

EXCITANTIA AND THE EVERYDAY: THE RISE OF PLEBEIAN LUXURIES

This paper¹ sets forth a discussion of the consumption of goods and services, as anthropologists have focused upon it. Consumption is a subject beloved of economists, and it has gained popularity as a research topic among historians and sociologists in the last two decades or so. The history of its study among anthropologists, however, has been curious—a coefficient, really, of the kinds of society at which the ethnographic, data-collecting aspect of our discipline was traditionally aimed, especially during that era when the field of anthropology was achieving its greatest growth.

The societies with which ethnography concerned itself—those of the so-called non-literate or ‘primitive’ peoples—were typically small, relatively unstratified, non-Western, highly localized, non-machine in their technology, and both integrated and divided by ties of blood and kinship. Of course those societies were many other things, too; this crude list is only suggestive. But they were not Western, or big, or literate, or based on machines, or prodigal in their consumption of fossil fuels, or urban, or anonymous in their social relations. For examples, there are the supposedly ‘classic’ instances: Malinowski’s Trobriand Islanders, Evans-Pritchard’s Nuer, Firth’s Tikopians, Fortes’s Tallensi, and so on. From this one sees that the *nature* of the societies being chosen is in these ways shared. That is not to say that these societies were like each other; there is no need to reduce the so-called primitive world to a sample of one, even less than would be true for capitalism itself, which clearly takes on a different character in different cultures. Nor

does this mean that the ethnographic portraits that we have been given of these societies by our predecessors are complete or correct in every detail, or that the societies themselves are frozen in time, unchanged and unchanging. Yet it can be argued that they were more like each other than any was like, say, Finnish society, or British society, or Japanese society.

In that first era of ethnography, it addressed societies such as these for good reasons. But anthropology did not feel limited by its own choices. Alfred Louis Kroeber writes:

After all, the subject of anthropology is limited only by man [he means man and woman; this was written almost fifty years ago]. It is not restricted by time—it goes back into geology as far as man [and woman] can be traced. It is not restricted by region but is worldwide in scope. It has specialized on the primitives because no other science would deal seriously with them, but it has never renounced its intent to understand the high civilizations also. Anthropology is interested in what is most exotic in mankind [and womankind] but equally in ourselves, here, now, at home. (Kroeber 1953: xiii)

Kroeber wrote that in 1953. But by then what he asserted was already being played out in a whole new era of anthropological inquiry. The change in subject matter happened quite suddenly, and also quickly. Boas in the Americas, and Malinowski, Radcliffe Brown and Rivers in the Old World, had marked together the

beginnings of modern ethnographic fieldwork, somewhere between the start of this century and the end of the First World War. Raymond Firth was Malinowski's student and Leach's teacher; Alfred Kroeber was Boas's student and—to name one—Julian Steward's teacher. They stand for the period. Firth, Malinowski's student, was as clearheaded and astute as ever, when this writer last saw him, in 1994. Kroeber died in 1960, but he had been Boas's first Ph.D. in 1901. Between them, Kroeber and Firth oversaw the first three quarters of anthropology in this century, and the *zenith* of *that* sort (if you will, of the 'primitive' sort) of ethnography.

Because of the kinds of society anthropologists chose to study in the classic period, the study of production and the study of consumption were of a piece with the societies themselves, *most* of whose economic activities were quite neatly bounded. One reason why the *kula* ring is of such consummate interest, for example, is because it transcends Trobriand locality. Malinowski writes of it with wonder, since it involved so many communities stretched over so many miles of open sea. The raiding of Dinka herds by the Nuer catches our attention because they are Dinka, and not Nuer, herds. But these wider connections, which are *always* present to some degree (Lesser 1961), are ancillary to the basic economic system in each case. The larger systems of production and consumption (of which these untypical externalities are admittedly a part) are linked *internally* in each instance, by arrangements not only for production, but also for circulation or distribution. Such arrangements 'on the inside' reveal, rather like a pinball machine when it lights up, who has power; whence it comes; and how it is transmitted in space and time. In each case it is possible to see how power works, so that access to the basic material needs of life is not interdicted by supervening authority. In

short, *production and consumption in such societies are intimately connected parts of the same thing.*

