CHAPTER 2

The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process

IGOR KOPYTOFF

For the economist, commodities simply are. That is, certain things and rights to things are produced, exist, and can be seen to circulate through the economic system as they are being exchanged for other things, usually in exchange for money. This view, of course, frames the commonsensical definition of a commodity: an item with use value that also has exchange value. I shall, for the moment, accept this definition, which should suffice for raising certain preliminary issues, and I shall expand on it as the argument warrants.

From a cultural perspective, the production of commodities is also a cultural and cognitive process: commodities must be not only produced materially as things, but also culturally marked as being a certain kind of thing. Out of the total range of things available in a society, only some of them are considered appropriate for marking as commodities. Moreover, the same thing may be treated as a commodity at one time and not at another. And finally, the same thing may, at the same time, be seen as a commodity by one person and as something else by another. Such shifts and differences in whether and when a thing is a commodity reveal a moral economy that stands behind the objective economy of visible transactions.

Of persons and things

In contemporary Western thought, we take it more or less for granted that things—physical objects and rights to them—represent the natural universe of commodities. At the opposite pole we place people, who represent the natural universe of individualization and singularity. This conceptual polarity of individualized persons and commoditized things is recent and, culturally speaking, exceptional. People can be and have been commoditized again and again, in innumerable societies throughout history, by way of those widespread institutions known under the blanket term “slavery.” Hence, it may be suggestive to approach the notion of commodity by first looking at it in the context of slavery.

The cultural biography of things

Slavery has often been defined as persons as property or, in some kind of process, in which ma• are at the core of the slave's social status (Vaughan 1977, Kopytoff and Miers 1982). From this perspective slavery is status, but as a process of social as• ion of phases and changes in status, statuses (for example, that of adoption) far removed from slavery.

Slavery begins with capture or sale of his previous social identity and becomes an object and an actual or potential con• ues. The slave is acquired by a person in the host group, within which he is re• being given a new social identity. The effect reindividualized by acquiring (or lowly ones) and a unique configuration. In brief, the process has moved the slave to an exchangeable commodity and toward occupying a particular social and person remain a potential commodity: he or she remain exchange value that may be realized was also true of the “free,” who were defined circumstances. To the extent possessed an exchange value and was not a definite in them was clearly not cultu• things.

What we see in the career of a slave from a given original social setting, followed by increasing singularization (or re• setting, with the possibility of later processes, the successive phases may the slave was unambiguously a common short period between capture or first new social identity; and the slave be more of a singular individual in the group into the host society. This biographic as a process suggests that the commu• usefully be seen in a similar light, shaping biographies.
Slavery has often been defined, in the past, as the treatment of persons as property or, in some kindred definitions, as objects. More recently, there has been a shift away from this all-or-none view toward a processual perspective, in which marginality and ambiguity of status are at the core of the slave’s social identity (see Meillassoux 1975, Vaughan 1977, Kopytoff and Miers 1977, Kopytoff 1982, Patterson 1982). From this perspective slavery is seen not as a fixed and unitary status but as a process of social transformation that involves a succession of phases and changes in status, some of which merge with other statuses (for example, that of adoptee) that we in the West consider far removed from slavery.

Slavery begins with capture or sale, when the individual is stripped of his previous social identity and becomes a non-person, indeed an object and an actual or potential commodity. But the process continues. The slave is acquired by a person or group and is reinserted into the host group, within which he is resocialized and rehumanized by being given a new social identity. The commodity-slave becomes in effect reindividualized by acquiring new statuses (by no means always lowly ones) and a unique configuration of personal relationships. In brief, the process has moved the slave away from the simple status of exchangeable commodity and toward that of a singular individual occupying a particular social and personal niche. But the slave usually remains a potential commodity: he or she continues to have a potential exchange value that may be realized by resale. In many societies, this was also true of the “free,” who were subject to sale under certain defined circumstances. To the extent that in such societies all persons possessed an exchange value and were commoditizable, commoditization in them was clearly not culturally confined to the world of things.

What we see in the career of a slave is a process of initial withdrawal from a given original social setting, his or her commoditization, followed by increasing singularization (that is, de-commoditization) in the new setting, with the possibility of later recommoditization. As in most processes, the successive phases merge one into another. Effectively, the slave was unambiguously a commodity only during the relatively short period between capture or first sale and the acquisition of the new social identity; and the slave becomes less of a commodity and more of a singular individual in the process of gradual incorporation into the host society. This biographical consideration of enslavement as a process suggests that the commoditization of other things may usefully be seen in a similar light, namely, as part of the cultural shaping of biographies.
The biographical approach

Biographies have been approached in various ways in anthropology (for a survey, see Langness 1965). One may present an actual biography, or one may construct a typical biographical model from randomly assembled biographical data, as one does in the standard Life Cycle chapter in a general ethnography. A more theoretically aware biographical model is rather more demanding. It is based on a reasonable number of actual life histories. It presents the range of biographical possibilities that the society in question offers and examines the manner in which these possibilities are realized in the life stories of various categories of people. And it examines idealized biographies that are considered to be desirable models in the society and the way real-life departures from the models are perceived. As Margaret Mead remarked, one way to understand a culture is to see what sort of biography it regards as embodying a successful social career. Clearly, what is seen as a well-lived life in an African society is different in outline from what would be pronounced as a well-lived life along the Ganges, or in Britain, or among the Eskimos.

