David Graeber
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Beginning in the 1980s, anthropologists began to be bombarded with endless—and often strangely moralistic—exhortations to acknowledge the importance of something referred to as "consumption." The exhortations were effective; for the past 2 decades, the term has become a staple of theoretical discourse. Rarely, however, do anthropologists examine it: asking themselves why it is that almost all forms of human self-expression or enjoyment are now being seen as analogous to eating food. This essay seeks to investigate how this came about, beginning with medieval European theories of desire and culminating in the argument that the notion of consumption ultimately resolves certain conceptual problems in possessive individualism.

I do not want to offer yet another critique of consumption or of consumer practices. I want to ask instead why it is that we assume such things exist. Why is it that when we see someone buying refrigerator magnets and someone else putting on eyeliner or cooking dinner or singing at a karaoke bar or just sitting around watching television, we assume that they are on some level doing the same thing, that it can be described as "consumption" or "consumer behavior," and that these are all in some way analogous to eating food?[1] I want to ask where this term came from, why we ever started using it, and what it says about our assumptions about property, desire, and social relations that we continue to use it. Finally, I want to suggest that maybe this is not the best way to think about such phenomena and that we might do well to come up with better ones.

To do so necessarily means taking on a whole intellectual industry that has developed over the past few decades around the study of consumption. For most scholars, not only is the category of "consumption" self-evident in its importance[2] but also one of the

[1] As Richard Wilk (2004) has shown in endless and elegant detail, the term "consumption" is basically a metaphor of eating.

[2] To take one example, a while ago a book came out called *The Consumer Society Reader* (Schor and Holt 2000), which contains essays by 28 authors, ranging

greatest sins of past social theorists was their failure to acknowledge it. Since the mid-1980s, theoretical discussions of the topic in anthropology, sociology, history, or cultural studies almost invariably begin by denouncing past scholars for having refused to give consumption sufficient due. The most frequent villains are the Frankfurt School. One widely used cultural studies textbook begins by explaining that theorists such as Adorno and Horkheimer

> argued that the expansion of mass production in the twentieth century had led to the commodification of culture, with the rise of culture industries. Consumption served the interests of manufacturers seeking greater profits, and citizens became the passive victims of advertisers. Processes of standardization, they argued, were accompanied by the development of a materialistic culture, in which commodities came to lack authenticity and instead merely met "false" needs. These needs were generated by marketing and advertising strategies and, it is argued, increased the capacity for ideological control or domination. (MacKay 1997:3)[3]

The author goes on to observe that this view was first shaken when ethnographers such as Dick Hebdige (1979) began examining the actual behavior of those involved in youth subcultures and discovered that

> rather than being passive and easily manipulated … young consumers were active, creative and critical in

from Thorsten Veblen to Tom Frank, about consumption and consumerism. Not a single essay offers a definition of either term or asks why these terms are being used rather than others.

[3] As Conrad Lodziak (2002), who also cites this passage, makes clear, this standard version does not really reflect the actual arguments of anyone involved in the Frankfurt School. It is all something of a myth.

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> their appropriation and transformation of material artifacts. In a process of bricolage, they appropriated, reaccented, rearticulated or transcoded the material of mass culture to their own ends, through a range of everyday creative and symbolic practices. Through such processes of appropriation, identities are constructed. (MacKay 1997:3)

Of course, Hebdige was dealing not just with subcultures but mainly with self-conscious countercultures. Still, this became the model. Before long, what was taken to be true of rebellious youth came to be seen as true, if perhaps in a less flamboyant fashion, of all consumers. Rather than being passive victims of media manipulation, they were active agents. In anthropology, a number of scholars soon began making similar arguments and telling similar stories from the mid1980s to the early 1990s: Arjun Appadurai (1986) in *The Social Life of Things*, Jonathan Friedman (1994) in *Consumption and Identity*, and above all, Daniel Miller (1987, 1995, 1997, 1998, 2001) in a series of books beginning with *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*. Each of these authors had his own version of the story, and each developed his own idiosyncratic theories of what consumption was all about, but what was ultimately more important than any particular author's version was what might be described as the standard narrative that began to take shape in classes, seminars, and informal graduate school conversations at the time. This was a surprisingly uniform little morality tale that runs something like this. Once upon a time, it begins, we all used to subscribe to a Marxist view of political economy that saw production as the driving force of history and the only truly legitimate field of social struggle. Insofar as we even thought about consumer demand, it was largely written off as an artificial creation, the results of manipulative techniques by advertisers and marketers meant to unload products that nobody really needed. But eventually we began to realize that this view was not only mistaken but also profoundly

elitist and puritanical. Real working people find most of their life's pleasures in consumption. What is more, they do not simply swallow whatever marketers throw at them like so many mindless automatons; they create their own meanings out of the products with which they chose to surround themselves. In fact, insofar as they fashion identities for themselves, those identities are largely based on the cars they drive, clothes they wear, music they listen to, and videos they watch. In denouncing consumption, we are denouncing what gives meaning to the lives of the very people we claim we wish to liberate.[4]

The obvious question is, Who is this "we"? After all, it is not as if cultural anthropology had ever produced any Frankfurt School–style analysis of consumption to begin with. This seems all the more significant because the story was not simply told at one historical juncture. By now it has effectively become a regular instrument of academic socialization whereby graduate students—many themselves coming from countercultural backgrounds or at least still struggling with their own adolescent revulsion against consumer culture—adjust themselves to more settled, consumer-oriented lives. Still, the real (and rather perverse) effect of this narrative has been to import the categories of political economy—the picture of a world divided into two broad spheres, one of industrial production, another of consumption—into a field that had never seen the world that way before. It is no coincidence that this is a view of the world equally dear to Marxist theorists who once wished to challenge the world capitalist system and to the neoliberal economists currently managing it.

[4] I note that such demotic wisdom is rarely precisely reflected in the works of any particular author, though Miller often comes very close to saying this. Yet they have tremendous power. Another example of the phenomenon is the phrase "How can I know The Other?" and the debate surrounding the question, which raged around the same time, in the late 1980s and early 1990s. As far as I know, the phrase never actually appeared in print at all, even in the works of those authors (e.g., Marcus and Clifford) with whom it was broadly identified.

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Perhaps this is not entirely surprising. I have argued elsewhere (Graeber 2010) that as an ideology, at least, neoliberalism consists largely of such systematic inversions: taking concepts and ideas that originated in subversive, even revolutionary rhetoric and transforming it into ways of presenting capitalism itself as subversive and revolutionary. And the story looks rather different if one looks at the broader social context, particularly what was happening within capitalism itself. Until the mid-1970s, economists and marketers, when they sought outside expertise to help understand consumer behavior, tended to consult psychologists. Starting in the late 1970s, essays in the *Journal of Consumer Behavior* and other marketing journals began to argue for the importance of social context—the foundational essay here is often considered to be by Belk (1975)—and look to anthropology, in particular, for models and assistance. At first there was a great deal of resistance to this line of approach within marketing studies itself, but as advertisers themselves began to speak of accelerated "market segmentation" and increasingly move to defining consumers as, essentially, a diverse collection of subcultures, it became more and more obviously relevant.

The first major attempt at an alliance between anthropologists and economists in the study of consumption was soon to follow—Mary Douglas's (1979) work with Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption.* Their work, however, had little real traction in the discipline largely because it came from a fairly explicitly conservative political position—it was framed in part as a rejoinder to 1960s countercultural types who criticized materialist values. In fact, with the exception of a few mavericks such as Steve Barnett, who (also in 1979) left academia to set up his own marketing consultancy firm, anthropology as a discipline remained largely reluctant to answer the business

world's call.[5] The real breakthrough occurred in the late 1980s with the populist turn described above, that is, when anthropologists began to take the opposite approach to Douglas, and rather than condemn countercultures, they effectively began treating all cultures as subcultures and all subcultures as countercultures.

The following quote is from a recently published encyclopedia of anthropology, in the section, "Anthropology and Business":

> The British anthropologist Daniel Miller argues that this "turn" represented a metamorphosis of anthropology, from a less mature state in which mass consumption goods were viewed as threatening (i.e., signifying both the loss of culture and a threat to the survival of anthropology), to a more enlightened outlook that frankly acknowledges consumption as the local idiom through which cultural forms express their creativity and diversity. This rather amazing about-face has permitted a confluence of interest between anthropology and the field of marketing. (Baba 2006:43)

The author goes on to observe that

> the literature in consumer behavior and marketing produced by anthropologists has been well received by marketing departments and corporations, with the result that anthropologists now hold positions in the marketing departments of several major business schools (e.g., University of Pennsylvania, Northwestern University, University of Nebraska, University of Utah). It would appear that anthropology is now a

[5] In fact there was equal resistance in the early 1980s on either side. Richard Wilk (personal communication) informs me that he and Eric Arnould, a professor of marketing, wrote a paper called "Why Do the Indians Want Adidas?" in 1981; no anthropological journal would accept it, and *American Anthropologist* returned it unreviewed with the comment "This is not an anthropological topic."

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> permanent addition to the disciplines that comprise the academic marketing field. (Baba 2006:47)

A synthetic discipline, called "consumer culture theory" (see Arnould and Thomson 2005) has emerged as increasing numbers of anthropologists follow the path blazed by Barnett and work directly with advertising firms on specific campaigns.

I certainly do not mean to suggest that pressures from the corporate world created this discourse; as I say, all this was part of a much broader infiltration of neoliberal categories into anthropology that was happening at the time. Neither do I mean to suggest that the resultant field of "consumption studies" has been driven by business interests or for that matter that it has not produced any number of interesting and worthwhile analyses. What I do want to argue is that this choice of initial terms has made a difference.

This is what I really want to investigate. How did "consumption" become a field of anthropology, and what does it mean that we now call certain kinds of behavior "consumption" rather than something else? It is a curious fact, for example, that those who write about consumption almost never define the term.[6] I suspect this is in part because the tacit definition they are using is so extraordinarily broad. In common academic usage (and to an only slightly less degree popular usage), "consumption" has come to mean "any activity that involves the purchase, use or enjoyment

[6] Of the few exceptions of which I am aware, one is Miller (1987), who first defined "consumption" as an action that "translates the object from an alienable to an inalienable condition; that is from being a symbol of estrangement and price value to being an artifact invested with particular inseparable connotations" (190), a rather idiosyncratic and arcane definition related to his own Hegelian notion of self-creation that, however, I do not believe is shared by any other consumption theorist, and later (Miller 2001:1) as "the consequences of objects for the people that use them," a definition that is so broad it is presumably not really meant as a definition at all. The other is Appleby (1999:130): "the desiring, acquiring and enjoying of goods and services which one has purchased," though elsewhere in the same piece she also defines consumption as "the active seeking of personal gratification through material goods" (164).

of any manufactured or agricultural product for any purpose other than the production or exchange of new commodities." For most wage laborers, this means nearly anything one does when not working for wages. Imagine, for example, four teenagers who decide to form a band. They scare up some instruments, teach themselves to play, write songs, come up with an act, and practice long hours in the garage. Now it seems reasonable to see such behavior as production of some sort or another, but if one takes the common de facto definition to its logical conclusion, it would be much more likely to be placed in the sphere of consumption simply because they did not themselves manufacture the guitars.[7] Granted, this is something of a reductio ad absurdum. But it is precisely by defining "consumption" so broadly that anthropologists can then turn around and claim that consumption has been falsely portrayed as passive acquiescence when in fact it is more often an important form of creative self-expression. Perhaps the real question should be, Why does the fact that manufactured goods are involved in an activity automatically come to define its very nature?

