SAN 2

ANTHROPOLOGY OF CONSUMPTION

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*******************Starred readings are required******************

Introduction, and questions to be considered

In popular terminology we ‘consume’ almost everything, from bacon rolls to television, from weather reports to adventure experiences. There are frontiers of consumption all around us, most obviously in education, where both students and teachers are now encouraged to think of ourselves as in the relationship of consumer and provider of a good, within a global market made up of university-experience providers. The anthropology of consumption, therefore, is not without its politics, and this must be taken into account when we use the language of consumption.

‘Consumption’ as an explanatory device was bequeathed to the discipline by political economy, economics, and anthropological theory, but thinking in terms of ‘consumer’ and ‘provider’ is also enthusiastically supported by powerful profit-interests. So how should we treat the ‘consumer society’ anthropologically? How should we understand consumers and their desires, as liberating? Deluded? Empowering? Marginalising? Could consumption be a (or the) key to understanding our collective experiences? An opportunity to become relevant? What about those people who lie at the peripheries and the frontiers of the global market, those who were once called ‘tribal’, are they also consumers? What then should we make of situations where British people ‘consume’ media of distant people performing ‘tribalism’ in exchange for consumer goods? Could the common language of consumption even/ever offer a radical level playing field for anthropolical inquiry?

Is a can of coke really the same product consumed in Thetford and Trinidad, Portugal and Papua New Guinea? Ethnographically the answer must surely be no, but is their divergence best understood through the idiom of the consumer as common denominator. As anthropologists should we work with or reject a language that is tied to how powerful interests want you to think about yourself? On what basis should such a judgement be made anyway? What is the baggage that comes with “consumption,” a word that was once shorthand for a terminal disease and which implies above all oral annihilation? What are the politics and the cultural circumstances under which the ‘anthropology of consumption’ flourishes? Who consumes what the subdiscipline produces? What are their motivations? These lectures examine consumption as a concept and its use in anthropology, critically evaluating one of our most successful subdisciplines.

Lecture 1: Consumption and its place in Political Economy and Economic Anthropology.

What is consumption? What divides consumption, exchange and production, and what is the history of this division in anthropology? What does the anthropology of consumption look at?
Core reading:


Background reading:


Friedman, Jonathan, ed. 1994. Consumption and Identity. Amsterdam: OPA.


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**Lecture 2: Consumption and the eating metaphor**

This lecture concentrates on consumption as a food metaphor applied to other objects, and anthropological attempts to grasp the consumption (as opposed to the simple eating) of food and drink. It involves examples from across the world, and is itself an example of what the anthropology of consumption typically explores.

Core reading:


Related reading:


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**Lecture 4: Money and Consumption**

In this lecture we consider those domains where consumption blurs into production or exchange, and on the way discourses of consumption rely on money to bring things into the same realm where they can be compared and consumed. Money is a medium which can be consumed but (usually) not destroyed. We look in particular at societies whose first experience with state-issued currency is relatively recent, and how this makes all forms of ‘consumption’ slippery.
Core reading:

*Stallybrass, Peter, 1998. 'Marx’s coat', in Patricia Spyer (ed), *Border fetishisms: Material objects in unstable spaces*, pp183-207


Supplementary reading:


Lecture 4: Critiques of Consumption

This final lecture is concerned with critiques of consumption theory, both within anthropology and from other disciplines, and asks whether anthropology has been less critical of the consumption paradigm than it should. This goes back to real world examples of consumption-led societies championing consumption or anti-consumption as a means of protest, e.g. not buying an iphone, eating locally, saving the high street, the slow food movement etc., while other peoples have become uneasy consumers. Can the anthropology of consumption incorporate its critiques?

Core Reading:

Supplementary reading:


Those interested may wish to look at how ‘anti-consumption’ is treated in the business and marketing academic literature.