It seems to me that we can profitably ask the same range and kinds of cultural questions to arrive at biographies of things. Early in this century, in an article entitled "The genealogical method of anthropological inquiry" (1910), W. H. R. Rivers offered what has since become a standard tool in ethnographic fieldwork. The thrust of the article - the aspect for which it is now mainly remembered - is to show how kinship terminology and relationships may be superimposed on a genealogical diagram and crease through the social-structure in time that the diagram mirrors. But Rivers also suggested something else: that, for example, when the anthropologist is in search of inheritance rules, he may compare the ideal statement of the rules with the actual movement of a particular object, such as a plow of land, through the genealogical diagram, noting concretely how it passes from hand to hand. What Rivers proposed was a kind of biography of things in terms of ownership. But a biography may concentrate on innumerable other matters and events.

In doing the biography of a thing, one would ask questions similar to those one asks about people: What, sociologically, are the biographical possibilities inherent in its "status" and in the period and culture, and how are these possibilities realized? Where does the thing come from and who made it? What has been its career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such things? What are the recognized "ages" or periods in the thing's "life," and what are the cultural markers for them? How does the thing's use change with its age, and what happens to it when it reaches the end of its usefulness?

For example, among the Suku of Zaire, among whom I worked, the life expectancy of a hut is about ten years. The typical biography of a hut begins with its housing a couple, or, in a polygynous household, a wife with her children. As the hut ages, it is successively turned into a guest house or a house for a widow, a teenagers' hangout, kitchen, and, finally, goat or chicken house - until at last the termites win and the structure collapses. The physical state of the hut at each given age corresponds to a particular use. For a hut to be out of phase in its use makes a Suku uncomfortable, and it conveys a message. Thus, to house a visitor in a hut that should be a kitchen says something about the visitor's status, and if there is no visitors hut available in a compound, it says something about the compound-head's character - he must be lazy, inhospitable, or poor. We have similar biographical expectations of things. To us, a biography of a painting by Renoir that ends up in an incinerator is as tragic, in its way, as the biography of a person who ends up murdered. That is obvious. But there are other events in the biography of objects that convey more subtle meanings. What of a Renoir ending up in a private and inaccessible collection? Of one being neglected in a museum basement? How should we feel about yet another Renoir leaving France for the United States? Or for Nigeria? The cultural responses to such biographical details reveal a tangled mass of aesthetic, historical, and even political judgments, and of convictions and values that shape our attitudes to objects labeled "art."

Biographies of things can make salient what might otherwise remain obscure. For example, in situations of culture contact, they can show what anthropologists have so often stressed: that what is significant about the adoption of alien objects - as of alien ideas - is not the fact that they are adopted, but the way they are culturally redefined and put to use. The biography of a car in Africa would reveal a wealth of cultural data: the way it was acquired, how and from whom the money was assembled to pay for it, the relationship of the seller to the buyer, the uses to which the car is regularly put, the identity of its most frequent passengers and of those who borrow it, the frequency of borrowing, the garages to which it is taken and the owner's relation to the mechanics, the movement of the car from hand to hand over the years, and in the end, when the car collapses, the final disposition of its remains. All of these details would reveal an entirely different biography from that of a middle-class American, or Navajo, or French peasant car.

One brings to every biography some prior conception of what is to
be its focus. We accept that every person has many biographies – psychological, professional, political, familial, economic and so forth – each of which selects some aspects of the life history and discards others. Biographies of things cannot but be similarly partial. Obviously, the sheer physical biography of a car is quite different from its technical biography, known in the trade as its repair record. The car can also furnish an economic biography – its initial worth, its sale and resale price, the rate of decline in its value, its response to the recession, the patterning over several years of its maintenance costs. The car also offers several possible social biographies: one biography may concentrate on its place in the owner-family’s economy, another may relate the history of its ownership to the society’s class structure, and a third may focus on its role in the sociology of the family’s kin relations, such as loosening family ties in America or strengthening them in Africa.

But all such biographies – economic, technical, social – may or may not be culturally informed. What would make a biography cultural is not what it deals with, but how and from what perspective. A culturally informed economic biography of an object would look at it as a culturally constructed entity, endowed with culturally specific meanings, and classified and reclassified into culturally constituted categories. It is from this point of view that I should like to propose a framework for looking at commodities – or rather, speaking processually, at commoditization. But first, what is a commodity?

The singular and the common

I assume commodities to be a universal cultural phenomenon. ‘Their existence was concomitant of the existence of transactions that involve the exchange of things (objects and services), exchange being a universal feature of human social life and, according to some theorists, at the very core of it (see, for example, Homans 1961; Ekel 1974; and Kuper 1970). Where societies differ is in the ways commoditization as a special expression of exchange is structured and related to the social system, in the factors that encourage or constrain it, in the long-term tendencies for it to expand or stabilize, and in the cultural and ideological premises that sustain its workings. What, then, makes a thing a commodity? A commodity is a thing that has use value and that can be exchanged in a discrete transaction for a counterpart; the very fact of exchange indicating that the counterpart has, in the immediate context, an equivalent value. The counterpart is by the same token also a commodity at the time of exchange. The exchange can be direct or it can be achieved indirectly by way of money, one of whose functions is as a means of exchange. Hence, anything that can be bought for money is at that point a commodity, whatever the fate that is reserved for it after the transaction has been made (it may, therefor[e], be decommoditized). Hence, in the West, as a matter of cultural shorthand, we usually take saleability to be the unmistakable indicator of commodity status, while non-saleability imports to a thing a special aura of apartness from the mundane and the common. In fact, of course, saleability for money is not a necessary feature of commodity status, given the existence of commodity exchange in non-monetary economies.