It seems to me that this theoretical choice—the assumption that the main thing people do when they are not working is "consuming" things—carries within it a tacit cosmology, a theory of human desire and fulfillment whose implications we would do well to think about.[8] This is what I want to investigate in the rest of this paper. Let me begin by looking at the history of the word "consumption" itself.

[7] Especially if the band had not yet received a record contract or many professional gigs; if they were able to market some kind of product, it might be considered production again.

[8] Here I also want to answer some of the questions rather left dangling at the end of my book on value theory (Graeber 2001).

solutely crucial and is not adequately addressed in the text. Here Puritanism played a crucial role. The question of Song China is also a perennial challenge, along with the broader "why didn't China conquer the world instead of Europe?" question (though this focuses more on the early Ming), which, to be honest, was in the back of my mind when writing this piece, even though it is not explicitly addressed. This is why I resisted calls from earlier peer reviewers to focus more on colonialism: I was much more interested in trying to get at the roots of that peculiarly European (or perhaps "Western," if that term is allowed to include Islam?) incorrigibility that made colonial expansion possible. But, surely, what I offer are just suggestions, and much comparative work is required.

Finally, I genuinely appreciate David Sutton's comments about food—appropriate indeed for a project that began in a restaurant in lower Manhattan with just the sort of conversation he describes. I would just reemphasize the second half of the clause "40-year-old upper-class white men eating food, or at least their ideas about their eating." Indeed. Conviviality has always been, for most humans everywhere, the definition of shared experience, a kind of communism of the senses that puts the lie to the entire ideology of consumption. (And even when rich white guys eat in expensive French restaurants—how often do you see one eating by himself?) It is not even most eating that is the model; it is the midnight snack, the piece of pie snarfed from the fridge when no one else is looking, the sandwich you have at the train station, the morning coffee, possibly the candy bar you buy when you are depressed. In a way, that last one tells you everything.

—David Graeber

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primary form of labor—is not about "producing" so much as preserving, maintaining, and sustaining things. So, too, with the point about passions. It dovetails both with Gershon's critique of agency (Gershon 2011) and in a complex way, I think, with Doukas's invocation of Herschfeld. We used to feel "consumed" by passions. Now we have a passion to consume. Yet to what degree is all this based not in an active desire to make, do, or construct but a (sometimes secret) desire not to have to do so for a change. In earlier drafts, one of the comments that most enraged marketing theorists seemed to be the idea that some of the desire to throw oneself in front of the television was grounded on the desire not to have to do—or think—anything at all.

Alf Hornborg might be right that I let my old teacher Marshall Sahlins off the hook in my genealogy of the modern notion of consumption, but if so, it is a genuine irony, because if there is one theme that runs through his entire intellectual history, it is a challenge to any assumption that humans are cursed with infinite needs. (It is also worth mention that as the commentator on the AAA version, he agreed strongly with the argument.) More challenging is his proposal that we retain the word "consumption" to remind us that everything we do has an ecological impact. I am of two minds about this. Certainly, everything we do (including production) expends resources and is subject to the law of entropy, and Hornborg deserves much credit for being one of the few anthropologists willing to consistently remind us of this fact. Still, why does this mean we have to continue to embrace consumption as an *analytical* category rather than as a native category that is having almost unimaginably destructive ecological effects?

Peter Stearns's generous comments raise a number of critical questions, only some of which I can fully answer—though I take some comfort in the suspicion that no one else can, either. I agree that the phenomenon of collective consumption, in Europe and elsewhere, and the shift from collective to individual (or family or interpersonal) forms and ideals of enjoyment and fulfillment is ab-

Etymologies and Antecedents

The English "to consume" derives from the Latin verb *consumere*, meaning "to seize or take over completely" and, hence, by extension, to "eat up, devour, waste, destroy, or spend." To be consumed by fire, or for that matter consumed with rage, still holds the same implications: it implies something not just being thoroughly taken over but being overwhelmed in a way that dissolves away the autonomy of the object or even that destroys the object itself.

"Consumption" first appears in English in the fourteenth century. In early French and English usages, the connotations were almost always negative. To consume something meant to destroy it, to make it burn up, evaporate, or waste away. Hence, wasting diseases "consumed" their victims, a usage that according to the Oxford English Dictionary is already documented by 1395. This is why tuberculosis came to be known as "consumption." At first the now-familiar sense of consumption as eating or drinking was very much a secondary meaning. Rather, when applied to material goods, "consumption" was almost always synonymous with waste: it meant destroying something that did not have to be (at least quite so thoroughly) destroyed.[9]

The contemporary usage, then, is relatively recent. If we were still talking the language of the fourteenth or even seventeenth centuries, a "consumer society" would have meant a society of wastrels and destroyers.

Consumption in the contemporary sense really appears in the political economy literature only in the late eighteenth century, when authors such as Adam Smith and David Ricardo began

[9] In French the word consummation, which is from a different root, eventually displaced consumption. But the idea of taking possession of an object seems to remain, and any number of authors have remarked on the implied parallel between sexual appropriation and eating food.

to use it as the opposite of "production."[10] One of the crucial features of the industrial capitalism emerging at the time was a growing separation between the places in which people—or men, at least—worked and the places where they lived. This in turn made it possible to imagine that the "economy" (itself a very new concept) was divided into two completely separate spheres: the workplace, in which goods were "produced," and the household, in which they were "consumed." That which was created in one sphere is used— ultimately, used up, destroyed—in the other. Vintners produce wine, and consumers take it home and drink it; chemical plants produce ink, and consumers take it home, put it in pens, and write with it, and so on. Of course, even from the start, it was more difficult to see in what sense consumers were "consuming" silverware or books because these are not destroyed by use; however, because just about anything does eventually wear out or have to be replaced, the usage was not entirely implausible.

All this did, certainly, bring home one of the defining features of capitalism: that it is a motor of endless production, one that can maintain its equilibrium, in fact, only by continual growth. Endless cycles of destruction do seem to be, necessarily, the other side of this. To make way for new products, all that old stuff must somehow be cleared away, destroyed, or at least cast aside as outmoded or irrelevant. And this is indeed the defining feature of "consumer society" as usually described (especially by its critics): one that casts aside any lasting values in the name of an endless cycling of ephemera. It is a society of sacrifice and destruction. And often what seems to most fascinate Western scholars—and the Western public—about people living in radically different economic circumstances are phenomena that seem to mirror this in one way or another. George Bataille (1985[1937]) saw here a clue to the nature

[10] "Produce" is derived from a Latin word meaning to "bring out" (a usage still preserved in phrases such as "the defense produced a witness" or "he produced a flashlight from under his cloak") or "to put out" (as from a factory).

Robert Cluley and David Harvie manage to be both funny and poetic at the same time. Writing from a school of management, they suggest in their relation to the business world, anthropologists have failed in their primary duty, which is to challenge economists' received categories rather than reproducing them. This is perhaps not entirely fair (when I say it either), because there are anthropologists who are critical; it is just that marketers ignore them. But I would like to strongly second their point that the main voices criticizing consumption now come from outside the academy entirely. Here let me repeat an autobiographical note relegated to a footnote in the essay itself. I actually come from a working-class family—not only that, from a onetime Nielsen family that during my early childhood represented the entirety of southern Manhattan for ratings purposes until we gave an anonymous interview to *TV Guide*. I know a little about ordinary Americans' attitudes. This is why I find it so bizarre to be lectured by a bunch of high-bourgeois-born academics that critiquing consumption makes me out of touch. Maybe they should stop designing so many surveys and talk to people for a change.

Dimitra Doukas suggests that perhaps possessive individualism is not so much the culprit behind the rise of the ideology of consumption as the principle of universal competition. She may be right. I think the appeal of her notion of "affect hunger" is compelling. I guess I would only ask, Is affect hunger and the resultant perverse competitive dynamics the necessary result when you imagine your relation with the world primarily by analogy with things?

I much appreciate Felix Girke's suggestions that many have long been reminding us that "consumption" is largely about the creation and maintenance of households; one of the pitfalls of employing the term "production," even when referring to the production of people and social relations (a usage that goes back at least to the *German Ideology*), is that much of the most important labor—and particularly caring labor, which should probably be considered the

about what humans are and how they interact and convey meaning to one another and that those who do not consciously work out their theoretical assumptions are generally condemned to simply reproduce the dominant ideology of the day (usually some form of economistic individualism) without realizing it, could not help but be suspicious. We soon reached the collective conclusion that together, these terms did in fact begin to constitute a kind of neoliberal orthodoxy that had crept over anthropology without our being willing to admit it. It was neoliberal in the classic sense: naturalizing market ideology in the form of a mushy but often self-righteous populism even as anthropology itself (and now I am speaking for myself here) abandoned its onetime political autonomy and became, increasingly, a handmaiden to bureaucrats, marketers, and NGOs.

The project first led to a session called "The New Keywords: Unmasking the Terms of an Emerging Orthodoxy" at the 104th Annual Meetings of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) in Chicago in November 2003. It has taken some years to come together as a volume, but the key points of the essays continue to be all too relevant.

My own contribution was based on an idea that I had been working at on and off since graduate school inspired by puzzlement over the peculiar moral fervor with which, starting in the 1980s, anthropologists and others critical of consumerism had been denounced as enemies of the people by highly paid members of the academic elite. Why had this particular assault happened at that particular time?

It would seem that moment of moral fervor has passed—though there were some signs of outrage in the original peer reviews; the published responses are quite remarkable. Most are concerned mainly to extend the argument even further, and all of them offer something I would never have thought of myself. Let us take them one by one.

of culture itself, whose essence he saw as lying in apparently irrational acts of wild sacrificial destruction, for which he drew on examples such as Aztec human sacrifice or the Kwakiutl potlatch.[11] Or consider the fascination with the potlatch itself. It is hard not to think about Northwest Coast potlatch without immediately evoking images of chiefs setting fire to vast piles of wealth—such images play a central role not only in Bataille's but in just about every popular essay on "gift economies" since. If one examines the sources, though, it turns out most Kwakiutl potlatches were stately redistributive affairs, and our image is really based on a handful of extremely unusual ones held around 1900 at a time when the Kwakiutl population was simultaneously devastated by disease and was undergoing an enormous economic boom (e.g., Masco 1995). Clearly, the spectacle of chiefs vying for titles by setting fire to piles of blankets or other valuables strikes our imagination not so much because it reveals some fundamental truth about human nature largely suppressed in our own society as because it reflects a barely hidden truth about the nature of our own consumer society: that it is largely organized around the ceremonial destruction of commodities.

