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### Unexpected Subversions: Modern Colonialism, Globalization, And Commodity Culture

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## CHAPTER 24

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# UNEXPECTED SUBVERSIONS: MODERN COLONIALISM, GLOBALIZATION, AND COMMODITY CULTURE

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TIMOTHY BURKE

SCHOLARS initially engaged in the 'turn to consumption' in early modern European historiography often described themselves as rescuing the subject from long-standing neglect or marginalization by historians and social theorists. A closely connected series of studies ended up suggesting that attention to consumption was not merely a compatible addition to an established paradigmatic understanding of industrialization and modernization in early modern European societies, but a thorough revision, even inversion, of many existing assumptions about the causal roots and consequences of the transition to modernity.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, scholarship on the relationship between consumption and modern colonialism, has not had quite so clear a critique of existing work or even a sense of shared movement. More than a decade after a wave of similar works about consumerism in modern African, Asian, Middle Eastern, Latin American, or Pacific societies appeared in a variety of area studies fields, scholarly attention to consumer practices

<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the best single overview of this 'turn to consumption' in early modern historiography, as well as some sharply pointed critiques of its claims, is John Brewer and Roy Porter (eds.), *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London: Routledge, 1993). One particularly interesting description of the marginalization of consumption as a subject of study is given in this volume by Joyce Appleby, who attributes the neglect of consumption not to recent scholars but to a strong 'productivism' in Enlightenment-era political economy and moral philosophy which has carried over into contemporary times. For a particularly strong version of revisionist thinking about the causal importance of consumer desire, see T. H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) and Lisa Jardine, *Worldly Goods: A New History of the Renaissance*, 1st edn. (New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 1996).

and commodity culture in many developing societies remains, as Mona Abaza puts it, a 'blind spot'.<sup>2</sup>

In part, this sporadic development of a scholarly conversation is a mirror of diffuse connections between different area studies projects. I also think, however, that scholars studying the history of modern colonialism have been more reluctant to make strongly contrarian claims about consumerism and commodification similar to those made by early modern Europeanists because they are more unsettled by some of the implications of their own studies. As Abaza notes, modern consumer culture is strongly mapped to 'Westernization' and globalization, subjects which are the focus of acute theoretical and political unease in most scholarship devoted to colonial and post-colonial societies, not to mention political life within those societies.<sup>3</sup> It was one thing for a scholar like Lisa Jardine to argue that it was the desire for new goods that caused European expansion in the early modern period. It is another thing for a specialist in a colonial and post-colonial society to suggest that the study of consumption and commodities should spark a comprehensive rethinking of the transformative power or instrumental coherence of colonial governments and globalizing capitalism. Yet in some measure (though with numerous qualifiers) this is in fact what many of the works focused on consumer cultures in modern colonial and post-colonial societies have argued.

There is an inevitable bit of definitional business at the outset of the discussion. Namely, which societies count as 'colonial'? This is an especially vexing question if the specific topic at hand is consumerism and commodification. It is easier to apply sharp delineations of period and region if the topic at hand is the rise, development, and end of formal structures of European imperial rule, or even if the subject is specific moments in the transnational organization of capitalism as a whole, such as the relationship between late nineteenth-century financial speculation and industrialization in the capitalist periphery. When the discussion concerns subjects which are in some fashion or another concerned with culture, the practice of everyday life, or identity and personhood—which certainly describes consumption—setting temporal or spatial boundaries around the conversation is much more difficult.

Does a review of the character of consumption in 'colonial societies' include imperial metropolises as well as regions colonized by Europe, or the expansion of the United States across North America?<sup>4</sup> If so, there is a very large class of scholarly studies which in some respect or another discuss the association between colonialism and consumption

<sup>2</sup> Mona Abaza, *Changing Consumer Cultures of Modern Egypt: Cairo's Urban Reshaping* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), p. vii.

<sup>3</sup> See Abaza, *Changing Consumer Cultures*, ch. 2.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of how boundaries between empire and metropolis need to be understood as fuzzy or indeterminate, see Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Colony and Metropole in the English Imagination, 1830–1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002). Also see the essays in Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose, *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). For a broader theoretical discussion of the modern global system in terms of circulations and 'flows' which encompass and erode some of the distinctions between metropolis and colony, see Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

in nineteenth- and twentieth-century global culture.<sup>5</sup> Even constrained to the Western European states which created or extended formal empires in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific after 1860, studies like Anne McClintock's intricate reading of British commodity culture indicate the extent to which colonial meanings and images were circulating within metropolitan societies.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, there are good reasons that work of this kind should not be prominently included in a review of scholarship on colonialism and consumerism besides the sheer unmanageability of this scope of analysis. Bernard Porter has suggested that the cultural ubiquity of empire in the affairs of metropolitan societies has been overemphasized,<sup>7</sup> but even more to the point is Nicolas Thomas's pointed arguments against the generalizing tendencies of work on 'colonial discourse'.<sup>8</sup> Thomas's own markedly original work on the movement of commodities in the colonial cultures of the Pacific, *Entangled Objects*, seems to me to define the location of the boundary between work which is centrally concerned with the entanglement of consumption and colonialism and work on consumer culture where ideas about empire are in some sense present but not centrally constitutive.<sup>9</sup>

A great focus on particularity and on societies subjected to modern imperial domination by Western states puts traditional area studies scholarship at the centre of the analysis, with all of the advantages of its focused form of expertise, but also some of the problems that area studies work tends to pose for comparative or global analysis. Scholars working in area studies traditions sometimes resist or inhibit comparative approaches. Where this struggle between particularity and comparison poses a definitional problem is in deciding which societies were in fact the subjects of modern colonial rule. The regions subjugated by the 'new imperialism' of the late nineteenth century (Africa, parts of South Asia, the Middle East, and much of the Pacific) seem the obvious core cases. Even within those regions, however, there are diverse histories of imperial control. There are long-standing debates about how to compare South Africa's layering of early modern mercantile rule, mid-nineteenth-century expansion by a supposedly liberal British empire which also encouraged white settlement, and emblematic forms of later imperial administration, with something like the more abrupt and violent subjugation of other African societies in the 'Scramble for Africa' after 1870. The similar layering of imperial regimes and practices in India poses similar problems of comparison within South and South-East Asia, and so on.