I refer to the transaction involving commodities as discrete in order to stress that the primary and immediate purpose of the transaction is to obtain the counterpart value (and that, for the economist, is also its economic function). The purpose of the transaction is not, for example, to open the way for some other kind of transaction, as in the case of gifts given to initiate marriage negotiations or to secure patronage; each of these cases is a partial transaction that should be considered in the context of the entire transaction. While exchanges of things usually involve commodities, a notable exception is the exchanges that mark relations of reciprocity, as these have been classically defined in anthropology. Here, gifts are given in order to evoke an obligation to give back a gift, which in turn will evoke a similar obligation – a never-ending chain of gifts and obligations. The gifts themselves may be things that are normally used as commodities (food, feasts, luxury goods, services), but each transaction is not discrete and none, in principle, is terminal.

To be saleable for money or to be exchangeable for a wide array of other things is to have something in common with a large number of exchangeable things that, taken together, partake of a single universe of comparable values. To use an appropriately loaded even if archaic term, to be saleable or widely exchangeable is to be ‘common’ – the opposite of being uncommon, incomparable, unique, singular, and therefore not exchangeable for anything else. The perfect commodity would be one that is exchangeable with anything and everything else, as the perfectly commoditized world would be one in which everything is exchangeable or for sale. By the same token, the perfectly decommoditized world would be one in which everything is singular, unique, and unexchangeable...

The two situations are ideal polar types, and no real economic
system could conform to either. In no system is everything so singular as to preclude even the hint of exchange. And in no system, except in some extravagant Marxist image of an utterly commoditized capitalism, is everything a commodity and exchangeable for everything else within a unitary sphere of exchange. Such a construction of the world—in the first case as totally heterogeneous in terms of valuation and, in the second, as totally homogeneous—would be humanly and culturally impossible. But they are two extremes between which every real economy occupies its own peculiar place.

We can accept, with most philosophers, linguists, and psychologists, that the human mind has an inherent tendency to impose order upon the chaos of its environment by classifying its contents, and without this classification knowledge of the world and adjustment to it would not be possible. Culture serves the mind by imposing, a collectively shared cognitive order upon the world which, objectively, is totally heterogeneous and presents an endless array of singular things. Culture achieves order by carving out, through discrimination and classification, distinct areas of homogeneity within the overall heterogeneity. Yet, if the homogenizing process is carried too far and the perceived world begins to approach too closely the other pole—in the case of goods, that of utter commoditization—culture's function of cognitive discrimination is undermined. Both individuals and cultural collectivities must navigate somewhere between the polar extremes by classifying things into categories that are simultaneously neither too many nor too embracing. In brief, what we usually refer to as "structure" lies between the heterogeneity of too much splitting and the homogeneity of too much lumping.

In the realm of exchange values, this means that the natural world of singular things must be arranged into several manageable value classes—that is, different things must be selected and made cognitively similar when put together within each category and dissimilar when put into different categories. This is the basis for a well-known economic phenomenon—that of several spheres of exchange values, which operate more or less independently of one another. The phenomenon is found in every society, though Westerners are most apt to perceive it in commercialized and monetarized economies. The nature and structure of the spheres of exchange varies among societies because, as we can expect with Burkheim and Mautz (1963, original publication 1905), the cultural systems of classification reflect the structure and cultural resources of the societies in question. And beyond that, as we may expect with Dumont (1972), there is some tendency to impose a hierarchy upon the categories.

Spheres of exchange

A concrete example of an economy with clearly distinct spheres of exchange will help the discussion. In what is a classic analysis of a "multi-centric economy," Bohrman (1909) describes three such spheres of exchange as they operated before the colonial period among the Tiv of central Nigeria: (a) the sphere of subsistence items—yams, corns, melons, chickens, goats, onions, teeth, tools, and the like, (b) the sphere of prestige items—mainly cattle, slaves, ritual offices, special cloth, medicines, and brass rods; and (c) the sphere of rights-in-people, which included rights in wives, wards, and offspring.

The three spheres represent three separate universes of exchange values, that is, three commodity spheres. Items within each were exchangeable, and each was ruled by its own kind of morality. Moreover, there was a rigid hierarchy among the spheres: the subsistence sphere, with its unregulated market morality, was the lowest, and the rights-in-people sphere, related to the world of kin and kin-group relations, was the highest. In the Tiv case (in contrast to that of many other similar systems), it was possible to move—even if in a rather cumbersome manner—between the spheres. Brass rods provided the link. In exceptional circumstances, people relinquished, unwillingly, rods for subsistence items, and, at the other end, one could also initiate with rods some transactions in the rights-in-people sphere. The Tiv considered it satisfying and morally appropriate to convert "upward," from subsistence to prestige and from prestige to rights-in-people, whereas converting "downward" was shameful and done only under extreme duress.