When anthropologists began, really only with the Second World War, to look at larger, richer, more modernized and energetic societies, they discovered that *those* societies—societies like Finland, for example—were simply too big and too many-sided to be mastered ethnographically. Thinking back to their earlier experiences and the triumphs of the first ethnographers, they did the expectable: they chose and studied communities within such societies, which they hoped were somehow representative of them. When this writer went to Puerto Rico in 1948 as one of the student team organized by Julian Steward to test some of his ideas about complex societies, we did just that. We were expected to add insights at a later stage, in order to deal with the fact that the communities we studied were integrated within larger socio-cultural systems. But we soon discovered that that was easier said than done. What those larger systems were, how to describe them adequately, turned out to be beyond our powers. *The People of Puerto Rico* (Steward et al. 1956), the book that came out of that experience, was a pioneering work. But it was not wholly successful because the techniques to do what we were attempting to do had not yet been devised. Most of the conceptual and methodological problems persist, a half a century later.

TRACING THE LINKAGES BETWEEN PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION

In the Puerto Rican sugar plantation community this writer studied, it soon became apparent that production and consumption were hardly connected to each other at all. My friends were rural proletarians who had no productive property, except perhaps a few shovels and a

couple of chickens. They sold their labor in order to acquire the means to buy what they needed to live. In these ways, they were not at all like Trobrianders or Nuer or Tikopians. In the community in which I worked, which produced sugarcane from which raw sugar was made and shipped elsewhere for final refining, it would not be entirely off the mark to say that production and consumption really *weren't connected, except by labor*. People did not consume what they produced, and did not produce what they consumed. The community, such as it was, existed to produce sugar. Even the sugar that people consumed there had nothing to do with the sugar they produced there. Working there, it was easy to see how that vital connection between production and consumption, which the early ethnographers saw on every side as they did their work, might easily be forgotten when one was studying the modern world.

Of course production and consumption are everywhere linked; but in some eras, the mystification of that linkage has been more subtle. More than a decade ago, and nearly forty years after that Puerto Rican fieldwork, I wrote a book about the history of sugar, in which I tried to document a connection between production and consumption. In that case, the connection was, on the one hand, between production and consumption in the insular sugar-producing colonies; and, on the other, between production and consumption in the metropolitan powers, in my case in the United Kingdom. I was struck by the way the links between the two, colony and metropolis, tended to be ignored or forgotten in the modern world, even though they seem so obvious, because the loci, the places where the production and consumption occur, were so remote from each other, and the categories of laborer in the colonies and in the metropolises ostensibly so different from each other.

When anthropologists took up the study of consumption again—I have in mind, for example, Arm Stoler's 1975 study of Javanese rice cultivators, or Mary Weismantel's 1988 study of an Ecuadorian village—they often found themselves dealing with communities in some ways analogous to what I have described here for my friends, the Puerto Rican sugarcane workers. The penetration of the modern world into local life had particular and peculiar effects on their focus, and on their methods of study, of small communities.

Said differently, the early ethnographers chose societies that lay at least superficially outside capitalism, while the later ethnographers began dealing with societies that lay much more squarely within it. That is a change of focus of enormous proportions, and one with which we are still, and will for long be, struggling. Studies of consumption in societies of 'our' sort, of a capitalistic sort, will be at a substantial remove from, say, the Trobriands, no matter how we go about it. Of course, that has to do with the way capitalism transforms economic relationships.

Within the past century and a half there have been many attempts to analyze the large-scale historical processes behind such changes. The scholars who did so differed widely in their interpretations and in their scope of treatment; but all confront more or less directly certain basic features of economic change that appeared within Europe, somewhere between the fourteenth and the eighteenth centuries, and that contributed to the rise of a new, vigorous, and seemingly ever more powerful system, which came to be called capitalism.

