



# CONSUMPTION AND THE SOCIAL: ANALYSIS OF CONSUMPTION DIALECTICS IN ANTHROPOLOGICAL DISCOURSE

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## ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the transcendence of consumption within scholarly debate and literature in anthropology. The objective of this paper is to review unabatedly the distinctive relationship between commodities, consumption and normative social obligations that subsume human interactions within given societies. The paper argues that the “social” of consumption is primordial to the understanding of prescriptive social norms and cultural obligations attached to commodities. While discussing the commodities as shared objects of meaning, the paper contends that kinship relations cannot totally be dissuaded from the study of consumption. The paper concludes however on the premise that anthropology could play a key role in deconstructing the significance overriding the cultural production of meaning in consumption debate and presupposes the burgeoning developments that subsume the production and consumption of goods and services.

## INTRODUCTION

The description of social life as a bevy of structures and systems by Karl Marx invariably hypothesized an imperative relationship between such structures and systems and the types of society and or environment within which they thrive. Laying emphasis on the fact that such systems underlie social relationships was a logical deconstruction of how social practices shape and generate consumption patterns that characterize these systems (Sedden, 1978). The emergence of consumption as a key tenet in understanding the political economy discourse is not anew following new categorizations and perspectives of consumption as an ensemble of non-commercial commodities consumed and enjoyed communally as a system of social categorization and class (Douglas & Isherwood, 1978, quoted in Miller, 1995). The economic delineation of the consumption of goods and services has always put the satisfaction of consumer's needs and wants as supreme. The changes in consumption patterns and tastes have perpetually been argued in terms of demand and price theory, with little or no affixation to the underlying social and cultural spheres that seemingly influence these fluctuations; as well as the development and manifestation of consumers' consumption choices (Campbell, 1987).

The potential for individuals and communities to overtly "socialize" the process of consumption relates very much to the various commodities (or goods) acquired and for what given purposes. This brings into focus the limitations of conventional economic approaches towards the consumption of goods and services as previously indicated. Giving value to goods and or commodities<sup>1</sup> surpasses mere economic considerations, given that socio-cultural processes do create significant influence or contributions towards individuals' needs and demands. The dichotomy and contrast between individualistic rational behaviour towards consumption is perpetually glossed over the socio-cultural underpinnings of the demand of goods and or commodities. Rutz & Orlove (1989) enumerated this salient perspective by attributing a more "social economy" paradigm to consumption, with a staple emphasis on the role social structures and customary values and norms play in consumption processes and the choice of commodities. Evidently, the formalist-substantivist debate on the economy is being challenged by growing anthropological discourses on the subject of consumption to which end the latter in basic economic debates, receives a more critical outlook.

Nonetheless, we seemingly begin to ponder about the consumption practices that are nuanced within various socio cultural processes and conversely might come to the conclusion that the nature, process of production and distribution of goods and services shifts from an economic paradigm to encompass a cultural outlook. Communities and individuals are key to production and consumption and it becomes imperative to deconstruct this interdependence and or relationship. How can we make meaning of the objects, goods or commodities that intervene in our daily lives? Does the consumption of goods and services merely relate to personal rational needs and choices? Or does this process go beyond the sphere of the economy and market trends? Attaching socio-cultural significance to commodities benign recognition of the fact these commodities in themselves eases and expands socio-cultural relationships between individuals and their communities (Carrier, 2010). What needs to be taken into consideration here thus is the fact that the elaboration of consumption processes and patterns on economic paradigms and spheres as regards consumers' consumption habits and choices is mundane and unreflective of the social meanings ascribed to consumption and goods and services. Globalization in its own right, has spurred the growth of "interculturalness" and adaptation to the point where one cannot truly argue that most of the global "South" have lost cultural values as a result of consuming commodities "ascribed" particularly to the West (Miller, 1995).

