

CHAPTER 8

CONSUMPTION

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INTRODUCTION

Consumption is a material social practice involving the *utilization* of objects (or services), as opposed to their production or distribution. Some scholars, who argue for the recent development of a distinctive ‘consumer society’ during the modern period, would define it even more specifically as the utilization of *commodities* (that is, objects obtained through exchange, or, yet more narrowly, mass-produced objects manufactured for commercial exchange), but this seems unnecessarily restrictive. After many years of surprising neglect, consumption has garnered a great deal of attention among all the social sciences over the past few decades. Beginning in the 1970s, but especially from the mid-1980s, consumption suddenly began to receive increasing recognition as a crucial focus of analysis in a wide range of disciplines, especially in anthropology (Douglas and Isherwood 1979; McCracken 1988; D. Miller 1987, 1995c,d; Howes 1996b; Colloredo-Mansfeld 2005) and sociology (Bourdieu 1984; C. Campbell 1987, 1995; Boccock 1993; Edgell *et al.* 1996; Zukin and Maguire 2004), but also history, geography, economics, and other fields (Pred and Watts 1992; Brewer and Porter 1993; P. Jackson and Thrift 1995; D. Miller 1995a). Indeed, one prominent advocate has even argued that consumption has become ‘the vanguard of history’ (D. Miller 1995c: 1) and further claimed, with perhaps a hint of hyperbole, that the rise of consumption studies constitutes a fundamental transformation of the discipline of anthropology and may replace kinship as its core (D. Miller 1995b,d).

The reasons for this groundswell of interest are several and complex and these will be discussed in greater detail below. However, one may reasonably claim that the surge of engagement with material culture within the social sciences since the 1980s, after decades of languishing in obscurity is, in many ways, a by-product of this emergence of consumption as an important research domain. It is the emphasis on the social and symbolic significance of commodities raised by consumption studies that has provoked an interest in material culture more broadly. Consumption was recognized as the social process by which people construct the symbolically laden material worlds they inhabit and which, reciprocally, act back upon them in complex ways. Hence, as interest has grown in consumption as an important arena of agentic social action, symbolic discourse, and cultural transformation, a corresponding realization has emerged of the importance of understanding the long neglected material domain that consumption simultaneously operates within and creates. On the other hand, archaeologists, the one group of specialists for whom the study of material culture has always been a *sine qua non*, have, for different reasons, also recently turned to the study of consumption as something capable of helping to explain material culture and to illuminate ancient societies in novel ways (Deetz 1977; Dietler 1990a,b, 1998, 2006a; D. Rogers 1990; Mullins 1999). But whatever the relationship between the focus on material culture and the turn to consumption, the promise of consumption studies in the social sciences has stimulated the vigorous development of both cross-disciplinary theoretical discussion and new research strategies and methods.

This chapter offers a brief review of recent studies of consumption, with a particular emphasis on the fields of archaeology and socio-cultural anthropology. It examines the dramatic growth of a general analytical focus on this practice and the relationship to an expanding interest in the study of material culture. By way of example, it then focuses particularly on the possibilities and challenges that the study of consumption presents for anthropological and archaeological analysis of colonialism, while also pointing out more briefly a series of other domains in which consumption studies have been concentrated. Finally, the issue of methodology is briefly assessed, with special reference to the requirements for developing an effective archaeology of consumption.

THE EMERGENCE OF CONSUMPTION STUDIES

Let us first be clear about what is actually new about the recent wave of consumption studies, because it would be misleading to give the impression that consumption, in a very general sense, was completely ignored in the past. Archaeologists, for

example, have always been studying the patterns generated most directly by consumption, rather than production or exchange (which are generally another order of inference removed from the archaeological record). This is because, aside from a few cases such as excavations of shipwrecks or production sites (pottery workshops, factories, etc.), consumption is what ultimately determines where most of the objects they excavate are located and in what state they are found. Moreover, the subspecialty of zooarchaeology has been, from the beginning, almost entirely concerned with identifying patterns of food consumption from faunal remains. But, until recently, archaeological treatment of the process of consumption has been largely implicit, accepting it as a transparent epiphenomenon (the end product of production and distribution) rather than as a domain of agentic social action of primary analytical significance.

Economists, as well, have employed a concept of consumption since at least the emergence of marginalist microeconomics in the late nineteenth century; and, indeed, microeconomics might well be described as the study of consumer decision-making. However, economists have tended to treat consumption unproblematically in a very narrow economic sense as simply an aspect of the relationship between supply and demand, the 'marginal propensity to consume' being a response to prices through the rational allocation of resources among alternative wants or preferences. Understanding consumption then becomes a matter of plotting marginal utility and 'indifference' curves for competing commodities and services. But until recently, most economists have shown little interest in the social and cultural dimensions of consumption or the origins, roles, and meaning of consumer preferences; these are simply accepted as background givens and attention is focused narrowly on the process of quantitatively assessing how the preferences of individual consumers are relatively weighted, affected by prices, and satisfied by the allocation of income (see Fine 1995). In contrast, what is novel in the recent turn to consumption is its recognition as an emphatically social and cultural practice that has significant consequences in other domains of social life and that must be explicitly studied and theorized as a distinct field of action.