"Consumption," then, refers to an image of human existence that first appears in the North Atlantic world around the time of the industrial revolution, one that sees what humans do outside the workplace largely as a matter of destroying things or using them up. It is especially easy to perceive the impoverishment this introduces into accustomed ways of talking about the basic sources of human desire and gratification by comparing it to the ways earlier Western thinkers had talked about such matters. St. Augustine and Hobbes (1968), for example, both saw human beings as crea-

[11] Bataille's argument was that production, which Marx saw as quintessentially human, is also the domain of activity most constrained by practical considerations—consumption the least so. To discover what is really important to a culture, therefore, one should look not at how things are made but at how they are destroyed.

tures of unlimited desire, and they therefore concluded that if left to their own devices, they would always end up locked in competition. As Marshall Sahlins (1996) has pointed out, in this they almost exactly anticipated the assumptions of later economic theory. But when they listed what humans desired, neither emphasized anything like the modern notion of consumption. In fact, both came up with more or less the same list: humans, they said, desire (1) sensual pleasures, (2) the accumulation of riches (a pursuit assumed to be largely aimed at winning the praise and esteem of others), and (3) power.[12] None were primarily about using anything up.[13] Even Adam Smith (1976[1776]), who first introduced the term "consumption" in its modern sense in *The Wealth of Nations*, turned to an entirely different framework when he developed a theory of desire in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Smith 2002[1761]), one that assumed that what most humans want above all is to be the object of others' sympathetic attention.[14] It was only with the growth of economic theory and its gradual colonization of other disciplines that desire itself began to be imagined as the desire to consume.

The notion of consumption, then, that assumes that human fulfillment is largely about acts of (more or less ceremonial) material destruction represents something of a break in the Western tradition. It is hard to find anything written before the eighteenth

[12] Similar lists appear throughout the Western tradition. Kant also had three—wealth, power, and prestige—interestingly skipping pleasure.

[13] The sensual pleasures they had in mind seem to have centered as much on having sex as on eating food, on lounging on silk pillows, and on burning incense or hashish, and by "wealth," both seemed to have in mind, first and foremost, permanent things such as mansions, landed estates, and magnificent jewelry rather than consumables.

[14] One could even argue that Smith's approach to questions of desire and fulfillment is so one sided, centering almost entirely on social recognition and immaterial rewards (wealth, in his system, was only really desirable insofar as wealthy people were more likely to be the object of others' attention and spontaneous sympathetic concern), that it is meant to head off the very possibility of the consumption model that was to develop from his economic work.

anthropologists study apprenticeship (Sutton 2010). A reexamination of the usefulness of consumption as a theoretical category opens up all kinds of new possibilities, and in this Graeber is right on target.

Reply

I must confess I am a bit startled by the uniformly positive response; when one writes an intentionally provocative piece, one expects that at least someone will be provoked. Take it as a sign, perhaps, that as a discipline we have turned a corner. At any rate, I must offer my sincere thanks to the commentators for their grace and generosity and for giving me so much to think about.

The lack of any need for elaborate self-defense also allows me an opportunity to use the space to fill readers in on the background of this small collection. The real mastermind behind it is Lauren Leve, and the vision grew from a series of collective conversations between fellow anthropologists in New York as far back as 2002 around a "new keywords" project. Leve's idea was not just to make a list of buzzwords and explore—à la Raymond Williams (1983)—why at certain points in history, certain terms ("culture" was his famous example) suddenly seem to jump to the center of intellectual and social debate. Even more, she proposed to study those theoretical terms that were not, really, being debated—or often, really, defined—and why. Starting in the 1990s, anthropology has moved away from grand questions of theory; indeed, it largely stopped generating theory of any sort. Instead, we were greeted with a flood of new topics of research and attendant technical terms ("identity," "consumption," "agency," and "flow" but also "the body," "governmentality," etc.) whose meaning was largely assumed to be self-evident. The approach instantly made sense to the rest of us, who, as scholars trained to believe that it is, in fact, impossible to look at the world without applying some base assumptions

is the epitome of consumption: food. Indeed, food could be seen as "consumed" in the act of eating, and Melanesian anthropologists—for example, Weiner (1992)—have claimed that this is what makes food of limited social value: unlike shells, it is used up in its transacting and thus cannot carry enduring meaning. Indeed, Graeber suggests in his history of Western desire that food plays a particular role: he sees it as key to the transition from medieval and Renaissance to modern notions of consumption, from erotics to gastronomics. The model of modern consumption, Graeber suggests, highlights food because eating was "the perfect idiom for talking about desire … in a world in which everything, all human relations, were being reimagined as questions of property." Perhaps. But as Graeber points out with regard to most of these philosophical musings, we are probably talking about 40-year-old upper-class white men eating food, or at least their ideas about their eating. Anthropologists have shown repeatedly in many cultural contexts, including the United States, how food is one of the key ways that humans imagine their interconnectedness—how food is almost always about sharing and creating social relations as well as for tying past, present, and future together— not, primarily, their Marxian alienation and commodity fetishism. Food, *pace* Weiner, does carry enduring social meaning through its powerful role in imagining and in remembering social relatedness in everyday and ritual contexts. This is merely to suggest that the fitness of the metaphor of eating as a model for modern consumption is not inherently obvious; many other factors were clearly at play.

Indeed, Graeber's argument that we move beyond the categories of consumption and production fits very well with an interest in food preparation or cooking. Cooking clearly is not illuminated by a model of identity, creative consumption, and resistance as much as it might be by a model that focuses on cooking as part of a project of value transformation (Weiss 1996), as the creation of flavors that influence others (Adapon 2008), or as an embodied memory and skill that can be studied just as many

century that precisely anticipates it. It seems to appears abruptly, mainly in countries such as England and France, at exactly the moment when historians of those places begin to talk about the rise of something they call "consumer society" or simply "consumerism" (Berg and Clifford 1999; McKendrick, Brewer, and Plum 1982; Smith 2002; Stearns 2001), that is, the moment when a significant portion of the population could be said to be organizing their lives around the pursuit of something called "consumer goods," defined as goods they did not see as necessities but as in some sense objects of desire, chosen from a range of products, subject to the whims of fashion (ephemera again), and so on.

Theories of Desire

All this makes it sound as if the story should really begin around 1750 or even 1776. But could such basic assumptions about what people thought life is about really have changed that abruptly? It seems to me there are other ways to tell the story that suggest much greater continuities. One would be to examine the concept of "desire" itself as it emerged in the Western philosophical tradition, to understand how it is that "consumption" could become our key idiom for talking about material desire. Here I think there is a great deal of continuity, and investigating it should make it much easier to understand why in fact European thought provided fertile ground for the emergence of such a concept—one that, I suspect, would have seemed quite odd almost anywhere else.

This approach might seem surprising because it is not as if one can immediately identify a single "Western" theory of desire. In fact, thinking on the matter in what we have come to think of as the Western philosophical tradition contains a number of apparently contradictory strands. Since Plato, the most common approach has been to see desire as rooted in a feeling of absence or lack. This

does make a certain obvious intuitive sense. One desires what one does not have. One feels an absence and imagines how one might like to fill it; this very action of the mind is what we think of as "desire." But there is also an alternative tradition that goes back at least to Spinoza (2000) that starts off not from the yearning for some absent object but from something even more fundamental: self-preservation, the desire to continue to exist (Nietzsche's "life which desires itself"). Here desire becomes the fundamental energetic glue that makes individuals what they are over time. Both strands continue to do battle in contemporary social theory as well. Desire as lack is especially developed in the work of Jacques Lacan (1977). The key notion here is of the "mirror stage," where an infant, who is at first really a bundle of drives and sensations unaware of its own existence as a discrete bounded entity, manages to construct a sense of self around some external image, for example, an encounter with his or her own reflection in the mirror. One can generalize from here a much broader theory of desire (or perhaps merely desire in its more tawdry narcissistic forms) where the object of desire is always some image of perfection, an imaginary completion for one's own ruptured sense of self (Graeber 2001:257–258). But then there is also the approach adopted by authors such as Deleuze and Guattari (1983), who wrote *Anti-Oedipus*, their famous critique of psychoanalysis, largely as an attack on this kind of thinking. Appealing to the Spinozist/Nietzschean tradition, they deny that desire should be found in any sense of lack at all. Rather, it is something that "flows" between everyone and everything; much like Foucault's power, it becomes the energy knitting everything together. As such, desire is everything and nothing; there is very little one can actually say about it.

One might be tempted to conclude at this point that "desire" is not a very useful theoretical concept[15] —that is, one that can be

[15] Working here on the assumption that if one examines any intellectual tradition carefully enough, one could find the materials for a genuinely insightful

> word hesitated, then answered "chopping wood." (Ehn and Lofgren 2010:111)

David Graeber's article is a trenchant reminder of how problematic the categories of political economy are for anthropological analysis.[38] They were problematic in the 1970s, when it was all about modes of production, and they are problematic now that the focus has turned to consumption. The first step in thinking beyond these categories is to excavate them, which Graeber does with his fascinating genealogy of the concept of desire in the Western philosophical tradition. To the extent that consumption studies have become ubiquitous and many of them fail to define or even think through what is meant by the term "consumption," Graeber's critique is all the more cogent. I think many of us are familiar with the kind of studies he is referring to: ones that claim, for example, that McDonald's in Japan is really not so bad because they serve squid, too (thus short-circuiting or deflecting attention from any serious critique of their sourcing, labor, waste disposal, and other practices). These types of analysis are so ubiquitous that one of my students, Leo Vournelis, dubbed them the "It's OK, they've appropriated it" school of thought.

One of the key contributions of Graeber's approach, then, is to get us to consider the possibility of different models to analyze activities we have been lumping under the consumption rubric. Surely, he is right that it is dubious at best to think of television watching as an act of "consumption," and it would be more interesting to look at the categories that people bring to the activity of television watching in different contexts and communities. But I would like to briefly focus on one object that Graeber has suggested

[38] Thanks to my colleagues and students who shared their thoughts with me on this article over dinner. Animal and vegetable products were bought, cooked, and eaten and a fair amount of fermented beverages imbibed. Properly sated, we discussed and debated a lot of ideas. Only a bureaucrat would try to label this as either "production" or "consumption."

sumer decisions about church and clergy styles and decorations, but guild presentations count as well. One of the constraints on individual consumerism was the pervasive emphasis on using costume and other objects to denote group identity and conformity, though in terms of a basic definition of acquisitive efforts beyond the needs of any reasonable subsistence, they fit a consumerism umbrella. And this element, though by now far less organized, has hardly disappeared from consumer behavior. The frequency of individual decisions to acquire items or entertainments that in fact help blend with a recognizable group—the peer cluster in school, the office assemblage—is another complexity in consumerism that needs attention. Here, too, links with as well as changes from more traditional patterns factor in substantially.

