

Anthropology of Marketing and Consumption

Retrospect and Prospect

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We have asked the reader to wander the outback of interdisciplinary inquiry from behavioral archaeology to projective fantasy as a way of discovering some of the issues of contemporary relevance to theorists and practitioners interested in biobasic and marketized aspects of consumer behavior. In the course of this walkabout we have exposed the reader to artifacts and organizations, physical and social architecture, sacred and profane economies, superstructural and infrastructural public writing, cultural ideology and intrapsychic dynamics, fantasies and realities, prescriptions and proscriptions, and managers and consumers both foreign and domestic. I return the reader to our point of embarkation in the following pages by way of an interpretive summary of our enterprise.

Issues and Directions

Although anthropological attention to contemporary marketing and consumer behavior has been discontinuous and selective, we have shown that it is currently being trained on these areas with greater precision and fervor. In this sourcebook we have explored four broad topics in particular: the world of goods and services, the role of motivation in marketing and consumer behavior, the experience of emplacement in institutional perspective, and the managerial relevance of anthropology to marketing. This exploration opens further the door to those experiential consumption worlds (Holt, in

press) or market worlds (Sherry, 1993) of interest to researchers probing the phenomenology and cultural psychology of marketing and consumption. A synopsis of these four topics and a concluding assessment of the trajectory their anthropological investigation might assume are in order.

Let me begin by espousing the antireductionist, nonexclusivist position adopted by Orlove and Rutz (1989) without championing any of the traditions of economic anthropology—individual, political, social or cultural—that they view as stakeholders in the anthropology of consumption and without adopting their classificatory system of authors in those traditions. This position is the principle upon which our sourcebook is founded. Believing, like Fine and Leopold (1993), that one general theory of consumption would require “too much *ceteris paribus* to swallow” (p. 4), even if fielded by a holistic discipline such as anthropology, and, having celebrated diversity of perspective, I will impose an expedient framework upon the sociocultural inquiry of marketing and consumption to bring our discussion to fruition.

The World of Goods and Services

Perhaps this section should be retitled “Worlds of Materiality and Material” in recognition of the projectible, shape-shifting nature of the objects, experiences, and behavior exchanges that we have shown comprise marketing and consumption. “Goods” and “services” represent at worst a metaphoric denial of the dysfunctional or dark side of transactions and at best a masking of their neutrality as vessels of human agency. We might speak as productively of “bads” and “disservices”—as well as of “longages of demand” in lieu of “shortages of supply” (Hardin, 1985)—in our analysis of the role played by marketing and consumption in everyday life. At any rate, we have worked toward a cultural understanding of the corporeal and noncorporeal components of consumer and marketplace behaviors that can be recounted here.

It has become an anthropological commonplace since the Douglas and Isherwood (1979) assessment that products and services are a nonverbal medium of communication that make our cultural categories stable and visible. Products and services and our cognitive faculties are mutually constituting. We have illustrated some of the many ways that consumption pervades experience and is used strategically to recruit individuals to an array of projects. For Douglas and Isherwood (1979), consumption is ultimately about sociality and power. As we have emphasized, consumption serves societal and individual interests.

The sociality of consumption has been most vigorously pursued by anthropologists, yet its psychological significance has been relatively neglected by

them. We have indicated how this emphasis is beginning to shift. That products and services are not exclusive to so-called modern industrial societies, that the creation of value is a politically governed procedure, that consumption is subject to social control and political redefinition, and that the politics of value is often a politics of knowledge are each amply depicted in Appadurai (1986a) and amplified by his colleagues (Appadurai, 1986b). We have elaborated on these themes throughout this volume. The role of products and services in the cultivation of a self, perhaps most compellingly explored in detail originally by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981), has led to the postulation of two types of materialism: terminal and instrumental. The moral, pragmatic valuation of materialism in terms of purpose rather than simple existence has generated an object-relations subdiscipline among consumer researchers of anthropological bent. Differentiating between materiality as a relational condition and materialism as philosophy or strategy (perhaps even a syndrome) of acquisitiveness is the current project of this subdiscipline.

Motivation in Marketing and Consumer Behavior

If we accept the existence of a world of goods, how can we account for its animation? What type of cultural interpretation can we make of the motives of marketers and consumers? Although each of the contributors to this volume has offered some insight on this score, an effort at closure is warranted.

McCracken (1988) opened the anthropological window onto motivations by faulting conventional semiotic accounts of products and services for failing to deal with the transience of meaning in cultural systems. He tracked this mobility of meaning from its origins in the culturally constituted world, then through its investment in products and services, and on to its ultimate unpacking by individual consumers. Given that meanings are constantly in transit, McCracken became concerned to examine the occasions and investments of meaning transfer as a way of understanding the trajectory of those meanings. He has explored institutions such as advertising, fashion, design, and product development as well as personal rituals such as possession, exchange, grooming, and divestment in pursuit of the processual, constituting essences of consumption phenomena. This exploration has spawned something of a hermeneutic quest for vessels of consumption, especially among ethnographers eager to interpret the multileveled complexity of marketplace behavior depicted in this volume.

