

Cultural Exchange: New Developments in the Anthropology of Commodities

James Ferguson

*Department of Anthropology
University of California, Irvine*

The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective. Arjun Appadurai, ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986. \$42.50 (hardcover), \$14.95 (paperback).

The recent publication of Arjun Appadurai's edited collection *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (1986) is a milestone in the development of a new, culturally informed economic anthropology. Here, I hope to use a general discussion of this book, especially the challenging and ambitious theoretical introduction by Appadurai, as an opportunity to reflect not only on this exciting collection, but at the same time on a number of important new developments in the anthropology of commodities. These developments, I believe, point the way toward a fruitful integration of cultural and economic analysis. In the conclusion, I add a few observations on the theoretical moment that makes such new developments possible.

In the classical, holistic anthropology of the founding fathers and mothers, economy and culture were inevitably connected. Whether economic institutions or practices were seen as "total social facts" (Mauss), as parts of an interdependent, "functioning whole" (Malinowski), or as aspects of a total "culture pattern" (Benedict, Kroeber), their analysis was inseparable from the analysis of the larger cultural whole. The foundational works of "economic anthropology"—from Mauss's *The Gift* (1976) and Malinowski's analysis of the *kula* (1922) to Bohannan's account of spheres of exchange among the Tiv (1959) and Douglas's ethnography of the Lele (1963)—were based on the premise that since economic life is culturally ordered, economic analysis is inseparable from cultural analysis. Indeed, it is arguable that the founding insight of "economic anthropology" was precisely the realization that the economic could not be separated from the cultural and the symbolic.

Oddly, for reasons that will not be analyzed here, "culture" largely dropped out of "economic anthropology" in America during the 1960s and 1970s. The move away from culture in anthropological approaches to economy came in two main modes, both related to the breakdown of the functionalist paradigms.

The first set of moves away from cultural analysis came out of the various Marxist critiques of structural-functionalism and modernization theory. The influential attack on functionalist empiricism by Althusserian structural Marxism (see Hindess and Hirst 1975; Seddon 1978), and the associated move to analysis of "modes of production," had powerful effects. Focus on production shifted attention away from exchange, seen as peripheral to production (Dupré and Rey 1978); at the same time a commitment to a revitalized version of the "infrastructure/superstructure" distinction recast "culture" as superstructural "ideology" (cf. Althusser and Balibar 1970). Underdevelopment theory, at the same time, was having much to do with fostering an anticultural ethic in economic analysis. Andre Gunder Frank's slashing attack (1967) on the assumptions of modernization theory, for example, included a devastating critique of anthropological attempts to explain poverty and economic underdevelopment as consequences of the cultural traits and value orientations of Third World peoples.¹ The ideological implications of such "culturological" approaches (effectively blaming the exploited victims) cast strong, and mostly justified, suspicion on the then-current exoticizing, essentializing cultural approaches to explaining economic processes in the Third World—and, by implication, on cultural approaches in general. It was in this spirit that Palmer and Parsons (1977:7), for instance, later attacked what they called "the cattle complex myth" for southern Africa, insisting (incorrectly, as we shall see below) that Africans were not reluctant to sell cattle for "cultural" reasons, but that sales to the market were regulated only "by factors such as price levels, security of investment, and local demands for cash and consumer goods." Cultural differences, they implied, might exist, but economic exchanges proceeded independently of them.² The same fundamentally political hostility to the introduction of culture into economic analysis is still seen in the 1980s. Eric Wolf's *Europe and the People without History* (1982), for example, is (as Marcus and Fischer (1986:85) have noted) dismissive of the idea that cultural analysis might play an important part in understanding political economy and history. In a related way, Colin Murray, one of the best anthropologists of southern Africa, has declared that

Anthropologists working in Southern Africa will only do justice to the kaleidoscopic variety of everyday life when they transcend their several paradigms, whether derived from Durkheim, Mauss or Levi-Strauss, that are based on the primacy or integrity of culture as an object of study in itself . . . and when they commit themselves to interpreting Mfengu or Gcaleka or Sotho not as more or less passive purveyors of their respective cultural codes but as actors in history who diversely but inevitably participate in the regional political economy and in a long and complex struggle, as collaborators, resisters, victims and cultural entrepreneurs. [Murray 1981:11–12]

It is a stark choice that Murray seems to offer us here: either abandon the theoretical focus on culture to follow the honorable path of political economy and

history, or continue your culturology and continue to be politically irrelevant or worse. I shall return to this point shortly.

The second major stream moving away from culture was based on a second line of critique of structural-functionalist orthodoxy. Against the functionalist vision of society as a disembodied ideal system of norms and roles, many economic anthropologists in the 1960s and 1970s aimed to bring the active, decision-making individual back into the analysis; to give a dynamic, actor-centered perspective on economic life. As the polemics between "substantivists" and "formalists" died away indecisively, many economic anthropologists who had not been convinced by the Marxist critique of both schools came more and more to define their task as the empirical study of economic decision making (Barlett 1980 is a good example). In some cases, this involved an acceptance of "formal" economic models; in others, a critique through analysis of contexts of decision making (e.g., Chayanovian arguments about rational decision making in the household or "domestic" context). For both, though, the effect was to define the specifically "anthropological" aspect of "economic anthropology" as an aspect of scale or methodological level; if economic anthropology differed from economics, it was not because it focused on an object (culture) invisible to classical economics, but because it aimed at empirical, contextualized studies of economic behavior at the "local level," rather than merely formal models or generalizations from aggregate patterns. The recent monographs issued by the Society for Economic Anthropology (Greenfield and Strickon 1986; Maclachlan 1987; Ortiz 1983; Plattner 1985) contain a number of different approaches, some focused on decision research, others more global or regional in scope; but in their combined total of more than 50 articles on "economic anthropology," I was able to find not a single serious discussion of issues of culture, meaning, symbolism or interpretation or how they might relate to economic processes.

This, in its own way, is another reaction to the discredited "culturological" approaches to non-Western economic life discussed above. The "primitive" was seen for too long as a passive cultural automaton, the slave to irrational "custom," rather than an active, rational, calculating, rule-breaking agent. But in defending the rationality of the non-Western economic agent, so much emphasis is placed on individual decision making that the cultural issues that should be central to an anthropological approach (What makes people travel 200 miles in an open canoe to give away a shell bracelet? What makes an art collector pay \$6 million for a painting?) are often lost track of. Returning to southern Africa, those who insist, like Fielder (1973:351), that cattle are just like any other capital investment, "regarded very much as shares and investments are in capitalist society," allow their eagerness to demonstrate the banal truth that "the African" is rational to blind them to the main fact that needs to be explained—that cattle *are* culturally set apart from ordinary commodities (not out of irrationality, but for very good reasons to be discussed below). In posing "rational," "economic" explanations as alternative to "irrational," "cultural" ones, we leave ourselves unable to explain either the economic or the cultural.

In recent years, however, culture has come back into the economic picture in a big way. As cultural analysis has become more sophisticated, it has increas-

ingly dissociated itself from the static, apolitical tendencies shared by Boasian culture theory, British functionalism, and French structuralism alike, and taken up such central themes in political economy as power, process, and history (influential here, among many others, are Bourdieu 1977, 1984; J. Comaroff 1985; J. L. Comaroff 1981, 1982; Geertz 1980; Sahlins 1981, 1985).³ Culture, far from being a timeless, essential attribute of "tradition," is now seen as a dynamic, shifting, contested terrain, constantly shaped by and shaping a changing political and economic context. With the realization that culture is historical and history cultural, "symbolic" cultural analysis and "political-economic" historical analysis can no longer be credibly opposed. In the changed anthropological climate, Murray's choice (above) no longer makes sense: it is not a question of whether to ignore culture and focus on political economy or to ignore political economy and dwell on culture; it is a matter of grasping political and economic realities in a culturally sensitive way, and grasping culture in a way that convincingly relates it to political economy.

