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Arnold J. Bauer
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Goods, Power, History

Why do we acquire the things we do? Behind this apparently ingenuous question are several answers, some straightforward and others more interesting. To feed ourselves, might be the first response, for it is obvious that we expend much energy in the quest for food. Clothing and shelter would also seem to constitute our basic needs. Yet we can easily see that even in the Garden of Eden, people wanted more than they needed. This simple impulse has created the ever mounting abundance we call progress and nearly all of the subsequent trouble on our planet.

Four main interwoven themes run through this exploration of material culture in Latin America over the past five centuries: supply and demand; the relationship between consumption and identity; the weight of ritual, both ancient and modern, in what we acquire; and the importance of colonial and postcolonial power in the practice of consumption.

Arnold J. Bauer is Professor of History at the University of California, Davis. He has lived, worked, and studied in Mexico, Chile, and Spain and has held visiting professorships at Catholic University in Santiago, Chile, and Universidad Iberoamericana in La Rábida, Spain. Professor Bauer is the author of *Chilean Rural Society* (1975) and editor of *La iglesia en la economía de América Latina* (1986) and has published several articles in the *American Historical Review*, the *Hispanic American Historical Review*, the *Cambridge History of Latin America*, *Historia*, and various Latin American publications.

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Latin America's Material Culture

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University of California, Davis

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521772082

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First published 2001

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Bauer, Arnold J.
Goods, power, history: Latin America's material culture / Arnold J. Bauer.
p. cm. – (New approaches to the Americas)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-521-77208-7 – ISBN 0-521-77702-X (pb)
1. Consumption (Economics) – Latin America – History. 2. Material culture – Latin America. I. Title. II. Series.
HC130.C6 B38 2001
339.4′7′098 – dc21 00-064143

ISBN 978-0-521-77208-2 Hardback
ISBN 978-0-521-77702-5 Paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2009

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For
Rebecca, Lucy, Colby, Colton, Jonah,
and
Macarena Gómez-Barris

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Preface

Some two thousand years ago a well-known collection of books and letters warned that it was easier for a camel to pass through a needle's eye than for a rich man to enter heaven; worse yet, the volume's main protagonist even drove the money changers from the temple. At the beginning of the third millennium, we pay no heed to such distressing admonitions while money and goods are firmly enshrined in our emporia of consumption.

During the intervening two thousand years, not to mention the previous millennia, most people waged a daily battle, often unsuccessfully, to acquire the bare rudiments of food, clothing, and shelter that might enable them to reproduce their life. They adapted plants to the environment, fashioned tools, and tried to produce a little more as a hedge against misfortune. Only a relative handful of people got lucky, invented a better mousetrap or, more commonly, managed to persuade or force others to yield up a surplus that might create greater comfort or luxury. More recently, a larger but still small share of the planet's population is able to fill house and garage with consumer goods, while scrambling to pay off the mortgage and the Master Card bill.

On the eve of the year 2000, computers calculated that the planet's living population had reached six billion and, barring global disaster, will increase to around nine billion in the next fifty years. Unless we undergo an improbable change in values, our descendants will not be content with rice and homespun cotton cloth; more likely they will aspire to the high-energy, intensive consumerism so eagerly promoted in North America and Europe. Most people will probably want a wide range of goods, including a television, radio, and refrigerator, processed food and drink, maybe even a car, the single most destructive consumer

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good we've yet produced. The bad news is that if we get them, the environmental impact will probably be devastating; if we don't, or if goods continue to be so unequally distributed, one can imagine unprecedented class or ethnic conflict. Such prospects may help explain the outbreak of a rash of studies on consumption. Although the present book will solve no global problems, it may provoke readers to think a bit more about why we – or, more properly, why Latin Americans – acquired the things they did over the past five hundred years or so.

If pressed to explain, most of us would probably say we buy things because they're useful and we buy more when we have more income. That explanation is straightforward enough, and largely accurate, but the closer we look, the more we see that almost all goods are fraught with all kinds of meaning. The most humble gruel, as well as the prince's cape, are rather more than nourishment and clothing, and the explanation for acquiring them involves more than a conventional sense of utility.

