

Consumption and Material Culture Studies in the Global South

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This special issue of *International Review of Social Research* holds the challenge of representing a growing field of studies in the social sciences: that of consumption and material culture. In Brazilian academia, where most of the authors of the articles presented here come from, the study of consumption has experienced a boom in recent years, with an ever-increasing number of national and international meetings and congresses, as well as books and journals published. Despite

the recent interest in the dynamics of consumption in complex societies, consumption is not, however, a completely new and unexamined theme in social sciences. In fact, consumption has been studied by anthropology the home discipline of the guest editors since its inception. Not only the consumption, but also the production and circulation of goods, have been examined by disciplinary sub-fields such as, for instance, economic anthropology or anthropology of food,

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the latter focusing on a very specific and perhaps the most fundamental of all (Richards, 2004 [1932]).

Thus, since classic anthropology and its studies of so-called ‘primitive’ societies, the study of consumption has been thematized, even though the first anthropologists were more concerned with what Morgan deemed the ‘arts of subsistence’ (Morgan, 2000 [1877]). For Morgan, consumption in every society was to find its basis in kinship; the circulation of goods could only be motivated for relations of reciprocity between relatives and allies.

It is a consumption of prestige, and not only subsistence, that will be highlighted by other classic studies. Franz Boas (1966), in describing the *potlatch* – a practice among the Kwakiutl, Indians of Northwestern America, ritually destroyed their possessions from time to time –, and Mauss (1954) will interpret in other terms such exotic and extravagant consumption of goods. It will now be described as a form of confrontation by means of ostentation, a ‘fight over richness’ in the words of Mauss, in which tribal chiefs challenged other tribal chiefs to respond to ceremonial feasts with the same quantity and quality of goods that were to be reciprocated – or else, it would signal dishonor and would thus bring about war.

At the other side of the world, Malinowski (2005 [1922]) could observe in the Trobriand Island yet another social institution that took the form of an exchange systems, the *kula*. Again, this is not about an exchange of goods for subsistence; rather the exchange is motivated by prestige. The *kula* system implied a temporary,

rather than permanent ‘consumption’ of goods, since the shell necklaces and bracerlets, objects of the *kula* trade, should circulate and be worn by Trobrianders and later re-distributed in order to form new alliances. Although there was a parallel economic system (the *ginwali*) the *kula* pointed to the symbolic character of such circulation of goods. Therefore, the belief that tribal societies did not practice the exchange of goods or that such exchanges were limited to subsistence could no longer be valid. This way of thinking the *potlatch* and the *kula* will be reinforced by Mauss (1954) in his classic essay *The Gift*, in which Mauss argues that there is much more to exchanges than just economic reasoning.

There is no doubt that contemporary studies of consumption are indebted to these classic anthropologists, as well as other scholars from various fields of knowledge, such as Walter Benjamin (1968) who writes about the arcades of Paris as places of circulation of the new citizens of the new urban environment of the first decades of the 20th century, or Georg Simmel (1950) who highlights the growing individualism of social agents in modern highly monetarized societies. In later decades, the scholars of the School of Birmingham (Hoggart, 1958; Williams, 1958; and Thompson, 1963) had a strong impact on establishing consumption as an academic discipline. Upon proposing that research should focus on the dynamics of consumption processes in everyday life, the School of Birmingham helped bring to the fore research interests that were before relegated, since the focus had always been on the production sphere. In

the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, cultural processes are not to be thought as mere ideology any longer; rather, *meanings* and *values* are to be taken into account as lived experiences that strongly influence social practice.

Given the maturity that the field of consumption studies is managing to achieve, it has been a pleasurable, but huge task to put together this special issue, which focuses on the Global South perspectives on the topic of material culture and mass consumption. The selected articles, based on the comments and suggestions from our reviewers, portray a varied and comprehensive panel on the directions and perspectives of consumption studies in the Global South and, especially, in Brazil. Our authors take consumption in its relation to material culture and analyse it in three different main perspectives: that related to globalization, to youth and to goods. The articles analyse data from fieldwork carried out in locations as diverse as the urban metropolises of Brazil, the United States, the Philippines, Portugal, and the Javari Indian Land of North Amazon, portraying objects of study such as the consumption of mobile phones and 'affective technology'; the use of social network sites on the Internet by migrant women in their relationship with their left-behind children; rituals of consumption among young people in low-income neighbourhoods; the role of supermarkets as places of socialization; and the transformations introduced in an indigenous community on the Brazilian Amazon by the consumption of industrialized goods.