All this said, let me return to my admiration for the Graeber hypothesis about a transition, at least in Western culture, between desire for a person to a desire for things (whether the food consumption focus is entirely apt requires discussion, but it is beside the main point). I am not sure I agree that this is what happened; certainly, it is not what many new consumers thought was happening when they hoped to use objects to express not only personal identity but also sexual or affectionate relationships with loved ones. But perhaps it did happen, playing a role in the misfiring of relationships in the modern Western world, and it certainly is worth further exploration and analysis.

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> In the 1940s a Swedish sociologist traveled through the villages of northern Sweden asking people about their "hobbies." A farmer confronted with this newfangled

meaningfully distinguished from needs, or urges, or intentions—because even authors working within the same philosophical tradition cannot make up their minds what it is supposed to mean. But if one goes back to the origins of the alternative tradition of Spinoza (2000), one soon discovers that the two strands are not nearly as different as they appear. When Spinoza refers to the universal driving force of all beings to persist in their being and expand their powers of action, he is referring not to desire (*cupiditas*) but to what he calls conatus, usually translated "will." On a bodily level, *conatus* takes the form of a host of appetites: attractions, dispositions, and so forth. Desire is "the idea of an appetite," the imaginative construction one puts on some such attraction or disposition.[16] In other words, the one constant element in all these definitions is that desire (unlike needs, urges, or intentions) necessarily involves the imagination. Objects of desire are always imaginary objects and usually imaginary totalities of some sort because, as I have argued before, most totalities are themselves imaginary objects (Graeber 2001).

The other way one might say desire differs from needs, urges, or intentions is that as Tzvetan Todorov (2001) puts it, it always implies the desire for some kind of social relation. There must necessarily be some kind of quest for recognition involved. The problem is that owing to the extreme individualism typical of the Western philosophical tradition, this tends to be occluded; even where it is not, the desire for recognition is assumed to be the basis for some kind of profound existential conflict. The classic text here is Hegel's (1998) "On Lordship and Bondage," the famous "master/slave dialectic" in *Phenomenology of Spirit* that has made it difficult for future theorists to think of this kind of desire without also thinking of violence and domination.

analysis of such "big questions" (i.e., sufficient perusal of the Buddhist would also have yielded useful results had I been competent to do it, which I am not).

[16] For the best collection of essays on Spinoza's theory of desire, see Yovel (1999). On his theory of imagination, see Gates and Lloyd (1999) and Negri (1991).

If I may be allowed a very abbreviated summary of Hegel's argument,[17] human beings are not animals because they have the capacity for self-consciousness. To be self-conscious means to be able to look at ourselves from an outside perspective— that must necessarily be that of another human being. All these were familiar arguments at the time; Hegel's great innovation was to bring in desire, to point out that to look at ourselves this way, one has to have some reason to want to do it. This sort of desire is also inherent in the nature of humanity, according to Hegel, because unlike animals, humans desire recognition. Animals experience desire simply as the absence of something: they are hungry; therefore, they wish to "negate that negation" by obtaining food; they have sexual urges; therefore, they seek a mate.[18] Humans go further. They not only wish to have sex—at least, if they are being truly human about the matter—but also wish to be recognized by their partner as someone worthy of having sex with. That is, they wish to be loved. We desire to be the object of another's desire. So far this seems straightforward enough: human desire implies mutual recognition. The problem is that for Hegel, the quest for mutual recognition inevitably leads to violent conflict, to "life-and-death struggles" for supremacy. He provides a little parable: two men confront each other at the beginning of history (as in all such stories, they appear to be 40-year-old males who simply rose out of the earth fully formed). Each wishes to be recognized by the other as a free, autonomous, fully human being. But in order for the other's recognition to be meaningful, he must prove to himself that the other

[17] I am especially drawing on the famous "strong reading" of this passage by Alexander Kojéve (1969) that had such an influence on Bataille, Lacan, Sartre, de Beauvoir, Fanon, and so on. Levinas (1998) has recently challenged this reading, but it has certainly dominated social theory, and particularly French social theory, for at least half a century.

[18] In Hegel's language, they construct themselves as a negation; therefore, they seek to negate that negation by negating something else, that is, by eating it.

There are, I think, a few additional angles to explore under this general heading, not in frontal opposition to the Graeber formulation but by way of extension and complication. First, a historian looking at pre-eighteenth-century illustrations of premodern desire would not focus solely or even primarily on the Western context. (I always worry about Western statements that lack any real comparative ballast.) Those of us interested in the emergence of consumerism but with a disproportionately European or U.S. history background need to pay a great deal more attention to the earlier emergence of consumer commitments in prosperous urban settings such as Song China, where, among other things, tastes and possibly motivations emerged that would directly influence European interests later on. To the extent that we accept the Graeber focus on desire as a human or at least clearly premodern category, we may need to explore Asian (and probably other) manifestations as well. (It is also relevant to note that Chinese consumerism, if that is what it should be called, emerged in a cultural context officially hostile to undue emphasis on romantic or erotic attachments.) Of course, premodern Chinese consumerism, like its European outcropping until recently, frequently encountered societal disapproval, with arrests and even executions responding to some of the most vigorous consumer behaviors, but this does not contradict the existence and significance of relevant desire. Modern consumerism is gaining some excellent comparative attention from several disciplines including both history and anthropology, but we may well need more premodern work as well.

Even for the Western context, particularly before the eighteenth century but to an extent even since, I wonder also about a possible overemphasis on individualism. Another avenue to explore—and it may also encompass identifiable categories of desire—involves group consumerism. Premodern cities in the West but also elsewhere burst with group consumer projects (and I know by now I am referencing consumerism a lot despite the admonitions in the Graeber article). Religious projects were front and center, with con-

stimulating and entertaining contributions to economic anthropology continue to generate insights about how human relations to objects are ultimately about their relations to other humans, whether objects are treated as humans or humans are treated as objects.

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The challenge to open a new discussion on the meaning of consumerism is both welcome and stimulating. I am accurately cited in David Graeber's article as among the several historians who have worked to identify the emergence of new forms of consumer behavior in the Western world in the eighteenth century, and it is useful to be reminded of how new conceptualizations began to emerge at this point, if initially among the dreaded economists, as well as new behaviors.

Even with a commitment toward identifying significant historical change and using new intensities of consumer activities as one measure, the need to explore continuities, which the Graeber essay emphasizes under the broader category of desire, unquestionably deserves more scrutiny than it has received from historians and others. Even those of us who think that something new and important was emerging in early modern Europe have faced the question of whether the essential novelty resulted simply from greater prosperity and new shopkeeper lures, not from new motivations at all. Is the consumer potential rather uniformly present in human makeup, or at least Western cultural makeup, so that its awakening requires little explanation once new levels of mass affluence set in? The invitation to think more about continuities in desire—even though framed in this essay largely in terms of intellectual constructs rather than popular motivations— advances the issue constructively while partly redefining it.

is fully human and worthy of recognizing him; the only way to do this is to see whether he values his freedom and autonomy so much that he is willing to risk his life for it. A battle ensures. But a battle for recognition is inherently unwinnable, because if you kill your opponent, there is no one to recognize you; on the other hand, if your opponent surrenders, he proves by that very act that he was not willing to sacrifice his life for recognition after all and therefore that his recognition is meaningless. One can of course reduce a defeated opponent to slavery, but even that is self-defeating, because once one reduces the Other to slavery, one becomes dependent on one's slave for one's very material survival while the slave at least produces his own life and is in fact able to realize himself to some degree through his work.

This is a myth, a parable. Clearly, there is something profoundly true in it. Still, it is one thing to say that quest for mutual recognition is necessarily going to be tricky, full of pitfalls, with a constant danger of descending into attempts to dominate or even obliterate the Other. It is another thing to assume from the start that mutual recognition is impossible. As Majeed Yar (2001) has pointed out, this assumption has come to dominate almost all subsequent Western thinking on the subject, especially since Sartre refigured recognition as "the gaze" that, he argued, necessarily pins down, squashes, and objectifies the Other.[19] As in so much Western theory, when social relations are not simply ignored, they are assumed to be inherently competitive. Todorov (2001:66–67) notes that much of this is the result of starting one's examples with a collection of adult males: psychologically, he argues, it is quite possible to argue that the first moment in which we act as fully human beings is when we seek recognition from others, but that is because the first thing a human baby does that

[19] Lacan's "mirror phase" itself actually draws directly on Hegel (Casey and Woody 1983; Silverman 2000). I might note, too, that it is the Hegel-Kojéve-Sartre connection that is responsible for the habit of writing about "the Other" with a capital O, as an inherently unknowable creature.

an animal baby does not do is try to catch her mother's eye, an act with rather different implications.

At this point, I think we have the elements for a preliminary synthesis. Insofar as it is useful to distinguish something called "desire" from needs, urges, or intentions, then, it is because desire (*a*) is always rooted in imagination and (*b*) tends to direct itself toward some kind of social relation, real or imaginary, and that social relation generally entails a desire for some kind of recognition and hence an imaginative reconstruction of the self, a process fraught with dangers of destroying that social relation or turning it into some kind of terrible conflict.

Now, all this is more arranging the elements of a possible theory than proposing one; it leaves open the actual mechanics of how these elements interact. But if nothing else, it helps explain why the word "desire" has become so popular with authors who write about modern consumerism, which is, we are told, all about imaginary pleasures and the construction of identities. Even here, though, the historical connections between ideas are not what one might imagine.

In the next section, I will look at theories of consumerism as desire and see how they tie into this broader philosophical tradition—one rooted, I believe, in some very fundamental underlying assumptions about the nature of human beings.

On Lovers and Consumers

Let me begin with Colin Campbell's (1987) *Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, certainly one of the more creative essays on the subject. Campbell's book aims to provide a corrective to the usual critique of consumer culture, which is that it throws up all sorts of wonderful fantasies about what you will get when you purchase some product and inevitably disappoints you once you get the product. It is this constant lack of satisfaction,

ing perceived as creativity and destruction. As much as I share his skepticism regarding the ideological uses of the former perception, I am unable to abandon the latter (even when applied to television programming). In fact, it is only by acknowledging the material biophysical dimension of the global economy that we can resist the seductive neoliberal glorification of consumption as the right to creative self-expression.

Graeber traces the historical recognition that consumer desires are potentially infinite and quite possible to manipulate. Clearly, it is this latter dilemma that raises the most incisive doubts about capitalism rather than the extent of resource destruction itself. For if profits are proportional to our "creative" destruction of resources, it means that marketing will be geared to fabricating increasingly arbitrary incentives for us to maximize such destruction. To continue to expose this fundamental logic seems a more trenchant criticism of neoliberalism than to debate whether this or that activity is really destructive of resources.