As cultural analysis has recognized that it cannot ignore political economy, at the same time (and perhaps at a slower pace) "economic anthropology" is returning to the realization that culture matters. This general development is illustrated clearly in *The Social Life of Things*, as well as in a number of other recent approaches to the cultural and political analysis of commodities (Baudrillard 1975, 1981; Bourdieu 1984; Comaroff and Comaroff 1988; Douglas and Isherwood 1981; Ferguson 1985; Sahlins 1981; Tambiah 1984; Taussig 1980) that I will discuss here. Appadurai's book will thus provide both a good example and a convenient pretext for reviewing these developments. The discussion of the book will set an organizational frame within which I will try to talk about both general issues and other related work.

The Social Life of Things

By explicitly directing his attention to objects and their circulation, Appadurai is doing both something very old and something quite new. The focus on exchange and the cultural questions surrounding it is, of course, central to both the English (Frazer, Malinowski) and the French (Mauss, Lévi-Strauss) traditions of classical anthropology. But following the last decade's preoccupation in anthropology with production (e.g., Meillassoux 1981; Sahlins 1972; Seddon 1978), on the one hand, and consumption (Baudrillard 1968, 1975, 1981; Douglas and Isherwood 1981; Sahlins 1976) on the other, Appadurai's approach to commodities as "objects in motion" has the feel of a new departure, even while appearing at the same time as a kind of homecoming.

But although Appadurai is taking up classical themes, he is doing it in new and very interesting ways. First, there is the rather startling intention to treat objects as living beings, leading "social lives"—acquiring and losing value, changing signification, perhaps becoming nonexchangeable (maybe even sacred), only later to sink back into mere commodity status. Drawing on Simmel's claim (1978) that it is exchange that generates value rather than vice versa (see below), Appa-

durai argues that by following the paths through which objects are exchanged we open a window offering “glimpses of the ways in which desire and demand, reciprocal sacrifice and power interact to create economic value in specific social situations” (p. 4). The “trajectory” of a thing may be understood as the life history of a particular object, following Kopytoff’s notion (chapt. 2) of “cultural biography”; or as the “social history” of a particular kind of object, looking for historical shifts over the long term. Both these sorts of “trajectory,” Appadurai claims, can be narrated in terms of the “social lives” of things. The key claim here, of course, is not simply that things are “social,” but that they have *lives*; the suggestion is that the social dimension of things can be narratively approached through the conventions not only of traditional historical exposition, but through that venerable anthropological device, the “life history.”

We have known at least since Marx that people are easily led to think of commodities in “fetishized” terms, to impute powers of social origin to inanimate objects. And we are used to categorizing such fetishistic thinking as part of what Bloch (in a different context) has called (1977:290) the conceptual “systems by which we hide the world,” as opposed to the “systems by which we know the world.” Such distinctions, however, have always been problematic in anthropology. On examination, “systems of knowing” have a way of turning out to be simultaneously ways of concealing; while many ways of hiding can be seen at the same time as ways of knowing. Taussig (1980:30–31), for instance, attacks the fetishism of American capitalist folk theories of the business world, with all their talk about money that “grows,” capital that can be “put to work,” interest rates that “climb,” and so on. But what Taussig does not say, though any investment banker knows it, is that such colorful fetishistic concepts are in fact powerful and extremely effective conceptual tools for the job at hand (that is, predicting market “behavior”—as they say), just as the equally fetishistic understandings of the workers and peasants Taussig describes are powerful ways of thinking in their own right. The danger in thinking is not so much fetishism as it is the illusion that one has escaped it.

Appadurai thus has no apologies to make for the fetishistic implications of considering things as social beings endowed with lives and careers. He explicitly calls for a “methodological fetishism” because, he claims, it is only through the analysis of the “lives” of things that the social context can be illuminated in a new way; “we have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories” (p. 5). Even though “from a *theoretical* point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a *methodological* point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context” (p. 5; emphasis in original).

By looking at “things-in-motion,” Appadurai is able to escape many of the unproductive definitional questions that have beset static, typological approaches to commodities. For Appadurai, the typological questions—What is a commodity? In what types of society are commodities found?—are replaced by processual questions (cf. Moore 1986). How do objects circulate? Under what circumstances, and at what points in social time are they exchangeable? For Appadurai,

“commodity” is not so much a type of thing as it is a type of situation. Now the definitional question is shifted: the “commodity situation in the social life of any ‘thing’ [is] the situation in which its exchangeability (past, present, or future) for some other thing is its socially relevant feature” (p. 13). In this perspective, the commodity state can be further analyzed into questions of commodity phase (a temporal question); commodity candidacy (a question of politico-cultural categorization); and commodity context (a situational question). Appadurai is thus able to avoid the risk of the exaggerated and over-rigid oppositions between commodities and other forms of exchange like gift and barter that are the inevitable consequence of the typological method. Commodities are not a stage of social evolution (cf. Hart 1982); rather, the processual approach means

looking at the commodity potential of all things rather than searching fruitlessly for the magic distinction between commodities and other sorts of things. It also means breaking significantly with the production-dominated Marxian view of the commodity and focusing on its *total* trajectory from production, through exchange/distribution, to consumption. [p. 13; emphasis in original]

In a related way, Appadurai’s focus on things-in-motion gives life to questions of consumption as well. Against the often timeless semiotics of consumption (e.g., Douglas and Isherwood 1981; Sahlins 1976), the focus on process locates questions of signification, opposition, and reciprocity in the temporal context of practice (cf. Bourdieu 1977).

Tracing the social and cultural movement of objects leads Appadurai to focus on issues of what he calls “paths and diversions.” Every society lays out culturally and legally approved “paths” for the circulation of objects; determinations are made about what objects may be exchanged for what, by whom, when, and under what conditions. Even the most heavily commoditized societies are not free from such path-making, as Kopytoff (chapt. 2) shows in a brilliant discussion of the “spheres of exchange” in modern American culture. But at the same time, in any such system, there are countervailing tendencies for interested parties to engineer “diversions,” to violate the prescribed paths out of self-interest. Thus the world of “paths and diversions” is intrinsically a dynamic, contested, political one (“political” being “broadly understood”), and the “commodity status” of a given object in a given context is always in itself a political determination.

Looking at issues of “paths and diversions” necessarily means focusing simultaneously on both the cultural issues surrounding the categorization of objects and the political issues surrounding the determinations of paths and diversions. At a stroke, the traditional, static analysis of “spheres of exchange” is transformed by bringing in two missing dimensions: time and power. Bohannan’s classic account (1959), for instance, of spheres of exchange among the Tiv gives only an ideal, normative system of paths (Bohannan’s “conversions and conveyances”). There is no allowance for diversions, and correspondingly no exploration of the politics of what Appadurai would call the Tiv “regime of value.” The “paths” for Appadurai are not simply inert, neutral cultural principles, but polit-

ical instruments, while the inevitable diversions are the subversive and sometimes transformative challenge to the commodity status quo.

It must be clear by now that the approach championed by Appadurai is not an entirely new departure, but a creative work of synthesis, in which new ideas are combined with a host of valuable insights generated in recent years by the various critiques of "economic anthropology" in its classical form. Specifically, Appadurai and at least some of his contributors go far beyond the traditional "anthropology of exchange" in at least four ways. (1) They do bring production into the picture (though denying it central analytical place), thus answering at least in part the objections of Marxist critics (e.g., Dupré and Rey 1978) to the anthropological tradition. (2) They insert both time and interested calculation into the analysis of the cultural ordering of the economy, following up on the suggestions of Bourdieu (1977). (3) They problematize use value and restore to "the world of goods" its cultural foundation (following the critiques of Baudrillard (1975, 1981), Douglas and Isherwood (1981), Sahlins (1976)). (4) Finally, they politicize the cultural ordering of exchange, seeing in "paths and diversions" and in cultural valuations not a generalized social or cultural function, but a pitched political battle over a "regime of value."

Appadurai's insistence that the question of the exchangeability or nonexchangeability of goods is always a political determination calls to mind Sahlins's suggestive analysis (1981) of the transformative politics of *tabu* in Hawaiian history. Sahlins shows how the chiefly power over *tabu* became, in the changed context of British trade, an economic instrument of exploitation wielded by the chiefs against the commoners. As the pragmatic elements of economic exploitation gradually displaced the religious elements in *tabu*, the cultural distinction between the marked category of *tabu* and the unmarked category, *noa*, itself came under attack by the commoners. In this way, the pragmatics of trade ended up undermining the cultural ordering of "paths" that had originally structured it. The political battle here is pitched on the cultural terrain of *tabu*—that is, on the terrain of the politico-cultural issue of "paths and diversions."