Nor have we been unambivalent in the way we feel about our own acquisitions; of course, about the possessions of others we can become even more agitated and often condemnatory. At various times, people in the West, at least, have been both ecstatic and tormented about the possession of material objects. We also have the wit to see, and consequently to fear, that wealth, unequally divided, is a source of social upheaval. It's not just that some have possessions and others don't, or that egregious display or a sense of deprivation has led to envy, resentment, contempt, or warfare. Those who manage to acquire clothes and carriages, a Lambourghini or an Internet company, have at times felt uncomfortable and even guilty about the goods they've accumulated. Reflecting, perhaps, the influence of the two-thousand-year-old teachings mentioned earlier, the ambivalence between the propriety of restrained "decency" on one side and the desire to flaunt spectacular wealth on the other runs right through European history and its transatlantic extensions.

A random tour, through time and place, reveals this ambivalence. *Fifteenth-century Tuscany:* When the Franciscan monk Giralomo Savonarola tells the people of Florence that they ought to tear off their jewels and silk and sacrifice them to God, they praise him as a saint and offer him a cardinal's hat; when he insists they actually do it, they have him burned as a public nuisance. *Twentieth-century Mexico:* When certain members of the community of Tzintzuntzan acquire more animals and land than others, they are elected to stage the annual fiesta.

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In a week-long display of food, drink, and fireworks, their excess wealth is burned off and the village returns to a relatively egalitarian harmony. *Present-day Rio de Janeiro:* When white Brazilians sniff at the excesses of the poor inhabitants of the hillside *favelados* who spend nearly their entire annual income on the extravagant use of sequins and costumes for Carnival, they are mocked by one Joaozinho Trinta, a samba float designer: "only intellectuals like misery, what poor people go for is luxury."[1] *The industrialized West:* These days, one of the luxuries that people in the high-consuming industrial countries give ourselves, out of high moral or aesthetic impulse – and, even more passionately, because of environmental concerns – is to lament the efforts made by less fortunate people in poorer countries to attain the standard of living, or, more precisely, the consumption patterns, of the West.

These and many other issues and a great many fascinating stories, hover around the history of material culture. Goods, commodities, things, are present in a thousand books, pictures, and paintings, but in regard to that part of the world imperfectly called Latin America, there are actually very few attempts to explain why people acquire the things they do or to follow out the implication of certain patterns of consumption.[2] This book does not attempt to plug one of those gaps we historians are forever trying to fill, but rather to tiptoe around the cracks in the record. The examination of what and why we acquire things, is, of course, a vast and fascinating subject that can hardly be resolved – indeed, barely introduced – here. But there are a few stories to be told, and I have tried to do that in a way that might provoke the interested reader to take up the subject of material culture more profoundly.

The present book emphasizes the core items of material life – food, clothing, shelter, and the organization of public space – in both their

[1] In the biting interpretation of George Bernard Shaw, *Androcles and the Lion*, in *Collected Plays with Their Prefaces* (London: Max Reinhardt, 1972), 4:467; George Foster, *Tzintzuntzan: Mexican Peasants in a Changing World* (Boston: Little Brown, 1967); Alma Guillermoprieto, *Samba* (New York: Random House, 1991), p. 90.

[2] Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985), which shows how a European taste for sweetness is connected to the enslavement of millions of workers on Caribbean plantations; Eric Van Young's essay, "Material Life," in Louisa Shell Huberman and Susan Socolow, eds., *The Countryside in Colonial Latin America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), pp. 49–74; and Benjamin Orlove, ed., *The Allure of the Foreign: Imported Goods in Postcolonial Latin America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), are exceptions.

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rudimentary and elaborate manifestations. It begins with pre-Columbian practice and then takes up the effect of the European invasion from the sixteenth century onward; the consequence of the first wave of classical liberalism from the 1870s to the 1920s; the inward turn toward a kind of consumer nationalism from the 1930s to the 1970s; and the present neoliberal epoch.

Four main interwoven explanatory schemes run through the narrative: supply and demand, or relative price; the relationship between consumption and identity; the importance of ritual, both ancient and modern, in consumption; and the idea of "civilizing goods." This last refers to the relationship between colonial and postcolonial power and consumption. "Power" means not only, say, royal directives regarding clothing, the tax and tariff policy of the modern state, the dominance of knowledge, or the naked force of capital, but also the attraction exercised by external reference groups or the power of fashion set by the powerful at home and abroad. All of these brought forth imitation, resistance, negotiation, and modification, and out of the resultant mix we can see – or I hope, at least, that this book helps the reader see – the ongoing practice of Latin America's material culture.