To be sure, the economist and sociologist Thorsten Veblen (2008) and the sociologist Georg Simmel (1905, 1961) both produced much more explicit *social* analyses of consumption nearly a hundred years ago. However, these studies of newly emerging patterns of consumption among the urban upper-middle classes in America and Germany at the beginning of the twentieth century failed to stimulate a sustained engagement with the analysis of consumption, and they emerged only in the 1980s as re-discovered ancestral precursors of the current consumption literature. Walter Benjamin's early twentieth-century philosophical reflections from the Paris Arcades Project (Benjamin 1999) and, especially, his essay on 'the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction' (1977) have also been resurrected in recent years to discuss consumption, especially by scholars in the cultural studies and media fields (e.g. Harvey 1989: 346–349; Shields 1992;

Slater 1993: 192–194; Hall 1997: 333–336). Although not focused specifically on consumption, some of Benjamin's musings on themes such as the staging of commodities through retail spectacles and the nature of 'aura' and its role in investing original, singular works of art with forms of value embedded in regressive structures of power and the consequent emancipatory potential of mass reproduction, have been found relevant to issues being explored in the consumption field.

But the development of a serious widespread analytical focus on consumption as a cultural phenomenon and a significant domain of social action really stems from both the rise of mass consumption among the lower middle and working classes in the mid-twentieth century (something beyond the analytical horizons of Veblen and Simmel) and the growing influence of structuralism within the social sciences in the 1960s, as well as the subsequent versions of practice theory that emerged out of a reaction to structuralism. More recently, it has also been greatly stimulated by an interest, in particular among geographers and anthropologists, in the connections between globalization and postmodernity, in which both are understood to involve the development of novel forms of expressive 'consumer culture' in a post-industrial age (e.g. Harvey 1989; Featherstone 1991; D. Miller 1997; Haugerud *et al.* 2000). The growth of mass consumption in the United States and Europe since World War II was enabled by the expansion of what Gramsci (1971: 279–322) had earlier labelled 'Fordist' production strategies (i.e. systems of factory production geared toward both the creation of new groups of consumers with increased disposable income from higher wages and the rapid manufacture of inexpensive standardized goods for them to consume). This mass consumption initially elicited a largely negative and pessimistic assessment among scholars on both the political right and left: either elitist disdain or despair about the irresistible, seductive, and destructive power of capitalism and the effects of marketing in determining mass tastes and behaviour. The latter view was heavily indebted to the Frankfurt School's analysis of popular culture (e.g. Marcuse 1964; Horkheimer and Adorno 1972; Adorno 1982), but also to other Marxian traditions in which commoditization was linked to the masking of power relations and the process of alienation. However, by the late 1980s, consumption was increasingly being viewed more optimistically, not as passive acquiescence to a form of capitalist control and distraction of the masses, but as a type of creative resistance and expressive means of constructing identity. It came to be seen as a significant form of agency that resulted in forms of popular culture that were participatory and democratic. This radical transformation in perspective, which has occasionally exhibited an almost neo-Romantic cast (with an elevation of popular culture as a new form of ennobled folk art and a vision of consumption as a kind of individualized heroic aesthetic resistance to capitalism), can be credited in no small part to the influence of structuralism in popularizing a semiotic approach to culture and social action during the 1960s. Early French structuralist analyses of fashion and cuisine, for

example, were instrumental in highlighting consumption as a good deal more than the provision of material needs: it was treated as primarily a symbolic domain with a semiotic code to be deciphered (e.g. Barthes 1961, 1967b; Lévi-Strauss 1978). Roland Barthes' (1967b) famous dissection of the fashion industry, for instance, demonstrated the arbitrary quality of signs mobilized in the domain of fashion and the way their naturalization served to assert bourgeois values. The ahistorical, static, and structurally overdetermined aspects of the core research programme of structuralism (that is, searching for hidden 'deep structure' in the surface manifestations of various social and cultural phenomena, such as consumption, myth, and kinship), among other problems, eventually led to a reaction against orthodox structuralism. However, the semiotic and relational forms of analysis that were a hallmark of structuralism were retained as a central feature in the work of anthropologists and sociologists who emerged from the structuralist school and were seminal in pushing the symbolic analysis of consumption further (e.g. Sahlins 1976; Bourdieu 1984; Baudrillard 1996, 1998).