The issue begins with the article of our guest authors, Daniel Miller and Mirca Madianou, 'Should You Accept

a Friends Request from Your Mother? And Other Filipino Dilemmas'. In the piece, the authors highlight the role of the consumption of digital technologies in the redefinition of mother-child relationships and problematize the issues that arise when migrant mothers – mostly nurses and maids who emigrated from the Philippines to England – try to fulfill their parental roles through the use of social network sites such as Facebook and MySpace. What notions of privacy are to be shaken when mothers send friends requests to their left-behind children? What expectations are to be fulfilled – or not – in terms of experiencing family life in such an emotional context? More than the study of social network sites or the new notions of friendship that are made visible, the article argues in favour of a redefinition of kinship in the light of how digital media affects the relationships among members of transnational families.

The second paper deals with the urban Brazilian youth. In 'Music and Youth in Contemporary Brazilian Society', Livia Barbosa (one of the most important Brazilian scholars in the field of consumption studies), Letícia Velloso and Veranise Dubeaux analyze consumption of music by young people in three Brazilian metropolises: São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Porto Alegre (the most populated city in South Brazil). Drawing from both quantitative and qualitative approaches, the authors surveyed more than one thousand individuals to conclude that music has become more pervasive in young people's lives than ever before, to the point of constituting an actual 'soundtrack' to everyday life. Through a material

culture framework, the authors intend to answer the following question: how do youth currently give meaning to music as a key feature of life, and how do music and the objects through which it is experienced constitute life as such?

Ronaldo Corrêa and his co-authors Carmen Rial and Gilson Queluz in their article “‘The Idea Is for Us to Work Here in the Workshop!’: The Re-functionalization of Artisans’ Economic and Cultural Circuits in Florianópolis, South Brazil” focuses on the cultural consumption aspects of a traditional practice – the handicraft of the urban artisan. The space where craftspeople of Santa Catarina Island (South Brazil) work – the workshop – is thus taken as a symbolic space. Rather than a mere workplace, the artisans’ workshops are analysed as performative spaces that redefine notions of what can be deemed modern or traditional in the light of globalization processes.

On the other hand, by shedding light on another aspect of the global flows – the symbolic value of food in lived experiences of Brazilian immigrants in Boston, USA – Viviane Kraieski de Assunção, in her article entitled ‘Circulating Food and Relationships: the Movement of Food (and Other Things (Between Brazilians in Boston and Brazil)’ manages to deepen the debate on how the immigrant condition influences these social agents’ relation to food and how this newly acquired condition influences their alimentary practices in their new cultural context. The authors argues that the circulation of food and other objects that symbolically refer to homeland – perfume, cosmetics, clothing, for instance - engenders new transnational social networks that would not be

formed otherwise. More importantly, the circulation of food and other comfort objects is only symbolically relevant when it follow only one way – from Brazil to the United States. In the process of their circulation and consumption, such food and objects carry with them the memories of people and places, flavours, and beliefs; that is, meanings and values that reinforce to the immigrants a feeling of belonging to the network of relations they previously had, and which is thus ressignified in a transnational context.

Closing the first thematic block which focused mostly on consumption and globalization, Angela Maria de Souza, in her article ‘Globalizing Locations: Production-Consumption Relations in the Hip-hop Movement in Brazil and Portugal’ deals with the global flows pertaining to the hip-hop movement across continents and in Brazil itself. The author is interested in the relationship between the global peripheries of Greater Lisbon in Portugal and Greater Florianópolis in South Brazil, analyzing the ways by which groups belonging to the hip-hop movement create and circulate specific flows of common aesthetic and musical discourse.