Even more vexing are questions about societies which were not under direct European territorial control after 1860, but were nevertheless strongly affected by imperial hegemony,

<sup>5</sup> Deborah Root, *Cannibal Culture: Art, Appropriation, and the Commodification of Difference* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996); Mona Domosh, *American Commodities in an Age of Empire*, (New York: Routledge, 2006); Kristin L. Hoganson, *Consumers' Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Nicholas Thomas, *Colonialism's Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).



such as those in China, Thailand, or Latin America. While I have chosen to focus strongly on the core cases of modern colonialism, I will sometimes refer to work on China, Thailand, and other locations outside of that core because of its strong analytic resemblance to work on more narrowly defined examples of colonial societies. There are strong intellectual and theoretical connections linking much of the scholarship on consumption, commodification, shopping, and material culture in China, Thailand, Latin America, or the Caribbean to work on Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and the Pacific.

## CONSTRUCTING THE COLONIAL AND POST-COLONIAL CONSUMER

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If nothing else, non-Western populations have often been similarly constructed as consumers (or non-consumers) by Western actors, with little regard for any differences between them. The distinctive fashion in which colonial subjects or non-Western populations were or were not envisioned as consumers in the discourses of colonial authorities or metropolitan elites has therefore been a powerful starting point for scholars studying these subjects. This very much makes sense as a point of intellectual origin: post-1950 historical and anthropological scholarship on colonial and post-colonial societies was intensely interested from the outset in refuting or attacking the ways in which colonial rulers had depicted their subjects as backward, primitive, lacking history, child-like, violent, and a host of associated stereotypes. The academic study of modern colonialism and its consequences has since extended this critique in a variety of ways: to more specific forms of colonial social construction applied to specific identities or groups, to more specific institutional uses of representation in the domination of colonized populations, or to forms of particular contradiction and tension in the imperial imagination. The historical circumstances under which non-Western societies and individuals have or have not been envisioned as consumers turn out to be potently visible in all three of these extensions, strongly accenting or complicating imperial ideas about class, gender, and ethnic difference in colonial societies while also unsettling their ideas about the passivity of colonial subjects.

The contradictions between imagining modern consumers as imbued with a distinctly modern kind of capitalist agency and imagining colonial or non-Western populations as not-yet-modern and incapable of self-rule appear as fault lines in the earliest moments of the 'new imperialism' of the late nineteenth century. For example, Thomas Richards and Anne McClintock both speak to the extent to which nineteenth-century British culture envisioned the commodity as an instrument of empire, autonomously civilizing or modernizing Africans and other non-Western societies.<sup>10</sup> Some of the most

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851-1914* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990); McClintock, *Imperial Leather*.

politically powerful arguments in favour of imperial expansion across Europe and in the United States primarily envisioned African, Asian, and Pacific societies as new markets for manufactured goods, rather than as sources of raw materials for Western industries, the opposite of what actually occurred in the early economic development of most of Europe's new colonial possessions. (Though as Elisabeth Croll notes of China, many of these societies were also long-standing 'dream markets' that had figured in the imagination of Western commerce for far longer.<sup>11</sup>)

The reality was unsurprisingly different. When colonial labourers were partially motivated by the desire to accumulate commodities, as in the case of mine workers from Mozambique travelling to South Africa after the initial opening of the Witwatersrand gold fields, the active suppression of wages and increasingly tighter control over the migrant economy severely limited rather than promoted the development of local consumption.<sup>12</sup> In the case of many colonized societies in Asia, East Africa, and the Middle East, the extension of colonial control or of indirect imperial hegemony in the late nineteenth century interrupted or impeded long-standing flows of European imports into local consumer markets. Important new work in recent years has described the degree to which non-Western consumer markets were an active driver both of the early modern world economy and in the industrialization of Europe and the United States.<sup>13</sup> To some extent, the consuming practices and material culture of colonized societies between the late nineteenth century and the middle of the twentieth century remains one of the least explored areas within this general area of study. Sherman Cochran's study of Chinese merchants and consumer culture in China and South-East Asia underscores how little we know about merchants, retailing, and material culture in most colonial societies before 1960.<sup>14</sup> This relative emphasis on more contemporary experiences in scholarly publications may partially be a by-product of the imperial perception of their subjects as always-about-to-consume, an attitude which also affects what kinds of information exist in archives and thus the plausibility or difficulty of studying the topic in the first place.

However, the characteristic double move of forgetting that colonized populations were already consumers with existing relationships to global commodity flows (or were actively interested in becoming so) and depicting those same populations as an always-potential yet to be tapped market for Western consumer goods, has retained most of its force in a continuous fashion, from the establishment of modern European empires through to the contemporary moment, even among scholars. The constant rediscovery

<sup>11</sup> Elisabeth Croll, *China's New Consumers: Social Development and Domestic Demand* (London: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> Patrick Harries, *Work, Culture, and Identity: Migrant Laborers in Mozambique and South Africa, c.1860-1910* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1994).

<sup>13</sup> See for example Jeremy Prestholdt, *Domesticating the World: African Consumerism and the Genealogies of Globalization* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> Sherman Cochran, *Chinese Medicine Men: Consumer Culture in China and Southeast Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

of this double trope resembles internal tensions associated with other 'civilizing' projects, most notably missionary Christianity. All such projects of modernizing were imagined as always just beginning, never quite actually begun, but consumerism has its own peculiar valences and associations.