Another example here is what I have called the "Bovine Mystique" in Lesotho (Ferguson 1985). Cattle in Lesotho are set apart from ordinary commodities by a cultural rule disapproving sale of livestock except under certain circumstances. The effect is to set aside livestock as a special domain of property, protected from conversion into cash by a sort of "one-way barrier," allowing cash to be converted into livestock, but restricting conversions from livestock into cash. In the labor reserve economy of Lesotho, livestock can thus act as a protected domain of stored value for absent migrant laborers, resistant under ordinary circumstances to the demands of wives and other dependents. The "mystique" of livestock is thus at the center of a general contestation between workers and dependents (and, more generally, between men and women) over the disposition of migrant earnings. The "enclaving" of livestock is here related to the political power not of chiefs but of working men; the erosion of the enclave is the work not of commoners, but of dependent women.

The case of the "Bovine Mystique" is of special interest because the setting apart of livestock from the general realm of commodities is supported here not by

some sort of precapitalist "tradition," but by a domestic power struggle directly related to the modern capitalist wage labor system. The separation of livestock from the sphere of general commodities exists not due to the absence of capitalism, but thanks to its presence in a particular form. This should lead us to question notions of "commodification" as a simple, unidirectional evolutionary trajectory (cf. Hart 1982). It suggests instead an approach more like Appadurai's in which

Commodification is . . . regarded as a differentiated process (affecting matters of phase, context, and categorization, differentially) and the capitalist mode of commoditization is seen as interacting with myriad other indigenous social forms of commoditization. [p. 16]

Part and parcel of Appadurai's sophisticated comparative approach to "regimes of value" is a rejection of the dualism so common in comparative theorizing about economies and exchange. Appadurai attacks the overdrawn contrast in many recent authors (Dumont 1980; Gregory 1982; Hyde 1979; Sahlins 1972; Taussig 1980) between gift exchange and commodity exchange, and between reciprocity and market exchange, and aims (with Baudrillard 1968, 1975, 1981; Douglas and Isherwood 1981; Sahlins 1976; and Tambiah 1984) to "restore the cultural dimension to societies that are too often represented simply as economies writ large, and to restore the calculative dimension to societies that are too often simply portrayed as solidarity writ small" (p. 12). As Appadurai says:

The exaggeration and reification of the contrast between gift and commodity in anthropological writing has many sources. Among them are the tendency to romanticize small-scale societies; to conflate use value (in Marx's sense) with *gemeinschaft* (in Toennies's sense); the tendency to forget that capitalist societies, too, operate according to cultural designs; the proclivity to marginalize and underplay the calculative, impersonal and self-aggrandizing features of noncapitalist societies. [p. 11]

This section of Appadurai's argument might well be read as an explicit rejoinder to Taussig's influential account of South American worker and peasant countermythologies of capitalism (1980). Taussig's impressive analysis is flawed by a grand dualist distinction between, on the one hand, "the precapitalist mode of production," characterized by reciprocity and a "use value orientation," in which production and exchange are aimed at "satisfying natural needs" (1980:29); and, on the other hand, "the capitalist mode," characterized by exploitation, an "exchange value orientation," and the never-ending quest for profit. The suggestion is that there are only two fundamental modes of relation between people and economic objects ("the precapitalist" and "the capitalist"), along with transitional forms. As so often in Western social thought, there is Us (calculating, aggrandizing, exploiting, unnatural) and Them (cooperating, gift-giving, familial, natural), the two halves of the recurrent but apparently unslayable dualist monster (*Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*, tradition and modernity, etc.). But even a cursory review of the anthropological literature casts doubt on the simple notion of precapitalist societies as existing on an economic plane of

unadulterated nature and “use-value orientation.” Are *kula* shells among the Trobrianders, or raffia cloth among the Lele, produced for their use value? Bourdieu’s concept of “symbolic capital” may be overextended in his grandiose “Theory of Practice” (1977); but there is no gainsaying the observation that concepts of exploitation, calculation, and symbolic “accumulation” can be applied fruitfully to the way goods are produced and circulated in “precapitalist” societies. Ironically, Taussig himself cites the Bakweri of West Cameroon as an example of “the creative resistance of use-value orientations,” even while noting that “if they did accumulate property, it was only to destroy it in potlatch-type ceremonies” (1980:20). Now, the potlatch certainly seems an odd paradigm for production-for-use. Indeed, what is most striking about such practices is how completely unintelligible they are from the point of view of “natural needs,” as well as the striking parallel they present to the institutions of conspicuous consumption in Western class societies, as Bourdieu (like Mauss and Veblen before him) has noted.

Appadurai’s views here are both more complex and more illuminating than the simple equation: “precapitalist” = “nonmarket” = “use-value orientation.” Instead of seeing precapitalist societies as primordially innocent of manipulation and aggrandizement through exchange, he emphasizes the way in which transactions in certain specially significant objects are commonly part of institutionalized elite political and status competition in capitalist and noncapitalist societies alike. In so doing, he once again returns to an old anthropological theme—those specialized, meaning-laden, competitive exchanges such as the potlatch and the *kula*. He proposes, as a general category, the term “tournaments of value,” which he defines as follows:

Tournaments of value are complex periodic events that are removed in some culturally well-defined way from the routines of economic life. Participation in them is likely to be both a privilege of those in power and an instrument of status contests between them. The currency of such tournaments is also likely to be set apart through well understood cultural diacritics. Finally, what is at issue in such tournaments is not just status, rank, fame or reputation of actors, but the disposition of the central tokens of value in the society in question. [p. 21]

So defined, the concept of “tournaments of value” sets the stage for a broadly conceived comparative study that would include not only such classical cases as the *kula*, but contemporary Western forms such as the art auction (cf. Baudrillard 1981).

Appadurai’s approach to “tournaments of value” is supplemented by a useful approach to luxury goods, seen not in opposition to “necessities” (whatever that might mean), but rather as goods whose “use” is exhausted in their social meaning—“incarnated signs,” responding to “necessities” of a fundamentally sociopolitical variety (p. 38). Consistent with his general approach, Appadurai sees “luxury” here not as a special class of things, but rather as a special “register” of consumption, politically charged and semiotically complex. Luxury consumption is thus not so much a material process as a form of politico-symbolic action, much as Veblen argued.

But Appadurai goes beyond the fairly familiar point that to consume is to send symbolic messages to argue that consumption needs to be doubly politicized, in its "receiving" aspect as well as its "sending." In so doing, he exposes a whole political dimension to consumption that was elided in earlier anthropological studies (e.g., Douglas and Isherwood 1981; Sahlins 1976). Sahlins (1976), eager to show that in consuming people are engaged in making symbolic statements, ended up accepting the advertising industry's view of itself as doing no more than helping free consumers to complete their symbolic projects. Douglas and Isherwood (1981) took fundamentally the same line: commodities are treated as "a non-verbal medium for the human creative faculty" (1981:62); if power is exercised, it is the power of the consumers sending their own messages through their consumption. Appadurai's view is more complex. Consumption is certainly not a simple reflex of manipulative advertising, but at the same time, the semiotic path of consumption runs both ways: messages are not only sent, but *received* in consumption. For a southern African example: if black women in South Africa purchase skin-lightening cream to make their faces less black, on the one hand they are sending a message to their peers (about their status, sophistication, fashionability, etc.); but on the other hand, in the same act of consumption they must inevitably *receive* an unsubtle message about the value of their own blackness and the relation of blackness to beauty, a message "sent" not so much by the advertiser as by the larger society.

Yet another political dimension of consumption is revealed in the distribution of knowledge about commodities. This can be a matter of knowing what goods are, where they come from, and so on; but it can also be (cf. Bourdieu 1984) a matter of knowing *how* to consume. As Appadurai points out (p. 54), in Western societies knowledge about commodities is itself commoditized, leading to a "traffic in criteria" concerning things. The radical absence of knowledge about commodities can produce mythologies at all levels (producers, distributors, consumers), which Appadurai analyzes skillfully; at the same time, ironically, it can also intensify economic demand. Whenever circulation of objects across cultural boundaries is accompanied by radical differences in knowledge, "the interplay of knowledge and ignorance serves as a turnstile, facilitating the flow of some things and hindering the movement of others" (p. 56).