These analysts viewed consumption as a symbolic process guided by a system of signs that is culturally ordered; but, more than being simply a coded reflection of deep structure, this process was seen to have profound social implications and effects. The early works of Jean Baudrillard and Marshall Sahlins on this theme were primarily interested in explaining the symbolic logic of consumption and asserting a primacy for consumption in shaping the broader political economy, and they operated on a fairly sweeping cultural scale. For instance, Baudrillard, in his *The Consumer Society* (1998), used a somewhat anecdotal approach to evidence from various domains of consumption (media, the body, leisure, etc.) to argue for the idea that consumption as a system of signs had displaced production at the centre of contemporary culture and identity. On the other hand, Pierre Bourdieu (1984), in his *Distinction: a social critique of the judgment of taste*, used a very focused and systematic empirical analysis of French society in the 1960s to apply his general theory of practice (Bourdieu 1990) to the realm of consumption. He was concerned to show the ways in which taste (in things like art, music, literature, home furnishings, etc.) is distributed in highly patterned ways corresponding to positions within fields of social power, and how it both reflects and reinforces those relational positions. Consumption is structured by distinctive sets of aesthetic and moral dispositions that become embodied through life experience within particular class and status positions, and these aspects of a more general 'habitus' also become part of the 'symbolic capital' (or more specifically 'cultural capital') that actively reinforces power relations (Bourdieu 1984: 169–225; 1990: 52–65, 112–121). According to Bourdieu's analysis, the apparently distinctive tastes and consumption patterns of different classes and class fractions must always be viewed in a dynamic relational fashion, such that the dominant aesthetic subtly defines the aesthetic of dominated groups and fractions through a variety of symbolic oppositions, inversions, and imitations. This provides a far more nuanced and flexible

basis for analysis than, for example, Veblen's (2008: 49–69) concept of 'conspicuous consumption'.

The 1980s witnessed a sudden florescence of concern with consumption within socio-cultural anthropology (especially Anglophone anthropology), influenced by the pioneering studies noted above. But this anthropological engagement with consumption was also influenced by both a growing critique of neo-classical economics and a dissatisfaction with the limitations of traditional anthropological research (particularly the dominant focus on exchange within economic anthropology and the neglect of Western consumer culture as a field of analysis). Anthropologist Mary Douglas and economist Baron Isherwood's (1979) co-authored study, *The World of Goods*, was widely influential in stimulating anthropologists to focus on consumption and commoditization, and it directed a clear challenge to the hegemony of economics (as had Sahlins' earlier critique of practical reason [1976]). Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's (1986b) equally influential introduction to an edited volume on *The Social Life of Things* further opened the field of consumption to anthropologists by deconstructing the entrenched gift/commodity dichotomy and the boundaries between 'traditional' and 'modern' economies that had restricted disciplinary dispositions toward fieldwork. Daniel Miller (1987) was perhaps the most active advocate, pushing anthropologists towards both theorizing consumption in new ways and developing new methods and specific field studies of consumption, but other anthropological approaches to consumption emerged in parallel with his (e.g. Mintz 1985; McCracken 1988; Rutz and Orlove 1989; Friedman 1994). Colin Campbell (1987) played a similar role during this period within sociology.

Much of the growing consumption literature in sociology, geography, and cultural studies since the 1980s has followed Baudrillard's (1998) lead in focusing upon the emergence of a post-modern, post-industrial 'consumer society' in Europe and America, in which the practice of consumption has overtaken class and production-based categories as a means of defining identity (Hebdige 1979; Harvey 1989; Featherstone 1991). While anthropologists have also ventured into this terrain (e.g. D. Miller 1987, 1998c), a more widespread concern within the recent anthropological literature on consumption has been the flow of commodities across cultural boundaries and the social and cultural consequences of such consumption. This analysis has been directed both back in time, examining the role of consumption in the historical process of colonialism and Western capitalist expansion (e.g. Mintz 1985; Dietler 1990b, 1998, 2005, 2007; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 1997; N. Thomas 1991; Sahlins 1994; Howes 1996a; Mullins 1999), and toward the present, exploring the current process of globalization. Anthropologies of globalization have focused particularly upon the role of consumption in the historically-specific configurations of local/global relations and processes. These have emerged recently in the post-colonial, late-capitalist cultural economy, with their peculiar conjunctures of electronic mass-mediation, mass-migrations, and

global capital flows, which have created new forms of diasporic communities and radically new transnational spaces of imagination and identity (e.g. Hannerz 1992; Friedman 1994; D. Miller 1994, 1997; Appadurai 1996; Haugrud *et al.* 2000).

Archaeologists and historians have made an important contribution in relativizing some of the assumptions of uniqueness for the contemporary situation held by scholars in other fields. As the previous discussion makes clear, most of the consumption literature emerged in the context of an analysis of capitalist mass consumption and the use of industrially produced commodities in the construction of identities in the modern and post-modern eras in the United States and Europe, which was often with the assertion that there is something qualitatively distinctive about these recent phenomena. This assertion has, however, usually been unsupported by actual empirical analysis of earlier contexts and often rests on little more than conjectural contrasts. There clearly are potential dangers for archaeologists, historians, and historical anthropologists attempting to use theoretical concepts designed to tackle these specific historical situations in order to analyse cases from earlier periods. But these dangers exist only if models are imported as a priori explanatory devices and anachronistically universalized across all cultures and histories; that is, if historians and archaeologists act simply as naive consumers of consumption theory. Instead, they have an opportunity to contribute actively to the development of such theory by examining both similarities and differences between historical cases and thereby contextualizing the modern and postmodern situations that generated much of the early theorizing. Such work serves to temper some of the more radical assertions of uniqueness for modern and postmodern consumption; after all, the widespread circulation and consumption of mass-produced commodities was already a feature of the ancient Mediterranean economy in the first millennium BCE, and styles of consumption already played a major role in the formation of Roman provincial identities within the Empire, to cite but two related examples (see Tchernia 1986; Woolf 1998). Archaeological studies of consumption in past societies can also help to identify and understand genuinely novel aspects of the recent situation by examining simultaneously both continuities and disjunctures, and commonalities and contrasts. In brief, explorations of ancient consumption can serve to counteract tendencies toward both the production of Manichaean conjectural histories of pre-capitalist or pre-modern conditions through simple dichotomous inversion of the present and the facile universalizing of modern Western experience in the way that much social theory has done all too often and easily (e.g. Baudrillard 1996, 1998). In other words, archaeological research, in dialogue with the modern consumption literature, has the potential to develop a more nuanced understanding by demonstrating that modern and postmodern consumption is not unique: since such things as mass consumption of commodities circulating over long distances existed in other earlier contexts. At the same time, however, there are important differences in such things as the organization of commodity chains and the nature of marketing,