The most intense focus on this construction by scholars has been on post-1950s advertising and marketing carried out through mass media in post-colonial or late colonial societies. Studies like Steven Kemper's *Buying and Believing*, Mark Liechty's *Suitably Modern*, Robert Foster's *Materializing the Nation*, William Mazzarella's *Shoveling Smoke*, Daniel Miller's *Capitalism: An Ethnographic Approach*, and my own study *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women* all focus at some point on the particular construction of specific non-Western populations as consumers through post-1950 advertising and mass media, in Sri Lanka, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, India, Trinidad, and Zimbabwe respectively.<sup>15</sup> Other scholarship focused on advertising outside of the United States and Western Europe, such as Brian Moeran's *A Japanese Advertising Agency*, has also contributed to this body of knowledge by adding ethnographic and sociological texture to the scholarly understanding of transnational advertising.<sup>16</sup>

The relatively consistent observation offered by most of these studies is that in these settings advertising firms (both local and transnational) continually reworked their audiences as *differently desiring* and as *continually converging* towards some kind of cosmopolitan middle-class modernity which would align their desires with global culture. In Zimbabwe, for example, marketing campaigns aimed at African women through various 'women's clubs' in order to sell a parallel version of consumer domesticity which resembled white domesticity but did not converge upon or challenge it. The more interesting question for most scholars has instead been the relationship between media or official constructions of the colonial/post-colonial consumer and the practices and performances of the audiences envisioned or targeted by those representations. In some cases, as Kemper, Mazzarella, and I suggest, local advertisers and their post-colonial middle-class audiences have been socially overlapping, and so the constructions with which they mutually work do not so quickly conform to any simple version of a colonial or globalizing ideology.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Steven Kemper, *Buying and Believing: Sri Lankan Advertising and Consumers in a Transnational World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Mark Liechty, *Suitably Modern: Making Middle-Class Culture in a New Consumer Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); Robert John Foster, *Materializing the Nation: Commodities, Consumption, and Media in Papua New Guinea* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002); William Mazzarella, *Shoveling Smoke: Advertising and Globalization in Contemporary India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Daniel Miller, *Capitalism: An Ethnographic Approach* (Oxford: Berg, 1997); Timothy Burke, *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women: Commodification, Consumption, and Cleanliness in Modern Zimbabwe* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).

<sup>16</sup> Brian Moeran, *A Japanese Advertising Agency: An Anthropology of Media and Markets* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996).

<sup>17</sup> See in particular Part III of Mazzarella's *Shovelling Smoke* and ch. 7 of Kemper's *Buying and Believing*.

## MIDDLE CLASSES, NATIONS AND MODERNITY

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By far the most central, empirically rich area of focus among scholars studying the relationship between modern colonialism and consumption concerns the role of consumerism and commodities in the social and imaginative life of the colonial and post-colonial middle classes. In some cases, scholars have found their way to consumption as a topic by focusing on the life of the middle class, in others, to the middle class by an interest in commodity culture. Mark Liechty expresses a view common in much of the literature when he writes, 'Cultures of consumerism, media, and youth are not side effects or consequences of middle-class formation. Rather, they are among the most important cultural processes through which an emerging middle class actually creates itself as a sociocultural entity.'<sup>18</sup>

Liechty here identifies not only why the history and anthropology of colonial and post-colonial middle-classes should so strongly involve attention to consumerism and commodities, but also why this attention often runs against the grain of an older historiography. To some degree, both colonial rulers and later anti-colonial critics have viewed non-Western middle classes or aspirant elites as chimeras or phantoms, a group that should not exist or whose social role is debased or compromised. Some studies (including Liechty's book) finesse that challenge by viewing such middle classes as new or emergent, working with globalized or cosmopolitan material culture in circumstances of rapid economic and social change. Other work, however, not only looks at the contemporary circumstances of the post-colonial middle classes but argues that those circumstances have deeper roots in a history that extends back all the way to the outset of the colonial era and in some cases beyond it.<sup>19</sup> One especially influential examination of the early colonial production of new social forms through commodities and consuming practices that were both 'middling' and self-consciously modern is the second volume of Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff's *Of Revelation and Revolution*, which focuses heavily on the uses of material culture by both Nonconformist missionaries and Christian converts in a Tswana chieftdom in nineteenth-century southern Africa. The Comaroffs are insistent that nineteenth-century struggles and collaborations around clothing, domestic space, and other objects and commodities have a strong genealogical connection to more contemporary assertions of middle-class identity and ethnic pride in Botswana.<sup>20</sup> Though many studies in other regions which focus instead on the last two or three decades note some of the historical rootedness both of middling classes

<sup>18</sup> Liechty, *Suitably Modern*, 7.

<sup>19</sup> Two historical studies focused centrally on colonial middle-class life are Sanjay Joshi, *Fractured Modernity: Making of a Middle Class in Colonial North India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) and Michael O. West, *The Rise of an African Middle Class: Colonial Zimbabwe, 1898-1965* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, Vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).



and their uses of goods, the kind of historical depth offered by the Comaroffs is still in relatively short supply.

