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Commentary

30 Years Later—Does the Shoe Still Fit?

Richard Wilk

There are some very obvious things to say when re-reading a paper (which I will call “Adidas”) authored so long ago—one I have not read in many years. Yes, it was ahead of its time, and it does hold up pretty well in the light of subsequent scholarship. Since it was published only in a very truncated form in conference proceedings, it has had little impact or influence. It is also very much an artifact of its time, raising issues that were novel then, but that have now become commonplace. Most important, the paper also raises some fundamental questions, which still have not been answered, about why people want particular material goods. Subsequent research has moved on to other issues, leaving the most basic questions unanswered about value, desire, and materialism behind.

On the negative side, the images that seemed shocking and humorous at the time, the juxtaposition of indigenous and modern material culture, are no longer funny, and may even be seen as demeaning or offensive. The concept of a “mode of consumption” still has some resonance—at the time we optimistically thought a taxonomy and typology would help us organize and compare different case studies, a kind of ethnological exercise which has since fallen far out of favor. It is also strange to see just how much of what I have been doing in the last 30 years is presaged in this paper—including my present interest in the relationship between food and gender.

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In these comments, I discuss the things that I still find surprising and significant in the paper, and use it to reflect on the way disciplines work, and the way career pathways intertwine with global changes and the peculiar boundaries of anthropology as a discipline.

Disciplinary context

Reading is just as much a temporally-placed process as writing, so reading Adidas today communicates very different messages and meanings from those we intended in the early 1980, as we were both embarking on our careers. At that time we were dealing with a strong feeling of disconnection from the anthropology we had learned in graduate school. The paper uses the established anthropological vocabulary to describe phenomena and to organize things we had seen in our own fieldwork that could not be described or encompassed by the wisdom of our teachers and advisors.

With hindsight it is much easier to place the paper in a disciplinary context. There were probably many other young anthropologists in the same situation at that time, a pre-paradigmatic state of dissatisfaction that ultimately drove the discipline through what has been called a crisis, a collapse, or a reinvention during the 1980s and 90s. There were other anthropologists working on consumption and consumer culture, but lacking any kind of label for our work we were isolated from one another. Looking back, I can recall that we took the marginality of our work very much as a reflection of our marginality in anthropology. When this paper was rejected by journals it seemed like the discipline was not only ignoring a topic we found important, but rejecting us as well. We both finished graduate school in the first years of the collapse of the job market in academic anthropology, as the rapid expansion of the 1970s entered a time of retrenchment and austerity. Both of us covered walls with pinned-up rejection letters, and again it was hard not to take this personally. Now that we are both very successful academics, it is good to be reminded of that angst, because it helps us remain open to new ideas, to radical rethinking, and challenges to a status quo that we have now helped construct.

Both Eric and I started graduate school at the University of Arizona in 1974, both bringing an East-Coast sensibility and records of student activism and enthusiastic participation in what was then called the counter-culture. I think we both saw anthropology as a radical way of rethinking our own culture, finding alternatives by learning from the examples of others. But what we found in our classes was a very conservative discipline, which had little engagement with the rapidly changing American culture of the time. We were still learning about Nuer kinship terminology, while our country was facing an oil boycott and fighting proxy wars in Asia, Africa, and Central America. The discipline just did not have the tools or lexicon needed to describe a world that was

becoming mass-mediated, where norms and boundaries were crumbling, and *citizens* were becoming *consumers*. In graduate school we heard almost nothing about research methods, ethics, or even the most practical issues of research design and beginning fieldwork.

As graduate students we were rebellious and uncomfortable in a discipline and department that was devoted to its tradition and reputation, intent on training us in esoteric knowledge, codes, categories, and the names of carefully selected intellectual ancestors. We were encouraged to choose from a discrete set of sub-fields with names like “Political Anthropology,” “Kinship and Social Organization,” “Symbolic Anthropology,” and “Cultural Ecology.”

It is no surprise that we failed to place our thoughts about consumption in any of these mainstream traditions, which could have brought our ideas to the notice of senior colleagues. As it happened, we were junior scholars with newly minted Ph.D.s, with no influence or audience. Consumption would only take center stage when endorsed by more senior scholars at high status institutions.¹ It is possible that if we had been trained at a higher status institution, we never would have had the freedom of thought that went into this paper.

This paper is also autobiographical, in that it was the starting point for our divergent careers—Eric in applied anthropology and then consumer research; and my own in teaching archaeology, applied anthropology outside the academy, and then back into anthropology through the back doors of development anthropology and economic anthropology. While we both built successful careers around the issues we defined in this paper, we followed different, though often parallel, paths.