transport, and media, which prohibit the uncritical generalizing of theory derived from modern Western contexts. This does not make such theory irrelevant to the past: far from it. Rather, it means that archaeology has a role complementary to that of socio-cultural anthropology in helping to ‘provincialize’ (Chakrabarty 2007) Eurocentric social theory and thereby improve it.

CONSUMPTION, MATERIAL CULTURE, AND COLONIALISM

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Studies of consumption have ranged over a wide array of contexts and goods, and one can do little more than point to a selective sampling in a brief review such as this. However, the contribution of consumption studies to the understanding of colonialism will be singled out for somewhat more extensive discussion because, as noted earlier, this has been a particularly productive focus of anthropological research (Dietler forthcoming). One of its attractions is that, because it is focused on issues of transformation, the field of colonial consumption is one that has emphasized a dynamic view of historical process and avoided a tendency toward somewhat static synchronic visions of consumption that have often characterized analyses of modern Western mass consumption.

A new theoretical interest in consumption within anthropology has accompanied a growing awareness of the significance of material culture and consumption by scholars of colonialism and postcoloniality (e.g. Mintz 1985; Dietler 1990b, 1998, 2005, 2007; D. Rogers 1990; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 1997; N. Thomas 1991; Sahlins 1992, 1994; Appadurai 1996; Burke 1996; Howes 1996a; Turgeon *et al.* 1996; Turgeon 1998, 2003; Voss 2008b). Consumption in this context has come to be understood as an agentic symbolic activity deeply embedded in, and constitutive of, social relations and cultural conceptions, and is no longer simply an economic product of ends/means calculation (as in neoclassical economics) or a passive reflection of other structures (as in early structuralism). This relational approach to consumption has opened important new vistas for understanding the role of material culture in colonial strategies and processes. In archaeological contexts, it has also provided a way of addressing the issue of agency in colonial situations by revealing patterns of choice and their consequences.

However, while full of promise, one must acknowledge certain dangers in the growing popularity of this consumption work as well. For instance, an exclusive focus on consumption, particularly as exemplified in some of the more semiotically oriented forms of analysis stemming from the early work of Baudrillard, may risk decoupling it from those more traditional, but still important, domains of analysis:

production and exchange. An abstract treatment of consumption as the circulation of pure signs that is divorced from consideration of the relations of power in which they are embedded, or that ignores the crucial material dimension of the objects being consumed, would be particularly dangerous in a colonial context, where the issue of exploitation and the political context of the articulation of production and consumption should be ever-present concerns. Jack Goody (1982), for example, provided a useful critical reminder of what was generally missing from structuralist treatments of foodways as sign systems: an analysis of the structures of colonial power and the patterns of labour exploitation that provided the hidden conditions of possibility for the circulation of exotic foodstuffs in European cuisines (see also Mintz 1985; I. Cook and Crang 1996).

Nevertheless, with such caveats in mind, one can begin a productive exploration of this relationship between colonialism and consumption with the observation (well supported by the studies noted above) that consumption is *never* simply a satisfaction of utilitarian needs or an epiphenomenon of production. Rather, it is a process of symbolic construction of identity and political relations with important material consequences. Moreover, contrary to certain assumptions of neoclassical economic theory (e.g. see Ghez and Becker 1975; Stigler and Becker 1977; G.S. Becker 1996; see Fine 1995 for a critique), anthropological studies of consumption have shown that demand can never be understood as a simple or automatic response to the availability of goods, and particularly not in poly-cultural colonial situations. Consumption is always a culturally specific phenomenon and demand is always socially constructed and historically changing. These features offer, therefore, a good potential starting point for launching an exploration of the role of material culture in colonialism and the operation of agency in colonial encounters.