In all, Appadurai has sketched a promising and exciting outline of a theory of "regimes of value." He challenges economic assumptions by revealing the cultural aspect of "utility" and "market exchange"; at the same time he politicizes old cultural questions of exchange and consumption. In drawing out simultaneously both the political *and* the meaningful dimensions of demand, exchange, and consumption, Appadurai's approach promises to connect economic life with both culture and power in illuminating new ways.

Unfortunately, and perhaps inevitably, the contributed articles largely fail to follow through on the expectations raised in the introduction. The promise seems to be of something very new and different: an approach at once political, processual, and interpretive, founded on the methodological premise that economic objects are social beings whose "lives" and "careers" must be explored. After Ap-

padurai's and Kopytoff's opening chapters, one goes into the body of the book expecting experimental approaches to commodity "biographies." Letting the imagination run a little, I found myself even contemplating "autobiography," the narration of economic process "from the object's point of view." Imagine the "Bovine Mystique" narrated from the point of view of a cow! Why not?

Instead, the book is made up of mostly quite conventional articles in the sociology of exchange and consumption, and on the social history of particular industries. The articles are of generally excellent quality, and they present extremely interesting cases; but they are surely less innovative, theoretically and narratively, than Appadurai's exciting introduction (and Kopytoff's imaginative following piece) might lead one to hope. In fact, most of the pieces do not make use of the concept of "social lives" at all, and there is very little that could be described as "cultural biography" of objects. An added disappointment is that his contributors are not nearly so consistently or thoroughly sensitive to the political dimensions of exchange as is Appadurai himself. I will comment very briefly below on each contribution.

Kopytoff's "The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process" introduces the fascinating idea of "cultural biography" discussed above. More a manifesto than an example of the approach, the article does give tantalizing examples of what a truly "biographical" account would look like. On this level, the article realizes the expectations raised about experimental writing more fully than any of the others. With respect to the promised *political* analysis of the "regime of value," however, the article is less satisfactory. Commoditization is always constrained by some degree of "singularization" or setting apart of objects, Kopytoff argues; but the determinations of commoditization and singularization are not political determinations (as for Appadurai), but are based on two other considerations. First the general tendency to commoditization is always constrained by the "technology of exchange" (p. 72). Kopytoff thus accepts Bohannan's (1959) view that money, conceived as a simple technological or intellectual innovation, destroys the "multi-centric economy" by its own force. This view ignores the fact that money was around for millennia before it destroyed the Tiv economy; it was not merely money but the need for it (as a result of conquest, taxation, and the expansion of capitalism) that eroded the Tiv pathways.⁴ Second, the tendency toward commoditization is also constrained by the classifying needs of the culture and the individual. But this need to classify is understood more as a cognitive or semiotic urge than as a political question. For Kopytoff, singularization is a manifestation of a generalized need for meaning and order, not a specific "regime of value."

Davenport's "Two kinds of value in the Eastern Solomon Islands" is an interesting discussion of how ordinary goods can be, through ritual and aesthetic labor, transformed into sacralized nonexchangeable goods. But here, too, the analysis is disappointingly apolitical. The noneconomic sort of value proper to nonexchangeable goods ("spiritual value") is important, Davenport tells us, "because only by combining the two sorts of value, the material and the spiritual, are traditional social values fully expressed" (p. 108). But these "traditional social

values'' need to be problematized. Who shares such values, who does not; who benefits from such a ''regime of value,'' who contests it?

Gell's ''Newcomers to the world of goods: consumption among the Muria Gonds'' ably demonstrates its admittedly ''entirely uncontroversial proposition'' (p. 110) that goods signify, and thus that consumption must be seen ''as a form of symbolic action.'' The specific argument is that the Muria, with their egalitarian ethos, accumulate only goods that carry ''traditionally'' acceptable meanings, mostly brass and silver goods. But apart from the specifics of the Muria case, which are convincing enough, there is really nothing new here. This is not a biography of things but an anthropological account of consumption—very much, as Gell himself is well aware, in the old structural-functionalist tradition (''particularly the branch of it that is summed up in the tag 'the right hindquarters of the ox' '' (p. 112)). There is no analysis of the ''life of objects,'' no ''cultural biography of things''; indeed, the several biographies that do appear are all of individuals and households, in the conventional style.

Colin Renfrew's ''Varna and the emergence of wealth in prehistoric Europe'' makes the interesting suggestion that the key to old archaeological questions about the origins of political centralization and specialization of production may lie at the cultural level, in changing tastes and notions of value related to luxury goods such as precious metals. This line of argument has the considerable merit of taking culture seriously, rather than seeing it as a reflex of technology or production, as is all too easy to do in archaeology. (There are, however, perhaps inevitably, crippling problems of evidence.⁵) But fascinating as the article is, it, too, is hardly the revolutionary new approach to commodities that Appadurai seems to promise in the ''Introduction.'' It is an article about social stratification and the significance of the valuation of luxury goods—closely connected to the traditional concerns of archaeology; far less closely to Appadurai's envisioned study of the ''social life of things.''

Patrick Geary's remarkable ''Sacred commodities: the circulation of medieval relics'' is a delightful description of the circuits of exchange, gift, and theft associated with the bodily remains of medieval saints. Geary's rich and sensitive account does significantly follow through on the idea of using ''life histories'' of objects to illuminate the cultural dimensions of exchange. But, it must be noted, endowing objects with social lives is fairly easy to do where the ''objects'' are corpses. The hard part here is to see dead people as commodities; once that is done, restoring ''lives'' and ''careers'' to them is relatively easy.

Spooner's ''Weavers and dealers: the authenticity of an oriental carpet'' is the one article in the collection I found thoroughly unconvincing. At the theoretical level, I found Spooner's radical distinction between social and cultural processes profoundly unhelpful, and opposed to Appadurai's effort to unite the two. Indeed, his oversimple Durkheimian view of ''social evolution'' leads in precisely the wrong direction. In this perspective, the rise of modern, socially complex society leads to a demand for carpets by creating the alienated individual with an existential need for ''authenticity.'' The quest for ''authenticity,'' of which the purchase of oriental carpets is one form, is thus a quest for ''personal iden-

tity," seen as a manifestation of an essential individual need for self-expression, in the face of the anonymous conformity of mass society. Spooner seems unfamiliar with Bourdieu's powerful analysis of the quest for "distinction" in French society (1984), and seems unable to grasp the patent class dimension of the demand for "authentic" exotic goods like oriental carpets in the West. Again, Appadurai's hopes for a political analysis of demand and commodity paths is disappointed by his contributor.

Cassanelli's "Qat: changes in the production and consumption of a quasi-legal commodity in northeast Africa" is an interesting account of the socioeconomics of qat, a mildly psychoactive recreational drug grown and used in Somalia, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Yemen. It is an excellent piece of work, and makes good reading, but the fit with Appadurai's framework is strained. The article's title is accurate: the focus is on production and consumption, not exchange, commodity paths, or objects in motion. It is not an account of the "social life of things," but a conventional historical study of an industry, albeit an unusual one.

The last two articles in the collection are the most exciting and convincing pieces. The first of these, William Reddy's "The structure of a cultural crisis: thinking about cloth in France before and after the Revolution" is a fascinating, rich account of the kinds of transformations in systems of knowledge that must take place alongside and even prerequisite to economic transformations. Reddy shows how the transformation of cloth production in France waited on a kind of epistemic revolution in the grading and categorization of cloth, traced with great sensitivity through the imaginative use of trade dictionaries. Reddy's account unites cultural with economic processes most convincingly, decisively demonstrating that exchange occurs within a rich, complicated framework of knowledge and classification. In Reddy's hands, an examination of the way cloth was exchanged, known, and evaluated in the revolutionary period offers a fascinating window into the interrelation of economic and cultural processes.