The problem of value and value equivalence has always been a philosophical conundrum in economics. It involves the mysterious process by which things that are patentely unlike are somehow made to be alike with respect to value, making yams, for example, somehow comparable to and exchangeable with a mortar or a pot. In the terms we have been using here, this involves taking the patently singular and inserting it into a uniform category of value with other patently singular things. For all the difficulties that the labor theory of value presents, it at least suggests that while yams and pots can conceivably be compared by the labor required to produce them (even while allowing for the different investment in training that the labor represents in each case), no such common standard is available in comparing yams to ritual offices or pots to wives and offspring. Hence, the immense difficulty, indeed impossibility, of lumping all such disparate items into a single commodity sphere. This difficulty provides
The cultural biography of things

The drive to commoditization

From this perspective, a multi-centric economy such as that of the Tiv is not an exotically complicated rendering of a straightforward exchange system. It is rather the opposite – a feat of simplification of what is naturally an unmanageable mass of singular items. But why only three spheres and not, say, a dozen? The commoditization seems to be pushed to the limits permitted by the Tiv exchange technology, which lacked a common denominator of value more convenient than brass rods. One perceives in this a drive inherent in every exchange system toward optimum commoditization – the drive to extend the fundamentally seductive ideals of exchange to as many items as the existing exchange technology will comfortably allow. Hence the universal acceptance of money whenever it has been introduced into monetized societies and its inexorable conquest of the internal economy of these societies, regardless of initial rejection and of individual unhappiness about it – an unhappiness well illustrated by the modern Tiv. Hence also the uniform results of the introduction of money in a wide range of otherwise different societies: more extensive commoditization and the merger of the separate spheres of exchange. It is as if the internal logic of exchange itself pre-adapts all economies to seize upon the new opportunities that wide commoditization so obviously brings with it.

One may interpret Brandel’s recent work (1985) in this light – as showing how the development in early modern Europe of a range of new institutions shaped what might be called a new exchange technology and how this, in turn, led to the explosion of commoditization that was at the root of capitalism. The extensive commoditization we associate with capitalism is thus not a feature of capitalism per se, but of the exchange technology that, historically, was associated with it and that we dramatically wider limits to maximum feasible commoditization. Modern state-ordered, noncapitalist economies certainly show no signs of being systematically exempt from this tendency, even though they may try to control it by political means. Indeed, given their endemic shortages and ubiquitous black markets, commoditization in them expands into novel areas, in which the consumer, in order to purchase goods and services, must first purchase access to the transaction.

Commoditization, then, is best looked upon as a process of becoming rather than as an all-or-none state of being. Its expansion takes place in two ways: (a) with respect to each thing, by making it exchangeable for more and more other things, and (b) with respect to the system as a whole, by making more and more different things more widely exchangeable.

Singulization: cultural and individual

The counterdrive to this potential onrush of commoditization is culture. In the sense that commoditization homogenizes value, while the essence of culture is differentiation, excessive commoditization is anti-cultural – as indeed many have perceived it or sensed it to be. Emile Durkheim (1915; original publication 1912) saw it, societies need to set apart a certain portion of their environment, marking it as “sacred.” Singulization is one means to this end. Culture ensures that some things remain unambiguously singular, it resists the commoditization of others, and it sometimes resingularizes what has been commoditized.

In every society, there are things that are publicly precluded from being commoditized. Some of the prohibitions are cultural and upheld collectively. In state societies, many of these prohibitions are the handwork of the state, with the usual intertwining between what serves the society at large, what serves the state, and what serves the specific groups in control. This applies to much of what one thinks of as the symbolic inventory of a society: public lands, monuments, state art collections, the paraphernalia of political power, royal residences, chieftainship, ritual objects, and so on. Power often asserts itself symbolically precisely by insisting on its right to singularize an object, or a set or class of objects. African chief’s, and kings reserve to themselves the right to certain animals and animal products, such as the skins and teeth of spotted wild cats. The kings of Siam monopolized albino elephants. And British monarchs have kept their right to dead whales washed ashore. There may be some practical aside to these royal prerogatives, which ecological and cultural materialists will no doubt diligently discover. What these monopolies clearly do, however, is to expand the visible reach of sacred power by projecting it onto additional sacralized objects.

Such singulization is sometimes extended to things that are non-
mally commodities—i.e., commodities are singularized by being pulled out of their usual commodity sphere. Thus, in the ritual paraphernalia of the British monarchy, we find a Star of India that, contrary to what would normally have happened, was prevented from becoming a commodity and eventually singularized into a "crown jewel." Similarly, the ritual paraphernalia of the kings of the Suku of Zaire included standard trade items from the past, such as eighteenth-century European ceramic drinking mugs brought by the Portuguese; carried by the Suku to their present area, and secularized in the process. Another way to singularize objects is through restricted commoditization, in which some things are confined to a very narrow sphere of exchange. The Tiv system illustrates the principle. The few items in the prestige sphere (slaves, cattle, ritual offices, a special cloth, and brass rods), though commodities by virtue of being exchangeable one for the other, were less commoditized than the far more numerous items of the subsistence sphere, ranging widely from yams to pots. A sphere consisting of but two kinds of items—as in the classic model of the Trobriand kula exchange sphere of arm bands and bracelets— represents an even greater degree of singularization. The Tiv exchange sphere of rights-in-person achieved a singular integrity by a different though related principle, that of the homogeneity of its components. The two upper Tiv spheres, it may be noted, were more singular, more special, and hence more sacred than the lowest sphere, containing the many objects of mundane subsistence. Thus the moral hierarchy of the Tiv exchange spheres corresponded to a gradient of singularity.

Singularization can be achieved by singularity; singularity does not guarantee secularization. Being a non-commodity does not by itself assure high regard, and many singular things (that is, non-exchangeable things) may be worth very little. Among the Aghem of western Cameroon, with exchange spheres not unlike those of the Tiv, one could detect yet another and lower sphere, one below that of marketable subsistence items. Once, when trying to find out the pecuniary exchange value of various items, I asked about the barter value of manioc. The response was indignant scoffing at the very idea that such a lowly thing as manioc should have been exchangeable for anything: "One eats it, that's all. Or one gives it away if one wants to. Women may help cook one another with it and other such food. But one doesn't trade it." Let the outburst be misunderstood and sentimentalized, let me stress that the indignation was not about a suggested commercial corruption of a symbolically supercharged staple, on the order, say, of bread among Eastern European peasants. The

The cultural biography of things

Aghem are and were a commercially minded people, with no disdain for trade. The scoffing was rather like what an Aghem would get from a Westerner whom he asked about the exchange value of a much he offers to light a stranger's cigarette. Manioc was part of a class of singular things of so little worth as to have no publicly recognized exchange value. To be a non-commodity is to be "priceless" in the full possible sense of the term, ranging from the uniquely valuable to the uniquely worthless.

