

Cultures of commodity branding: archaeological and anthropological perspectives

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Conference announcement and call for papers

David Wengrow and Andy Bevan, Archaeology, UCL

Commodity branding has come to occupy a central but paradoxical place in understandings of modernity and globalization, and is widely equated with an advanced phase in the development of capitalist societies. Mass consumption of branded goods—and of the images of personal transformation they project—has been linked to the disappearance of older forms of identity based on kinship, class and caste. Branded products inspire visions of progress but also networks of resistance, both arising from the view that brands are a recent and unprecedented phenomenon in human history, spreading from a core area in the post-industrial West to influence a wider economic and cultural periphery.

On May 10th and 11th, 2008 the Institute of Archaeology at University College London will be hosting an international conference that seeks to investigate and challenge these assumptions by approaching the production and consumption of branded goods on a comparative scale, across a wide variety of historical and cultural settings. In particular we seek to explore the contribution of archaeological and anthropological perspectives, thereby broadening the scope of current debate on the role of commodity branding in contemporary social life and in the long-term transformation of human societies.

What follows is a list of key themes that we hope to address. We are also open to contributions from colleagues in other fields such as history, art history, cultural studies, marketing, advertising and other areas of the social sciences:

Archaeology: How do different strategies of product identification (e.g. standardisation of form and packaging; application of labels, seals, and innovative surface designs) develop within contrasting frameworks of economic activity, from household exchange to sacred hierarchies, and from village communities to empires? How do they relate to economies of scale and patterns of cross-cultural trade? How far do ancient forms of quality control, authenticity and intellectual property resemble those of today's global economy? In what ways were they different?

Anthropology: How far does the availability of branded goods in contemporary societies really transform pre-existing hierarchies of value? To what extent are the material and cognitive strategies invested in their production translatable across cultural contexts and styles of consumption? What kind of comparisons can be drawn in terms of the web of agencies (real or imagined) through which homogeneous goods must be seen to pass in order to be consumed—be they the bodies of the ancestors, the gods, heads of state, secular business gurus, media celebrities, or consumer citizens?

If you feel that you have something to contribute, please send an abstract of around 500 words to d.wengrow@ucl.ac.uk and/or a.bevan@ucl.ac.uk by September 1st, 2007. Places are

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unfortunately limited: we will aim to finalise the programme by no later than the end of September 2007.