Finally, there is C. A. Bayly's "The origins of swadeshi (home industry): cloth and Indian society, 1700–1930." This is a splendid account of the changing cultural meaning of transactions in cloth in Indian history, and of the way in which those cultural meanings were mobilized in colonial and nationalist politics. Bayly, a historian, gives an extremely sensitive cultural analysis not only of the symbolism of cloth, but of the symbolism of the *consumption* of cloth. Appadurai's idea of consumption as both the sending and the receiving of messages is well illustrated here. Bayly describes the way in which transactions in cloth in precolonial India formed part of a grand political "discourse" in goods, a system in which "The failure of the king to consume, the artisan to produce, or the merchant to market was tantamount to a denial of political obligation" (p. 302). He traces a two-stage political transformation in this system, in which, first, the consumption of local cloth and the associated political legitimacy of local rulers was challenged by imported cloth. Then, in the second stage, indigenous cloth was reappropriated by the nationalist political movement as a symbol of the purity and lost glory of independent India. Tracing the symbolic and political trajectory of cloth ends up providing a fascinating view into the political and cultural transformation of modern India.

If, as I have suggested, many of Appadurai's most potent suggestions are incompletely realized in this book, it remains all the same a very exciting collection. It is made up of many different individual projects, and the worst one can say is that it suffers from the lack of focus that is perhaps inevitable in such collections. But there are, it seems to me, two limitations in the collection that apply not only to individual pieces but to the entire collection.

First, the contributors show very little familiarity with what would seem to be a very relevant French literature on commodities, taste, and consumption. It is unfortunate that the most compelling recent analyses of consumption and the politico-cultural basis of demand and desire for goods, those of Baudrillard (1968, 1975, 1981) and Bourdieu (1984), though drawn on by Appadurai, are almost completely absent in the contributions of the other authors.⁶ Baudrillard, especially (notwithstanding the considerable irritations of style), is a gold mine for anyone seeking to lay the foundations for a theory of Western capitalism as a cultural system. If the aim is, as Appadurai says, "to demystify the demand side of economic life" (p. 58), then it is Baudrillard who has done much of the groundwork, at least for Western society. It is true that Baudrillard lacks the anthropologist's processual insights, and suffers from an unsophisticated view of non-Western societies. But this is precisely why Baudrillard and the anthropologists should be talking to each other: each has something to contribute to the other. Appadurai's is the second major attempt to bring anthropologists' attention to the insights of Baudrillard (following Sahlins 1976). One hopes for greater success this time.

Bourdieu, for his part, has convincingly related the complex semiotics of display and consumption in the West to the class structure. His proposed historical interpretation of the interminable quest for "distinction" as the ingenious, creative response of a threatened bourgeoisie to the 19th- and 20th-century democratization of politics, inheritance, and education appears plausible and powerful. His specific analyses of the class tastes of the French bourgeoisie, *petite-bourgeoisie*, and working class (in descending order of convincingness) are provoking, illuminating, and often brilliant, while his critique of Kantian aesthetics is enormously effective and thoroughly "vulgar" in the very best sense of the word. There are undoubtedly problems with Bourdieu's analysis: most seriously, the failure to deal with the distinction between occupational and cultural location (do all taxi-drivers have the same cultural tastes?); and the associated inability to deal with taste differences based on nonoccupational criteria such as ethnicity (does an immigrant Arab taxi-driver really fit into Bourdieu's scheme in the same way as an ethnically "French" one?). Then, too, there is the rather flat notion of "inculcation," all too close to the familiar "socialization" of Durkheim and Parsons. But, warts and all, *Distinction* is surely the most important book on taste to be written for a very long time, and it is striking that so many scholars whose work directly bears on questions of taste and economic demand still, nine years later, refuse to engage with it.

A more serious problem with nearly all the contributions is what can only be called rampant dualism. In spite of Appadurai's attempt to avoid the "us and

them'' dichotomies that plague social theory, nearly all of his contributors fall unprotestingly into the trap. Gell and Geary both speak baldly of ''traditional societies''—without saying what in the world such a label might mean. For Kopytoff, it is a caricatured and stereotyped (especially p. 89) notion of ''small-scale'' versus ''complex''; for Bayly, it is ''literate'' versus ''preliterate'' (we ''literate'' have public discourse, they ''preliterate'' have symbolic exchange); for Spooner, as for Renfrew, it is ''complex'' versus ''simple.'' Tambiah has recently declared:

We must chart more ideologies of exchange than the simple binary division between primitive and modern, status and contract. We have learned two lessons since the days of *Gemeinschaft* versus *Gesellschaft*: Firstly, probably all societies have their versions of ''fetishism'' of objects. Secondly, the manner in which objects and persons are intertwined and evaluated differs according to each society's cosmological design and cultural grid, in which social, divine, animal, and object hierarchies are mutually implicated. [Tambiah 1984:340]

In short, there are more than two possibilities. Yet in the contributions to *The Social Life of Things*, the comparisons are inevitably of the 19th-century sort, as if there were only two kinds of societies in existence. With all the fascinating cases documented in recent work (none of which is reducible to simplicities like ''simple''/'complex'' or ''traditional''/'modern''), surely we can come up with more interesting and imaginative comparisons than that tired old song of ''us versus them.''

Not all of the book's problematic aspects are confined to the contributors. In Appadurai's own introduction, there are minor confusions that are all the more unfortunate for being unnecessary. The first of these is related to Simmel, who is offered as a kind of theoretical grandfather for the kind of approach Appadurai urges. Appadurai begins his essay with the deliberately provocative, and to my mind quite dubious, claim that ''Economic exchange creates value'' (p. 3), and ''exchange is not a by-product of the mutual valuation of objects, but its source'' (p. 4). This proposition, that exchange is the source of value, is taken from Simmel's *Philosophy of Money* (1978), but it is a special case of Simmel's more general view that ''interaction'' is the source of ''society.'' ''Society,'' Simmel wrote (1950:10), ''merely is the name for a number of individuals, connected by interaction. It is because of their interaction that they are a unit—just as a system of bodily masses is a unit whose reciprocal effects wholly determine their mutual behavior.'' This is the sort of chicken-and-egg formulation that leads nowhere. Are we part of society because we interact with others, or do we interact with others because we are part of society? To be sure, there is no society without interaction, but (Wild Boys aside) interaction occurs only in a context where society is always already there. A relation of mutual entailment and dependence is misrepresented as one of logical or even temporal priority. We have the silly image of a world once peopled by unrelated individuals, who then decided to begin to interact, and thus to constitute society. Durkheim's famous refutation of the ''social contract'' comes to mind: the very idea of a contract presupposes society, and cannot be its origin.

But Simmel's premise about exchange being the *source* of value depends upon precisely this implausible view of society. Exchange, for Simmel "is a sociological phenomenon *sui generis*, an original form and function of social life" (1978:100). It is one of the "most primitive forms of human socialization, not in the sense that 'society' already existed and brought about acts of exchange but, on the contrary, that exchange is one of the functions that creates an inner bond between men—a society, in place of a mere collection of individuals" (1978:175). Again, we have the social contract image of a primordial group of asocial individuals entering into society through exchange. The argument for exchange as "source" or "origin" of value rests on an identical argument. "The difficulty of acquisition, the sacrifice offered in exchange, is the unique constitutive element of value, of which scarcity is only the external manifestation, its objectification in the form of quantity" (1978:100). Thus, as Appadurai says, "exchange is not a by-product of the mutual valuation of objects, but its source" (p. 4). But once again, do we imagine people starting out with no conception of the value of things, then exchanging them (even though they have no value), and only in the end, through the miracle of exchange, developing a scheme of values? As in the interminable debates about the relative priority of *langue* and *parole* (as also structure and action, culture and practice, etc.) both sides are always right. It is by now banal to note that while language finds its existence only in concrete speech acts, at the same time all speech depends on and instantiates an already existing language. The same relation exists between exchange and value, and it is equally fruitless here to privilege one term as the "source" or "origin" of the other. The "mutual valuation of objects" of course does not exist in an airy cultural stratosphere, but in the give and take of ordinary economic practice; but at the same time exchange always takes place in an already value-laden world. Value and exchange each entail the other, but neither can be the source of the other.⁷

The strength of Appadurai's approach is the *methodological* focus on exchange as a process, not the dubious theoretical claim of logical primacy. Giving priority to the latter only invites confusion, and distracts from the real virtues of Appadurai's approach.