In addition to things being classified as more or less singular, there is also what might be called terminal commoditization, in which further exchange is precluded by fat. In many societies, medicines are so treated: the medicine man makes and sells a medicine that is utterly singular since it is efficacious only for the intended patient. Terminal commoditization also marked the sale of indulgences in the Roman Catholic Church of half a millennium ago: the sinner could buy them but not resell them. In modern Western medicine, such terminal commoditization is achieved legally: it rests on the prohibition against reselling a prescribed drug and against selling any medicine without proper licensing. There are other examples of legal attempts to restrict commoditization: paperbound books published in Great Britain often carry a bewildering note forbidding the buyer to resell it in any but the original covers; and in America, an equally mystifying label is attached to mattresses and cushions, forbidding their resale.

Other factors besides legal or cultural laws may create terminal commodities. Most consumer goods are, after all, destined to be terminal—or so, at least, it is hoped by the manufacturer. The expectation is easily enough fulfilled with such things as canned peas, though even here external circumstances can intrude: in times of severe shortages, all sorts of normally consumable goods begin to serve as a store of wealth and, instead of being consumed, circulate endlessly in the market. With durable goods, a second-hand market normally develops, and the idea that it does may be fostered by the sellers. There is an area of our economy in which the selling strategy rests on stressing that the commoditization of goods bought for consumption need not be terminal; thus, the promise that oriental carpets, though bought for use, are a "good investment," or that certain expensive can have a "high resale value."

The existence of terminal commoditization raises a point that is central to the analysis of slavery, where the fact that a person has been bought does not in itself sell us anything about the uses to which the person may then be put (Kopytoff 1982:223ff). Some purchased people ended up in the mines, on plantations, or on galleys; others
became Grand Viziers or Imperial Roman Admirals. In the same way, the fact that an object is bought or exchanged says nothing about its subsequent status and whether it will remain a commodity or not. But unless formally de commoditized, commoditized things remain potential commodities—they continue to have an exchange value, even if they have been effectively withdrawn from their exchange sphere and deactivated, so to speak, as commodities. This deactivation leaves them open not only to the various kinds of singulatization I have mentioned so far, but also to individual, as opposed to collective, redefinitions.

In the Bamenda area of western Cameroon, people prized large decorated calabashes that came over the border from Nigeria. The conduit for them was the Aka, a pastoral group whose women used them extensively and normally were willing to sell them. I had acquired several in this way. Yet one day I failed completely to convince an Aka woman to sell me a standard calabash to which she had added some minor decorations of her own. Her friends told her that she was being silly, arguing that for the money she could get a far better and prettier calabash. But she would not budge, no more than those that ever-newsworthy man in our society—part hero, part fool—who refuses to sell his house for a million dollars and forces the skyscraper to be built around it. And there is also the opposite phenomenon: the ideological commoditizer, advocating, say, the sale of public lands as a way of balancing the budget, or, as I have seen in Africa, calling for the sale of some piece of chiefly paraphernalia in order to provide a tin roof for the schoolhouse.

What these mundane examples show is that, in any society, the individual is often caught between the cultural structures of commoditization and his own personal attempts to bring a value order to the universe of things. Some of this clash between culture and individual is inevitable, at least at the cognitive level. The world of things lends itself to an endless number of classifications, rooted in natural features and cultural and idiosyncratic perceptions. The individual mind can play with them all, constructing innumerable classes, different universes of common value, and changing spheres of exchange. Culture, by contrast, cannot be so exuberant, least so to the economy, where its classifications must provide unambiguous guidance to pragmatic and coordinated action. But if the clash is inevitable, the social structures within which it takes place vary, giving it different intensities.

In a society like the precolonial Tiv or Aghem, the culture and the economy were in relative harmony; the economy followed the cultural classifications, and these catered successfully to the individual cognitive need for discrimination. By contrast, in a commercialized, monetized, and highly commoditized society, the value-homogenizing drive of the exchange system has an enormous momentum, producing results that both culture and individual cognition often oppose, but in inconsistent and even contradictory ways.

Complex societies

I said above that the exchange spheres are, to us, more visible in non-commercial, non-monitized societies like the Tiv than in commercial, monetized ones like our own. Partially this is a matter of noticing the exotic and taking the familiar for granted. But it is more than that. Certainly, in our society, some discrete spheres of exchange exist and are nearly unanimously accepted and approved. Thus, we are adamant about keeping separate the spheres of material objects and persons (a matter I shall elaborate on later). We also exchange dinners and keep that sphere discrete. We blandly accept the existence of an exchange sphere of political or academic favors, but would be as shocked at the idea of monetizing this sphere as the Tiv were at first at the idea of monetizing their marriage transactions. Like the Tiv, who carefully moved from the sphere of subsistence to that of prestigious titles by using the mediation of brass rods, so do our financiers cautiously navigate between exchange spheres in such matters as gift-giving to universities. A straight money donation in general funds, if it is of any size, is suspect because it looks too much like purchasing influence, and such donations, when made, are normally anonymous or posthumous. A money donation in instalments would be particularly suspect, implying the donor’s power to withhold the next check. But converting a large donation into a building moves the money into a nearly de commoditized sphere, freezes the gift into visible irrevocability, and shields the donor from suspicion of continuous undue influence on the university. Putting the donor’s name on the building thus honors not simply the donor but also the university, which declares in doing so that it is free of any lingering obligations to the specific donor. The values underlying such transactions are, on the whole, societywide, or at least are held by the groups who wield cultural hegemony in our society and define much of what we are apt to call our public culture. “Everyone” is against commoditizing what has been public for as singular and made sacred: parks, national landmarks, the Lincoln Memorial, George Washington’s false teeth at Mount Vernon.