The most significant point in Graeber's paper is his observation that consumption is really about the production of people, echoing Marx's insight that in capitalism, relations between people masquerade as relations between things. The human appropriation (and incorporation) of things has always been about the production of persons, but as Graeber reminds us, commodity fetishism encourages us to imagine otherwise. Although the idea of private property is a thoroughly social relation, that is, a person's right to exclude others from access to a thing, it presents itself to us as a relation between that person and that thing. Nor do we generally see that the commodity is an embodiment of other people's labor and landscapes. If the consumer's sovereignty over his or her commodified objects is modeled on the monarch's sovereignty over his or her subjects, as Graeber suggests, the affinity between the two relations thus boils down to a transformation of social power. Viewed in this light, it is indeed revealing to see capitalism as a transformation of slavery or even cannibalism. Graeber's (2001, 2004, 2007a)

pers sought to incorporate into their selves, as the consummation of culturally constituted desires. Such an understanding of consumption, of course, is not in itself a reason to turn to marketing.

Graeber provides several persuasive historical hypotheses for why the metaphor of eating is now applied to whatever people do when they are not working, including the fusion of medieval elite desires for ephemera and plebeian desires for food, the expansion of market principles and individual property rights, and the urge to destroy things in order to gain recognition of one's sovereignty over them. Eating is indeed the perfect idiom for destroying something while literally incorporating it. But Graeber argues that many activities conventionally classified as consumption, such as watching television, do not involve goods that are destroyed by use. Nor, for the same reason, does he think that a teenage band practicing in a garage should be called consumption. Yet even these activities must submit to the twin constraints of capitalism and the law of entropy (Georgescu-Roegen 1971) that correctly identify consumption as destruction: any activity that, for want of other resources, must involve manufactured goods—or even using electricity—implies destroying purchased physical resources in the process of creating meaning. The concept of consumption thus deserves to be retained, paradoxically, for its critical potential: because it highlights how that which capitalism would have us maximize is ultimately destroying the planet. While there is no exemption from entropy whatever the mode of production, the specificity of capitalism lies in its relentless pursuit of ever higher rates of resource destruction.

It thus seems that Graeber's call for an abandonment of the discourse on consumption, although highly understandable when directed at its neoliberal version, would be at odds with those activists for whom the concept remains integral to their criticism of the treadmill logic of capitalism. His paper, conceived in the early 1990s and published some years ago (Graeber 2007a), criticizes the concept of consumption from two opposite angles, that is, for be-

the argument goes, that then drives consumption and thus allows the endless expansion of production. If the system delivered on its promises, the whole thing would not work. Campbell is not denying this happens so much as he is questioning whether the process itself is really so frustrating or unpleasant as most accounts imply. Really, he says, is not all this a form of pleasure in itself? In fact, he argues that it is the unique accomplishment of modern consumerism that it has assisted in the creation of a genuinely new form of hedonism.

"Traditional hedonism," Campbell argues, was based on the direct experience of pleasure: wine, women, and song; sex, drugs, and rock and roll; whatever the local equivalent. The problem from a capitalist perspective is that there are inherent limits to all this. People become sated and bored. There are logistical problems. "Modern self-illusory hedonism," as he calls it, solves this dilemma because here what one is really consuming are fantasies and daydreams about what having a certain product would be like. The rise of this new kind of hedonism, he argues, can be traced back to certain sensational forms of Puritan religious life but primarily to the new interest in pleasure through the vicarious experience of extreme emotions and states that one sees emerge in the popularity of Gothic novels and the like in the eighteenth century and that peaks with romanticism itself. The result is a social order that has become, in large measure, a vast apparatus for the fashioning of daydreams. These reveries attach themselves to the promise of pleasure afforded by some particular consumer good or set of them; they produce the endless desires that drive consumption, but in the end, the real enjoyment is not in the consumption of the physical objects but in the reveries themselves (see also Wagner 1995).

The problem with this argument—or one of them (one could find all sorts)—is the claim that all of this was something new. It is not just the obvious point that pleasure through vicarious participation in extreme experience did not become a significant social phenomenon only in the seventeenth century. It was accepted wis-

dom as early the eleventh century that desire was largely about taking pleasure in fantasies.

Here I turn to the work of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (1993a, 1993b) and the Romanian historian of religions Ioan Couliano (1987) on medieval and Renaissance theories of love. These theories all turned on the notion of what was called the "pneumatic system." One of the greatest problems in medieval metaphysics was to explain how it was possible for the rational soul to perceive objects in the material world because the two were assumed to be of absolutely alien natures. The solution was to posit an intermediate astral substance called "pneuma," or spirit, that translated sense impressions into phantasmic images. These images then circulated through the body's pneumatic system (which centered on the heart) before they could be comprehended by the intellectual faculties of the soul. Because this was essentially the zone of imagination, all sensations, or even abstract ideas, had to proceed through the imagination—becoming emotionally charged in the process—before they could reach the mind. Hence, erotic theory held that when a man fell in love with a woman, he was really in love not with the woman herself but with her image, one that, once lodged in his pneumatic system, gradually came to hijack it, vampirizing his imagination and ultimately drawing off all his physical and spiritual energies. Medical writers tended to represent this as a disease that needed to be cured; poets and lovers represented it as a heroic state that combined pleasures (in fantasy but also, somewhat perversely, in the very experience of frustration and denial) with an intrinsic spiritual or mystical value in itself. The one thing all agreed on, though, is that anyone who got the idea that one could resolve the matter by "embracing" the object of his or her fantasy was missing the point. The very idea was considered a symptom of a profound mental disorder, a species of "melancholia."

Here Agamben discusses Ficino:

This leads me to the intriguing methodological (as well as ideological) alternative of acknowledging "passion(s)" along with actions/agency. Burkhard Schnepel (2009), not coincidentally a student of Godfrey Lienhardt's, has recently suggested a return of this dialectic to its proper place: it could serve both to balance the overly individualistic and infuriatingly vague postmodern propagation of human agency and to better understand certain emic positions in which, classically, one does not catch a cold but is caught by a cold. Just because it is more difficult to talk about passions does not mean we should not try to do it. Thinking through this dialectic, then, we soon reach the field of the middle voice, where desire (to have, to absorb) might be reconceived as "something that befalls the subject without subjugating him or her" (Eberhard 2004:63), with untold effects on the idea of consumption. Such an understanding might be critical for the research program suggested by Graeber, to work out what it is that actually drives people to destructive encompassment. In this theoretical tangent, I find this valorously quixotic paper most stimulating.

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Although at times more convoluted than necessary, Graeber's argument is a welcome antidote to the currently fashionable neoliberal discourse on consumption as creative self-expression. He is supremely justified in asking how anthropologists became engaged in marketing and is to be congratulated for reorienting anthropology toward a critical analysis of the cultural foundations of capitalism. His paper raises several worthwhile questions that deserve lucid and coherent treatment. The least problematic is how consumption became a field of anthropology. For many, it was Marshall Sahlins's (1976) useful elaboration of Baudrillard that taught us to view commodities as elements of semiotic systems that shop-

tween people, and connecting them to things and intangibles," providing "conditions for sustaining locally constituted life" (64). Not every object-oriented segment of individual behavior is an equally meaningful actualization of the self.

Still, has the argument not overstayed its welcome? Complaints about the turn to consumption and its particulars are not a particularly new phenomenon within anthropology; by now 15 years old, there are the gently cautioning words by Jim Carrier (1996), "whether consumption is the new master narrative we ought to construct about the world and, if so, how we ought to construct it" (422), and Carrier and Heyman's (1997) only slightly later explicitly stated "intellectual and political dissatisfaction with the anthropology of consumption" (356). Strikingly, in these earlier texts, the hypertrophic overextension of the term was not a critical issue; in fact, the authors themselves might be targets for Graeber's criticism because they include items from housing to television in the category of consumption. Their thrust, then, was instead turned against one-dimensional semiological analyses of the "meaning" of objects rather than their actual consequences and practical applications and the larger contextual constraints of class and race, that is, inequality. Additionally, Carrier and Heyman (1997) emphasize how much of consumption is in fact about reproduction of the household, about necessity and practical uses more than about fantastic desires, a turn that also allows them to divert the focus away from "the individual actors who populate much of the conventional consumption literature" (362). This is where they again converge with Graeber's stance against the commonly involved emancipatory narratives, which while seemingly liberating the constrained agents and turning them into selfactualizing individuals (or members of self-actualizing sub/ countercultures; e.g., Habeck/Ventsel 2009) also cast them out of their supportive dependences. Of course, this eviction locks such agents with quite a bit of interpretive violence into the everyday battle for "recognition," which in its antagonistic sense is usefully shown here as a social *unobtainium*.

> In the same passage, the specific character of melancholic Eros was identified by Ficino as disjunction and excess. "This tends to occur," he wrote, "to those who, misusing love, transform what rightly belongs to contemplation into the desire of the embrace." The erotic intention that unleashes the melancholic disorder presents itself as that which would possess and touch what ought merely to be the object of contemplation, and the tragic insanity of the saturnine temperament thus finds its root in the intimate contradiction of a gesture that would embrace the unobtainable. (Agamben 1993b:17–18)

Agamben goes on to quote the French scholastic Henry of Ghent to the effect that melancholics "cannot conceive the incorporeal" as such because they do not know "how to extend their intelligence beyond space and size." For such depressive characters, lonely brooding is punctuated by frustrated urges to seize what cannot really be seized.[20]

Now, one might quibble over whether anyone was ever quite so consistently pure in his or her affections as all this might imply. A fair amount of "embracing" certainly did go on in medieval Europe, as elsewhere. Still, this was the ideal, and critically it became the model not just for sexual desire but for desire in general—that is, at least among the literate elites. This leads to the interesting suggestion that from the perspective of this particular form of medieval psychological theory, our entire civilization—as Campbell (1987)

[20] "That is the incapacity of conceiving the incorporeal and the desire to make of it the object of an embrace are two faces of the same coin, of the process in whose course the traditional contemplative vocation of the melancholic reveals itself vulnerable to the violent disturbance of desire menacing it from within" (Agamben 1993b:18).

describes it—is really a form of clinical depression, which in some ways does actually make a lot of sense.[21]

Couliano (1987) is more interested in how erotic theory was appropriated by Renaissance magicians such as Giordano Bruno, for whom the mechanics of sexual attraction became the paradigm for all forms of attraction or desire and, hence, the key to social power. If human beings tend to become dominated by powerful, emotionally charged images, then anyone who developed a comprehensive scientific understanding of the mechanics by which such images work could become a master manipulator. It should be possible to develop techniques for "binding" and influencing others' minds, for instance, by fixing certain emotionally charged images in their heads or even little bits of music (jingles, basically) that could be designed in such a way as to keep coming back into people's minds despite themselves and pull them in one direction or another.[22] In all of this, Couliano sees, not unreasonably, the first self-conscious form of the modern arts of propaganda and advertising. Bruno felt his services should be of great interest to princes and politicians.

