, at least to some, when the surrogate mother announces that she receives not "payment" but "compensation" of ten thousand dollars – "because of the inconvenience to my family and the risk involved." And the agency arranging for surrogate child production makes a point of declaring "We are not in the rent-a-womb business." In the meantime, while ethicists and theologians argue, the cost of securing a surrogate mother has now risen to around twenty-five thousand dollars (Scott 1984).

There is, of course, a precedent for the commoditization of physical human attributes: the supply of blood in American medical practice depends overwhelmingly on a straightforward commodity market in blood – in contrast, for example, to most European countries, which have deliberately rejected the commodity approach (Cooper and Culyer 1968). At present, advances in organ transplants and the inadequate supply of organs raises the same question of public policy that was confronted in the past in the case of blood: what are the best ways of ensuring an adequate supply? In the meantime, advertisements have begun to appear offering to buy kidneys for transplantation.

How to deal with ova is only beginning to be discussed. Culturally, the situation is perceived as being more complex than in the case of

sperm, which has been commoditized for some time without a great deal of discussion. Is this because the ovum is seen as the basic core of the future human being? Or because women are expected to feel maternal toward the ova as potential babies and should not sell them, whereas men are not expected to have paternal feelings about their sperm?[2] (Many societies describe the generation of life as the union of two elements; Westerners, however, choose the scientific metaphor in which one speaks of the fertilization *of* the ovum *by* the sperm, so that the ovum becomes a homunculus being activated into life.) The inevitable development into routine procedures of the transplantation of ova and the freezing of ova for storage will represent an expansion of the possibilities of the exchange technology for human attributes, including the possibility of trafficking in them. The question is whether this will increase the permeability of the boundary between the world of things and that of people, or whether the boundary will be displaced by recourse to new definitions but itself remain as rigid as before.

Conclusion: kinds of biographies

Although the singular and the commodity are opposites, no thing ever quite reaches the ultimate commodity end of the continuum between them. There are no perfect commodities. On the other hand, the exchange function of every economy appears to have a built-in force that drives the exchange system toward the greatest degree of commoditization that the exchange technology permits. The counterforces are culture and the individual, with their drive to discriminate, classify, compare, and sacralize. This means a two-front battle for culture as for the individual – one against commoditization as a homogenizer of exchange values, the other against the utter singularization of things as they are in nature.

In small-scale uncommercialized societies, the drive to commoditization was usually contained by the inadequacies of the technology of exchange, notably, the absence of a well-developed monetary system. This left room for a cultural categorization of the exchange value of things, usually in the form of closed exchange spheres, and it satisfied individual cognitive needs for classification. The collective cultural classification thus constrained the innate exuberance to which purely idiosyncratic and private classifications are prone.

In large-scale, commercialized, and monetized societies, the existence of a sophisticated exchange technology fully opens the economy to swamping by commoditization. In all contemporary industrial societies, whatever their ideologies, commoditization and monetization

tend to invade almost every aspect of existence, be it openly or by way of a black market. New technological advances (for example, in medicine) also open previously closed areas to the possibilities of exchange and these areas tend to become quickly commoditized. The flattening of values that follows commoditization and the inability of the collective culture of a modern society to cope with this flatness frustrate the individual on the one hand, and, on the other, leave ample room for a multitude of classifications by individuals and small groups. These classifications, however, remain private and, except in the case of culturally hegemonic groups, without public support.

Thus, the economies of complex and highly monetized societies exhibit a two-sided valuating system: on one side is the homogenous area of commodities, on the other, the extremely variegated area of private valuation. Further complications arise from the constant referring of private valuation to the only reliable public valuation that exists – which is in the commodity area. It is inevitable that if worth is given a price, the going market price will become the measure of worth. The result is a complex intertwining of the commodity exchange sphere with the plethora of private classifications, leading to anomalies and contradictions and to conflicts both in the cognition of individuals and in the interaction of individuals and groups. By contrast, the structure of the economies of small-scale societies in the past resulted in a relative consonance of economic, cultural, and private valuations. These differences lead to quite different biographical profiles of things.