It is a system the nature of which has been explored from many different perspectives. Among them is the development of the texture and structure of the rewards in goods and services, both material and symbolic which,

over time, came to characterize the lifeways of proletarians in the leading capitalist countries. Such rewards were part of a much larger transformation of life. They were linked to changes in the nature of capital itself; to runaway urbanization in western Europe, and a corresponding decline in the rights of landless or poor rural dwellers; to the growth of industry of all sorts, and the differentiation of industry; to different conceptions of time; and, of course, to the development of new wants. We know that the system expanded geographically, implicating new regions both inside and outside Europe and, with them, new populations, who became its servitors, both those who made it work, and those who figured (though sometimes only minimally) among its beneficiaries. For the system to work best, ordinary people, those who did the hardest work, had to learn to desire things that they had not had before, and to want to work hard and long enough not just for prestige or personal satisfaction, but also to fulfill those desires. They also had to believe that they really *could* obtain those things, and they had to sustain such beliefs.

We still don't fully understand how that happened. That book I wrote about the history of sugar enabled me not only to link production and consumption, but also to talk about the desires and about some of the rewards, modest though they were—or seem to us now to have been. After all, when we speak of 'eating like a king', it is a letdown to add that once meant having strong black tea with lots of sugar in it; or large helpings of coarse but heavily-sweetened jam, to put on one's store-bought bread to eat with the tea. Yet so important were such acquisitions by the poor that one could defensibly argue that the first cup of tea drunk by a British worker marked a turning-point in the history of human society. I beg the reader's

indulgence to repeat here my concluding sentences:

The first sweetened cup of hot tea to be drunk by an English worker was a significant historical event, because it prefigured the transformation of an entire society, a total remaking of its economic and social basis. We must struggle to understand fully the consequences of that and kindred events, for upon them was erected an entirely different conception of the relationship between producers and consumers, of the meaning of work, of the definition of self, of the nature of things. What commodities are, and what commodities mean, would thereafter be forever different. And for that same reason, what persons are, and what being a person means, changed accordingly. In understanding the relationship between commodity and person, we unearth anew the history of ourselves. (Mintz 1985: 214)

Food and drink were only one small slice of the rewards capitalism promised, and sooner or later delivered. Material culture, especially household furnishings, was an additionally rewarding sphere of expanding expenditure. Dress, for men, women and children, and of course for babies and for the dead, also became important. Nor were food and drink, housing and furnishings, dress and decor all there was to be had, either. But the acceptance and legitimation of desire for such new materials was a lengthy process, and probably less simple than it seems to us now. It involved much more than just persuasion. That we may still not fully understand how such a process unfolds, results most of all, perhaps, from our being convinced (or convincing ourselves) that it is all a matter of

simple common sense. It is more likely a series of changes, some of them probably quite subtle, that exceed by much the idea of choosing. To put it crudely, a buyer deciding between two makes of automobile is *only* making a choice—he has already come to the decision that he needs a car. To a certain extent the decision has been made *for* him by other constraints, such as where he must live, and where he must work. But he probably perceives these as *conditions*, as givens, things with which he simply must cope, rather than as *constraints*. The all-important precondition is some kind of felt need to buy; and ‘felt need to buy’, in the case of capitalism, has to mean the exchange of labor time for some part of its market value so that the purchases themselves, and the ‘choices’ they involve, can become possible. We can really speak of labor time here, because the buyer-to-be becomes a seller, the seller of his own labor; and he is often not in a position to set as he wishes the price for that labor.

All this for the proletarians, who have nothing but their labor to sell, and who came into the world as a precipitate of changes that separated them from all of the means of production to which they had had, before, slim but nonetheless real access. We distinguish them from persons in other social categories—not only from the feudal labor that had preceded them in Europe, and from those who owned productive property; but also from the so-called ‘primitive’ people who still lived outside the capitalist system, and whom anthropology first studied; and from the enslaved Africans, who became so important, and such an odd fixture, to capitalism in the form that it took on the plantations of the New World, in the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries.

Though study of how persons in those categories became consumers of new goods and producers for capitalism is a vital task for

anthropology, it cannot be essayed here. But a few paragraphs on such differences, may not be out of place.