The problem is perhaps related to the tendency in modern academics to speak profoundly only through the mouths of dead gods. Thus we have heard Lévi-Strauss speak his theory of totemism through the mouth of Radcliffe-Brown; we have read Althusser's "ventriloquist structuralism" as a recovery of Marx; while Deleuze has presented his own philosophical insights as a clarification of Nietzsche. This, of course, is a common strategy of rhetorical presentation, and one risks missing the point by wondering whether any of the above departed divinities would agree with their priests. But in all these cases (whatever else one might say about them), the "recovery of the dead god" strategy was enormously effective, both at the level of narrative dramatics, and at that of academic politics. In Appadurai's case, in my view, the strategy flops at both levels, and the reason it flops, it seems to me, is that it chooses a "god" (Simmel) who delivers neither the intellectual nor the politico-academic goods. To speak against Marx on commodities, one may well need some big name protection. Certainly the German

tradition of historical sociology appears ripe for revival. But Simmel ends up being a peculiarly inappropriate choice.

First of all, Simmel's ideological position is problematic. His polemic opposition to Marx on the question of value is helpful to Appadurai, but his association with neoclassical and even neoconservative positions in economic theory gives Appadurai a political location that fits him badly. Consider the following appraisal by two neoconservative economists, Laidler and Rowe:

Though Simmel is, beyond doubt, a Sociologist and not an Economist in disguise, the approach that he takes to the study of society in the *Philosophy of Money* is one that many economists will find congenial. To begin with, he rejects Marx's version of the labor theory of value in favor of a not always clearly or consistently formulated Marginal Utility approach that obviously derives from Carl Menger (though no such debt is explicitly acknowledged), and, closely related, a central feature of his analysis of society is a conception of man as a rational evaluating agent who carefully matches means to end. . . . All this, with its pre-echoes of Brunner and Meckling (1977) and above all of [Milton] Friedman (1953) is quite enough to make Simmel very much an economist's sociologist. [Laidler and Rowe 1979:2]

The same authors note Simmel's claim that the development of a money economy is associated with a growth in individual liberty, and remark "Clearly Simmel's analysis of the relationship between the development of the money-using market economy and the growth of freedom is in many respects similar to much that is to be found in the writings of modern neo-conservatives" (1979:5). Obviously Appadurai is no neoconservative, and perhaps Simmel was not either (though his enthusiasm for the market-organized society is hard to deny), but the ideological association puts the rhetorical strategy into question.

In a different way, the substance of Simmel's thought often works against Appadurai. Appadurai aims to transcend excessively dualistic approaches, for example, but Simmel propounds an extreme and simple dualism, in which the presence or absence of money virtually determines all. And Simmel's caricature of Western society as going "all grey," losing all its localized, particularized meanings upon the spread of a money economy, flatly contradicts Appadurai's intention to see Western capitalism as a cultural system as well as an economic one. Likewise, Simmel's analysis of the money economy seems flat and depoliticized compared to Appadurai's ambition for analysis of "regimes of value." For Simmel, the "free market" is not a regime, but simply the logical correlate of "money," apolitically conceived as an intellectual or technical innovation (cf. Bottomore and Frisby 1978:28).

Using Simmel as a rhetorical "grandfather" thus works against many of the strengths of Appadurai's approach: the attack on dualism, the sensitivity to the embeddedness of exchange in culture (for Simmel it precedes culture), the analysis of the political determination of "regimes of value." Instead of giving Appadurai's ideas a divine boost, bringing Simmel in only hampers Appadurai's otherwise lucid development of his own ideas.

After Simmel, there is a second, less developed try at a resurrected god, again in the German tradition. This is Sombart, who is described as offering "a

powerful (though subterranean) alternative to both the Marxian and the Weberian views of the origins of occidental capitalism" (p. 37). Sombart is taken as important for his argument that, to put it crudely, transformations in Western customs of sex, love and courtship ("the secularization of love") generated a revolution in tastes for luxury goods, and thus new, specialized markets, which ultimately were instrumental in the development of capitalism (1967). Appadurai himself declines to defend this implausible argument, which, as he notes, has been "legitimately criticized for a variety of empirical deficiencies and methodological idiosyncracies" (p. 37). The importance, he insists, lies "in the generalizability of the *logic* of his argument regarding the cultural basis of demand for at least some kind of commodities, those that [Sombart] calls luxuries" (p. 38; emphasis in original). But one wonders if we really have to go all the way to Sombart for the insight that the demand for luxuries has a cultural basis. After all, if we decline to defend the claim that bourgeois tastes cause capitalism, rather than vice versa, then surely what is left—the observation that luxury tastes are rooted in culture and not practical reason—is hardly a novel insight. Did we really suppose that the demand for frankincense and myrrh, egret feathers or kula shells, could ever be accounted for in any other way? The general point is a commonplace, and for the specific analysis of *how* cultural systems figure in economic demand, classical anthropology as well as modern semiotics would seem to have at least as much to offer as Sombart.

As with Simmel, the reliance on Sombart is important not so much for the specific ideas drawn on as it is as a symbolic or rhetorical grasping for an alternative, "subterranean," tradition to stand against the well-worn idols of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim. But, even more than Simmel, the idea of using Sombart as a symbolic "founding father" is fatally flawed. Authors, like commodities, can be polluted by their prior contexts. Sombart's prior context, of course, was Hitler's Germany, where during the 1930s he proved a vigorous supporter of "National Socialism." Nor can this be dismissed as an anomaly of old age; the modern consensus seems to be that Sombart was an enthusiastic fascist from at least 1933 until his death in 1941. Moreover, as Klausner puts it, he exhibited "a proto-fascist mentality two decades before the collapse of the bourgeois economic order spread such an attitude among the masses of his compatriots" (1982:xcvi–xcvii). Indeed, Sombart's *Luxury and Capitalism* (1967 [1911]), which Appadurai praises so highly, should in fact be read as a companion to his *The Jews and Modern Capitalism* (1982 [1913]), for his analysis of the "culture" of capitalism is only part of the larger analysis of the "spirit" of capitalism, which is nothing other than "the Jewish spirit," embodied in the innate⁸ (1982:322) racial characteristics of the Jews.

Jewish influence extended far beyond the commercial institutions which it called into being. In other words, the Stock Exchange is not merely a piece of machinery in economic life, it is the embodiment of a certain spirit. Indeed, all the newest forms of industrial organization are the products of this spirit, and it is to this that I wish specially to call the reader's attention. . . . The outer structure of the economic life of our day has been built up largely by Jewish hands. But the principles underlying eco-

conomic life—that which may be termed the modern economic spirit, or the economic point of view—may also be traced to a Jewish origin. [1982:115]

The thrust of the book is a bold argument for a causal link between the arrival of alien, “nomad” Jews in northern Europe, and the rise of capitalism there. His critique of capitalism and his anti-Semitism are thus inseparable, as Klausner notes:

The Jewish religion and capitalism contain the same spirit. Both are alien artificial elements in the midst of a natural, created world. Both are a creation of the intellect, a thing of thought and purpose projected into the world of organisms, mechanically and artfully wrought. . . . Before capitalism could develop, the natural man had to be changed out of all recognition and a rationalistically-minded mechanism introduced in his stead. A transvaluation of all economic values resulted in *homo capitalisticus* who is closely related to the *homo Judaeus*. Both belong to the same species, *homines rationalistici artificiales*. [1982:xxiv–xxv]

Subterranean, indeed. Obviously, Appadurai does not wish to set his work in this historical tradition, just as he does not mean to embrace neoconservative economics by his choice of Simmel. And surely no one would suggest that by relying on these authors Appadurai is thereby subscribing to their politics. There is certainly no reason why one should not selectively draw insights where one can, even from authors who hold politically reprehensible views. And Appadurai may well be right that there is something to learn even from this man who regularly closed his letters with the words “Heil Hitler!” (Klausner 1982:cv). Stranger things have happened. But if, as it seems to me, the principal role of Sombart is not as a provider of ideas (Appadurai has plenty of these on his own) but as a provider of historical legitimacy, a “grandfather” guaranteeing the pedigree, and thus the profundity, of Appadurai’s approach, then he is a peculiarly poor choice. Sombart, who “became an accessory to the fascist slaughter of Jews” and “unequivocally participates in the guilt” of the Nazi atrocities (Klausner 1982:xxxvi, cv), is surely not the right symbolic “father” for the “alternative tradition” Appadurai seeks to develop.