A caveat is required at this point. While in this discussion I have dwelt on the gross contrast between two ideal and polar types of economies, the most interesting empirical cases to be studied, with ultimately the highest theoretical returns, are the cases in between. It is from these cases that we can learn how the forces of commoditization and singularization are intertwined in ways far more subtle than our ideal model can show; how one breaks the rules by moving between spheres that are supposed to be insulated from each other, how one converts what is formally unconvertible, how one masks these actions and with whose connivance, and, not least, how the spheres are reorganized and things reshuffled between them in the course of a society's history. Equally interesting would be the cases where the different systems of commoditization of different societies interact. For example, Curtin (1984) has shown the importance, for the history of world trade, of trade diasporas; in these, traders, constituting a distinct *quasi*-cultural group, provided the channels for the movement of goods between disparate societies. The usefulness of such trading

groups in mediating between the different exchange systems is manifest. By cushioning the direct impact of world trade, this mediation spares the societies involved from seeing their particular ideas of commoditization challenged, sheltering their baroque exchange systems in the comfort of their cultural parochialism. This, perhaps, would explain the striking viability, historically, of parochial economic systems in the midst of worldwide networks of trade. And it might also explain what has long been a puzzle in economic anthropology – namely, the limited spread, until the twentieth century, of "all-purpose" currency, a spread far more limited than diffusion theory or commonsense utilitarianism would have suggested. Having said all this, let me nevertheless return to the gross contrast between the "complex, commercialized" and the "small-scale" societies, the implications of which I have pursued throughout this paper.

One can draw an analogy between the way societies construct individuals and the way they construct things. In small-scale societies, a person's social identities are relatively stable and changes in them are normally conditioned more by cultural rules than by biographical idiosyncracies. The drama in an ordinary person's biography stems from what happens within the given status. It lies in the conflicts between the egoistic self and the unambiguous demands of given social identities, or in conflicts arising from interaction between actors with defined roles within a clearly structured social system. The excitement in the biographies is of the picaresque variety. At the same time, the individual who does not fit the given niches is either singularized into a special identity – which is sacred or dangerous, and often both – or is simply cast out. Things in these small-scale societies are similarly modeled. Their status in the clearly structured system of exchange values and exchange spheres is unambiguous. An eventful biography of a thing is for the most part one of events within the given sphere. Any thing that does not fit the categories is clearly anomalous and it is taken out of normal circulation, to be either sacralized or isolated or cast out. What one glimpses through the biographies of both people and things in these societies is, above all, the social system and the collective understandings on which it rests.

In complex societies, by contrast, a person's social identities are not only numerous but often conflicting, and there is no clear hierarchy of loyalties that makes one identity dominant over the others. Here, the drama of personal biographies has become more and more the drama of identities – of their clashes, of the impossibility of choosing between them, of the absence of signals from the culture and the society at large to help in the choice. The drama, in brief, lies in the

uncertainty of identity – a theme increasingly dominant in modern Western literature where it is pushing aside dramas of social structure (even in the eminently structural cases dealt with in writings on women and "minorities"). The biography of things in complex societies reveals a similar pattern. In the homogenized world of commodities, an eventful biography of a thing becomes the story of the various singularizations of it, of classifications and reclassifications in an uncertain world of categories whose importance shifts with every minor change in context. As with persons, the drama here lies in the uncertainties of valuation and of identity.

All this suggests an emendation to the profound Durkheimian notion that a society orders the world of things on the pattern of the structure that prevails in the social world of its people. What also happens, I would suggest, is that societies constrain both these worlds simultaneously and in the same way, constructing objects as they construct people.

Notes

I owe thanks to Arjun Appadurai and Barbara Klamon Kopytoff for discussions that led to the writing of this paper, and to Jean Adelman, Sandra Barnes, Muriel Bell, Gyan Prakash, Colin Renfrew, and Barbara Herrnstein Smith for comments and suggestions that helped shape its final version.

1. I wish to thank Barbara Herrnstein Smith for drawing my attention to the importance of such institutions in the processes I am describing.
2. I am grateful to Muriel Bell for this suggestion.

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