However common or universal we may think human *emotions* to be, when one crosses those blurred and permeable boundaries that separate one society from another, the economic *systems* themselves—within which our personal, emotional lives are lived—may be quite different from each other. Thus the seemingly same emotions are given culturally different contexts within which to be experienced and played out. For example, in a capitalist society the marginal efficiency of capital *does* determine who works and who is unemployed. But in the societies anthropology first concentrated upon—and no matter how individualistic the people may have been—whether one worked or did not was not subject to the marginal efficiency of capital, but to utterly different social forces. That means that the context *within which* emotional states were experienced and played out was a quite different matter.²

CAPITALISM AND THE MEANINGS OF CONSUMPTION

Hence the question arises whether what consumption *meant*, and how it was enjoyed, were the same things, or different things, for producers and consumers who were still largely outside capitalism.³ What seems certain is that the desires of such people could be awakened, even if their understanding of what lay beyond those desires—their understanding of how capitalism worked—might remain meager, and their need to respond to external pressures less acute. Native Americans, for example, were repeatedly implicated in trade relationships with Europeans, and frequently found those relationships agreeable as long as they did

not become totally dependent upon them. ‘The beaver does everything perfectly well’, a Montagnais Indian says to a French missionary; ‘it makes kettles, hatchets, swords, knives, bread (...) in short, it makes everything’ (Axtell 1988, 167). We can figure out easily enough what this Montagnais was thinking; and that was the way it looked, from his perspective.

Analogous—yet wholly different—were the slaves who produced the sugar, indigo, cotton, coffee, molasses and rum that the New World shipped to the Old, in return for the lumber, grinding machinery, Osnaburgh cloth and instruments of torture required by the plantations. In discussing the New World slave plantations of the nineteenth century, Marx had conceded to the slaves no buying power at all. All of the slave’s labor, he argued, *looks like* unpaid surplus labor for the master. But in fact we know that in many of those instances the slaves *did* produce much or even most of their own subsistence, and as part of *that* surplus labor they also produced exchangeable wealth, some of which they could and did use as they wished (Mintz 1955, 1978). Their understanding of how capitalism worked was surely better than that of most so-called ‘primitive’ peoples; and their uses of the things they bought were no doubt closer to capitalist notions of consumption. In any event, these remarks are meant to show that anthropology still has before it work of a serious kind, before the study of the history of consumption succeeds in taking into account all of the larger characteristics of those societies within which that consumption was or is occurring.

The kind of consumption to which the balance of this essay is devoted, however, is of a fairly specific sort. It focuses upon our sort of society, and seeks to deal with a single rather unwieldy category of substances, the histories and consumption of which are not yet all that

well known. The category carries the term *excitantia*, which comes from Jordan Goodman, whose article by that name appeared three years ago (Goodman 1995). Goodman had borrowed the term in turn from L. Lewin, whose 1931 book, *Phantastica*, was devoted to the study of drugs and drug-induced effects. Goodman refers to substances that produce altered states of consciousness. That usage is helpful though perhaps not altogether appropriate for all of the substances covered. The word is used here more crudely and broadly than that, because the line between such substances and what can be called foods is sometimes really rather hard to draw.

Consumable goods that became newly available in Europe during the growth of capitalism before being carried elsewhere by the Europeans included tea, coffee, chocolate, tobacco, distilled alcoholic beverages, laudanum (which was opium in alcohol), some other drugs meant as medicines that resembled laudanum, and rum, sugar and molasses. In some cases *these substances* replaced or supplanted indigenous (that is, European) herbs or plants that were used to make quasimedical infusions, teas, *tisanes*, and the like.

Some of these new substances can be aligned on the food side of a seam that separates foods from drugs but others are plainly what *we call* drugs. One of items on the list, for example, sugar or sucrose, is well known to us, yet somewhat anomalous. Except for some quite exceptional moralists (Dufty 1976; see also Mechling & Mechling 1983), hardly anybody thinks of sugar as a drug. There is no convincing scientific evidence yet that hyperactivity among children is actually traceable to sugar, and the so-called ‘Twinkie defense’ simply has not held water.⁵ But except for the sugar companies, probably few people think of sugar as simply another food, the way they think of cabbages or potatoes. Processed sugar (sucrose) first became

widely used as an accompaniment to other ingestibles, particularly the three bitter beverage stimulants, coffee, tea and chocolate, which reached Europe a few centuries after sugar itself. Chocolate possesses some caloric value, while the other two beverages have none. All are bitter; all contain a stimulant; all were primarily consumed hot. To these early commodities one might add tobacco, which is certainly not a food, but which became popular partly in conjunction with these other substances (and like them was often sweetened before being consumed).