Whatever period they are focusing on, scholars rarely refer to colonized or post-colonial elites as a single social class in the Marxist sense. As Liechty notes, a Weberian approach to what might be called 'middling classes' often seems more appropriate. These groups were (and often remain) a heterogeneous assembly of people with diverse sources of wealth or social prestige who share a common if loose imagination of themselves as between an elite (whether European colonial rulers, 'traditional' landholders, state rulers, or the extremely wealthy) and the rural and urban poor. Consumer culture, in the view of scholars, has become for these groups a crucial domain of performance and practice, an indispensable tool for crafting and expressing a sense of competency and affiliation with global, cosmopolitan, or modern meanings and objects in order to express a 'middling' identity and position. Indeed, as Maureen O'Dougherty notes, the definition of who counts as 'middle' is an active subject of concern for both 'natives' and observers, and contested actively through consumerism and commodities.<sup>21</sup> Descriptive accounts in various works often resemble the picture sketched by the Comaroffs, in which an increasingly commodified material culture simultaneously becomes a dialogic arena for struggle and collaboration. Communication and performance, on one hand, and consciousness, on the other, are central, repeated themes in this scholarship, often joined to a third, which is attention to the everyday or ritual practices which constitute consumer culture, particularly shopping.

The entanglement of the middle classes with consumer culture is hardly understudied in Euro-American contexts. One difference made by colonialism and its various after-maths is that the middle classes of colonial and post-colonial societies have to struggle to claim a cosmopolitan identity through consumerism against discursive constructions that make that fashioning invisible, yet to happen, or intrinsically oppositional; that these groups live in places which are represented as absent of modernity or as struggling against the imposition of 'Westernized' global culture, whereas Euro-American middle classes have related to consumer culture as something they are situated always already within, on 'home ground'. Priti Ramamurthy, for examples, has written about how Indian 'modern girls' self-fashioned through and around the representation of local cinematic 'sitara' celebrities like Sulochana in the 1920s and 1930s, on one hand appropriating the styling of American film stars like Clara Bow, on the other inflecting that image with novelty through saris and connections to local performative genres and aesthetics.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps as a consequence, scholarship details how the colonial and post-colonial middling classes also have struggled with ambivalence about identities fashioned through commodity culture, and the very real limitations that their peripheral position in colonial or global economies has imposed upon their access to manufactured consumer

<sup>21</sup> Maureen O'Dougherty, *Consumption Intensified: The Politics of Middle-Class Daily Life in Brazil* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

<sup>22</sup> Priti Ramamurthy, 'All-Consuming Nationalism: The Indian Modern Girl of the 1920s and 1930s', in Alys Eve Weinbaum et al. (eds.), *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).



goods. Those limitations also drive some of the fascination both inside and outside of scholarly circles with consuming practices in the developing world which appear to be financially impossible or dramatically improvident, such as the use of Parisian fashions by Congolese *sapeurs*,<sup>23</sup> or perhaps the most descriptively fetishized form of 'colonized consumption', the cargo cult of Pacific societies. Many scholars working on these often exoticized practices argue that to see them as consumption is a categorical error in the first place, as in Martha Kaplan's careful and critical reconceptualization of cargo cults in Fiji.<sup>24</sup> Even when the practices on hand are not marked off as unusually exotic, scholars writing about middle-class identity and consumption in colonial and post-colonial society often struggle to describe honestly what one collection of essays on Latin America calls 'the allure of the foreign' without succumbing to the concept of 'emulation' as it has sometimes figured in the critique of consumer culture, precisely because the tropes associated with emulation seem so uncomfortably close to the common colonial stereotype of non-Western elites as slavishly and immaturely imitative.<sup>25</sup>

Much of the scholarship in this field seeks to amplify its description of this dilemma through careful attention to specific social locations and circumstances such as urban neighbourhoods, domestic spaces, professional or working life. Mona Russell's essay on consumerism and modernity in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Egyptian home is a good example of this angle of approach.<sup>26</sup> Another common way further to specify analysis is through the prism of gender. An especially notable example of this approach is Mary Beth Mills's *Thai Women in the Global Labor Force*, which pays close attention to consumerism as the key domain within which the women she studies construct and interrogate *thansamay* or 'modern' selves simultaneously in reference to their locality, class, work process, and gender.<sup>27</sup> Yet another common form of specification is to focus on the intersection between class, consumerism, and middling-class youth, which is a major part of Liechty's analysis but also informs many other works, such as Chua Beng Huat's *Life Is Not Complete Without Shopping: Consumption Culture in Singapore*.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>23</sup> See Bob W. White, *Rumba Rules: The Politics of Dance Music in Mobutu's Zaire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> Martha Kaplan, *Neither Cargo nor Cult: Ritual Politics and the Colonial Imagination in Fiji* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).

<sup>25</sup> Benjamin Orlove (ed.), *The Allure of the Foreign: Imported Goods in Postcolonial Latin America* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997). A potent and easily accessible example of racist caricature of colonized peoples consuming in a slavish or imitative fashion can be found in Hergé, *Les Aventures de Tintin: Tintin au Congo (Tintin in the Congo)* (French and European publications, 1931). In many respects, Homi Bhabha's analysis of colonial mimicry is a useful guide for approaching emulation as a trope, but the concept has a separate intellectual history of association with consumerism that traces back to Veblen.

<sup>26</sup> Mona Russell, 'Modernity, National Identity, and Consumerism: Visions of the Egyptian Home', in Ruth Schecter (ed.), *Transitions in Domestic Consumption and Family Life in the Modern Middle East: Houses in Motion* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 38–62.

<sup>27</sup> Mary Beth Mills, *Thai Women in the Global Labor Force: Consuming Desires, Contested Selves* (Chapel Hill, NC: Rutgers University Press, 1999).

<sup>28</sup> Chua Beng Huat, *Life Is Not Complete Without Shopping: Consumption Culture in Singapore* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003).