A Note on Terminology

The terms people use to describe geography or themselves and others are laden with meanings that betray, sometimes unconsciously, cultural prejudices or suggest a point of view offensive to current sensibilities. "Naming" implies power, and because we are dealing with a colonial world, many terms we have were originally imposed by the conquerors or invaders of what is now Latin America. Columbus, indifferent to the fact that places had names before he came on the scene, claimed that he "named" more than two hundred islands and settlements during the first days of the Northern Hemisphere autumn of 1492. He extended the practice to human beings. His first mistake, to call the native inhabitants "Indians," was continued by colonial Europeans and by the "Indians" themselves, and it is still with us. Spanish-speaking people also used *naturales* or, later, *gente indígena*, but these are awkward in translation. Because many teachers and students in the Native American studies programs in North American universities today often self-describe themselves with Columbus's original misnomer, "Indian" is used in this book to signify those people who thought of themselves

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as such or were considered by others to have been Indians. Neither usage is unproblematic.

Other terms such as black, white, mestizo, cholo, and mulatto have often been employed pejoratively, but their use is inescapable for a modern writer. Designations for specific native people are no less troublesome. When Hernán Cortés met Moctezuma on the main road to Tenochtitlan in November 1519, his translators described the native people as "Culhua," "Mexica," or "Nahua." The term "Aztec" only came into popular usage three centuries later. Yet, we are stuck with it, and I use it. "Inca" in the sixteenth century referred to a specific social class among the inhabitants of the central Andes; "Quechua," to a topographical stratum. Today, the term "the Incas" commonly describes the people present in Peru at the time of the European entry.

Generally I try to use the terms spoken or written by the people who lived in the period I write about in order to avoid jarring anachronisms. Thus I use "the Indies," the words used by many Europeans in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries to designate what is now "Latin America" because that (still imaginary place) did not yet exist. Englishmen during the same centuries, following the lead of German geographers, preferred "America" for the entire Western Hemisphere, as Latin Americans did and some still do today. "Our America," for example, in the mind of the great nineteenth-century Cuban writer, José Martí, stretched from the Rio Grande to Patagonia. But this is confusing for some students in the United States because in recent years, again, quite unthinkingly, our leaders have arrogated the term "America" to apply just to this country.

For the two great pre-Columbian high-culture regions in the Western (another loaded term) Hemisphere, there is no entirely satisfactory vocabulary. I use Mesoamerica or Mexico for one high-culture area and the Andes or the Andean zone for the other where perhaps I should use Anáhuac and Tawantinsuyo. But I use the currently popular terms because I imagine they are more familiar to my readers than the Náhautl or Quechua terms, which in any case apply only to specific regions within the larger core areas. Because I almost entirely (and shamefully) ignore Brazil, I often generalize with "Spanish America" but sometimes, if Brazil *is* included, I try to use the more inclusive adjective "Iberian" or "Latin" America.

The names for the invaders themselves present a certain problem. We usually think, and I usually write, that "Spaniards," or "Portuguese,"

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conquered and colonized Latin America. But, in fact, a small number of people from all around the Mediterranean – from Crete, Genoa, France, Tuscany – as well as from Holland, the Atlantic Islands, and, of course, Africa, all participated.

"Latin America" was invented by the devilish French in the 1850s, who also came up with the unhelpful, "Third World" a century later. This became conventional usage only toward the end of the nineteenth century. It is an unsatisfying, grossly inaccurate term, but hard to ignore. When appropriate, after the new republics emerge in the early nineteenth century, I write of Chileans, Colombians, Mexicans, Cubans, and so forth.

Apologia pro Vita Sua

In this discussion of tastes and values that are inevitably subjective, I should, perhaps, try to make clear the origin and quirky development of my own. I was brought up on a proper Kansas farm in the rolling, wooded country five miles east and ten north of the intimidating metropolitan hub of Clay Center. On Saturday nights in the summer, my family would "go to town"; my mother and sisters browsed in the Five and Ten, while my father, down the street, leaned on the new harvestors in the farm machinery stores and talked solemnly with other farmers about the weather and soils. Now and then we'd be treated to nickel hamburgers in a little corner niche by the gas station, a welcome change from fresh, fried chicken and tender ears of corn, which was the daily fare at home. I wouldn't go near a Big Mac today, but the smell and taste of those five-cent burgers and the feel of the torn plastic covers on the counter stools still call out to me. I'm glad that no cultural critic in those years condemned my indescribable pleasure as vulgar.