In an unpublished paper, Bradburd and Jankowiak have undertaken to show how substances of this sort were not only introduced into Europe as part of the creation of capitalism, but also how they were used in its expansion in frontier areas not yet fully assimilated within a cash and wage-labor economy. These authors invoke the term ‘drug food’ (Mintz 1966), which they define as ‘substances like coffee, tea, sugar, chocolate, tobacco, alcohol, opium and coca, pharmacological agents that alter cortical stimulation and modify mental activity’. Though the category is not on firm ground pharmacologically, there are other substances one might include here. Thus, for example, Paul Lovejoy (1995) writes of kola nuts in the Sudan; others have written about *qat* (*Catha edulis*) in Yemen and nearby; and of *pan* (betel nut and leaf), both on the Indian subcontinent and in Oceania. Some hallucinogenic substances used religiously in South America qualify. But it is not always clear in specific instances whether a substance does belong in this makeshift category or not. The whole sphere of alcoholic beverages, for instance, should be considered, even though many of the least spirituous, such as weak beers made from sorghum, millet or bananas, for example, are barely alcoholic at all; while the distilled liquors became especially important within capitalism and beyond, after

the seventeenth century. The easy definition of this range of substances is as psychoactive or mind altering. But anyone who consumes both coffee and whisky, say—or betel nut and crack—will recognize instantly that such a definition does not solve all of our problems.

In any event, Bradburd and Jankowiak do not think that such things as tea and alcohol simply diffused to the margins of capitalist expansion; they show how they were carried there and peddled—or given—to local people, in order to ‘domesticate’ their labor power. Their paper provides documentary evidence of the conscious intentions of many traders to use substances of these sorts to make those whom they wished to employ, or to buy from, dependent upon external access to new ingestibles.⁶

Among the enslaved, particularly in the eighteenth century, rum was employed by the planters to provide pleasure and good feeling, particularly at the close of the harvest—‘cropover’ in the anglophone islands (cf., for example McDonald 1993). But over time, tea, coffee, sugar and tobacco were also important substances for slave consumption in the Antilles. In many cases, the slaves were themselves the producers of the last three of these (tea, of course, has remained an Asian import throughout its history).

REDEFINING COMMODITIES

It was in Europe, however, that these drug foods or psychoactive substances were most important and, in later centuries, in the major European-settled or ‘white’ colonies—where the consumption swiftly became enormous, where patterns of work and leisure developed around the use of such things as tea and tobacco, and where we can say that people redefined the commodities, while being partly redefined by

them. In Europe itself, the rise of coffee houses and later, tea gardens; the appearance of such aesthetic productions as Bach's 'Coffee cantata', or the adventures of *Candide*; the significance of political utterances such as Michelet's, that coffee contributed to the French Revolution; the role of tea in British social history, including the part it played in de-alcoholizing the working class (Mintz 2002); the commercial significance of the importation of china from China, and the subsequent rise of the House of Wedgwood; the spread of snuff and tobacco use—subjects that, for the most part, had lain dormant for centuries, have only recently become topics of scholarly discussion once more. All have to do with the insinuation of *excitantia* within the cultural life of the masses.

While the term *excitantia* was borrowed, the phrase 'plebeian luxuries' was not. These days, of course, it could refer to many things that, only a couple of centuries ago, were not only beyond the reach of ordinary mortals, but even beyond the reach of kings. Among them are some of those balms for the spirit mentioned above: those warming, cooling, sweetening, uplifting, calming, exciting substances, which now travel worldwide.