The global context

This paper marks what we can now recognize as an important transitional period in global culture, the passing of the last vestiges of the colonial world where our teachers had done their fieldwork. Our professors and mentors worked in a world where the white scholar was a highly privileged character. In those waning years of colonial power, Europeans and Americans still had strong cultural, political, and economic ties with their colonies. When anthropologists went to the field they could still find people who seemed “primitive” and “untouched”—a state we now recognize as an effect of colonialism itself (e.g. Fabian, and others). We were taught that people like the !Kung Bushmen, or the Yanomamo, were the survivors of a rapidly disappearing era, when economics was subordinated to kinship and cosmology, and people followed timeless

¹ Appadurai and colleagues began this process with the edited *The Social Life of Things....* in 1986.

customs and traditions, rather than self-interest. They lived suspended in an imagined “ethnographic present,” which left them entirely out of the contemporary world (see Fabian on the denial of coevalness), the detritus of survivals doomed to disappear under the steamroller of modernism. A visit to the field was a voyage back in time.

Eric and I did our fieldwork in a far different world, where it was hard to identify discrete cultures, and where our informants themselves were completely familiar with the story of an inevitable clash between local tradition and a Western modernity. This is why, when I told people in Belize that I was an anthropologist, they immediately assumed I was working in the remote southern district with “Indians” or on the coast with exotic “Caribs” (now called Garifuna), like all the other anthropologists. Nobody at the time had thought to work with Latino or Afro-Caribbean people who comprised the majority of the population (except for Zora Neal Hurston, who never published the results of her work). The fact that the southern district was also the poorest, with negligible infrastructure and by far the worst schools and hospitals in the country, was just—in the eyes of the British Governor and District Officers—a consequence of its inhabitants’ primitive nature. They were said to cling to primitive farming—their esoteric languages and superstitions would eventually disappear when modernity arrived.

In my dissertation, I attacked these myths and excuses using the dependency theory I had recently learned in Robert Netting’s seminar. I argued that poverty was not caused by a lack of development, but by 500 years of “peripheral capitalism,” as outsiders took what they wanted and hired Indians to work on plantations during boom times, and then departed during recessions, leaving nothing behind for the people who lived there.

The incongruity of what I had seen in southern Belize did not really affect me until I was back in Tucson trying to write the dissertation. I could not find anything written by anthropologists that explained, or even described, the things I had seen and heard. And my fieldwork experience was totally unlike that of my teachers, or what I had read about in hundreds of ethnographies. Rather than being assisted by the local government, I was mostly ignored or resisted by almost every level of officialdom, in a colony that was trying very hard to show that it no longer needed educated white people to show it how to govern. People did not want me checking on their work and exposing it to public scrutiny.

I expected at least some degree of acceptance by the rural people I intended to study. Instead, the villages I visited were unwilling to talk, suspicious of outsiders, and often openly hostile at the prospect of being observed, photographed, and monitored. They kept asking what kind of help I could offer in exchange for their allowing me to live among them. They already had experiences with foreigners who wanted to study them, who left and were never heard from again. Some suspected that I was

going to portray them as backward and ignorant, abetting the way that they were patronized, derided, and exploited by the Belizean outsiders they had met. As I found out later when delving onto the history of the area, they had been abused and virtually enslaved for centuries, driven into constant migration when their land was stolen (Grandia). Already most of the private land in the district was in the hands of foreigners.

I am sure that anthropologists have always had difficulties dealing with the people they do fieldwork with (see Malinowski's diary, for example), and have dealt with gossip, theft, insults, unpleasant practical jokes, and constant begging for money or possessions. But most drew on the exaggerated respect paid to scholars and teachers, and worked in settings where white foreigners still enjoyed a privileged status. There was always an implicit danger that the law or government stood behind the intrusive stranger.

By the 1970s, though, things had changed dramatically in many parts of the world. Even though Belize was still a British colony, I was usually treated as a potential threat; people worried that I was a missionary, a Mennonite looking for land, or a spy from neighboring Guatemala (then pursuing a land claim against Belize). I had no support from the government because I had no official status, and the nearest British military garrison had no interest in me once their field intelligence officer had determined that I was harmless. The first village I visited where I hoped to do fieldwork had a community meeting where I was to explain myself and ask permission to stay. As a beginner in Q'eqchi' I did not understand what was said, though the argument was loud and vigorous, but in the end the Alcalde (elected village leader) said that they might let me stay if I agreed to pay them an unspecified amount of money, but I would have to come back in a month and ask again.

The only way I was finally able to gain the trust of a community was through the agency of the local Catholic priest, an American who had taken anthropology classes in college. He agreed to vouch for me, as long as I did not tell anyone I was a Jew, went to church every Sunday, but did not take communion.

More to the point, just like Eric, I could not make sense out of the events and practices I saw every day, and unearthed in archives. Kinship theory, Durkheim, and Levi-Strauss offered nothing useful when confronted with a mule-load of Coca Cola passing by the door. The ecological anthropology that inspired my fieldwork was mostly about how "population pressure" drove culture change and innovation. It said nothing about desire for the money to buy a radio, clothes for school, a cold beer, makeup, and measles vaccinations for one's children. In the world I was trained to study, teenagers did not have a deep desire for tennis shoes, village life did not stop for the afternoon soap opera, and people did not grow huge amounts of rice—a food they did not eat—to sell so they could put a down payment on a pickup truck. Cultural materialism

tried to rationalize the desire for jewelry and guns as some devious form of functionalism, an investment for the future.²