Other singulatizing values are held by more restricted groups. We have explicit exchange spheres recognized only by segments of society,
such as professional and occupational groups, which subscribe to a common cultural code and a specially focused morality. Such groups constitute the networks of mechanical solidarity that tie together the parts of the organic structure of the wider society, the latter being ruled by most of its activities by commodity principles. Let me lead into my discussion by looking at an activity in one such group: the collection of African art among American Africanists.

In the simpler days of thirty or more years ago, African art picked up randomly in the course of fieldwork was placed entirely in a closed sphere with a sacred cast. The objects collected were greatly singularized; they were held to have for their collector a personal sentimental value, or a purely aesthetic one, or a scientific one, the last supported by the collector’s supposed knowledge of the object’s cultural context. It was not considered entirely proper to acquire an art object from African market traders or, worse, from European traders in Africa, or worse still, from dealers in Europe or America. Such an object, acquired at second hand, had little scientific value, and it was vaguely contaminated by having circulated in a monetized commodity sphere—a contamination that was not entirely removed by keeping it thereafter in the same category as the objects “legitimately” acquired in the field. The exchange sphere to which African art objects belonged was extremely homogeneous in content. It was permissible to exchange them for other African (or other “primitive art”) objects. One could also give them as gifts. Students returning from the field usually brought one or two as gifts to their supervisors, thus inserting them into another circumscribed sphere, that of academic patron-client relationships. The morality governing the sphere did not allow for them to be sold, except at cost to a museum. Nevertheless, as among the Tiv, for whom it was permissible though shameful to sell a brass rod for food, so here extreme need justified “liquidation” on the commercial art market, but it had to be done with appropriate discretion and it was certainly seen as converting “downward.”

As Douglas and Isherwood (1980) show, the public culture in complex societies does provide broadly discriminating value markings of goods and services. That is, the public culture offers discriminating classifications here no less than it does in small-scale societies. But these must constantly compete with classifications by individuals and by small networks, whose members also belong to other networks expounding yet other value systems. The discriminating criteria that each individual or network can bring to the task of classification are extremely varied. Not only is every individual’s or network’s version of exchange spheres idiosyncratic and different from those of others, but it also shifts contextually and biographically as the originators’ perspectives, affiliations and interests shift. The result is a debate not only between people and groups, but within each person as well. To be sure, the seeds for such debates also exist in societies like the peculio-101, but there the culture and the economy joined hands to provide an approved model of classification. In a commercialized, heterogeneous, and liberal society, the public culture defers most of the time to pluralism and relativism and provides no firm guidance, while the only lesson the economy can teach is that of the freedom and dynamism that ever-wider commoditization clearly brings with it.

The results can be partly glimpsed in what has happened to African art collecting over the past quarter century. The rules have been loosened in some of the same ways that monetization, according to Bohannan, loosened the rules among the Tiv—namely, by merging the previously distinct exchange spheres. There are, for example, no strictures now on buying an African art object at an auction in America, let alone from an African trader in Africa. Monetization in itself has become less contaminating as it has become more seductive, for no one can remain unaware that these objects are what every newspaper and magazine calls “collectibles.” But the most noticeable change has been, quite simply, to make the rules less clear and more open to individual interpretations and to idiosyncratic systems of values. Where before the professional culture decreed that the value of these objects was sentimental when it was not scientific, now sentimental value is conferred as a matter of individual choice, perhaps more sincerely but also less widely. At the same time, puritans have arisen, thundering about the immorality of any kind of circulation of these objects and calling for their complete singulization and sacralization within the closed boundaries of the society that produced them. In brief, the rules of the professional culture have become less tight and the rules of property have become more idiosyncratic. The widespread rejection, since the 1960s, of the very idea of cultural restrains has, here as elsewhere, opened the door to a great variety of definitions by individuals and small groups.

What I am arguing here is that the crucial difference between complex and small-scale societies does not lie simply in the extensive commoditization in the former. There have been, we must not forget, small-scale societies in which commoditization (helped by indigenous money) was very extensive, such as the Yurok of northern California (Kroeber 1925) or the Kapaun of western New Guinea (Poes 1965). The peculiarity of complex societies is that their publicly recognized commoditization operates side by side with innumerable
The cultural biography of things of the new "collectibles" of the beer can variety are similarly caught in this paradox: as one makes them more singular and worthy of being collected, one makes them valuable; and if they are valuable, they acquire a price and become a commodity and their singularity is to that extent undermined. This interpenetration within the same object of commodity principles and singularity principles is played upon by firms specializing in manufacturing what might be called "future collectibles," such as leather-bound editions of Emerson, bas-relief renditions of Norman Rockwell's paintings on sculptured plates, or silver medals commemorating unmemorable events. The appeal to greed in their advertising is complex: buy this plate now while it is still a commodity, because later it will become a singular "collectible" whose very singularity will make it into a higher-priced commodity. I can think of no analogy to such possibilities among the Tiv exchange spheres.