It apparently never occurred to Bruno or anyone else in this early period to apply such protoadvertising techniques to economic rather than political purposes. Politics, after all, is about relations between people. Manipulating others was, by definition,

[21] There is a lot of evidence that suggests that levels of clinical depression do in fact rise sharply in consumer-oriented societies; they have certainly been rising steadily in the United States for most of the century. I should emphasize, by the way, that while Agamben (1993b) and Couliano (1987) draw exclusively on European sources, these ideas were very likely developed earlier and more extensively in the Islamic world. Certainly, it is well established that the courtly love tradition in medieval France harkened back to Sufi poetic traditions of love as the chaste and spiritually fulfilling contemplation of an idealized object (e.g., Boase 1977; Massignon 1982:348–349). Unfortunately, I lack the language skills to pursue the question of medieval Islamic theories of the imagination, but I would underline that this is yet another way in which when one refers to the "Western tradition," one should think of oneself, especially in this period, referring equally or even primarily to Islam.

[22] Along lines already developed by the Art of Memory (see Yates 1964, 1966).

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This commentary provides a welcome return to a familiar text, which has gained only a few hundred words since its last and considerably less centrally placed appearance (Graeber 2007b), and I do believe it has earned its republication and discussion in this much more visible format. David Graeber's anamnesis of the current hypertrophic attention to consumption is to me plausibly argued. My commentary, then, is not intensely critical of the argument itself: there is currently a broad public tendency to see citizens as consumers or as "customers" of their own governments even. This does entail a number of disconcerting notions about who we are, what we want, and how we go about getting what we believe we need or, rather, what we ephemerally think we desire. Some anthropologists, instead of deconstructing public discourse, are consumed by the very idea of consumption, having accepted it as our own analytical term instead of treating it as an epistemological arena, as a concept that sits in fact rather uneasily between phenomenon and category. But even in fields such as tourism, where "consumption of people" has long been augmented to "cannibalism," the metaphor needs to be understood as just that: even if people feel as if they are being eaten alive, they are, in fact, not. By calling this "consumption," we actively impoverish our tool kit. Graeber's text does us the considerable service of treating the ongoing consumption conversation as data, as an empirical phenomenon just like others we study, and tracing its emergence as well as some of its ramifications with great clarity. In the end, he returns us to the anthropological commonplace that social life is really about "the production of people," a statement echoing Stephen Gudeman's (2009) consistent calls for attention to what he has termed the base, "the incommensurable collection of goods and services mediating relationships be-

Human beings are in no way autonomous. (Hegel's two men meet "at the beginning of history," having never encountered another consciousness, i.e., in the impossible condition of having survived infancy without caregivers.) To the contrary, we are, as the late Walter Goldschmidt (2006) put it, innately "affect hungry," such sluts for recognition that we are likely to see worthiness in anyone who offers us encouraging words, as flatterers and cons the world over have always known.

Consumption in everyday practice is a way to satisfy our affect hunger, and that is exactly what advertisers promise. Get love with cosmetics. Get respect with a Lexus. Be the envy of your friends with the latest electronic gizmo. But not everybody can play this game, and here is where the question of worthiness breaks out on ever larger scales. Take "keeping up with the Joneses," a competitive consumption that is at the same time a mutual creation of human beings—neighbors become worthy of recognition by exhibiting the material signs of having engaged this torturous labor-money system and having been able to claim some of its prizes (tokens, as Graeber says, of the actions they represent). Who cannot play? The unemployed and the so-called underclass—constructed as unworthy in consumerist ideology, they suffer the fate of political scapegoats.

Take the same dynamic global and we find "backward" multitudes who have not "evolved" to the heights of modern consumption. As enslavement and colonization were once justified by enlightening the benighted native, so the unworthiness of the "backward" justifies a so-called international development that covertly pursues the same goals: cheap labor, cheap resources, mass markets. Hidden in the ideology of consumption, no matter how creatively people use it, is the world-shaking contempt of the West for "the rest" that our discipline has long been at pains to deconstruct. Graeber is right. Let it go.

a political business, which I think brings out the most fundamental difference between the medieval conception of desire and the sort of thing Campbell (1987) describes. If one starts with a model of desire where the object of desire is assumed to be a human being, then it only makes sense that one cannot completely possess the object. ("Embrace" is a nice metaphor, actually, because it is so inherently fleeting.) And one is presumably not intentionally in the business of destroying it, either.

One might say, then, as a starting point, that the shift from the kind of model of desire that predominated in the Middle Ages and Renaissance to the kind of consumerist model described by Campbell is a shift from one whose paradigm is erotic to one in which the primary metaphor is eating food.

Complications 1: Individualism

Still, even if one examines the original medieval version, the basic conception is already surprisingly individualistic. This is because it is so passive. Desire is the result of an individual receiving sense impressions from outside. Now it is certainly true that this is one very common experience of desire, as something that seems to seize us from outside our conscious control, let alone better judgment, and often causes us to do things for which we would really rather not hold ourselves entirely responsible. But it also allows us to overlook the fact that desire emerges in relations between people.

Granted, the relationship between lover and beloved, even an imaginary one, is a relationship of a sort. Still, it is easier to see how much this opens the way to a purely individualistic conception if one compares this particular model of desire as developed explicitly in medieval and Renaissance theory and tacitly through the sort of consumer practice Campbell (1987) describes with, say, the kind of value-based approach I have tried to develop elsewhere

(Graeber 2001). Money, for example, can be considered in Marxian terms as a representation of the value (importance) of productive labor (human creative action) as well as the means by which it is socially measured and coordinated, but it is also a representation that brings into being the very thing it represents, because after all, in a market economy, people work in order to get money. Arguably, something analogous happens everywhere. Value then could be said to be the way the importance of one's own actions register in the imagination—always by translation into some larger social language or system of meaning, by being integrated into some greater social whole. It also always happens through some kind of concrete medium—which can be almost anything (wampum, oratorical performances, sumptuous tableware, kula artifacts, Egyptian pyramids)—and these objects in turn (unless they are utterly generic substances, such as money, that represent sheer potentiality) tend to incorporate in their own structure a kind of schematic model of the forms of creative action that bring them into being but that also become objects of desire that end up motivating actors to carry out those very actions. Just as the desire for money inspires one to labor, the desire for tokens of honor inspires forms of honorable behavior, the desire for tokens of love inspires romantic behavior, and so on.[23]

By contrast, pneumatic theory begins not from actions but from what might once have been called "passions." Godfrey Lienhardt (1961) long ago pointed out that while actions and passions form a logical set—either you act on the world or the world acts on you—we have become so uncomfortable with the idea of seeing ourselves

[23] Almost always this also ends up involving a certain degree of fetishization, where the objects end up appearing, from the actor's perspective, to be the source of the very powers by which they are in fact created—because from the actor's position, this might as well be true. Often, too, these objects become imaginary micrototalities that play a similar role to Lacan's mirror objects or similar critiques of the commodity as capturing an illusory sense of wholeness in a society fragmented by capitalism itself (Debord 1994; Graeber 2001).

Consumption, Graeber argues, embeds an "impoverished" theory of "human desire and fulfillment" that breaks decisively with all previous Western tradition. Centuries of Western philosophy viewed desire not as directed toward objects for consumption but toward *social* objectives: recognition, "sympathetic attention," sexual pleasure, wealth (for the praise and esteem of others), and power.

By the early modern period, however, the achievement of these social objectives had become a vexing problem in Western thought. Graeber illustrates with a parable of Hegel's: two men desire mutual recognition as free, autonomous, fully human beings but only if the other is *worthy*—the recognition of an inferior does not count. But determining whether the other is equally free and autonomous brings these men to an impossible dilemma. How could they know for sure? A fight would only end in revealing the inferiority of the loser. (It is rather like the other Marx's not being interested in joining any club that would have him as a member.)

Consumption, Graeber suggests, resolves the dilemma of such "passions" by redirecting the imagination from relations with persons to relations with things. This resonates with Albert O. Hirschman's (1977) study of writings from the early Modern period, in which the winning argument for the removal of legal limits on European capitalists was the substitution of "interests" for "passions." Rather than destroying each other, the ideology of consumption, in Graeber's words, has individual consumers relating to each other in "an endless struggle to establish … sovereignty, or autonomy, by incorporating and destroying aspects of the world around them."

The problem here is that a truly autonomous being would have no desire for recognition from another nor any other kind of social relationship. Hegel and those who followed this line of thinking were not so much "starting from a model of possessive individualism," as Graeber proposes, but rather from one of innate competition, a model that would soon surface as "survival of the fittest."

If marketing scholars do not want to limit their studies, economists rarely care, and anthropologists have been distracted by the very concept they should be critiquing, what is to be done? One solution is to look outside of academia. Those outside the academy are happy to critique consumption. This work is being done. Graeber's challenge to us, though, is to force ourselves to regurgitate the concept, to stick our scholarly fingers down our academic throats until we vomit up the idea of consumption. The question is, once it has been exposed to the disinfectants of sunlight, will we, like dogs, return to the concept and swallow it down once more?

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This is a very persuasive analysis. Consumption, Graeber argues, no matter how creatively it is used by the people we study, is an ideology that tricks us into shouldering the modernist assumption of an economy with two spheres, production and consumption. Whatever is not production for markets becomes, by default, consumption, a symbolic eating that both destroys and incorporates its object. Relegated to the sphere of consumption, social life appears as the pursuit of products, its life-giving creativity all but forgotten. In this ideological regime, social life itself, the "mutual creation of human beings," can appear as "a gift granted us by the captains of industry."

What Graeber is doing here is one of anthropologists' most important tasks: owning up to the cultural bias in our analytical vocabulary and pruning it out. In support of this necessarily social effort—the mutual creation of anthropologists—I would like to draw out a couple of Graeber's points, add a pinch of four-fields perspective, and suggest further hidden entanglements of consumerist ideology.

as passive recipients that the latter term has almost completely disappeared from the way we talk about experience. Medieval and Renaissance authors did not yet have such qualms. In pneumatic theory, "passions" are not what one does but what is done to one (where one is not agent but "patient"); at the same time, they referred, as they do now, to strong emotions that seem to seize us against our will. The two were linked: emotions such as love were in fact seen as being caused by just such impressions on the pneumatic system. Far from being models of action, in fact, passivity came to be seen as a virtue in itself: it was those who tried to act on their passions, to seize the object rather than contemplate it, who really missed the point.

Framing things in such passive terms then opened the way for that extreme individualism that appears to be the other side of the peculiarly Western theory of desire. A schema of action is almost of necessity a collective product; the impression of a beautiful image is something that one can imagine involves a relation between only two people or even (insofar as love became a mystical phenomenon) between the desirer and God. Even with romantic love, the ideal was that it should not really be translated into an ongoing social relation but remain a matter of contemplation and fantasy.

Complications 2: Shifting Lines of Class and Gender

All this makes it easier to understand how it might be possible to shift from erotic fantasies to something more like the modern idea of "consumption." Still, the transition, I would argue, also required a number of other conceptual shifts and displacements in terms of both class and gender.