In this paper, I ascertain that the concept of consumption in modern day development discourse has shifted from mere economic contextualization to deconstructing socio-cultural identities and relationships expressed through consumption and acquisition of goods and services. It is a process most akin to societal and kinship relationships and demands extensive understanding of cultures and sub cultures. It is thus for this reason that Miller ascribes "relativism" to consumption process (and to which point I concur with), in that *"there is the equality of genuine relativism that makes none of us a model of real consumption and all of us creative variants of social processes based on the possession and use of commodities"* (Miller, 1995; 144). However, it is imperative for our analysis to draw an understanding of consumption as nuanced in various conceptual etymologies and historical processes.

<sup>1</sup> The term *goods* is used interchangeably throughout the paper to reflect one and the same meaning of commodities within the consumption discourse.

### **Consumption Etymology: A Brief Review**

Studies in economics and development have affixed consumption to the economy usually with regards to analyzing and assessing community and individual well being, socio-economic hardship and the potential of families to muddle through various dispositions of the demands for goods and services. In contemporary usage and understanding, the works of Adam Smith and David Ricardo highlighted the process of consumption as an “end product” of production within the industrial capitalist economy. Within this environment, the apparition of two separate spheres of social interaction revealed the nature of the flow of commodities at which point, one sphere involved production (usually factories, firms, industries etc) and creation of these commodities and or goods, and the other sphere (households, individuals, communities etc) related to consumption (Graeber, 2011). Although this underscored the effervescence and growth of capitalism, there was arguably an underlying feature that shaped the consumption of goods and commodities; which was that of value and meaning attributed to these commodities by those who consumed them. Making sense of how people “consume” goods and or commodities was not too much reflective of capitalist society and early political economy literature focused faintly on the social meanings and values consumption may accrue.

It was by no chance therefore that consumerism was argued from the perspective of the rational autonomous behaviours of individuals with little or no consideration for the socio-cultural meanings, values and relationships that obviously could develop in the process. The consideration then that assumes consumption along the lines of rational, autonomous economic choices presents itself as a subset of individuals desire to acquire and consume a good or commodity (Smith, 2002).

### **Commodities as Objects of Shared Meaning**

Earlier, I highlighted that the consumption patterns of individuals and communities in the sphere of the economy gave precedence to the social significance attached to goods and commodities. The social importance attributed to how goods bought are used, is akin to cultural connotations. For instance, this is reflective of various ritualistic activities, ceremonies and or events, not only in Western societies and communities, but in many other parts of the world as well, especially in Africa. Commodities become objects that communities and households utilize or consume in respect of given ritual processes, and provide an avenue through which these same households and communities create and consolidate social and communal relationships (Douglas & Isherwood, 2002). The debate on the shared social meaning of commodities as objects is nonetheless reflective in scholarly literature in anthropology and sociology. The consumption of food and drinks within given settings has been particularly researched upon by Douglas (1987, quoted in Miller, 1995) and Mars (1987, quoted in Miller, 1995). Douglas pointed out the symbolic importance of drinks as an object that constructs the world and Mars, following his research on drinking patterns in Newfoundland, posited that drinking determines social worlds and reputations. This is particularly true when we research ritual activities and ceremonies in most societies in the global “South”. In the Northwestern grass fields in Cameroon for instance, the consumption of what is commonly known as *born house plantains* is symbolic of the birth of a new born child into a family and the numerous blessings seemingly bestowed upon the new born by family members and well wishers invited to partake in the ceremony.

This highlights shared values not only among members of that family, but is a display of openness and communal living between them and the society in which the new born will grow up. Interestingly enough, other events such as weddings and marriages also do demonstrate a great social and symbolic importance to food and drinks which as well reflects social class, status and reputation as evident in Mars’ own research in Newfoundland. The type, nature, quality and amount of these commodities are measuring indexes through which the social status of a family or community is determined and their reputation maintained. Arguably, one cannot assume per se that commodities serve purposely for satisfying the subsistence needs of communities and households, as it becomes evident that they go beyond this sphere of mere consumption to generate more socio-cultural meanings on the nature and use of these commodities. It is thus no unfamiliarity when Douglas (1987) and Bourdieu (1977) actively suggested the significant role of commodities as objects, essential for creating social relationships and appending meaningful values to human relationships and culture. The consumption of food and drinks become variants of social processes through which communities construct a social universe and enables them derive meaning from communal sociability and solidarity.