Less dramatically, Sombart’s attempts to link culture to economic process through “national character” and “world-view” only serve to link Appadurai, again inappropriately, to the discredited “culture and personality” approach in modernization theory. The attempt by writers like McClelland (1961) and Hosieltz (1960) (who wrote an introduction to an earlier edition of *The Jews and Modern Capitalism*⁹) to account for the poverty of structurally exploited Third World societies by referring to the presumed inadequacies of their “traditional” “values” and “world-views” did more than anything else to put cultural analysis of economic processes into disrepute. If there is one tradition Appadurai should not wish to associate himself with, one would think it would be this one. With all this in mind, Appadurai’s use of Sombart as a recovered Great Thinker, emblematic of an alternative cultural approach to economy, seems rhetorically even less effective than the earlier use of Simmel.

The interest in exploring alternative traditions remains. Where they will be found, however, remains an open question. Certainly, older theorists are a resource. If nothing else, Appadurai has reminded us that in going back to "the classics," we need not confine ourselves to the trinity of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber.

But with that said, it may be that Appadurai was too quick to discard Weber. First of all, Appadurai's treatment of his "protestant ethic" argument (1958) is brief and peripheral (though he refers to Sombart-inspired critique by Mukerji (1983)), and one wishes he had addressed Weber's still-powerful argument more directly. But second, there is no attention to the Weberian conception of "charisma," which Tambiah has recently (1984) shown to be of great importance to understanding the relationship between politics, legitimacy, and magically charged religious objects such as amulets in modern Thailand. Through a far-reaching critique of Weber, Tambiah brings a revamped and revitalized notion of "charisma" together with the insights of Marx and, especially, Mauss on commodities into a powerful and original synthesis. In a certain sense, Tambiah can be seen to be performing a kind of reversal on Appadurai's "methodological fetishism" discussed above; where Appadurai and Kopytoff invite us to imagine things as living, social "beings" with "lives," Tambiah may be read as suggesting an interpretation of the Weberian charismatic leader as a fetishized object, endowed with "charisma" not as a natural or essential attribute (Weber) but as a "charged object," just as gifts, commodities, and amulets are "charged objects" endowed with social power. By identifying the "charge" carried by amulets as "charisma," he is able to apply in a very interesting way Weber's insights on the interrelation of charismatic authority and problems of political legitimacy to the highly political circulation of amulets in Thai society, thereby putting the analysis of the magical power of economic/religious objects on a political plane. At the same time, by giving a Maussian analysis of "charisma" as a thoroughly sociological objectification or sedimentation of a social power into an entity that by its essential nature has none, he invites us to see the charisma of religious leaders and that of religious objects within the same theoretical frame. Tambiah's account gives powerful insight into the interrelations of religious leadership, political legitimacy, and the circulation of sacred objects in modern Thailand. But it also provides a pointer toward a general theory relating the mystical powers of things and men, thus establishing links at a very general level between Mauss and Weber, and between the analysis of the "political life of things" and the fetishisms of political life. The omission of any serious discussion of this suggestive theory of the "charisma" of objects appears unfortunate, certainly, in light of Appadurai's own concerns and those of his contributors.

Conclusion

The insights of the many recent works on culture and economy are not just individual successes, but are related to the state of the intellectual climate. Two factors in particular may be important here. First, and most important, there is a

breakdown of disciplinary and national provincialisms. Historians and anthropologists are finally really talking, not just talking about talking (as the conference from which the articles in *The Social Life of Things* were drawn testifies). Scholars today are routinely crossing both disciplines and traditions; anthropologists are reading English social history, French semiotics and post-structuralism; they are recovering long-neglected German sociology (Simmel, Sombart), and rereading classics like Weber (Tambiah 1984) and Marx (Taussig 1980) in creative ways.

The second factor, harder to locate, is the movement toward experimental writing in anthropology (cf. Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986). In weighing the impact of this movement on recent attempts to relate economic and cultural processes, I am struck by the tension between a widely expressed interest in experimental ethnography on the one hand, and the fact, on the other, that most of what seem to me the best ethnographic monographs in the last couple of years—Abu-Lughod (1986), Bloch (1986), J. Comaroff (1985), Kelly (1985), Lan (1985), Moore (1986), Scott (1985), and Tambiah (1984) are some examples that come to mind—have been fairly traditional in narrative strategy, though not in other respects (a conspicuous exception here is Taussig (1986)). This apparently peaceful coexistence between a highly critical meta-commentary and more established narrative practices suggests an important question about the future of ethnography: Will the new self-consciousness of issues of narrative and representation in ethnography give rise to new, transformed mainstream practices in the writing of ethnography? Or will such critical energy be localized as a kind of subfield (“reflective anthropology”), a running commentary riding on the back of a fundamentally unchanged common practice? In the context of such questions, the continuing commitment of many of our most sophisticated theorists of ethnography to “reflective,” second-order commentary has left some of us wondering if it is not possible for a discipline to spend too much time at the mirror. What is promising from this point of view about *The Social Life of Things* is the exploration, tentative though it is, of an alternative narrative tradition (life history) as a way to begin thinking new things about economic objects and economic exchange. The project, even if only partly realized in the book itself, is an exciting one. It is still too early to say if such an approach will really reveal much that is new and different. But Appadurai’s ground breaking is convincing enough to suggest that exploring new, and possibly more “fetishized,” narrative devices may indeed be a way to open up new, creative, imaginative perspectives not only on commodities, but on other classical anthropological themes as well.

Notes

¹Frank’s main target here was Manning Nash, but his critique applied to an entire school of sociologists and anthropologists, especially those (including Clifford Geertz) associated with the journal *Economic Development and Cultural Change* and the work of W. W. Ros-tow.

²This anticultural prejudice is widespread in southern African studies—largely because the effects of “culturology” have been so pernicious there. See Comaroff and Comaroff’s

general observations (1987) on the relation between Marxist approaches to "consciousness" and anthropological conceptions of "culture," and their specific objection (1987:205) to van Onselen's failure to consider the cultural dimensions of mine workers' resistance.

³There are, of course, important differences in the approaches of the authors cited. Geertz and Sahlins take their rather traditional "symbolic anthropology" conceptions of culture and show how "the culture" thus understood figures in historical processes. Bourdieu and the Comaroffs go further by seeing sociocultural systems as intrinsically contradictory and negotiated, thus bringing power more forcefully into the analysis and providing the sense of internal dynamic that Sahlins's model of Hawaii so conspicuously lacks. None of the authors goes far enough, in my view, toward breaking down the unitary conception of "the culture" as a bounded unit or totalizable "system"—but that is another article!

"Bayly makes the same point in a later chapter, when he remarks (of India): 'Money of itself could not transform relationships—an obvious point, but one that needs stating in the face of much contemporary Indian economic history'" (p. 316).

⁵It is often, even usually, difficult for archaeology to make serious conclusions on questions of significance and value in the absence of either texts or informants. Renfrew's argument about precious metals is intriguing, but it is hard to pass judgment on it when there is really no good evidence for what gold signified, why it was valued, who valued it, under what circumstances, and so on. Appadurai puts it gently when he says that Renfrew's article "has the virtue of going against the grain of what his evidence most comfortably supports" (p. 35).

Problematic, too, is the persistent tendency of archaeologists to draw sweeping social structural conclusions from burial practices. After all, it does not take much imagination to imagine that people might have other reasons for putting gold in a grave than that of marking exceptional political or economic status. Nuer twins are buried not in the ground like everyone else, but (as befits birds) in trees. Will future archaeologists tell us this means the Nuer had kings?

"The one exception is Gell, who makes two passing references to Bourdieu.

