

Book Review by student 2115841 UWTSD

On: The social life of things, commodities in cultural perspectives (1986)

Introduction

The social life of things, commodities in cultural perspectives, is edited by Arjun Appadurai and published by University of Pennsylvania. It is a 317 paged reference book, with a forward by Nancy Farriss. T

Background

The work is delivered in five parts-

- Part 1 Towards the anthropology of things.
- Part II Exchange, consumption, and display.
- Part III Prestige, commemoration, and value.
- Part IV Production regimes and the sociology of demand.
- Part V Historical transformations and commodity codes.

Each of the five parts comprise of two chapters each, they are the works of ten authors who represent cross-disciplinary contributions. By the following proportions, five chapters from anthropologists four from Historians and one entry from an archaeologist. Historian Nancy Farris

the sole female contributor in the forward describes the need for some two-way learning channels.

Where anthropologist's may increase their knowledge of how histories are unpicked: historians' she claims will gain, bigger windows to see how ordinary lives were lived. Farriss highlights the benefits of having valuable exchanges between differing viewpoints, whilst advocating for combined methodological frameworks between ethnographical and historical research work.

Four women are thanked in the preface for being the main support pillars behind the culmination of the book, which comprises of ten male authors, which on a positive note shows, the efforts to improve inclusion and equality across the relevant disciplines over the past few decades necessary.

The gender in balance between the prominent contributions to the main text and the mono-gendered administrative team reflects the publishing date.

A project that began with face-to-face discussions between historians and anthropologists within the sphere of ethnohistory in Pennsylvania (Appadurai) led to a symposium in 1984, where the workshop sessions shaped this book.

Main body

By selecting just three chapters this short review will cover an anthropologist's, archaeologist's, and historians' input towards understanding commodities in cultural perspective.

Starting with the Introductory essay, Commodities, and the Politics of Value, by anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, pages 3-63 successfully place a new dimension between Simmel's (1907) (1978) concept of the exchange of sacrifices, in which Simmel suggests we desire one thing over another which in turn determines value and perpetuates exchange. The model was introduced by Simmons

in his book, 'The Philosophy of Money' Using this work by Simmons as a springboard Appadurai adds a new dimension to this exchange structure from the outset. He sets the scene for how this body of work will be highlighting how the very 'things (of commodity) themselves' can interact by nature so that these objects also determine social situations. Therefore 'things' can continually create economic and political exchange values. The contributors do not include the views of historic economists or art historians, this is recognised by Appadurai as an invite to widen these discussions and reciprocal cross disciplinary learning going forward from here.

From Part 3. Varna and the emergence of wealth in prehistoric Europe, by archaeologist Colin Renfrew. By applying an analytical approach to the 1970's discoveries from Varna in Southeast Europe, Renfrew considers that the work of Archaeologists best explores prehistoric systems of value and exchange. To plot how the ancient economies came to be more complex as they expanded. Believing that neo-Marx world views determine Anthropological perspectives. Pre-acculturation for all early societies begins before written language so historians methods he states are not often applicable. Renfrew's well-structured valuable essay only falls short when it seems to be attempting to prove the importance of an Archaeological approach. The idea of taking three disciplines perspectives and either learning from each other or meshing ideas is not supported in his chapter. Rather he is clearly advocating in favour of an Archaeological perspective to any prehistoric question.

This said Renfrew's contribution meticulously explores both emic and etic agency in the 'worlds of things' in production. The case study builds a deep understanding for the reader of how The Three

Age System theory, oversimplifies and under values the shaping of egalitarian societies. He uses the archaeological records from Varna to show clearly how the actual material composites of prestige objects begin as inconsequential and rare, have little effect on the world culture, form slowly as exchange items, before they live on into production to eventually become common place.

Unlike Marx, Renfrew adds labour as an exchange value, within a prestige item, as a side he also considers the symbolic value seen with in disassembled items. The axiomatic notion here being that any material made to look like another will always be acting upwards in attached value. For example he explains how a symbolic stone axe covered in a thin gold plate, depreciates another prized mace head that is not made to look like gold.

Concluding that similarly, to The Kula Ring, prestige gift exchanges in the Balkans forged relationships during good times paving the way for obtaining more utilitarian commodities, during harder times.

Finally also from Part 3, Sacred commodities: the circulation of Medieval relics, by the historian Patrick Geary

In contrast to Renfrew Geary sets out to explore how differing periods and disciplines might illuminate, the underpinning forces driving the developments of value and exchange systems in Europe. He focuses on relics as medieval commodities, categorised them as things personified and interestingly likens relics to slaves using a reverse perspective here, as slaves can be conceived as persons made thing. (Kopytoff 1986)

Geary exposes some historical shortcomings within past methodologies: like the presents of specie automatically been taken by historians as evidence of 'just' price trade in commodities. His essay sets out the societal background to regions of The Carolingian Empire. He explains the early exchange systems as they move from gifts between equals, or larceny ransom and compensation between differing groups, through plundering and warfare plus the less tumultuous exchanges of ritualised goods for services. These exchanges Geary states precede societal change by the end of the 12th century when the culture normalises and embraced neutral exchange as a strong system rather than as a weak act as it had earlier in the century.

Alienable objects or parts of religious relics are introduced to Geary's essay to further explore the exchange systems of commodities, he chooses the retrieved saints' bones that were deemed necessary to possess via societal doctrines. Their value is in their preserved security to church communities via tests of the authenticity of their connection to sainthood. These venerable commodities have interesting social lives as they can start off as desirables, pass through several levels of prestige, travel through many possible states. Furthermore they can spend time as stolen, become gifted, get sold, be forgotten, get rediscovered, be re-stolen, re-sold and then re-gifted again. They can be the subjects of investigation until proved worthy often more than once in their currency lifetimes and they must create miracles! Geary prompts the cynic in the reader by so clearly attaching the functional gains to the diocese from the circulation of pilgrims seeking the power of miracles in the objects of relics. Before arguing that clergy were mainly motivated to secure a market share, as they themselves were also pilgrims circulating to find miracles, noting that elite relic cults were never commonplace. Geary collaborates nicely with Kopytoff with his methodology that brings

forward the identity of commodities in the society looking for the dualities of what they represent within the Carolingian reach.

Discussion and Conclusion

This book is delivered without a conclusion or an afterword's section. So, the reader is left to absorb the books intention from the strong object focus within each essay. No author presents or suggests a using a framework to trial a collaborative methodology, the combined works are still too disparate to suggest a whole paradigm shift towards a multi-disciplined theory which Farriss promotes in the book's introduction.

The value in this book is in its explicit examples of the understanding that comes to scholars from tracing the social lives of commodified objects, when seen in their cultural perspectives. The title is very well chosen.

References and Bibliography

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