Gender is a dominant focus in the historiography of consumerism as a whole in part because of the degree to which consumer practices and consciousness have been envisioned in the West as distinctively feminine. Extending this focus to the experience of non-Western societies in some cases parallels the insights of 'women in development' scholarship, documenting the mis-mapping of Western binaries onto societies which formerly had very different conceptual and social maps of the relationship of gender to labour, spatiality, cultural reproduction, and so on. In other cases, however, study of commodity culture and changing terrains of gender identity and practice have revealed consumption's importance in facilitating new or transformed gender roles within colonial and post-colonial societies.<sup>29</sup>

The constitution of middle-class life in colonial and post-colonial societies is not the only domain where the use or role of consumerism has drawn scholarly attention. Foster, Kemper, Miller, Huat, Abaza, Gerth, Richard Wilk and many other authors in this field have also focused centrally on the relationship between consumption and national identity, on the making of post-colonial nations through commodity culture, mass media, and public space. In many respects, the principal tension evident in middle-class uses of commodities for self-fashioning repeats itself in constructions of the nation. Richard Wilk's work suggests, for example, that the spectrum of commodified performances trying to negotiate the relation between globalizing and local identities is expansive, illustrated in his studies by a close reading of beauty pageants in Belize. Just as colonial and post-colonial middle classes struggle to balance a consuming modernity with the constraints and possibilities of the local, post-colonial nations represent consumer culture both as a homogenizing, Westernizing force which they oppose through cultivating a distinctive local nationality *and* as a tool for achieving legitimacy and parity within global modernity. In Wilk's reading, this struggle for balance is inevitably tilted against post-colonial societies, and, in the end, all 'cultural consumers', who are 'shifted away from participating in culture, and towards treating objectified culture as a consumer good'.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps the single most emblematic example of this deployment of consumption and commodities against the backdrop of colonial rule is the *Swadeshi* movement against the British in India, with its iconic focus on homespun cloth as both political weapon and nation-making tool, but there have since been many other episodes around the world which repeat some elements of this episode.<sup>31</sup>

As Foster makes explicit, a focus on consumption, commodities, and advertising along these lines is in some sense a natural extension of Benedict Anderson's description of artefacts like the census, the map, and print culture as producing national identity.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> See Weinbaum et al (eds.), *The Modern Girl Around the World*, particularly the two introductory essays and essays by Lynn Thomas, Priti Ramamurthy, Madeline Dong, Ruri Ito, Tani Barlow, and Timothy Burke.

<sup>30</sup> Richard Wilk, 'The Local and the Global in the Political Economy of Beauty: From Miss Belize to Miss World', *Review of International Political Economy*, 2/1 (1995), 134.

<sup>31</sup> See Lisa Trivedi, *Clothing Gandhi's Nation: Homespun and Modern India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007); Manu Goswami, *Producing India: From Colonial Economy to National Space* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); and Mazzarella, *Shoveling Smoke*.

<sup>32</sup> Foster, *Materializing the Nation*, 64–5.

But as Foster, Kemper, Huat, and other scholars note, defining emerging or developing nations as composed of active consumers also speaks very directly to the history of imperial ideas about the agency of colonial subjects in a manner that is paradoxically both subversive and reassuring to capitalist globalization. Within the public discourse of modern capitalism, the consumer is a *choosing* subject, but only, as Wilk observes, within the often severe limits of a consumer marketplace. Post-colonial nations assertively defining themselves as consuming nations have run the risk of being at once accused by wealthy nations of being both improvident and vulgar, and of being regarded as a threat to existing distributions of wealth, security, environmental quality, and so on. In the past two decades, the most emblematic case to spark this kind of anxiety in Western societies is that of China, and scholars have responded with a wave of studies of new or emerging consumer cultures in China, many of which are attentive to the consequences of weaving together China's international profile, its domestic national identity, and increasingly conspicuous forms of global consumerism within China.<sup>33</sup> But examples can be found anywhere. South African news stories in 2010 and 2011 about the notoriously excessive 'sushi parties' of South African businessman Kenny Kunene, who has boasted that 'he has eaten sushi from the body of a white woman in Cape Town, a black woman in Johannesburg and in the future, will eat off the body of an Indian woman in Durban', were only partially concerned with ruling party corruption and at least as concerned with the proposition that profligate consumption is somehow an even worse or more provocative spectacle when it is embodied in a non-white subject.<sup>34</sup>

Most scholars working in this loose constellation of subjects agree that there are marked excluded areas where little work has been done, such as the consuming habits or material culture of rural populations throughout the developing world. That absence strikes me more as a product of the ways in which we categorize study than as an actual absence. There is a huge body of scholarship on rural life in Africa, South-East and East Asia, and the Middle East which incidentally often describes material culture or everyday life in detail, including the use of imported, foreign, or manufactured commodities. Only rarely does such work define itself as being *about* commodification, however, such as James Ferguson's important essay on 'commodity pathways' in rural Lesotho or Bruce Roberts's account of beer as a commodity in rural Kenya.<sup>35</sup> Ferguson observes, for example, that divergent expressions of agency through consumption in rural communities

<sup>33</sup> See Croll, *China's New Consumers*; Karl Gerth and Harvard University, *China Made: Consumer Culture and the Creation of the Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003); and *Patterns of Middle Class Consumption in India and China* (Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2008) for only a few examples of this fast-growing area of scholarly enquiry.

<sup>34</sup> See Celia W. Dugger, 'Partying Amid Poverty Stirs a South African Debate', *New York Times*, 15 February 2011, A4, for a summary of the Kunene controversy. For images from Kunene's parties, see 'Kenny Kunene—40th Birthday', YouTube, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=buWaqJxgLLk>> (accessed 15 February 2011).

<sup>35</sup> James Ferguson, 'The Cultural Topography of Wealth: Commodity Paths and the Structure of Property in Rural Lesotho', *American Anthropologist*, 94/1, New Series (1992), 55–73; Bruce D. Roberts, 'Always Cheaply Pleasant: Beer as a Commodity in a Rural Kenyan Society', in Angelique Haugerud, M. Priscilla Stone, and Peter D. Little (eds.), *Commodities and Globalization: Anthropological Perspectives* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).