The intellectual tools that anthropology offered us for this new world were vague concepts like “assimilation” and acculturation,” which essentially meant, from the white man’s perspective, “becoming more like us.” This made sense from the perspective of early anthropologists like Franz Boas, an immigrant who learned to join the “melting pot”—particularly during WWI when Germans were decidedly unpopular—and many changed their names and cuisine. How exactly acculturation and assimilation worked was never clearly defined, assuming somehow that culture flowed, like a thick viscous liquid, from the dominant larger vessel to the smaller, accounting for the global spread of modern Western culture, and the inevitable disappearance of the indigenous cultures that Boasian anthropology was intended to record. Resistance was futile, as proven by the failure of Native American revitalization movements like the Ghost Dance. The only alternative to being assimilated was a pathetic “deculturated” life at the margins. Even today some anthropologists continue to decry the loss of true culture, and its replacement by an ersatz, commoditized shadow. After all, the passing of the traditional world was the founding charter for the work of anthropology.

In our paper, Eric and I found these concepts quite useless, because they assume exactly what we were trying to explain, and did not even hint at the complexity we saw in our fieldwork. Instead of assimilation, we used images of extreme juxtaposition of the “modern” and “indigenous” to show how consumer culture was being absorbed, adapted, and indeed assimilated, through the continuing creativity agency of diverse peoples. At the time we had no terms like appropriation, creolization, or resistance; we had learned about Levi-Strauss’ concept of bricolage in our classes, but it seemed to be an almost random process, a reprise of Lowie’s classic depiction of culture as “shreds and patches.”

The political movements of the time affected our skepticism about the inevitable triumph of modernity. We had both been draft eligible during the last, losing gasps of the war in Vietnam, and the Iranian revolution had overthrown the modernizing regime of the Shah while we were both in the field. The “new immigrants” to the USA, the ones who were refusing to assimilate and give up their culture, were arriving in the USA at the same time as we returned from the field to write our dissertations. We were learning that the old notions of assimilation and acculturation were hiding a violent political process under a label that made it seem like a natural progression, regrettable but inevitable.

The governments of the countries where we and our friends were working were just as oblivious—the seemingly radical visions of Mao,

² See Gross et. all cited in the paper—a truly remarkable publication.

Fidel, Khadaffi, and Khomeini were just a translation of modernism into a local language. Prosperity and rising “standards of living” were still the end goal, even if achieved through different means. Even the most stern and fastidious leaders had to face a population hungry for consumer goods, to the point that seeking American consumer culture was often seen by many of their citizens as a form of opposition, liberation, and resistance to a fossilized leadership and a failed economy. The USSR could not keep its people from seeking Levi’s and Rock and Roll.

Hindsight

We had no idea writing this paper in 1982 and 1983, that we were at the opening of a decade that would transform anthropology, and bring globalization and consumer culture into the ambit of the discipline. At the end of the decade, consumer culture itself was expanding through a global reach melded with new consumer technologies, the entry of mass media into even remote areas, and a fall in the real prices of many manufactured goods—particularly those made in China. The decade culminated with the opening of the first McDonalds in Moscow in 1990, just as the USSR was crumbling away. This was also the decade which saw the birth of neoliberalism under the Reagan administration, and the dominance of the World Bank and IMF in reshaping global economics.

We were certainly right when we tried to shake anthropology into paying more attention to the movements of the time, and broaden its vision and vocabulary. We also argued that, rather than being forced or coerced into the marketplace, many people were enthusiastically embracing it, finding new sources of pleasure and engagement, and escaping some of the discomforts of poverty. This bias towards victimology, based on ideas of coercion and false consciousness, is still very common, and leads to many strangely disconnected encounters. I am reminded of the hippie migrants to rural Belize in the 70s and 80s seeking authentic rural culture, farms, and closeness with nature—exactly what so many Belizeans were fleeing from, as about half the population migrated to the USA. My favorite image of the time was the slightly leaky jars of locally produced organic peanut butter alone on the shelves of grocery stores, since the government was encouraging local production by banning imports. Belizeans would not touch the local stuff, and depended on a thriving black market in Jif and Skippy—only the Peace Corps volunteers and tourists would buy the local stuff.

There were always anthropologists who understood the tragedies of capitalism, people like Sidney Mintz who was deep in the writing of *Sweetness and Power* (1986) when we wrote this paper. He understood that there was a close connection between the promises of prosperity and abundance, and the other side of consumer capitalism: savaged forests, exploited labor, land seizure, drug wars, pollution, and waste. We had already begun to see that consumer culture could be both liberation and

slavery, that creative creolization had a counterpart in demeaning appropriation. We were entering a twilight zone where we are all willing victims.

As beginning professionals, I think both Eric and I felt marginalized, that our concerns had no place in our chosen profession. We could not see that we were in the early stages of a much larger scale transformation in the discipline and its engagement with the world. But, as with consumer culture, change often happens by addition rather than replacement. There are still many anthropologists who would still reject this paper as “not anthropological,” so perhaps it is still worth reading.

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