An approach to colonialism through consumption requires consideration of a few key concepts, not least of which is culture. This is important because, not only is consumption structured by cultural categories and dispositions, but also 'culture is constructed through consumption' (Comaroff 1996: 20). This process of cultural construction through consumption implies two things. In the first place, objects materialize cultural order. They render abstract cultural categories as visible and durable, they aid the negotiation of social interaction in various ways, and they structure perception of the social world (see Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Bourdieu 1984; Baudrillard 1996, 1998). The systems of objects that people construct through consumption serve both to inculcate personal identity and to enable people to locate others within social fields through the perception of embodied tastes and various indexical forms of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1984). Despite somewhat hyperbolic claims by some scholars about recent revolutionary transformations of such practices (e.g. D. Miller 1987; Baudrillard 1998), this is by no means something unique to capitalist consumer societies, although it clearly operates in different ways in different contexts. However, more than simply reproducing static systems of cultural categories, consumption constructs culture

in a more dynamic sense. This is particularly relevant to the issue of cross-cultural consumption and colonialism. Consumption can thus be understood as a process of structured improvization that continually materializes cultural order by also dealing with alien objects and practices through either transformative appropriation and assimilation or rejection.

To accept this perspective implies a processual understanding of culture that differs fundamentally from the one held by, for example, the older acculturation paradigm that guided earlier analysis of colonialism and culture contact in American anthropology (e.g. Herskovits 1938; Social Science Research Council 1954). Rather than viewing culture as simply an inheritance from the past, a processual approach recognizes that it is, more accurately, a kind of eternal project (Hountondji 1994; Sahlins 1999). In other words, culture is not a fixed, static, homogeneous system of shared beliefs, rules, and traits, but rather sets of embodied categorical perceptions, analogical understandings, and values that structure ways of reasoning, solving problems, and acting upon opportunities. The operation of culture is always a creative process. Among those problems/opportunities to be handled is the ever-present one of dealing with exogenous peoples and objects. This process involves both the selective domestication (or indigenization) of formerly foreign goods, practices and tastes, and the rejection of others. Such selective incorporation operates according to a specific cultural logic, but it also has a continual transformative effect in the reproduction of culture. Moreover, this process, obviously, does not occur through the actions of cultures (seen as reified entities) coming into contact, but rather through the often contradictory actions of individual human beings and social groups located differentially within complex relational fields of power and interest.

This process of selective appropriation and indigenization is not something that is unique to colonial situations. It happens everywhere and continuously, given that societies have never existed in a state of isolation and people must always negotiate their lives in relation to external conditions. This is what Amselle, following Ricoeur's (1992) observation that 'selfhood' is constructed in a permanent relation with alterity, meant in writing about 'originary syncretism' (Amselle 1998: x). Cultures are inherently relational in nature: they have always been both products of fusion and in a ceaseless process of construction through fusion. The distinctive feature of colonial contexts is that the particular configurations of colonial relations of power have a marked influence on the nature and structure of the process. Moreover, precisely because of the significance of consumption to the construction of culture, material culture has repeatedly been used as a tool of colonialism.

Perceiving culture in this way means deconstructing the entrenched Western dichotomy between tradition and change (and the linked dichotomy between static and dynamic societies). It also means understanding that the adoption of foreign goods and practices does not result in 'deculturation', and it does not render

cultures inauthentic or incoherent. As Marshall Sahlins (1999: xi) has noted, ‘anthropologists have known at least since the work of Boas and his students that cultures are generally foreign in origin and local in pattern’. Moreover, cultural continuity usually consists of the distinctive ways that cultures change (Sahlins 1993: 2). Hence, cross-cultural consumption is a continual process of selective appropriation and creative assimilation according to local logics that is also a way of continually constructing and reconstructing culture (Figure 8.1).

This is not to say that such consumption does not have significant consequences in terms of altering the conditions of cultural reproduction. It clearly does. Moreover, focusing upon the role of consumption in the process of colonial entanglement should underline precisely this feature. However, these effects are often subtle and gradual, and they frequently will not be perceived by the participants as marking a cultural discontinuity (although there will sometimes be generational or gender differences in such perceptions). What is usually perceived by colonized peoples as marked rupture or discontinuity is the imposition of colonial political domination and the forms of colonialism that follow it: that is, the sudden loss of control over the process of cultural reproduction and the imposition of techniques of repression and discipline.

Such considerations argue for a more symmetrical treatment of consumption on both sides of colonial encounters than has usually occurred in the past. The consumption of goods and practices does not flow in one direction only, and the



Fig. 8.1 Local consumption/global circulation: shopping for second-hand European clothes at a rural Kenyan market (Boro, Kenya).

process deserves to be examined in comparable ways in all contexts. For example, consumption of foreign objects and practices by Euro-American societies is rarely credited with provoking sentiments of cultural crisis or inauthenticity in popular consciousness. Europeans and Americans are allowed any number of invented traditions and indigenizations of foreign objects and practices—whether pasta and tomatoes in Italian cuisine, tea in England, or the decoration of American homes with African baskets, Indonesian cloth, Persian rugs, and Japanese furniture, for example—without the suspicion of cultural emulation or incoherence. Yet, similar kinds of adaptations of European or American objects or practices in places such as Africa or the Pacific have often been seen as a flawed mimesis of the West rather than creative, and sometimes subversive, appropriations. Nevertheless, symmetrical analysis of consumption can correct such misperceptions. Jean Comaroff (1996: 31) has used the revealing example of a Tswana chief in South Africa of the 1860s, who had a Western style suit made for himself out of leopard skin, to show that, rather than simply imitating Western goods in a curious way that did not quite get it right, he was creatively playing upon symbols of power from two domains to create an object that doubled its impact.