By demonstrating that the cultural logic of modernity is characterized by a tension between rationality and passion and that the “dynamism” of

Western culture stems from the "strain between dream and reality, pleasure and ability," Campbell (1987, p. 227) has moved our discussion of consumer behavior from an ideological platform of mere risk aversion and utility calculation to a more progressive emphasis on risk seeking and hedonism. This dialectic between asceticism and sentimentality, discipline and desire (Agnew, 1993, p. 26), has driven the emergence and efflorescence of a consumer culture whose complications and sequelae we have examined in this book. Modern autonomous imaginative hedonism has given rise to and has been substantiated by contemporary consumption.

In Campbell's (1987) view, the "essential activity" of consumer behavior is "not the actual selection, purchase or use of products, but the imaginative pleasure-seeking to which the product image lends itself" (p. 89). We have seen that the function of advertising in particular (Leiss, Kline, & Jhally, 1986) and marketing in general (Gardner & Levy, 1955) is to create this image. Our current ethnographic fascination with the production of consumption stems in no small measure from the interaction of this romantic impulse with the commercial libido we invoked throughout this volume. The practical resuscitation of branding will depend for its success on a deeper understanding of this impulse.

Most recently, Falk (1994) has sought to revise the work of McCracken and Campbell in his interpretation of the ways in which desire interacts with object-relations. Falk perceives both an introjective and a distinctive logic to be guiding contemporary consumption. Exercise of the former logic results in an inclusive, individually constructed self. Exercise of the latter logic results in an exclusive, socially constructed self. The interplay between the incorporating activity of the individual self and the distinguishing activity of the social self animates the pursuit of completion, around which the system of consumption revolves. The individual's life project is driven by a desire that, paradoxically, is at once objectless and constituted through objects, referring back to an undifferentiated state of being preceding ontogenic separation. Thus, ineluctably, elaboration of a cultural poetics of desire returns us to biology.

Tracking transient meaning across domains of consumer experience beyond the merely economic—marketing semiosis broadly construed (Larsen, Mick, & Alsted, 1991; Umiker-Sebeok, 1987)—has become a preoccupation among some consumer researchers during the past decade. This preoccupation is in large part a response to the postmodern climate in which our research regimes are unfolding (Firat, Sherry, & Venkatesh, 1993; Hirschman & Holbrook, 1992; Sherry, 1991). We have shown how ethnographers have concentrated on contextuality to make sense of things. Parallel investigation

by researchers employing an existential-phenomenological approach emerging from psychology (Mick & Buhl, 1992; Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989, 1990) has focused on the lived experience of consumers. We have seen something of a merging of anthropologists' semiological inquiry into cultural process with psychologists' semiotic inquiry into individual process in recent naturalistic (Belk, 1991) and humanistic (Hirschman, 1989) treatments of marketplace behavior; experiments with hybrid forms such as telethnography (Sherry, 1994a) reflect this trend as well. I expect this merger to intensify as research teams become more facile in combining ethnographic techniques, depth interviewing, and projective tasking.

In their exploration of consumers' and marketers' motivations, postmodern researchers have adopted a critical posture (Sherry, 1991). Their criticism has been both disciplinary and cultural. By broadening their inquiry beyond information processing, they are exposing dimensions of actors' experience in a manner that dampens the reflexively judgmental enthusiasm of an earlier generation of macro thinkers and promotes an enlightened, thoughtful criticism of the cultural conditions of slippage in marketing, consumer, and public policy sectors.

The Experience of Emplacement

We are witnessing the emergence of a marketing and consumption-based research tradition that can be characterized as the phenomenology of emplacement (Sack, 1992; Sherry, 1994b). On one level, this tradition is concerned with behavior on the ground and specifically addresses issues arising directly from institutions both formal and informal. On another more abstract level, this tradition is concerned with the kaleidoscopic individual "worlds" inhabited by stakeholders in the marketing transaction. The former aspect deals with the impact of the built environment on marketplace behavior; the latter deals with the individual elaboration of that environment as a projectible field for personal fantasy. Each aspect contributes to the experiential state we identify as "being-in-the-marketplace." Together they take us into the heart of the "embeddedness" issue we have broached in this book.

The sites of emplacement studies have begun to proliferate. Formal organizations such as marketing firms and advertising agencies are being investigated. Marketplaces themselves, from swap meets to upscale specialty boutiques, are becoming increasingly prominent field sites. The marketing of places (Kotler, Haider, & Rein, 1993) promises to become a growth industry of the future and will require a phenomenology of place to sustain it. Informal

organizations, such as individual households and families (Heisley & Levy, 1991; Willis, 1991), are being studied for the light they can shed on the production of consumption. Experiential "worlds," both tacit and manifest, created by consumers in interaction with marketers (Holt, in press; Sherry, 1993) are proving to be more interestingly configured than our conventional dispassionate conceit of "the Market" (Carrier, 1994; Dilley, 1992) would suggest. As the ethos of retail theatre diffuses across all elements of the marketing mix, we will require more sensitive methods to apprehend our engagement with it.