(such as one Lesotho man buying a television, the other buying cattle) are especially likely to be misperceived as fundamental structural differences in social class. To some extent, this categorical rather than descriptive absence reinforces again the importance of the ways in which consumer culture in colonial and post-colonial societies has been constructed in association with modernity—hence, with urban, middle-class, educated, cosmopolitan, and ‘national’ populations. Another interesting wrinkle in the sociology of consumption in colonial and post-colonial societies is patterned rejections or avoidances of consumerism in general or of specific commodities as a strategy for defining identity or community, as in Amy Stambach’s analysis of the contradictory meanings of consumerism for evangelical youth in Tanzania.<sup>36</sup>

## THE THINGS THEMSELVES

One of the distinguishing features of the historical and ethnographic study of consumer culture is that such work necessarily directs attention not just to the sociality and practices of consumers, but to the materiality of commodities themselves, and hence not just to how they are used by their owners but also how they are acquired and how they are produced. Advertisers may try to affect how audiences see commodities, manufacturers may powerfully shape what goods are or are not available for consumption, governments may endorse or suppress some products. But commodities themselves also shape consumption practices through their concrete materiality and in terms of the embedded histories of meanings associated with them.

Scholars studying colonial and post-colonial societies have been as attentive to commodities as scholars in other regional and temporal fields of study. In fact, one of the fundamental canonical templates in this area of study is centrally concerned with colonialism, though more with the early modern Atlantic: Sidney Mintz’s *Sweetness and Power*.<sup>37</sup> Mintz’s study of sugar insists that the production of sugar through slavery, its rising global ubiquity since 1750, and our cultural imagination of sugared foods and objects are always inextricably tied together. On one hand, Mintz’s work has arguably given shape to a genre of popular histories of the global production and consumption of a single foodstuff or commodity, such as Mark Kurlansky’s *Salt* or Tom Standage’s *A History of the World in Six Glasses*.<sup>38</sup> Some of these books trace the history of their object or commodity in relation to modern colonial experiences, generally with little analytic depth, though there are notable exceptions.<sup>39</sup> However, there are also more

<sup>36</sup> Amy Stambach, ‘Evangelism and Consumer Culture in Northern Tanzania,’ *Anthropological Quarterly*, 73/4 (2000), 171–9.

<sup>37</sup> Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Viking, 1985).

<sup>38</sup> Mark Kurlansky, *Salt: A World History* (Penguin, 2003); Tom Standage, *A History of the World in Six Glasses* (New York: Walker Publishing Company, 2006).

<sup>39</sup> See for one example Pietra Rivoli, *The Travels of a T-Shirt in the Global Economy: An Economist Examines the Markets, Power, and Politics of World Trade*, 2nd edn. (Wiley, 2009).



scholarly works which take on some part of Mintz's blueprint in a more specific context, generally to study a commodity produced for global consumption within a colonial or post-colonial society. Brad Weiss's study of coffee in Tanzania, Yangwen Zheng's social history of opium consumption and exchange in China, and Karen Hansen's study of the circulation of second-hand clothing in Africa are three good examples of this approach, which strives for an integrated account of the production, circulation, and consumption of a globalized commodity in the context of a particular locality.<sup>40</sup>

A slightly different but equally influential blueprint for studying the relationship between particular commodities and colonial and post-colonial societies is the anthology *The Social Life of Things*, edited by Arjun Appadurai. The analysis of Appadurai and his contributors frequently ends up at some of the same junctures as work by scholars who focus on social identity and consumer practice, such as Alfred Gell's essay on how one local South Asian elite feel obligated to avoid conspicuous consumption.<sup>41</sup> Sometimes, however, the road travelled in tracing what Igor Kopytoff calls 'The Cultural Biography of Things' is also importantly different in some key respects.<sup>42</sup> Essays in the volume on carpets, qat, and cloth suggest that a focus on commodities first, consumption practices second, often allows the analysis to follow goods in and out of social contexts, and to observe how meaning is accumulated or redirected in the course of this circulation. Arnold Bauer's *Goods, Power, History* demonstrates the strength of this approach by categorizing various commodities as contact, civilizing, modernizing, developing or global in Latin American history.<sup>43</sup> In many respects, a commodity-focused approach also allows scholars to discuss distinctive cultural subsystems which involve but are not limited to consumer practices, such as fashion in the case of clothing or beauty pageants in the case of cosmetics. Or, as in the case of Thomas's *Entangled Objects*, to trace the circulation of goods between distantly separated localities.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, a commodity-driven analysis often puts materiality into clear focus compared to a heavier emphasis on sociological analysis or representation in treatments of consumerism and advertising, which often adds a crucial missing dimension to those other approaches. Materiality constrains where and how a commodity can be kept or used, where it can travel, how much it costs, and the kinds of social and economic organization needed to produce it. As a result, such work is inviting to comparative analysis, both across regions and time periods, including between modern commodity culture and pre-colonial or premodern

<sup>40</sup> Brad Weiss, *Sacred Trees, Bitter Harvests: Globalizing Coffee in Northwest Tanzania* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003); Yangwen Zheng, *The Social Life of Opium in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Karen Tranberg Hansen, *Salaula: The World of Secondhand Clothing and Zambia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

<sup>41</sup> Alfred Gell, 'Newcomers to the World of Goods: Consumption Among the Muria Gonds', in Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 110–40.

<sup>42</sup> Igor Kopytoff, 'The Cultural Biography of Things', in Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things*, 64–94.