The case of the Tswana chief underlines the fact that when an object crosses cultural frontiers, it rarely arrives with the same meanings and practices associated with it in its context of origin. If one thinks of the consumption of Coca-Cola, for example, a bottle of this beverage consumed in rural East Africa does not have the same meaning as an identical one consumed in Chicago. In the former context, it may be reserved for serving to distinguished visitors and incorporated into ceremonial commensality in a pattern reminiscent of the use of imported French wine in bourgeois homes in Chicago, where it would be unthinkable to use Coca-Cola in a similar way. Hence, the presence of bottles of Coca-Cola in rural Africa is not a sign of the Americanization of Africa, but rather of the Africanization of Coca-Cola (Dietler 2007). It is crucial to understand the specific contexts of consumption in order to recognize the meaning and significance of goods. After all, it is reported that in Russia Coca-Cola is employed to remove wrinkles, in Haiti it is believed to revive the dead, and in Barbados it is said to transform copper into silver (Pendergrast 1993: 245–247; Howes 1996b: 6). Moreover, Coca-Cola is sometimes valued precisely for its foreign origin (indeed, sometimes for its indexical relationship to an imagined concept of America), while in other contexts it comes to be seen, as Daniel Miller has observed, as a thoroughly local drink without any aura of the exotic (Miller 1994, 1998a).

Obviously, speaking about the Africanization of Coca-Cola does not imply that its consumption is a benign activity without potentially serious economic and cultural consequences. For example, in some contexts, imported soft drinks can come to replace native beverages, and this can have implications for both nutrition and relations of economic dependency (J. James 1993). Moreover, it is also clear that the availability of Coca-Cola in Africa is driven by strategies of corporate



Fig. 8.2 Coca-Cola advertising in rural Africa (Siaya, Kenya).

executives seeking global market penetration and is enabled by a massive international infrastructure of production and distribution embedded in global geopolitical structures of power. Finally, one must also avoid a romanticized vision of unfettered indigenous agency in which consumption becomes an autonomous form of liberating resistance. There are always both intended and unintended consequences in consuming alien goods, and these consequences ought precisely to be the focus of analysis in understanding the entangling operation of consumption and the subtle transformations of consciousness and identity that result (Dietler 1998, 2007). This is the reason that analysis of consumption should not be simply about the semiotic play of signs, but must be firmly grounded in the material conditions and power relations of the political economy. However, just as clearly, this is not a simple homogeneous, or homogenizing, process of the 'coca-colonization' (Hannerz 1992: 217) of passive peripheral subjects. Whatever the hegemonic schemes of Coca-Cola executives for global market domination, demand for this beverage in Africa, Chicago, Paris, or Trinidad is a product of local desires and tastes generated according to local cultural conceptions and social practices. In order to be desired and used, exotic goods must always be imbued with culturally relevant meaning locally and incorporated into local social relationships. Moreover, these processes of redefinition and reorientation must be contextualized and understood if we are to comprehend the transformative effects of cross-cultural consumption (Figure 8.2).

This approach to consumption also leads to consideration of the significance of material culture in strategies of colonialism, something that has gained increasing

recognition among anthropologists in recent years. As Nicholas Thomas has noted, ‘material cultures and technologies are central to the transformative work of colonialism’ (2002: 182). Given the importance of consumption in constructing culture and social relationships, it should not be surprising that goods have not only been appropriated and indigenized, they have also been used by both parties in exchanges to attempt to control the other—‘making subjects by means of objects’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997: 218). This involved not only attempts to create novel desires for new goods, but also attempts to get people to use imported objects in particular ways, as well as the (usually mistaken) belief that the use of particular objects or technologies would inherently induce certain kinds of desired behaviour. For example, it is clear that clothing played a very important instrumental role in the strategies of European missionaries to colonize the consciousness of indigenous peoples in various parts of the world. Christian missionaries in the Pacific tried to use clothing as a means of transforming Samoan and Tahitian moral consciousness and instilling new concepts of work discipline, temporality, and gender relations (N. Thomas 2002). Similarly, among the Tswana in South Africa, both clothing and architecture served as vehicles for attempts by missionaries to inculcate European concepts of domesticity and bodily discipline; and they became sites of struggle as the Tswana used these new material forms as an expressive language to structure identity in new ways and contest colonial categories and aesthetics (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997). As this case suggests, such strategies to use material objects as vectors of control always have unintended consequences for all the parties concerned.

Anthropological and archaeological studies of consumption guided by this kind of perspective have been instrumental in providing new insights into the operation and consequences of colonialism in a wide variety of colonial and postcolonial (or neocolonial) contexts, ranging from the cases of African and Pacific encounters with Europeans noted above (see also Hansen 1992; Sahlins 1992, 1994; Burke 1996), to European missionary activity in South America (Scaramelli and Tarble de Scaramelli 2005), North American slavery (Mullins 1999), the politics of identity in colonial Ireland (Hartnett 2004), colonial ethnogenesis in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century California (Voss 2008b), and ancient Greco-Roman encounters with indigenous peoples of the Mediterranean (Dietler 1998, forthcoming).