It is worth mentioning that none of these *excitantia* really deserves to be 'explained' in terms of its inherent chemical properties. In United States culture—perhaps because it is in some degree a relatively recent derivative of North European puritanism—people seem particularly prone to discuss sin as if it were a kind of voltage or magical power, and to find its more than merely chemical power present in some substances and not in others. Alcohol is the best illustration, of course, especially when viewed from the perspective of the North American national experience with Prohibition. Since that time, marijuana has become an important substance in this way, not to mention

cocaine, 'crack' and many other things. But in a National Public Radio report some years ago on delinquent adolescent behavior in Salt Lake City—not a place famous for its criminality—the chemical culprit turned out to be an over-the-counter cough remedy called Pertussin, which adolescents were drinking in large quantities to produce a mood of elevated well-being. It is well known that nutmeg in large doses produces hallucinations. So does the sniffing of some glues, dry cleaning fluids, and so on. There are so many chemicals that we moderns cannot do without, that controlling all such substances is impractical. But for those who want to settle for chemically or biologically based explanations of behavior, without taking into account the social context of use, the situation is even worse.

There are, after all, various behaviors—such as gambling—that certainly seem to be addictive for *some persons*. But no one has identified a chemical substance or a gene to explain such addiction. There is no doubt that some scientists are looking, because if there is no gene or substance to explain the apparent addiction, one would *have* to explain it by reference to social context, and that is a direction in which many observers are unwilling to go. A gene for gambling? A food that makes gamblers into addicts? How convenient such discoveries would be! For if there *were* such a connection, it would 'explain' addictive behavior automatically, without the need for any reference to the social and cultural *circumstances* of addiction—and for some people, that would be a reassuring discovery, indeed.

Nonetheless, we know as a matter of fact that, at any time, some people are seeking different emotional states, to feel close to others, to give life additional meaning, to experience altered states of consciousness. We need to remember that many people who are involved in

such searches may be induced in various ways to try things they might not have tried otherwise. They are not induced to try substances such as coffee or cigarettes or alcohol *because* the substances are addictive, but for other reasons. But they do try them, often because they are made to believe that doing so is sophisticated, a way of showing love, a way of growing up, a way of belonging. Accordingly, in modern society, telling people to ‘just say “no”’ — probably will not help, most of all because so many others are simultaneously shouting ‘just do it’ in our ears.

That circumstances are critical to the taking on of new habits is, of course, not news; and of course different substances *are* different chemically. An attractive illustration is provided by the August 22, 1997 Business section of *The New York Times*, in a story headlined ‘More hip, more hop’. It concerns the new vogue for heavily-caffeinated beverages in North America, with campaigns aimed at young males in particular. ‘What the cola companies have found is that cola is dead’, says Steven Grasse, head of Gyro Worldwide in Philadelphia, an advertising firm that specializes in marketing to teenagers and twenty-somethings. ‘Kids are saying, “Those are the drinks of my grandparents.”’ ‘Caffeine,’ the publisher of *Trends Journal* tells us, ‘is the new-millennium drug of choice’. But the growing market for high-caffeine beverages, it turns out, is not just the crowd at Starbucks—more than anybody else, apparently, it’s the *six-year-olds*. Among the names for the new beverages are Jolt, Hype, Boost, Guts, and Zapped. Some names—such as XTC and Krank 20—associate to familiar illegal drugs such as Ecstasy, the hallucinogen, and crack, a popular methamphetamine. ‘Krank 20 is water with caffeine’, its manufacturers tell us at their website. ‘Lots of caffeine. All that we could get away with. If this stuff doesn’t roll your oats, better check your pulse!’ No one needs a map to

decipher the path along which these advertisers are seeking to lead their youthful readers.

It may seem like a giant leap from tea and the British working class, at the start of the eighteenth century, to the growing success of Guts, Zapped, Jolt and Boost among the twenty-somethings and six-year-olds in today’s America. But there should be no need to build a bridge between these phenomena; there is more and more convincing evidence that the bridge was there, all along. If tea, coffee, tobacco and rum *are* the forefathers of XTC, Jolt and Zapped, the study of consumption may help us to discover how consumption has changed or stayed the same, even as the items consumed—their production, distribution, promotion and consumption—have evolved.