<sup>43</sup> Arnold J. Bauer, *Goods, Power, History: Latin America's Material Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>44</sup> Thomas, *Entangled Objects*.



circulations and uses of the same commodity. While the materiality of a particular good or product can usefully constrain an analysis of consumption, a focus on a particular commodity also often offers an opportunity for a deep hermeneutical reading (something that colonialism often otherwise obscures or makes difficult). Reading meaning from material culture is not as easy as it might seem (an issue with which archaeologists must continually grapple), but comparing the circulation and production of textiles in premodern South Asia or West Africa and the contemporary scene for the same is nevertheless an important strategy for connecting past and present in spite of the intervening presence of modern colonial rule.

The disadvantages of commodity history are most readily visible in popular works following this format. The integration of production, consumption, and circulation for a single commodity runs the risk of disembedding the commodity from all its relations to other commodities, other acts of consumption, and the overall structure of production and circulation, a form of commodity fetishism conferred through exclusivity of focus. At its most problematic, this approach magnifies its chosen commodity to a position of overwhelming historical centrality and supreme self-determining agency, a danger that is mitigated only slightly by the whimsy deployed in many popular Kurlansky-style works. It is easy to forget the uneven and unequal relations of the political economies that lie at different ends of the global circuits defined around and through goods as diverse as coffee, skin-lighteners, popular music, bananas, and second-hand clothing when the focus is on the commodities themselves. Recalling the 'colonial' part of the story with particular emphasis makes it easier to keep this point in view.

## CONSUMER AGENCY IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALIZATION

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In Brewer and Porter's collection of scholarship on early modern European consumption, the practitioners of the 'turn to consumption' are confronted by several forms of criticism. Jean-Christophe Agnew in particular argues that while the newer accounts enhance historians' understanding of early modern European economy and society in many respects, they overestimate the causal power of consumption. More pointedly, Agnew argues that if consumer culture has been dismissed as the antithesis of a society dedicated to democratic liberty and social justice, it is for good reason. In Agnew's view, the long-standing hostility of liberal and left thinkers towards consumerism ought to be only slightly blunted by the insights of scholars studying consumption.<sup>45</sup> Debates between intellectuals about the politics of mass consumption and commodity culture in contemporary American culture have at times been still more sharply drawn, with

<sup>45</sup> Jean-Christophe Agnew, 'Coming Up For Air: Consumer Culture in Historical Perspective', in Brewer and Porter (eds.), *Consumption and the World of Goods*, 19–39.

appreciative treatments of the constructive or generative aspects of consumerism often bracketed by sharp critiques from both the right and the left.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, as Joyce Appleby observes in the Brewer and Porter anthology, consumerism figures as both an excluded and condemned construct across the span of early modern social thought, at the root of later conservative and radical traditions.<sup>47</sup>

Scholarship concerned with the intersection of consumption, commodities, and modern colonialism has yet to provoke so sharp a response, but perhaps it is time that it should. I suspect many scholars writing on consumerism in developing societies in the 1990s encountered modest pre-emptive scepticism similar to the kind that early modern Europeanists once complained about. (I recall one historian objecting to a presentation of my own work on consumerism in colonial Zimbabwe on the grounds that since colonialism so thoroughly impoverished Africans, there could be nothing worth studying.) More typically, however, specialists in colonial and post-colonial societies have welcomed work along these lines.

Most recent anthropological and historical studies of consumption and commodities in the modern developing world begin from the assumption that older critical assumptions about the cultural and social impact of globalization and modernization are partially flawed; most crucially, in the view that globalization will inevitably remake the material culture and everyday practices of non-Western societies into a single homogeneous world culture modelled on Western norms and ideals. In this, scholars working on consumerism and globalization are not alone: this critical assumption is shared across a broad span of work on 'multiple modernities' in colonial and post-colonial societies. Such work tends to argue that colonial rule and globalization has not produced a single monolithic and homogenous global culture for a variety of reasons: because of colonialism's own ambivalent and contradictory view of such an objective, because colonial and post-colonial societies have resisted attempts to remake them in such a fashion, because the power of global capitalism and colonial rule was and is more limited or fragmented than many modernization theorists assumed, and, most crucially, because global capitalism and modernity are as productive of new forms of difference as they are of homogeneity. Much of this critical response, particularly as applied to material culture and everyday life, has been compactly summarized in John Tomlinson's book *Cultural Imperialism*, frequently cited in this literature. Tomlinson writes:

It can reasonably be argued that the processes of modernity originated in the West and that the imperialist adventures of Western nations have been central in establishing a context of domination in which 'Western-modern' institutions have been transferred more or less intact. But to blame 'the West' cannot mean to blame a coherent collective project belonging to agents in the West. For we have seen that

<sup>46</sup> See for example Juliet Schor, *The Overspent American: Upscaling, Downshifting, and The New Consumer*, 1st edn. (New York: HarperPerennial, 1999) versus James B. Twitchell, *Lead Us into Temptation: The Triumph of American Materialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

<sup>47</sup> Joyce Appleby, 'Consumption in Early Modern Social Thought', in Brewer and Porter (eds.), *Consumption and the World of Goods*, 162–76.

agents in the West have been as little able to control the direction of their route out of tradition as are agents in the Third World.<sup>48</sup>

Or as Frank Trentmann writes: 'Modernity created different openings for consumers in different political and cultural spaces, depending on the role of nation, state, traditions of citizenship and social identities. There is no universal history of the consumer, just as there is no essentialist consumer.'<sup>49</sup>

In descriptive terms, what this approach often amounts to is an emphasis on the localization and remaking of consumer culture in colonial and post-colonial societies. Here too this emphasis on the study of consumption and material culture in the developing world resembles scholarship on similar topics, such as mass media and popular culture. Indeed, this emphasis on the localization of global culture and institutions has been so pronounced in the last decade and a half of anthropological and historical scholarship that it is not uncommon to catch a hint of impatience at even having to revisit the view that modernization brings homogenization or that modernity entails any single or fixed set of meanings, practices, and/or social formations.