OTHER FIELDS OF CONSUMPTION

Aside from colonialism, the range of domains of material culture and social action in which consumption research has played a prominent role is extensive. Food,

alcohol, and drugs have constituted one obvious area, given that consumption of such 'embodied material culture' (Dietler 2006a: 231–232), transforms goods by ingesting them directly into the body, is so closely linked to the construction and display of social and personal identity. This is also an area where the performative aspects of consumption are closely tied to the creation and maintenance of social relationships and politics. Because of the biological imperatives of nutrition, it is also an area where symbolic action in the domestic sphere is so obviously linked to production and the broader political economy. Hence, it is hardly surprising that this is also an area that attracted the attention of early structuralist analyses (e.g. Barthes 1961; Douglas 1975; Sahlins 1976; Levi-Strauss 1978) and that has consistently linked social anthropologists, archaeologists, historians, and sociologists in a common dialogue. Subjects of study have ranged from the micro-politics of cuisine in Indian homes to the invention of the restaurant in Europe, the construction of national cuisines, the wine trade in the ancient Mediterranean, the role of alcohol in the construction of gender and class, and the consumption of world cuisine in cosmopolitan cities, to name only a few (e.g. Douglas 1975, 1984, 1987; Appadurai 1981; Goody 1982; Weismantel 1988; Dietler 1990a, 2006a, 2007; Falk 1994; McDonald 1994; Goodman *et al.* 1995; A. James 1996; Mennell 1996; Counihan and van Esterik 1997; Wilk 1999; de Garine and de Garine 2001; Turgeon 2003; Twiss 2007; Mullins 2008). Most recently, rituals of food and alcohol consumption, called feasts, have attracted particular theoretical and empirical attention, especially by archaeologists, as prominent arenas of political action (e.g. Dietler and Hayden 2001; Bray 2003a; Mills 2004; J.C. Wright 2004).

Another domain of consumption closely associated with the body—clothing and dress—has also been a long-term popular theme for researchers from a variety of fields, and has generated an enormous literature. This includes both analysis of fashion (the constantly shifting semiotics of clothing style, especially in Western bourgeois society) and more general treatment of cloth, clothing, jewellery, and other forms of bodily adornment in other contexts (e.g. Hebdige 1979; T. Turner 1980; Weiner and Schneider 1989; Comaroff 1996; Caplan 2000; Entwistle 2000; Hansen 2000, 2004; N. Thomas 2002; Banerjee and Miller 2003; Allman 2004; Küchler and Miller 2005). Studies of the consumption of media and services have also become increasingly popular, particularly as the former industrial powers of Europe and America move increasingly toward service economies (Morley 1992, 1995; Silverstone and Hirsch 1992; Mazzarella 2003). However, the list of goods and services that have been treated in consumption studies (furniture and other household items, art, music, tourist experiences and memorabilia, automobiles, etc.) is both enormous and expanding daily (Figure 8.3).

For archaeologists and historians, another recent expanding domain of research attention has been the consumption of the past, including concerns about the implication of scholars in this process and the effects it has on both disciplinary practice and society at large (e.g. see Lowenthal 1998; Abu El-Haj 2001; Baram and



Fig. 8.3 Consuming the past: cultural tourism and the use of archaeological objects in popular culture (Murlo, Italy).

Rowan 2004; Dietler 2006b; Silberman 2007). Archaeologists, in particular, have been concerned about the role of the discipline in producing the objects and sites that constitute a material symbolic reservoir for the construction of modern identities. Whether under the banner of ‘heritage’, which is often linked to nationalizing narratives of the state, or the neo-liberal private commercialization of archaeological sites and artefacts as marketable commodities, entertainment and cultural tourism, or the media-fed integration of archaeology into popular culture under the tropes of mystery, discovery and adventure, the perceived value of archaeology to consumers plays a major role in the funding and use of research. This fact has a variety of ramifications for archaeological practice that are the subject of a growing body of current research.

METHODS

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Analysts of consumption have tended to approach the issue from two directions: focusing either on the symbolic logic and social action of consumers or on the efforts of marketers and vendors to shape and/or follow consumer tastes. The work of early social theorists on consumption was often rather loosely grounded in anecdotal personal impressions and general assumptions (e.g. Baudrillard 1996, 1998). However, the methods used by subsequent analysts vary from detailed ethnographic analysis of communities of consumers or advertising firms (e.g. Comaroff 1996; Mazzarella 2003; D. Miller 1994), to statistical analysis of consumer tastes and class and status position correlations by sociologists (e.g. Bourdieu 1984), to more text and image-based studies of advertisements, shop windows, and novels by historians and cultural studies scholars (e.g. W.R. Leach 1993; Frank 1997), to product biographies tracing the history of the creation, promotion, and reception of particular commodities (e.g. Pendergrast 1993; Parr 1999; Mullins 2008). The demands of consumption studies have also been instrumental in pushing anthropologists and sociologists toward methodological innovation, such as new forms of cooperative ‘multi-sited ethnography’ (Marcus 1995; Gille and Ó Riain 2002) that are capable, for example, of exploring the social life of classes of objects by following commodity chains or commodity networks (e.g. Mintz 1985; Collins 2000; Hansen 2000, 2002). In this way, the often hidden linkages between the decisions, actions, and effects of consumers and those of transnational corporations, media, bureaucracies, and producers spread around the world can be exposed and analysed.