In summary, the intention here was to suggest, first, that consumption as studied by anthropologists is a difficult undertaking when we have in mind the complex division of labor, highly-developed transportation, machine technology, and capitalist economy that typify the modern world. Elaborate and nuanced though it was, the economy of the Trobriand Islands, or of Tikopia, for example, posed very different problems for the ethnographer than does a community that is now unmistakably part of ‘The West’. This has led to a research concentration on consumption, but often quite divorced from the study of production.

If one turns back to the period when the first commodities created by capitalism were being installed in European popular consumption, it may be a little easier to understand in what ways these things were tried, accepted, then enthusiastically embraced. Such is what happened within working-class Europe, with the bitter stimulant beverages, such as tea and coffee; with their sweetener, sugar; and with that now over-familiar accompanying comfort, tobacco.

Though substances of this sort might serve much the same *subjective* needs in different kinds of societies, it still mattered in what ways the societies themselves were different. Where a money economy, a price system, competition among sellers, advertising, and a self-regulating market are all part of daily life, then how products are sold, and how supply and demand are tied together without reference to environing social needs, become processes that leave the Trobriands and Tikopia far behind. It is not that tea, Jolt and Coca Cola are all that different from each other, whatever their exact chemical composition. But as they have become part of the culture of consumption, their nature—what they mean, how they are used, the power their producers can exercise—changes in ways that simply cannot be matched in the non-capitalist world. The democratization of consumption has accompanied the forging of a world in which who you are is, more and more, a matter of what and how you consume.

Hence, the subjective effects of such use may be approximately the same; but the context of use has become radically different. In the ambiance of plebeian luxury—the luxury of Everyman under capitalism—even six-year-olds have buying power, and they must be appealed to accordingly. Those who have buying power have power: the power to buy. Because they have buying power, they are entitled to a thrill. How else would they—or for that matter, their parents—know how lucky we all are?

NOTES

- 1 This article first appeared in *Suomen Antropologi* 23 (4), published in 1998. Reprinted with permission of Mrs. Jackie Mintz.
- 2 Surely no one has stated this more eloquently than Raymond Firth: 'Primitive is definitely alive to his economic advantage, but his traditional

background does not allow him to treat this as the universal, unique, and dominant imperative in the determination of his behaviour' (1950). Firth's discussion of the economic characteristics of a primitive economy is still lively and astute.

- 3 At least one anthropologist, Marshall Sahlins, employs the difference between consumption under capitalism and consumption outside it as the decisive difference. Sahlins' argument follows that which he has laid down in earlier work. The Western definition of human fate begins with The Fall. Joyless creatures, born in sin, cursed to labor for their daily bread, destined to die with no more than the hope of posthumous redemption, humankind was to find its salvation in economic theory. The application of limited means to infinite ends is as good as can be expected; guaranteeing no satisfaction but unending labor, and death as a final resting place. Such a moral framework is reinforced at later points in Western history by the Reformation and the rise of capitalism. Individualism receives a new definition: consumer satisfaction. In contrast, Sahlins argues, we have the Savages. Like animals, they have no sense of sin. They do not view their means as scarce, nor their ends as infinite. Whatever their joys, consumer satisfaction among them is defined in radically different ways. They shock us; they appear to lack ambition. They also choose not to excel—at least not in order to separate themselves from the common herd, so much as to be able to join it again. Their interest in material accumulation is feeble, another sign of their animality and primitivity. They seem to put group welfare above individual success. But since they are feckless and improvident, they often starve together. The grasshoppers are cared for by the ants. These societies 'are not going anywhere', to use a modern expression.
- 4 The term was used with reference to a famous criminal case where there had been speculation by the defense that the ingestion of sucrose could produce a state of altered consciousness.
- 5 The most infamous instance, of course, was that of the peddling of Indian opium to the Chinese by Great Britain in defiance of the Imperial Government—undertaken to obtain foreign exchange to pay for the tea that the British were importing from China since the Chinese were uninterested in anything the British had to sell.

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