"Place" may eventually become the predominant element of the marketing mix. It profoundly shapes the nature and reception of the other variables. Indeed, in a post-instant-gratification era where the interlude between a wish and its fulfillment becomes vanishingly small, one of marketers' most pressing concerns is to reach "the person who doesn't know that he or she wants to shop at that moment in time" ("Shopping," 1994, p. 27). Our understanding of place as a phenomenological address—whether utopia or dystopia—is in its infancy. We have attempted to speed up its maturation a bit in this book.

Relevance of Anthropology to Marketing Management

Anthropology provides a powerful challenge to the ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions of conventional marketing and consumer research (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988; Sherry, 1987). It provides a worldview, methodology, and values system that not only complement traditional approaches but also threaten to supplant aspects of positivist paradigms currently incapable of apprehending the empirical and theoretical richness of marketplace behavior. In terms of praxis, the discipline is well suited for managers' nascently anthropological theories-in-use and is supremely compatible with either the management-by-wandering-around or management-by-interfunctional-team philosophies currently esteemed. As a management tool or research orientation, it gets us about as close to customers as is presently possible. We have taken the reader "up close and personal" throughout the volume.

For over a decade, as an educator, consultant, and trainer, I have demonstrated to managers the utility of an anthropological approach to the marketplace. It has been my experience that practicing managers have often been more receptive to a marketplace anthropology than have many of my academic research colleagues. Other contributors to this volume have had similar experiences. As practitioners cater to emerging and evolving segments everywhere around the globe, an anthropological lens will become

indispensable to their strategic and tactical vision. Anthropology is a practical discipline, anchoring the blue-sky thinking it encourages firmly to the local ground that it inhabits.

Conclusion

Recall our positioning of this volume as a sourcebook. The limitations of our treatment are apparent. The volume is not a textbook on marketplace behavior. The vigilant reader will observe that pricing alone among the marketing mix variables has been treated obliquely in this volume. Although such short shrift is unintentional, anthropological attention to pricing (e.g., Alexander, 1992; Lave, 1988) has been fleeting in comparison to other marketing elements, although the use of quasi-ethnographic techniques to understand pricing dynamics in retail settings (Dickson & Sawyer, 1990) may portend change. Nor is this volume a consumer behavior textbook. It is encouraging to note the increasing frequency with which anthropological perspectives are appearing in traditional consumer research vehicles (Sherry & Sternthal, 1991; Solomon, 1994; Wallendorf & Anderson, 1987; Wilkie, 1990), and we await the appearance of a textbook on the anthropology of consumption.

Neither is this volume a textbook on economic anthropology. Horticulturalists (Johnson, 1989) and peasants (Cancian, 1989; Hodges, 1988; Roseberry, 1989), central places and itineracy (Plattner, 1989), and formalist-substantivist-Marxist-local metaphorist debates (Sherry, 1989) have been elided in our discussion, although the exploration by marketers of preference formation in non-Western settings (Arnould, 1989) and of the overall relationship of marketing to development (Dholakia & Sherry, 1987) suggests that these issues may grow more relevant to managerial practice. As subsistence sectors of advanced and peripheral economies are integrated into the global system, the very existence of capitalism is threatened (Nash, 1994) in a way that may dwarf the collapse of command economies of the former Soviet bloc; this imminent threat lends greater urgency to the rigorous empirical search for marketing universals (Dawar & Parker, 1994). Contrary to gung ho conventional wisdom (Levitt, 1984), it may not ultimately be in anyone's best interest for marketers to push local preference patterns to their absolute limits. We must heed Dilley's (1992) admonition that "the market" cannot be disembedded from the culturally specific bodies of knowledge that generate, model, and deploy it in discourse (p. 14).

Studies emerging from the fields of anthropology, economics, history, literary criticism, and sociology (Sherry, 1991) make it increasingly apparent

that, in Agnew's (1993) delightful phrase, "the productionist, supply-side and hegemonic interpretation of consumer culture has been shaken, if not overthrown, leaving one dimensional man marooned on a small and ever shrinking island of history" (p. 23). Perhaps, as the historiography of consumption matures and as the ethnography of marketing accelerates, we will understand how consumer behavior precludes and preempts possible futures, how it becomes a comprehensive *mentalité*, how it encourages us to oscillate between the existential conditions of *Homo edens* and *Homo gulosus* (Brewer & Porter, 1993), and how, if apprehended in situ though extended experiential participation of researchers (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994), its credible interpretation can reform managerial practice. Only rigorous empirical research will help us decide whether a unified field theory (as opposed to less ambitious middle-range theories) of marketing and consumption, of the universal generalizability currently prized as the grail of academic pursuit, or the profoundly relativistic, situational systems of provisioning view of marketplace behavior (Fine & Leopold, 1993) best suits our interpretive needs.



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*To our informants, those
consultants, collaborators, and friends
in the field*

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An Anthropological Sourcebook

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Editor



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