For archaeologists, the epistemological issues are somewhat different. Historical archaeologists have been able to rely partly on the kind of textual evidence available

to historians (archives, advertisements, wills and probate statements, etc.), but supplemented, interwoven with and challenged by the material evidence of consumed objects (Deetz 1977; Mullins 1999; Cochran and Beaudry 2006; Voss 2008b). For those working in periods and areas where textual evidence is scarce or non-existent, the archaeological turn to the study of consumption has required some methodological ingenuity, as older excavations were usually not geared toward the acquisition of data that are useful for detecting consumption patterns.

The kinds of regional distribution maps of objects and limited excavations that have been typical for discussions of trade, and even many typologies of ceramics and other objects that were originally designed for purposes of regional chronologies and culture histories, will often be inadequate for investigating consumption. Moving beyond the limitations of these techniques to study consumption requires examining much more carefully the particular things that were consumed and the ways they were consumed: that is, examining closely the specific *properties* and *contexts* of objects and practices in order to understand the social and cultural logic of the desire for them and the social, economic, and political roles that their consumption played. It is also, of course, necessary to examine the counter-phenomenon—that is, what might be called the logic of indifference and/or rejection. It is necessary to understand what goods and practices were available for appropriation but were ignored or refused, and why a particular pattern of selective consumption emerged from a range of possibilities. In brief, one must seek to discern and explain the *choices* that were made and the consequences of those choices.

This kind of close examination of consumption requires a research strategy geared toward the simultaneous relational analysis, on regional, intra-site and household scales, of several features: the contexts of consumption, the patterns of association among objects consumed, the spatial distribution of objects, the relative quantitative representation of different kinds of objects, and the specific material and functional properties of different objects. Finally, such analysis is most effective when one subjects these patterns to comparative analysis, in both their temporal and spatial dimensions; that is, when there is both a focus on historical process, comparing successive phases at individual sites and within regions, and also an attempt to compare and contrast local patterns with those of adjacent sites and regions. This kind of analysis has, for example, enabled a much richer understanding of the shifting nature of demand for imported wine in Iron Age France, its role in articulating the colonial encounter with Greeks, Etruscans, and Romans over several centuries, and the social and cultural consequences of this consumption (Dietler 1998, 2005, forthcoming; see also Sanmartí 2009) (Figure 8.4).

This strategy obviously places quite stringent demands upon the archaeological evidence, demands of a kind that cannot always be met adequately by the data from many past and current field research projects. It is clear, for example, that the kind



Fig. 8.4 Studying consumption in the past: open-area excavations necessary to reveal patterns of consumption in multiple contemporary dwellings and neighbourhoods (Lattes, France).

of understanding sought cannot be gleaned from a single site or dwelling in isolation: it requires fairly dense contextual documentation over a regional landscape and over individual sites within that regional landscape (comparing detailed household and funerary data on consumption patterns within and among sites), as well as good chronological control. It is also evident that, by itself, archaeological survey cannot provide an adequate basis for this kind of analysis, because it yields very little *contextual* information. Excavation is therefore essential, but not just any type of excavation. One really needs large-scale, area-extensive excavations that pay very careful attention to the contextual and processual details of domestic and funerary situations, and that record this information in ways that allow fine-grained comparative analysis on a variety of scales. It also requires, for example, classifications of ceramics that are based on functional criteria, rather than on the kinds of decorative elements or fabric types that have been traditionally employed to construct chronologies and trace horizons and trade patterns. Tamara Bray (2003b), for instance, has shown how a major rethinking of ceramic classification was necessary to understand the operation and significance of food consumption rituals of the Inca state (see also A.G. Cook and Glowacki 2003; M.E. Smith *et al.* 2003).

CONCLUSIONS

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Consumption is a material practice that has seen a dramatic increase in research attention in recent decades, and that has had a major impact on the revival of interest in material culture in the social sciences and humanities. Consumption research has stimulated an appreciation of the symbolic significance of the material world and a new analytical focus on the use of objects in the construction of identity and in the politics of daily life. It has also brought about a re-evaluation of popular culture as a domain of consequent agency rather than simply a banal and decadent distraction or a mystification of capitalism.

The pursuit of consumption studies is a vibrant, evolving research frontier that has provoked a good deal of theoretical discussion and methodological innovation. This popularity poses certain dangers, particularly if consumption is studied in isolation or treated in a limited semiotic fashion as an entirely symbolic activity. However, if understood as a social practice with significant material consequences that is intimately entangled in systems of production and distribution, then consumption studies have the potential to serve as a heuristic bridge between various disciplines and fields and to provide novel insights into a variety of phenomena ranging from identity to agency, class, nationalism, colonialism, and globalization. Studies of consumption by archaeologists and socio-cultural anthropologists have a special place in this domain of research because they bring to it a global perspective that ranges widely in time and space. Hence, they offer the crucial ability to relativize and contextualize studies of modern Western consumer culture, which generated most of the early theoretical work on consumption.