Yet as a popular discourse in both Western and developing nations, the older tropes of modernization theory retain much of their force and authority. National publics have worked and continue to work with (and are worked upon) the proposition that commodities, advertising messages, and consumer practices are 'Westernizing' or 'globalizing' forces that need to be adapted or fought. Popular works of social criticism such as Benjamin Barber's *Jihad vs. McWorld* continue to use the basic framework of modernization theory and its assumptions about the impact of the spread of consumerism around the world.<sup>50</sup> But these sentiments are not really the other side in a debate which encompasses anthropological and scholarly study of colonialism's entanglement with commodities and consumption. They are more a subject of study, something to reframe and examine; indeed, for Mazzarella, Foster, Kemper, and others, this reframing is perhaps the most central objective of their analysis.

So is there anything in this literature to parallel the provocative inversion of consumption and production in the historiography of early modern Europe? I think there is indeed a gun on the mantelpiece which gets fired by the last act, but it is done quietly and offstage, with considerable ambivalence. If consumerism and commodity culture turn out to be an excellent vehicle for studying both the limits and contradictions of colonial power and globalization on one hand, and richly diverse histories of localization on the other, does not this suggest that many standard critiques of imperialism, neo-liberalism, or capitalist globalization are in need of serious modification or softening?

This prospect is precisely what drives the objections of some scholars to the magnification of local agency and the decomposition of colonial power in much of the 'multiple

<sup>48</sup> John Tomlinson, *Cultural Imperialism: A Critical Introduction* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 168.

<sup>49</sup> Frank Trentmann, 'The Evolution of the Consumer', in Sheldon Garon and Patricia L. Maclachlan (eds.), *The Ambivalent Consumer: Questioning Consumption in East Asia and the West* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 43.

<sup>50</sup> Benjamin R. Barber, *Jihad Vs. McWorld* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2001).

modernities' literature.<sup>51</sup> Yet many studies which might seem to have a diminished view of colonial or capitalist power and an accordingly magnified vision of local autonomy take some pains to suggest that this is precisely *not* what they are claiming, often by arguing that binary pairings of local/global, Western/non-Western, colonial/colonized are unhelpful or unproductive in the first place. Richard Wilk, writing about beauty contests in Belize, observes:

a place like Belize has never had very much range for autonomous action; not under British colonialism and not under Cold War discipline. But the growth of a global order of communication and of systems of common difference forces us to think about autonomy and dependence in very different ways. The same processes that destroy autonomy are now creating new sorts of communities, new kinds of locality and identity.<sup>52</sup>

Wilk's move here strikes me as common to this body of literature on commodity culture and modern colonialism, a simultaneous agreement that colonialism, post-1945 internationalism, and globalization exerted enormous power over the developing world, and yet also accidentally or uncontainably spurred the development of novel forms of social and cultural practice which perpetually 'slip the leash' of hegemony or domination, only sometimes because of programmatic resistance by the colonized. Mazzarella puts it in a rather different way, that the problem with advertising in India is not that it is false or deceptive, but that it misappropriates universality, 'cloaks its partiality', and 'reaches into the concrete foundations of our collective experience.'<sup>53</sup>

Put in that way, it is not clear about which forces, institutions, or practices in the modern world this could not be said. There is a certain amount of the having and eating of cake going on in these formulations, of wanting to find commodity culture, advertising, and consumerism guilty of something, culpable in some fashion, but not in a way which obliges the critic to have any alternatives in mind, or a praxis to turn to. This is in some measure because these critics are attempting to map and describe what they think is an existing praxis of response to consumerism which is neither resistance nor submission. At least the old modernization theorists (both on the left and the right) had a clear descriptive view of an alternative traditional or authentic culture in non-Western societies that they claimed consuming modernity had or would displace. At least some of the same critics on the left also took pains to imagine that there could be some future dispensation that would replace consumer culture with a preferable alternative, or that an anti-colonial nationalism might be meaningfully mobilized against Westernization, just as critics on the right have tried to describe a moral, spiritual, and intellectual world we (or they) have lost in a morass of materialism.

I would not argue that the study of consumption and colonialism needs to return to embracing these perspectives. Indeed, I think the move away from such arguments is

<sup>51</sup> See the discussions of Talal Asad's critique of colonial studies in Charles Hirschkind and David Scott, *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors*, first edn. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006) for one example of this scepticism.

<sup>52</sup> Richard Wilk, 'Learning to be Local in Belize', in Daniel Miller (ed.), *Worlds Apart: Modernity Through the Prism of the Local* (London: Routledge, 1995), 130.

<sup>53</sup> Mazzarella, *Shoveling Smoke*, 287.



empirically, theoretically, and politically sound. But I think in some cases, what looks like a highly conditional, partial acknowledgement of the imaginative and material possibilities of commodity culture in the developing world needs to be accepted as such without too many attempts to evade responsibility for making such a characterization. Along with that argument, this scholarship is potentially one of the stronger documentations that colonial power and globalizing transformation were neither as strong nor as instrumentally coherent as they and their critics have frequently imagined them to be. At a global level, the fecundity of consumer culture and bourgeois life-worlds may be a messier and more multiplicitous thing than European liberals or conservatives once (or still) imagined they would be, but so much the better. At the conclusion of my own study of commodification and consumption in modern Zimbabwe, I argued that I had written a history of the making of desire, and implied that both colonial rulers and scholarly commentators had underestimated the generative force and subversive meanings of that history. Perhaps it is time to stop doing so.

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