

Communities and Commodities: Anthropological Perspectives on the Material Bases of Social Groups

Date : March 18, 2014

CALL FOR PAPERS: American Anthropological Association annual meeting, Washington, DC, December 3-7, 2014

While commodity consumption and commodification, especially when tied to globalization, were once primarily defined as superficial pursuits in modern societies linked with the homogenization or “loss” of culture, we now understand that people use commodities, even mass-produced goods, in highly varied and culturally-meaningful ways. Commodities can and do reflect a community’s status, ethnicity, identity, and even morality. The creation, acquisition, and exchange of commodities can be processes of socialization that reinforce some identities and social ties while downplaying or masking others, and this can occur at many scales and toward many purposes. The existence and use of varied commodities by people in ancient and modern communities in ways that create or manifest material patterns (e.g. specialized crafts, organized labor, slavery, the body as a sexualized commodity), reinforces the need and potential of research in all of the subfields of anthropology on this subject.

We welcome papers from across the sub-disciplines of anthropology that explore how communities, past and present, are produced through the practices of making, moving, controlling, and consuming commodities. From Marx’s ‘relations of production’ to Appadurai’s ‘social life of things,’ scholars of society and culture have investigated the links among social organization, cultural practices and identities, and the economy. Building on these ideas, we welcome papers that apply a wide range of theoretical stances. We are especially interested in how a focus on the material dimension of this topic provokes questions about how best to identify, investigate, and understand multi-scalar communities from the perspectives of material remains, social practices, historical patterns, political economies, language and communication, and physical bodies.

If commodities are one anchor for this session, the idea of the community is the other. We define communities in an open-ended way – drawing especially on John Watanebe’s definition of the community as the union of ‘people, place, and premise’ – to investigate the ways in which economic practices are social practices. Defined broadly, communities of study may be imagined (in Benedict Anderson’s sense) and/or ‘real,’ and they may be based in spatial proximity, biology, production, consumption, or other practices.

Questions addressed by this session may include: How do workshops, factories, and unions become sites of social production and group identity? How do changes in global commodity flows

challenge existing communities or bring new communities into being, and how do existing communities create links to new commodities? How do commonalities and conflicts over consumption practices galvanize some communities and dissolve others? How do more hidden points in commodity chains – from storage and transportation, to sale and stealing – become the basis for social groups to form and operate? How can communities become commodities in and of themselves (such as tourist destinations)? Linking all of these questions are material patterns that reflect and reinforce communities.

We especially encourage submissions that explore how material goods and the places where they are made, stored, transported, sold, and consumed become anchors for social relations. However, this is not an effort to fetishize the commodity, but rather to better investigate the many ways in which products of economic demand are producers of social groups. Our focus on the material qualities of commodities is deliberate, as it provides a link to various anthropological approaches to study communities past and present.

If you are interested in participating, please contact both John Millhauser (millhauser@ncsu.edu) and Dru McGill (dremcgil@indiana.edu) with an idea of your topic. The deadline for submitting abstracts to the AAA is April 15 (both for sessions and individual papers). Once we have gauged the level of interest and range of topics, we will contact potential participants to let them know if their paper fits. Participants should be prepared to provide a rough draft of an abstract to us by April 8th so we can organize the session (or sessions, depending on the response) and provide instructions for submitting abstracts to the AAA. Details are also available on the AAA website: <http://www.aaanet.org/meetings/Call-for-Papers.cfm>

We also plan to submit this session for sponsorship by the Society for Economic Anthropology: <http://econanthro.org/meetings/sea-at-the-aaas/>

Please don't hesitate to get in touch with us if you have any questions whatsoever,

John & Dru

millhauser@ncsu.edu & dremcgil@indiana.edu