The next three papers in the Special Issue bear in common the theme of young consumption and, especially in the case of the first two, the focus lies on practices of consumption in low-income settings of two Brazilian metropolises: Rio de Janeiro and Porto Alegre. In ‘Juvenilise Sociability, Cultural Classifications and “Tastes”: A Study on the Universe of Games and Social Networks in Lower Class LAN Houses’, author Carla Barros draws from an ethnographic study

to discuss the consumption of digital media by low-income young people from a Rio de Janeiro slum. Barros points out to the important role of 'lan-houses' (the Brazilian equivalent of a cybercafé) in allowing access to digital media and to the playing of games in particular. More importantly, the author observes and analyses how sociability is permeated by the way games are consumed and played – the ways by which the youngsters establish relationships with the game characters and the expectations they have about them. Barros also observes the important role played by the lan-house attendants in the establishment of social networks based on reciprocity, collaboration and respect. Following on the theme of young consumption, Rosana Pinheiro-Machado and her co-author Lucia Scalco turn their eyes to an apparently paradoxical phenomenon: how can low-income young people spend all their money on expensive branded clothing? In their article 'Brand clans: consumption and rituals among low-income young people in the city of Porto Alegre' the authors shed light on their ethnographic by resorting to classic anthropological theory – thus, the 'brand clans' found in Porto Alegre are approached via the classic anthropological concept of totemism. By discussing the symbolic logic which permeates the consumption practices in the community studied, the authors manage to build a consistent argument in favour of the redefinition of the paradigms of consumption and poverty, but also to analyse how the branded goods consumed are ressignified by these youngster in order to constitute the 'clans' that distinguish them from other groups.

On the other hand, consumption can also be taken in a historic perspective. The article by Santos, Pedro and Rial, 'The configuration of 'young' spaces in Brazil in the late 1960s: pop domesticity through the perspective of the magazine Casa & Jardim' addresses issues related to the youth in the last century and which, in their turn, are connected to broader themes such as the behavioral revolution occurring in the 1960s. From the pages of the most important home decoration magazine of the time, the authors show the ways by which a pop language directed to the consumption of the middle classes of urban, Western societies is built.

The closing block of articles comprises three pieces concerned with the discussion on consumption practices related to specific sites of consumption, ethnographic locations and goods, and how those engender forms of sociability, affection and emotion. First, Maria Elisabeth Goidanich and Carmen Rial, in 'A Place Called Supermarket' used their ethnographic data to deconstruct Marc Auge's (1995) argument that supermarket are to be considered 'non-places'. Rather than being an impersonal setting, the authors demonstrate that the supermarket is, rather, a place teeming with abundant sociability instances. The authors show how the shoppers they studied employ different strategies to establish a particular relation to supermarkets as social and historical spaces. The next article, although also concerned with the debate on consumption as material culture, is dedicated not to sites of consumption such as supermarkets, but to the dynamics of consumption pertaining to a specific

object that has become ubiquitous in everyday life: the mobile phone. In her article 'On Emotion and Memories: the Consumption of Mobile Phones as 'Affective Technology'', Sandra Rubia SILVA Silva turns her attention to the consumption of media technology in a low-income neighbourhood, and how such consumption practices affect relationships in terms of gender and generation. By analyzing her ethnographic data, the author highlights the consumption of mobile phones as an 'affective technology' given that consumers not only tend to develop an emotional relationship with their mobile phones and the content stored on them, but also experience strong emotions in the process - emotions that, when experienced or discovered by means of communication and information technologies such as mobile phones, can be amplified, built or reinvented. The closing article, 'Amazonian exchanges: Txema's lessons with outboard engines, mosquito nets and images', by Barbara Arisi, addresses the transformations that the increasing flow of industrialized

goods and foreign people – such as TV crews - is bringing to the lives of the Matis Indians of North Amazon, Brazil. Drawing from her ethnography of the Matis and her relationship as a researcher to the Indian chief Txema in particular, Arisi weaves an interesting argument showing how the Matis use this new influx of objects as a means to build close relationships and teach their values to white people.

As guest editors, we hope that the articles portrayed here will give readers a varied panel of the perspectives and possibilities for studies of consumption in the Global South. We would also like to take this opportunity to thank the authors for all their patience during the revising process. In a special way, our thanks go to the Editors of *International Review of Social Research* for hosting this special issue, as well as their careful dealing of all the aspects of the editing process. Above all, we want to thank all the reviewers in Brazil, Europe and the United States for their invaluable help and substantial evaluations.

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