Compare, for example, how images of paradise in medieval and early modern Europe varied by social milieu. When peasants, craftspeople, and the urban poor tried to imagine a land in

which all desires would be fulfilled, they tended to focus on the abundance of food. Hence, the land of Cockaigne, where bloated people loll about as geese fly fully cooked into their mouths, rivers run with beer, and so forth. Carnival, as Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) so richly illustrated, expands on all the same themes, jumbling together every sort of bodily indulgence and enormity, pleasures sexual as well as gastronomic and every other kind. Still, the predominant imagery always centers on sausages, hogsheads, legs of mutton, lard and tripes, and tubs of wine. The emphasis on food is in striking contrast with visions of earthly paradise in other parts of the world at that time (such as those prevalent in the Islamic world), which were mostly about sex. Erotic fantasies are usually strikingly absent from the literature on the Land of Cockaigne; if they are present, they seem thrown in rather by way of an afterthought.

As Herman Pleij (2001:421) has pointed out, the medieval high-culture version of paradise was in many ways conceived in direct opposition to the popular one—not that it emphasized erotic pleasures, either. Instead, it tended to fix on what we would now call elite consumables, the exotic commodities of the day that were primarily essences: spices above all but also incense, perfumes, and similar delicate scents and flavors. Instead of the Land of Cockaigne, one finds a hankering after the lost Garden of Eden, thought to exist somewhere in the East, near the fabled kingdom of Prester John (Delumeau 2000)—anyway, from somewhere near those fragrant lands whence cardamom, mace, peppers, and cumin (not to mention frankincense and myrrh) were harvested. Rather than a land of complete fatty indulgence in every sort of food, these were often conceived as lands whose ethereal inhabitants did not have to eat at all but simply subsisted on beautiful smells (Friedman 1981; Schivelbusch 1992). This emphasis on refined flavors and fragrances in turn opens onto a whole different realm of experience: of "taste," ephemerality, fleeting essences, and, ultimately, the familiar elite consumption

libidinal economy. Here Graeber shows us how the concept of consumption has changed over time, from being a reference to waste and destruction to a mirror for production in monopoly capitalism and now, finally, in the "consumer society" to being a mirror to itself. It is not the things we consume that are important to us anymore but that we consume. We no longer produce things in a sphere of production that we consume elsewhere. Rather, we consume everywhere. Or so say the scholars.

For many academics, consumption is a concept whose ingredients are milk and honey. And it is true that for many of us in paradise, we plan to do a lot of consuming. But there is a hell of a lot of consumption going on in hell, too. Here, though, it is the individual who is being consumed—by fire, hate, and frustration, by one's inability to be consumed. It is through prolonging desire, as desire for destruction, that hell is imagined to be so, well, hellish. In hell, your appetites are turned against you. The separation of appetite or desires and consumption, we might conclude, is tantamount to hell. In short, capitalism, for most people for most of the time, is a lot like hell. And it is capitalism that produces this separation (or "scarcity" in the language of economics) just as it consumes we who labor within it.

So for us, the power of Graeber's piece is that it encourages us to ask what the world might look like if we, like early political economists, could draw a line around "consumption"—thus defining it and containing it. (Indeed, it is notable that within marketing studies there is much talk of a "nexus" between consumption and production, a blurring of the categories, without ever specifying the contours of this nexus.) Researchers would have to look at consumption rather than *through* consumption. Traditionally, we have done this in terms of production, but that has now melted into air or at least migrated to the global South. But what if we had a concept other than production, consumption, or some stupid combination of the two that would allow us to look into the mirror of consumption rather than hold up another mirror to it?

Comments

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We like this piece a lot. Our only real criticism is perhaps the journal in which it is being published. It should be required reading for all theorists of consumption, but alas, it seems few of them "consume" *Current Anthropology*. A search on the Business Source Premier database reveals that the journal has never been cited in any of the five marketing journals ranked highest by the United Kingdom–based Association of Business Schools or in "top" economics journals.

As Graeber stresses in his article, it is not that these disciplines do not care about anthropology but that they largely care only about what anthropology can do for them. (See Basbøll 2010 for an exemplary exposé of the way organization studies scholars use and abuse anthropological research.) Indeed, one of the most informative aspects of the essay is the way it describes a performative power of "consumption" as an imperialistic concept taking over the academic galaxy one discipline at a time. Graeber shows us that many anthropologists have been willing to add to the marketing and economics literature, but in so doing they have accepted a readymeal understanding of consumption prepackaged by the disciplinary demands of marketing and economics such that their research serves to valorize the very category they should analyze.

Part of the appeal of consumption, then, is that it simultaneously pleases the two handmaidens of the modern university: business and intellectuals. It bridges the practical and the useless, the scholarly and the mundane. But these material factors do not fully explain the power of consumption-asconcept. All too often an analysis that focuses on political economy does not take account of the

worlds of fashion, style, and the pursuit of ungraspable novelty. Once again, then, the elite—who in reality, of course, tended to grasp and embrace all sorts of things—constructed their ideal of desire around that which somehow seemed to escape their hold. One might argue that the modern consumer ethos is built on a kind of fusion between these two class ideals. The shift from a conception of desire modeled on erotic love to one based on the desire for food ("consumption") was clearly a shift in the direction of popular discourse; at the same time, though, one might say the innovative aspect of modern consumeristic theories of desire is to combine the popular materialist emphasis on consumption with the notion of the ephemeral ungraspable image as the driving force of maximization of production.

This might at least suggest a solution to what has always struck me as a profound paradox in Western social theory. As I have already noted, the idea of human beings as creatures tainted by original sin and therefore cursed with infinite wants, as beings living in a finite universe who were inevitably in a state of generalized competition, was already fully developed by authors such as St. Augustine and therefore formed an accepted part of Christian doctrine throughout the Middle Ages. At the same time, very few people actually seemed to behave like this. Economically, the Middle Ages were still the time of "target incomes," in which the typical reaction to economic good times, even among urban craftspeople and most of the protobourgeoisie, was to take more days off. It is as if the notion of the maximizing individual existed in theory long before it emerged in practice. One explanation might be that until the early modern period, at least, high culture (whether in its most Christian or most courtly versions) tended to devalue any open display of greed, appetite, or acquisitiveness, while popular culture—which could sometimes heartily embrace such impulses—did so in forms that were inherently collective. When the Land of Cockaigne was translated into reality, it was in the form of popular festivals such as Carnival; almost any increase in popular wealth was im-

mediately diverted into communal feasts, parades, and collective indulgences. One of the processes that made capitalism possible, then, was what might be termed the "privatization of desire." The highly individualistic perspectives of the elite had to be combined with the materialistic indulgences of what Bakhtin liked to call the "material lower stratum."

Getting from there to anything like the capitalist notion of consumption required, I think, one further shift, this time along lines not of class but of gender. The courtly love literature and related theories of desire represent a purely male perspective,[24] and this no doubt was true of fantasies about the Land of Cockaigne and similar idealized worlds of gastronomic fulfillment, too. Although here it was complicated, the fact is that in the folk psychology of the day, women were widely considered more lustful, greedy, and generally desirous than men. Insofar as anyone was represented as insatiable, then, it was women: the image of woman as a ravenous belly, demanding ever more sex and food, and men as haplessly laboring in an endless but ultimately impossible effort to satisfy them is a standard misogynist topos going back at least to Hesiod. Christian doctrine only reinforced it by saddling women with the primary blame for original sin and thus insisting that they bore the brunt of the punishment. It was only around the time of the industrial revolution and the full split between workplace and household that this sort of rhetoric was largely set aside and women—proper bourgeois women, anyway—were redefined as innocent, largely sexless creatures, guardians of homes that were no longer seen as places of production but as "havens in a heartless world." Significantly, it was at just the moment that consumption came to be defined as an essentially feminine business (Davis 1975:125–151; Graeber 1997; Thomas 1971:568–569; cf. Federici 2004).

[24] Even women, when they wrote love poems, tended to adopt a male point of view.

ing, at least in part, is simply insisting on continuing to act as if this were the case even when using objects manufactured elsewhere. In some cases, this can turn into self-conscious resistance to—or, for that matter, an equally self-conscious enthusiastic embrace of—consumer capitalism. But in many cases, at least, I suspect that our issues and categories are simply irrelevant.

One thing I think we can certainly assert. Insofar as social life is and always has been mainly about the mutual creation of human beings, the ideology of consumption has been endlessly effective in helping us forget this. Most of all it does so by suggesting that (a) human desire is essentially a matter not of relations between people but of relations between individuals and phantasms; (b) our primary relation with other individuals is an endless struggle to establish our sovereignty, or autonomy, by incorporating and destroying aspects of the world around them; (c) for the reason in c, any genuine relation with other people is problematic (the problem of "the Other"); and (d) society can thus be seen as a gigantic engine of production and destruction in which the only significant human activity is either manufacturing things or engaging in acts of ceremonial destruction so as to make way for more, a vision that in fact sidelines most things that real people actually do and insofar as it is translated into actual economic behavior is obviously unsustainable. Even as anthropologists and other social theorists directly challenge this view of the world, the unreflective use—and indeed self-righteous propagation—of terms such as "consumption" end up undercutting our efforts and reproducing the very tacit ideological logic we are trying to call into question.

do base key aspects of their identity around what they see as the destructive encompassment of manufactured products. Let us find out who these people really are, when they think of themselves this way and when they do not, and how they relate to others who conceive their relations to the material world differently. If we wish to continue applying terms borrowed from political economy—as I have myself certainly done elsewhere (e.g., Graeber 2001, 2005)—it might be more enlightening to start looking at what we have been calling the "consumption" sphere rather as the sphere of the production of human beings, not just as labor power but as persons, internalized nexes of meaningful social relations, because after all, this is what social life is actually about, the production of people (of which the production of things is simply a subordinate moment), and it is only the very unusual organization of capitalism that makes it even possible for us to imagine otherwise.[37]

This is not to say that everything has to be considered a form of either production or consumption (consider a softball game—it is clearly neither), but it at least allows us to open up some neglected questions, such as that of alienated and nonalienated forms of labor, terms that have somewhat fallen into abeyance and therefore remain radically undertheorized. What exactly does engaging in nonalienated production actually mean? Such questions become all the more important when we start thinking about capitalist globalization and resistance. Rather than looking at people in Zambia or Brazil and saying "Look! They are using consumption to construct identities!" and thus implying they are willingly or perhaps unknowingly submitting to the logic of neoliberal capitalism, perhaps we should consider that in many of the societies we study, the production of material products has always been subordinate to the mutual construction of human beings and what they are do-

[37] Another approach that treats consumption largely as a form of production—in this case, value production—is the "immaterial labor" argument that has emerged from Italian post-Workerism, particularly in the works of Maurizio Lazzarato (1996). I have critiqued this position elsewhere (Graeber 2008).