⁷"Value" is itself so polysemic a word in English as to make it a troublesome analytic concept. It conflates, at the very least, questions of (1) How much is possession of a thing desired; (2) What is the price or exchange-equivalent of a thing; (3) What is the "worthiness" of a thing (in the sense that one may "value" a thing without wishing to possess it); (4) How much labor does it take to produce or substitute for the object. Each of these meanings is at least in principle independent of the others.

Marx distinguished use-value from exchange-value, and claimed that exchange-value sprang from the socially necessary labor time expended in the production of the commodity. But his concept of "use-value" went unanalyzed (cf. Baudrillard 1975; Sahlins 1976), and his "exchange-value" conflates meanings (2) and (4) above. This conflation works well enough in some contexts (where price and ease of production are related), but falls apart completely where objects of manifestly identical labor input have radically different prices—for example, designer clothes without the labels at one third the price. It is because "exchange-value" means two things at once that Marxist economics is unable to theorize prices. As a cynic might put it, Marxism knows the value of everything and the price of nothing.

⁸Sombart's examination of "The Race Problem" concludes that "the Jewish characteristics are rooted in the blood of the race, and are not in any wise due to educative processes"

(1982:115). Sombart's naïve racist anthropology should not be explained away as a simple artifact of the period, either. One must keep in mind that Sombart was a 20th-century author, contemporary with Boas, not Bismarck. His unenlightened attitudes reflect not simply his era, but his politics.

"It should be noted that Hoselitz (himself a Jewish refugee from fascism) was very critical of Sombart's concept of an essential, unchanging national character, and of his racial ideas, which he termed "sheer nonsense" (1951:xxix). In spite of this, he praised *The Jews and Modern Capitalism* as a pioneering attempt to causally connect a national or cultural "personality type" to processes of economic development (Hoselitz 1951).

References Cited

- Abu-Lughod, L.
1986 *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Althusser, Louis, and Etienne Balibar
1970 *Reading "Capital."* London: New Left Books.
- Appadurai, Arjun, ed.
1986 *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Barlett, P., ed.
1980 *Agricultural Decision Making: Anthropological Contributions to Rural Development*. London: Academic Press.
- Baudrillard, Jean
1968 *Le Systeme des objets*. Paris: Gallimard.
1975 *The Mirror of Production*. St. Louis: Telos Press.
1981 *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. St. Louis: Telos Press.
- Bloch, Maurice
1977 *The Past and the Present in the Present*. *Man* (N.S.) 12:278–292.
1986 *From Blessing to Violence: History and Ideology in the Circumcision Ritual of the Merina of Madagascar*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bohannan, Paul
1959 *The Impact of Money on an African Subsistence Economy*. *Journal of Economic History* 19:491–503.
- Bottomore, T., and D. Frisby
1978 *Introduction to the Translation*. In *The Philosophy of Money*. G. Simmel. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Bourdieu, Pierre
1977 *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
1984 *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Richard Nice, trans. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Clifford, James, and George Marcus, eds.
1986 *Writing Culture: The Poetics and the Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Comaroff, J.
1985 *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Comaroff, J. L.

1981 *Rules and Processes: The Cultural Logic of Dispute in an African Context*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

1982 Dialectical Systems, History, and Anthropology: Units of Study and Questions of Theory. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 8(2):143–172.

Comaroff, J. L., and J. Comaroff

1987 The Madman and the Migrant: Work and Labor in the Historical Consciousness of a South African People. *American Ethnologist* 14(2):191–209.

1988 Goodly Beasts and Beastly Goods: Cattle in Tswana Economy and Society. *In* *Herders, Warriors and Traders*. John G. Galaty and Pierre Bonte, eds. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press (in press).

Douglas, Mary

1963 *The Lele of the Kasai*. London: International African Institute.

Douglas, M., and Baron Isherwood

1981 *The World of Goods*. New York: Basic Books.

Dumont, L.

1980 On Value (Radcliffe-Brown Lecture). *Proceedings of the British Academy* 66:207–41. London: Oxford University Press.

Dupré, G., and P.-P. Rey

1978 Reflections on the Relevance of a Theory of the History of Exchange. *In* *Relations of Production*. D. Seddon, ed. London: Frank Cass.

Ferguson, J.

1985 The Bovine Mystique: Power, Poverty, and Livestock in Rural Lesotho. *Man* (December).

Fielder, R.

1973 The Role of Cattle in the Ila Economy: A Conflict of Views on the Uses of Cattle by the Ila of Namwala. *African Social Research* 15:327–361.

Frank, Andre Gunder

1967 Sociology of Development and Underdevelopment of Sociology. *Catalyst* (Summer).

Geertz, C.

1980 *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth Century Bali*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Greenfield, S., and A. Strickon, eds.

1986 Entrepreneurship and Social Change. *Monographs in Economic Anthropology*, No. 2. Lanham, Md.: University Press of American and Society for Economic Anthropology.

Gregory, C. A.

1982 *Gifts and Commodities*. London: Academic Press.

Hart, Keith

1982 On Commoditization. *In* *From Craft to Industry: The Ethnography of Proto-industrial Cloth Production*. Esther Goody, ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hindess, B., and P. Q. Hirst

1975 *Precapitalist Modes of Production*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Hoselitz, B. F.

1951 Introduction. *In* *The Jews and Modern Capitalism*. W. Sombart. M. Epstein, trans. Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press.

1960 *The Sociological Aspects of Economic Growth*. Chicago: The Free Press.

Hyde, L.

1979 *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*. New York: Random House.

Kelly, R.

1985 *The Nuer Conquest: The Structure and Development of an Expansionist System*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Klausner, S.

1982 Werner Sombart's *The Jews and Modern Capitalism: A Methodological Introduction*. In *The Jews and Modern Capitalism*. W. Sombart. London: Transaction Books.

Laidler, D. E. W., and N. Rowe

1979 Georg Simmel's Philosophy of Money: A Review Article for Economists. Research report, Department of Economics, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario.

Lan, D.

1985 *Guns and Rain: Guerrillas and Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Leach, J. W., and E. Leach, eds.

1983 *The Kula: New Perspectives on Massim Exchange*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Maclachlan, M., ed.

1987 *Household Economies and Their Transformations*. Monographs in Economic Anthropology, No. 3. Lanham, Md.: University Press of American and Society for Economic Anthropology.

Malinowski, Bronislaw

1922 *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. London: Routledge.

Marcus, George, and Michael M. J. Fischer

1986 *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mauss, Marcel

1976 *The Gift*. New York: Norton.

McClelland, D.

1961 *The Achieving Society*. Princeton: D. Van Nostrand.

Meillassoux, C.

1981 *Maidens, Meal, and Money*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Moore, S. F.

1986 *Social Facts and Fabrications: A Century of "Customary Law" on Kilimanjaro*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mukerji, C.

1983 *From Graven Images: Patterns of Modern Materialism*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Murray, Colin

1981 Review of *Black Villagers in an Industrial Society*, P. Mayer, ed. *Social Dynamics* 7:1.

Ortiz, Sutti, ed.

1983 *Economic Anthropology: Topics and Theories*. Monographs in Economic Anthropology. No. 1. Lanham, Md.: University Press of American and Society for Economic Anthropology.

Palmer, R., and N. Parsons, eds.

1977 *The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Plattner, S., ed.

1985 *Markets and Marketing*. Monographs in Economic Anthropology, No. 4. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America and Society for Economic Anthropology.

Sahlins, Marshall

1972 *Stone Age Economics*. New York: Aldine.

1976 *Culture and Practical Reason*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

1981 *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities: Structure in the Early History of the Sandwich Islands Kingdom*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

1985 *Islands of History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Scott, J.

1985 *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Seddon, J.

1978 *Relations of Production: Marxist Approaches to Economic Anthropology*. London: Frank Cass.

Simmel, G.

1950 *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. Translated and edited by Kurt H. Wolff. Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press.

1978[1907] *The Philosophy of Money*. Translated by T. Bottomore and D. Frisby. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Sombart, W.

1967[1911] *Luxury and Capitalism*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

1982[1913] *The Jews and Modern Capitalism*. London: Transaction Books.

Tambiah, S. J.

1984 *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Taussig, M. T.

1980 *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

1986 *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Weber, M.

1958[1904-5] *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. New York: Scribner's.

Wolf, Eric

1982 *Europe and the People without History*. Berkeley: University of California Press.