Increasingly, goods and services are becoming objectified as a source of deriving social value and meaning as well as shared social experiences within members of a community. The concept of “image” as reflected in the consumption dialectics usually follows the need to create long lasting impressions in the minds of community members through expenditures incurred in the purchase of certain “level” or “class” of goods and commodities. In most communities in rural sub Saharan Africa, this is exemplified usually during

ceremonies and or activities in which a mutual relationship of respect is established between hosts, guests and the community at large. Class differentiation and the need to consolidate a long lasting reputation are symbolic of these massive expenditures on commodities. This inversely will depend as well on the quality of the good and or commodity which invariably is the pull factor behind the large mass of people at a give consumption ritual or ceremony. One might undoubtedly ascertain at this juncture that the way commodities are used and or consumed is pivotal to understanding consumption processes and how these enable members of a community experience shared meanings and values. Nonetheless, on the downside of it all, the fast growing trend of globalization and market liberalization tends to degenerate class differentiations via consumption practices and perpetually reinforces the bargaining and purchasing strengths of various segments of the community over others.

## Methods

This paper is based on secondary sources of date collected from reviews of anthropological and economic literature on consumption. Applying a purely qualitative approach, the arguments, discussions and reflections put forth emphasized a desktop research and review process. Internet sources also served as a source of secondary data, and the paper purposively targeted anthropological sources that discuss consumption dialectics and their social connotations. However, the delimitations of the paper in terms of time frame is not taken into consideration but is approached in more generalist terms.

## Consumption and Commodities: A Bonding Relationship

Perceiving the “potlatch” as a total social fact (Mauss, 1990) is exemplary of the inherent bonding relationship commodities and consumers in that context share. For Mauss, the process of gift exchange was far more symbolic of a relationship of mutual respect and solidarity, than a mere action of providing goods and services for consumption. The corresponding obligation the gift giving and exchange process demands of its partakers creates a sequence of chains and contractual relationships that determine the shape and nature of social groups. Conversely, the capitalist discourses and rhetoric of industrial economies revealed clearly the individualistic basis of the production and consumption of goods and services for self sufficiency and subsistence purposes. The social importance attributed to commodities in themselves, overrides the mere desire for communities and individuals to safeguard commodities for personal consumption only.

Intrinsically, the intricate process of inalienability and possession rights have overturned consumption paradigms and made central the bonding relationships of materialism and human communities as prime to anthropological considerations of consumption. It is no overstatement to ascertain that the application of anthropology to the study of consumption has chartered a new discourse on social obligations and values that precede debates on gift giving, consumption and commodities in market based economies. This is virtually evident in Appadurai (1986) who positioned the contextual logic of commodities and social bonding by drawing on the transformation of goods and commodities as not only mere objects, but are “commodities” seemingly laden with social meaning and normative value. Arguing that “*a goods’ value hinges on the way exchange is instituted*” Appadurai at this juncture overtly emphasizes the ideals that bind individuals to the goods and commodities being exchanged. However, it is not uncommon to underscore in the course of this realization the doggedness of human nature and needs to preserve “prized” goods and commodities as a result of social cultural affiliations to these goods, thus necessitating invariably class differentiations in the nature and type of goods consumed.

## Conclusion

The point de départ for most research and investigations on consumption has inherently been to basically perceive it as a disintegration of culture. The entry of economic communities into the market order propagates the gradual emergence of consumption dialectics that continuously pose a threat to the growth of socio-cultural relationships, to which end has intrinsically become a concept of interest for anthropology. It is left for anthropology to initiate a process of resurgence as to understanding how people use and consume goods and or commodities to establish social and cultural identities. The burden of market economy discourse from a social perspective is reserved for anthropology to provide new and innovative dimensions from which consumption can be understood and analyzed. One therefore cannot over emphasize that the discipline of anthropology finds itself implicitly subsumed within consumption discourse, in an attempt to provide salient meaning and significance of the cultural productions of goods and commodities and how these form normative processes about the lives and relationships of community members.

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