Singularity of objects by groups within the society poses a special problem. Because it is done by groups, it bears the stamp of collective approval, channels the individual drive for singularity, and takes on the weight of cultural sacredness. Thus, a community of a few city blocks can suddenly be mobilized by a common outrage at the proposed removal and sale of scrap metal of the rusting Victorian fountain in the neighborhood. Such public conflicts are often more than mere matters of style. Behind the extraordinary vehemence assertions of aesthetic values may stand conflicts of culture, class, and ethnic identity, and the struggle over the power of what one might label the "public institutions of singularity." In liberal societies, these institutions are higher nongovernmental agencies or only quasi-governmental ones—historical commissions, panels deciding on public monuments, neighborhood organizations concerned with "beautification," and so on; who controls them and how says much about who controls the society's presentation of itself to itself.

A few years ago, there was a public controversy in Philadelphia about a proposal to install a statue of the cinematic boxing hero Rocky on the Parkway in front of the Art Museum—an institution that happens simultaneously to serve as a public monument to the local social establishment and to satisfy the artistic needs of the professional intelligentsia. The statue came directly from the movie set of "Rocky," the success story of an Italian-American boxing champion from South Philadelphia. To the "ethnic" working-class sector of the Philadelphia population, the statue was a singular object of ethnic, class, and regional pride—in brief, a worthy public monument. To the groups whose social identities were vested in the museum, it was a piece of
The cultural biography of things...
The cultural biography of things

The concept of commodity renders, in most modern Western liberal societies, the adoption of a baby illegal if it involves monetary compensation to the natural parent something that most societies have seen as satisfying the obvious demands of equity. In the modern West, however, adoption through compensation is viewed as child-selling and therefore akin to slavery because of the implicit commoditization of the child, regardless of how loving the adoptive parents may be. Thus, the law specifically punishes such commodification in Britain, in most Canadian provinces, and in almost all states in the United States.

The hallmark of commoditization is exchange. But exchange opens the way to trafficking, and trafficking in human attributes carries with it a special approbrium. For example, we do not - we cannot at this point - object to the commoditization and sale of labor (by its nature, a terminal commodity). But we do object to the trafficking in labor that a complete commoditization of labor would imply. We have abolished indentured labor, and the courts have struck down the commoditization of the contracts of athletes and actors. The cultural argument against a team's or a film studio's "selling" a ballplayer or an actor to another employer is cast in the idiom of slavery. The transfer of a contract forces the worker to work for someone whom he had not chosen himself, hence forces him to work involuntarily. We see here a significant cultural detail in the Western commoditization of labor - the commoditization must be controlled by the laborer himself. By contrast, contractual obligations to pay, as in promissory notes or installment buying, and rent contracts are legally negotiable; they can be and are regularly sold and resold. By the same cultural logic, the idea of nearly confiscatory taxation is far less shocking to us than even a modest amount of coerced labor. As with trafficking in labor, we find the direct commoditization of sexual services (also a terminal commodity) by the immediate supplier less objectionable than the trafficking in them by pimps. And so we find the inimical possibility of terminal sales of human ova somewhat more morally acceptable than the idea of a commercial traffic in them.

The question remains, however: how secure are the Western cultural ramparts that defend the human sphere against commoditization, especially in a secularized society that finds it increasingly difficult to appeal to any transcendent sanctions for cultural discrimination and classifications? I have suggested that economies are inherently responsive to the pressures of commoditization and that they tend to commoditize as widely as the exchange technology allows. What then, we may ask, are the effects, on the divide between the human and cultural and monetarized society. But the West is also a unique cultural entity, with a historically conditioned set of predispositions to see the world in certain ways.

One of these predispositions I have referred to before: that of conceptually separating people from things, and of seeing people as the natural preserve for individualization (that is, singularityisation) and things as the natural preserve for commoditization. The separation, though intellectually rooted in classical antiquity and Christianity, becomes culturally salient with the onset of European modernity. Its most glaring denial lay, of course, in the practice of slavery. Yet its cultural significance can be gauged precisely by the fact that slavery did present an intellectual and moral problem in the West (see Davis 1966, 1975), but almost nowhere else. Whatever the complex reasons, the conceptual distinction between the universe of people and the universe of objects had become culturally axiomatic in the West by the mid-twentieth century. It is therefore not surprising that the cultural clash over abortion should be more fierce in the twentieth century than it ever was in the nineteenth, and that this clash should be phrased by both sides in terms of the precise location of the line that divides persons from things and the point at which "personhood" begins. For both anti-abortion and pro-abortion forces agree on one point: that "things" but not "persons" can be aborted. Hence the occasional court battles when pro-abortionists seek court injunctions against anti-abortionists' attempts to ritualize the disposal of aborted fetuses, since ritual disposal presumes personhood. In terms of underlying conceptions, both sides here stand together in striking cultural contrast to the Japanese. The latter have few misgivings about abortion but acknowledge the personhood of aborted children, giving them the special status of misogi, lost souls, and commemorating them by special shrines (see Miura 1984).