Several years later as a young man, I went for two years to study economics in Mexico City. Finding a room with a respectable Mexican family, I was gently and seriously checked out by student friends of the older son. In due course I met with their approval and was then asked to weekend house parties to dance, badly, with chaperoned girls. I was invited to the annual formal ball for engineering students in the old Minería Building on Tacuba Street and to listen to the first Cuban chachacha bands in the heart of the old city. We ate tacos and grilled onions in streetside stands and bought bread and olives from the abrupt Catalans, who seemed to own all the delicatessens in town. There was

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no Wal-Mart or Costco, not a single Burger King, whole districts of the city without ketchup. Returning in subsequent years, what I had imagined to be the "real Mexico" had mostly disappeared.

Having lived two years outside of Casablanca, I was not unaccustomed to unusual places, but, even so, Mexico in the mid-1950s was decidedly a foreign country. Having had the great fortune to live there, I thought, naively of course, that I had experienced at least a hint of what Guillermo Bonfil Batalla later called "México profundo" or the deep, authentic Mexico. The Mexico of recent years, by contrast, seemed drained of its uniqueness, Americanized, like any other place. I know, of course, that every serious visitor, from Hernán Cortés onward, must think that he or she has seen the real thing. When those writers and artists who lived through the heady years of the 1920s returned, they surely must have found my "authentic" Mexico of the 1950s unbearably superficial. And I'm sure that young people today find the great capital fascinating. I don't defend my conceit, but rather warn that any lingering crankiness about Big Macs, the Colonel and his chickens, the Cowboys, or MTV on a friend's cable television out in Tacubaya might be explained by a sense of loss.

The Cuban Revolution and Berkeley in the 1960s fed my anti-imperialism and outrage against United States policy toward Latin America; living in Chile before and after the disaster of the Popular Unity had a sobering effect. The subsequent twenty-five years have made me more circumspect and, probably, more boring.

I recognize that private property and material incentives generate wealth, but I can't bear the constant hammering, on all sides, to consume, as if shopping were our only reason for being alive. I like good plain food, particularly the *pollo deshuesado al ajo arriero* in the Casa Vieja, an honest restaurant in Santiago. I believe canned and bottled soft drinks should be banned from the planet. I became impatient with the inability of socialists in Chile, Nicaragua, and Cuba to create an adequate material life for their citizens, but if Fidel were to pass on, I'd feel it as I would a death in the family. I understand that the present capitalist global market makes available thousands of things previously unimagined to millions of people, but I think the system in its present workings is disastrous to the environment, spiritually deadening, and probably not sustainable. But "there are more things in Heaven and Earth than are dreamt of" in our present philosophy. I hope the present student generation will be able to find a balance between its humane and material culture.

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Acknowledgments

My interest in material culture was first provoked by my anthropology colleague, Benjamin Orlove, who has been a continuing source of ideas and gentle admonition. Marcello Carmagnani of the University of Turin invited me to write an earlier version of a portion of this book for the volume *Para una historia de América* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Economica, 1999) and gave me the benefit of his global knowledge. I want to thank my dear friends David Sweet, Louis Segal, Richard Curley, Ted and Jo Burr Margadant for critical comment and warm encouragement. M. Merker of San Francisco gave me a lifetime of loving support. Charles Walker, an incomparable colleague, read every word and offered, in his seemingly effortless manner, smart and constructive observation. Christopher Rodríguez was an exemplary research assistant; Sebastián Araya at California State University at Humbolt made the maps, and I am grateful to him and to Professor Mary Cunha for their kind assistance. Gabriel Unda provided his expert knowledge in working up the illustrations. Mr. Tobiah Waldron made the index.

Stuart Schwartz at Yale suggested that I write the present volume. The anonymous readers for the Press offered acute and informed opinion. Frank Smith and Brian MacDonald at Cambridge University Press have been patient, keen-eyed, and helpful editors. I should also like to thank the Committee on Research at the University of California at Davis, the Dean of Letters and Science, and the Office of Research for financial assistance.

Finally, what began as cultural wars ended in warm harmony, and in the course of this struggle, Danielle Greenwood managed to pry open my hard head so that two or three new ideas might rush into the vacuum. Her influence is present throughout the book.

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