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Commodities in cultural perspective

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ARJUN APPADURAI

University of Pennsylvania



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Foreword

The genealogy of any multidisciplinary volume is likely to be complex. The immediate antecedents of this one are clear: the vision and energy of the editor, Arjun Appadurai, have sustained the enterprise from beginning to end. But it is also a cooperative effort, and the symposium and workshop that produced the individual contributions are themselves the products of an ongoing dialogue that anthropologists and historians at the University of Pennsylvania began a decade ago under the aegis of the Ethnohistory Program. The original stimulus for the program came from a shared sense that the two disciplines had much to learn from each other. Just how much we had to learn became evident only as the dialogue progressed.

Exchange of a sort had already started. Social historians in recent years have been turning to anthropology for theoretical perspectives, as they expanded their interests to include peasants, ethnic minorities – the people without history – the family, and other topics thought to be the traditional domain of anthropologists. For those who wished to do history from the inside out as well as from the bottom up, anthropology offered the necessary dimension of culture, the systems of meaning that people invest in their social forms. Anthropologists' interest in history, although not entirely new, has become more intense and of a different kind. The past, once viewed as a more or less undifferentiated prelude to the ethnographic present, has increasingly come to represent a rich storehouse of information on socio-cultural organization: empirical grist for anthropology's conceptual mill. If anthropologists were to tap this storehouse, they would have to master the sources and techniques of historical research.

Exchange at this rudimentary level is a form of mutual raiding, with history seen as merely a source of facts and anthropology a source of theories. The results can prove disappointing. Unlike most types of plunder, historical facts and anthropological models lose much of their value when removed from their original contexts. The Ethnohistory Program was founded with the idea that it would be profitable for both parties to try to understand the other's discipline, to get

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inside it and see how it works. Initially the attempt produced culture shock. The two disciplines do not always speak the same language; more unsettling, they sometimes use the same words to mean vastly different things. As in other forms of culture shock, the discovery of difference is the first step to enlightenment. Seen through anthropologists' eyes, myth, ritual, and symbol are no longer historical trivia, decorative elements that can be tacked onto the serious subjects of analysis when they do not obscure these altogether; they become vital clues, interwoven with and revealing the very issues considered the real stuff of history. Historians' perceptions of change are equally illuminating; change ceases to be a shift from one steady state to another and becomes instead a continuous process to which all systems are subject. And once change over time is accepted as a given, diachronic analysis based on chronology and causation has to be incorporated into the model-building scheme.

The next, more fruitful stage comes when the interests of anthropologists and historians converge to produce a set of common, as opposed to complementary, goals: the development of dynamic models that combine system with process in long-term patterns of sociocultural change. Along with common goals come common problems. Two in particular have loomed large in Ethnohistory Workshop discussions. The first relates to sources. How do you reconstruct past systems of meaning (let alone changes in them) when you can neither participate in nor directly observe the lives of the people? Partial answers lie in drawing on new types of evidence, such as visual imagery and oral traditions; in using a wider range of documentary sources; and in digging more deeply into those sources for information the authors did not consciously impart. Yet history is ultimately limited by what past "informants" chose to record and what accident has preserved.

The second problem relates to method. How exactly do you combine system with process? The one fits parts together in a synchronic relationship explained by function; the other links them sequentially through cause and effect. Clearly, the relationship has to be seen in motion, continually changing while remaining more or less integrated. This is more easily said than done. At some point or points the movement must be frozen to allow analysis of system qua system. Yet a succession of tableaux does not reveal process and can mask the often incremental and gradual nature of change. Although the two modes of analysis are not necessarily incompatible, they may resist synthesis on an equal footing. Some sense of motion may have to be sacrificed to the analysis of structure, or the order of priorities may need to be reversed.

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The choice marks the boundary between the two disciplines. Along with other differences in emphasis, the choice comes, I suspect, from the basic difference in professional training, defined by either ethnographic fieldwork or documentary research. Historians and anthropologists may converge on the same ground, but they come from different places. They may understand and even engage in the other's mode of research, as well as use the data it generates. But they are most likely to use them as complements to their own, seeking either clues to the past from the present or clues to the present from the past.

The differences do not signify a failure of communication. The goal is to converse across disciplinary boundaries, not eliminate them; for there is little point in a dialogue if all speak with the same voice. Creative tension comes from the combination of two distinct perspectives, and from that creative tension new insights can continue to emerge.

This volume exemplifies the value to both anthropologists and historians of pooling their separate resources to focus on a single subject. Identities and approaches remain distinct despite varying degrees of overlap. Yet each contribution has gained from the dialogue, and the subject has been illuminated more brightly by the combined light. As the volume's editor so cogently argues in another context, exchange is the source of value.

NANCY FARRISS

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Preface

Although anthropologists and historians increasingly talk about one another, they rarely talk to one another. This volume is the product of a year-long dialogue between historians and anthropologists on the topic of commodities. Three of the papers (by Cassanelli, Geary, and Spooner) were delivered to the Ethnohistory Workshop at the University of Pennsylvania during 1983–4. The others (with the exception of my own introductory essay) were delivered at a symposium on the relationship between commodities and culture hosted by the Ethnohistory Program, in Philadelphia, on May 23–5, 1984.

Lee Cassanelli, my colleague in the Department of History at the University of Pennsylvania, first proposed the theme of commodities and culture for the 1983–4 Ethnohistory Workshop. To him and to Nancy Farriss (also of the Department of History, and the guiding spirit of the workshop from its inception in 1975), I owe many years of stimulating interdisciplinary dialogue. Lee Cassanelli's proposal coincided fortuitously with a conversation I had with Igor Kopytoff and William Davenport (my colleagues in the Anthropology Department at Penn), in the course of which we agreed that the time was ripe for a revitalized anthropology of things.

The May 1984 symposium, which led directly to the planning of this volume, was made possible by grants to the Ethnohistory Program from the National Endowment for the Humanities and from the School of Arts and Sciences at the University of Pennsylvania. The success of that symposium owes much to the intellectual and logistical support of students and colleagues who attended it. In particular, I must thank Greta Borie, Peter Just, and Christine Hoepfner for all manner of assistance before and during the symposium.

I have also been the beneficiary of much generosity in the course of assembling this volume. Susan Allen-Mills, of Cambridge University Press, was a valuable source of intellectual and procedural guidance throughout. I owe a special debt to the staff at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, whose secretarial and ad-

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