There is, therefore, a perennial moral concern in Western thought, whatever the ideological position of the thinker, about the commoditization of human attributes such as labor, intellect, or creativity, or, more recently, human organs, female reproductive capacity, and ova. The moral load in these matters comes partly from the long debates on slavery and the victory of abolition. Hence the tendency to resort to slavery as the readiest metaphor when commoditization threatens to invade the human sphere, slavery being the extreme case in which the totality of a person is seen as having been commoditized. The moral indictments of capitalism by both Marx and Pope Leo XIII derived their force from the notion that human labor should not be a mere commodity - hence the rhetorical power of such terms as "wage
The cultural biography of things

sperm, which has been commodified for some time without a great deal of discussion. Is this because the ovum is seen as the basic core of the future human being? Or because women are expected to feel maternal toward the ovum as potential babies and should not sell them, whereas men are not expected to have paternal feelings about their sperm? (Many societies describe the generation of life as the union of two elements; Westerners, however, choose the scientific metaphor in which one speaks of the fertilization of the ovum by the sperm, so that the ovum becomes a homunculus being activated into life.) The inevitable development into routine procedures of the transplantation of ova and the freezing of ova for storage will represent an expansion of the possibilities of the exchange technology for human attributes, including the possibility of trafficking in them. The question is whether this will increase the permeability of the boundary between the world of things and that of people, or whether the boundary will be displaced by recourse to new definitions but itself remain as rigid as before.

Conclusion: kinds of biographies

Although the singular and the commodity are opposites, no thing ever quite reaches the ultimate commodity end of the continuum between them. There are no perfect commodities. On the other hand, the exchange function of every economy appears to have a built-in force that drives the exchange system toward the greatest degree of commoditization that the exchange technology permits. The counterforces are culture and the individual, with their drive to discriminate, classify, compare, and sacrifice. This means a two-front battle for culture as for the individual— one against commoditization as a homogenization of exchange values, the other against the utter singularization of things as they are in nature.

In small-scale, uncommercialized societies, the drive to commoditization was usually contained by the inadequacies of the technology of exchange, notably, the absence of a well-developed monetary system. This left room for a cultural categorization of the exchange value of things, usually in the form of closed exchange spheres, and it satisfied individual cognitive needs for classification. The collective cultural classification thus constrained the innate exuberance to which purely idiosyncratic and private classifications are prone.

In large-scale, commercialized, and monetized societies, the existence of a sophisticated exchange technology fully opens the economy to swapping by commoditization. In all contemporary industrial societies, whatever their ideologies, commoditization and monetization
The cultural biography of things

groups in mediating between the different exchange systems is manifest. By cushioning the direct impact of world trade, this mediation spares the societies involved from seeing their particular ideas of commodification challenged, sheltering their baroque exchange systems in the comfort of their cultural parochialism. This, perhaps, would explain the striking viability, historically, of parochial economic systems in the midst of worldwide networks of trade. And it might also explain what has long been a puzzle in economic anthropology – namely, the limited spread, until the eighteenth century, of “all-purpose” currency, a spread far more limited than diffusion theory of common sense materialism would have suggested. Having said all this, let me nevertheless return to the stark contrast between the “complex, commercialized” and the “small-scale” societies, the implications of which I have pursued throughout this paper.

One can draw an analogy between the way societies construct individuals and the way they construct things. In small-scale societies, a person’s social identities are relatively stable and changes in them are normally conditioned more by cultural rules than by biographical discontinuities. There is no ordinary person’s biography seems from what happens within the given status. It has its origins in the conflict between the egoistic self and the unambiguously demand of given social identities, or in conflicts arising from interactions between actors with defined roles within a clearly structured social system. The existence in the biographies of a desire for a social role, for example, the individual who does not fit the given niches is either socialized into a special identity – which is sacred or dangerous, and often both – or is simply cast out. Things in these small-scale societies are similarly modeled. Their status in the clearly structured system of exchange values and exchange spheres is unambiguous. An eventful biography of a thing is for the most part one of events within the given sphere. Anything that does not fit the categories is clearly anomalous and is taken out of normal circulation, to be either sacralized or isolated or cast out. What one glimpses through the biographies of things is, above all, the social system and the collective understandings on which it rests.

In complex societies, by contrast, a person’s social identities are not only numerous but often conflicting, and there is no clear hierarchy of loyalties that makes one identity dominant over the others. Here, the drama of personal biographies has become more and more the drama of identities and their clashes, of the impossibility of choosing between levels of the absence of signals from the culture and the society, at large, to help in the choice. The drama, in brief, lies in the
uncertainty of identity—a theme increasingly dominant in modern Western literature where it is pushing aside dramas of social structure (even in the eminently structural cases dealt with in writings on women and "minorities"). The biographization of things in complex societies reveals a similar pattern. In the homogenized world of commodities, an eventual biographization of a thing becomes the story of the various singularizations of it, of classifications and reclassifications in uncertain worlds of categories whose importancemight shift with every minor change in context. As with persons, the drama here lies in the uncertainties of valuation and of identity.

All this suggests an emendation to the profound Durkheimian notion that a society orders the world of things on the pattern of the structure that prevails in the social world of its people. What also happens, I would suggest, is that societies constrain both these worlds simultaneously and in the same way, constructing objects as they construct people.

Notes

I owe thanks to Arjun Appadurai and Barbara Klamon Kopstorf for discussions that led to the writing of this paper, and to Jean Adelman, Sandra Barnes, Muriel Bell, Gyan Prakash, Colin Renfrew, and Barbara Herrnstein Smith for comments and suggestions that helped shape its final version.

1. I wish to thank Barbara Herrnstein Smith for drawing my attention to the importance of such institutions in the processes I am describing.

2. I am grateful to Muriel Bell for this suggestion.

References


Davis, David Brion. 1966. The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture. Ithaca, N.Y.