The legacy of this shift is still with us. As feminist theorists emphasize (e.g., Bordo 1993), women in contemporary consumer culture remain caught in a perpetual suspension between embodying the extremes of both spirit and matter, transcendent image and material reality, that seems to play itself out in impossible dilemmas about food.

On Having Your Cake and Eating It, Too, and Certain Problems Incumbent Therein

What I am suggesting, then, is that while medieval moralists accepted in the abstract that humans were cursed with limitless desires—that, as Augustine put it, their natures rebelled against them just as they had rebelled against God—they did not think this was an existential dilemma that affected them; rather, people tended to attribute such sinful predilections mainly to people they saw as social and therefore moral inferiors. Men saw women as insatiable; the prosperous saw the poor as grasping and materialistic. It was really in the early modern period that all this began to change.

Agamben (1993a) has a theory as to why this happened. He suggests that the idea that all humans are driven by infinite unquenchable desires is possible only when one severs imagination from experience. In the world posited by medieval psychology, desires could be satisfied for the very reason that they were really directed at phantasms: imagination was the zone in which subject and object, lover and beloved, could genuinely meet and partake of one another. With Descartes, he argues, this began to change. Imagination was redefined as something inherently separate from experience—as, in fact, a compendium of all those things (dreams, flights of fancy, pictures in the mind) that one feels one has experienced but really has not. It was at this point, once we were expected to try to satisfy one's desires in what we have come to think of as

"the real world," that the ephemeral nature of experience, and therefore of any "embrace," becomes an impossible dilemma (Agamben 1993b:25–28). One is already seeing such dilemmas worked out in De Sade, he argues, again around the same time as the dawn of consumer culture.

This is pretty much the argument one would have to make if one were to confine oneself, as Agamben does, entirely to literary and philosophical texts. In the past couple sections I have been trying to develop a more socially nuanced approach that argues, among other things, that the modern concept of "consumption," which carries with it the tacit assumption that there is no end to what anyone might want, could really only take form once certain elite concepts of desire—as the pursuit of ephemera and phantasms—fused, effectively, with the popular emphasis on food. Still, I do not think this is quite a complete or adequate explanation. There is, I believe, another element that made all this possible, perhaps inevitable. This was the expansion of the market in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the redefinition of the world according to an essentially market logic that came to accompany it. MacPherson (1962) first referred to it as an ideology of "possessive individualism"—but in this case, an ideology that extended far beyond the disputations of the learned and effected the perceptions of artisans and rabble-rousing politicians—one by which people increasingly came to see themselves as isolated beings who defined their relation with the world not in terms of social relations but in terms of property rights. It was only then that the problem of how one could "have" things, or for that matter experiences ("we'll always have Paris"), could really become a crisis.[25]

There is a great deal of debate about when the ideal of private property in the modern sense first developed and how early it could

[25] In other words, rather than asking how is it possible to truly "have" or possess some object or experience, perhaps we should be asking why anyone should develop a desire to do so to begin with.

What methodological conclusions am I suggesting, then? Above all, I think we should be suspicious about importing the political economy habit of seeing society as divided into two spheres, one of production and one of consumption,[36] into cultural analysis in the first place. Doing so almost inevitably forces us to push almost all forms of nonalienated production into the category of consumption or even "consumer behavior." Consider the following passage, found (in fact) in a critique of the culture of consumption:

> Cooking, playing sports, gardening, DIY (Do-It-Yourself), home decoration, dancing and music-making are all examples of consumer activities which involve some participation, but they cannot of themselves transform the major invasion by commercial interest groups into consumption which has occurred since the 1950s. (Bocock 1993:51)

According to the logic of the quote above, if I bought some vegetables and prepared a gazpacho to share with some friends, that is actually consumerism. In fact, it would be even if I grew the vegetables myself (presumably because I bought the seeds). We are back to my earlier parable of the garage band. Any production not for the market is treated as a form of consumption, which has the incredibly reactionary political effect of treating almost every form of unalienated experience we do engage in as somehow a gift granted us by the captains of industry.

How to think our way out of this box? No doubt there are many ways. This paper is meant more to explain why it is important to do so than to propose an actual solution. Still, one or two suggestions might be in order. The first and most obvious is that we might begin treating consumption not as an analytical term but as an ideology to be investigated. Clearly, there are people in the world who

[36] Or, at best, three: production, consumption, and exchange.

to resonate with many "ordinary people" in a way that the creative consumption literature never has.

Oddly, those writing in venues such as the *Journal of Consumer Research* itself often seem more open to this critical literature than most anthropologists,[35] perhaps because they are aware that one cannot very well represent consumers as subversive unless there is something out there, some dominant ideology, for them to subvert. After all, if all that existed was a collection of subcultures, there could not also be countercultures, as there would be no hegemony for them to resist. The shadow of the Frankfurt School's "mass society" must therefore be preserved if only to be eternally transcended. This is perhaps also why the story with which I began, that "we used to be naive Marxists," has effectively become a permanent element in academic socialization. We all come to graduate school already aware of the anticonsumerist discourse precisely because it is a popular discourse (if obviously not the only one). Part of our initiation into that peculiar elite that is academia is our learning to denounce that discourse as elitist.

[35] For example, Arnould and Thomson (2005), in their summary of 20 years of "Consumer Culture Theory" in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, are careful to acknowledge the importance of this critical literature and sometimes sound very much like ideology critics themselves. "Consumer culture theorists read popular texts (advertisements, television programs, films) as lifestyle and identity instructions that convey unadulterated marketplace ideologies"; thus, they aim to "reveal the ways in which capitalist cultural production systems invite consumers to covet certain identity and lifestyle ideals" (875). However, they add, in such theory, "consumers are conceptualized as interpretive agents rather than as passive dupes. Thus, various forms of consumer resistance inevitably greet the dominant normative ideological influence of commercial media and marketing. Consumers seek to form lifestyles that defy dominant consumerist norms or that directly challenge corporate power" (875). Lest this sound surprisingly radical for a marketing journal, I note that the authors immediately go on to argue that this by no means should be meant to suggest that there is any natural alliance between such subversive consumers and anticorporate "consumer activists." The latter, in their "evangelical" zeal to reform society as a whole, really see consumers themselves as "part of the problem." Corporate power is apparently to be challenged—but not unreservedly.

be said to have become common sense even among the popular classes. Some (e.g., MacFarlane 1998) insist that it was well under way in the High Middle Ages, at least in England. It was certainly so by the time of Cromwell.[26] The notion of "consumption," I would suggest, eventually came to resolve a certain contradiction inherent within this ideal.

From an analytical perspective, of course, property is simply a social relation: an arrangement between persons and collectivities concerning the disposition of valuable goods. Private property is one particular that entails one individual's right to exclude all others—"all the world"—from access to a certain house or shirt or piece of land, and so on. A relation so broad is difficult to imagine, however, so people tend to treat it as if it were a relation between a person and an object. But what could a relation between a person and an object actually consist of?

In English law, such relations are still described according to the logic of sovereignty—that is, in terms of dominium. The power a citizen has over his or her own possessions is exactly the same power once held by kings and princes and that is still retained by states in the form of "eminent domain." This is why private property rights took so long to enshrine in law: even in England, which led the way in such matters, it was almost the eighteenth century before jurists were willing to recognize a *dominium* belonging to anyone other than the king (Aylmer 1980).What would it mean, then, to establish "sovereignty" over an object? In legal terms, a king's dominium extended to his land, his subjects, and their possessions; the subjects were "included in" the person of the king, who represented them in dealing with other kingdoms, in a similar fashion to that by which the father of a family represented his wife, children, and servants before the law. The wife, children, and servants of a head of household were likewise "included in" his legal personality

[26] To the extent that, as MacPherson (1962) shows, populist politicians such as the Levellers framed their arguments in such terms.

in much the same way as his possessions. And in fact the power of kings was always being likened to that of fathers; the only real difference (aside from the fact that in any conflict, the king was seen to have a higher claim) was that unlike fathers, kings wielded the power of life and death over their subjects. These were the ultimate stakes of sovereignty; certainly, it was the one power kings were least willing to delegate or share.[27] The ultimate proof that one has sovereign power over another human being is one's ability to have the other executed. In a similar fashion, one might argue, the ultimate proof of possession, of one's personal dominium over a thing, is one's ability to destroy it—and indeed this remains one of the key legal ways of defining dominium, as a property right, to this day. But there is an obvious problem here. If one does destroy the object, one may have definitively proved that one owned it, but, as a result, one does not have it any more.

We end up, then, with what might seem a particularly perverse variation on Hegel's master/slave dialectic in which the actor, seeking some sort of impossible recognition of absolute mastery of an inanimate object, can achieve this recognition only by destroying it. Still, I do not really think this is a variation on the master/slave dilemma. I think a better case could probably be made that the dilemma described by Hegel actually derives from this. After all, the one thing least explained in Hegel's account is where the necessity of conflict comes from (after all, there are ways to risk one's life to impress another person that do not involve trying to murder that person).[28] Hegel's quest for recognition does not lead to the destruction of property, but it does lead to a choice of either destroying the Other or reducing the Other to property. Relations that are

[27] Supposedly, in early Roman law, the paterfamilias did have the power to execute his children as well as his slaves; both rights, if they really did exist in practice, were stripped away quite quickly.

[28] "Similarly, just as each stakes his own life, so each must seek the other's death, for it values the other no more than itself; its essential being is present" (Hegel 1998:114).

and continues to sell well to the present day. The same can be said of more recent additions to the literature, such as Kalle Lasn's (1999) *Culture Jam*, and of the flagship journal of the antimarketing activists, *Adbusters*, largely composed by current or former employees in the industry, which (unlike, say, the *Journal of Consumer Research*) can occasionally even be found for sale in supermarket checkout lines (even if, admittedly, mostly cooperative supermarkets). Some of this literature—which incidentally tends to take a neo-Situationist rather than a Frankfurt School approach[34] —may be anthropologically naive, but this is largely because anthropologists have played almost no role in helping shape it. This literature in turn overlaps with the truly voluminous critical literature on TV journalism, corporate public relations, and the mediatization of political life, from which again anthropologists have largely excluded themselves even if they may often be personally sympathetic. Pierre Bourdieu's (1999) *On Television*, for instance, which emerges from this tradition and which was a surprise best seller in France, has gone largely unnoticed as a result. What I am really trying to draw attention to here is the profound irony of the situation. While academics that espouse such opinions risk being instantly denounced as elitists with contempt for "ordinary people," these opinions seem

[34] The ritual vilification of the Frankfurt School is so relentless that I cannot resist one small word in their defense. It is certainly true that Adorno and Horkheimer could be remarkably puritanical and elitist. But it is also important to bear in mind these were German Jews who witnessed the rise of the Nazis to power in Germany and were keenly aware that fascism was one of the first political movements to make full use of modern marketing techniques. Starting from that fact makes it much harder to deny that sometimes people really are intentionally manipulated with political ends in mind. Would anyone seriously suggest that most of those who "consumed," for example, Goebbels's anti-Semitic effusions, were really creatively and subversively reappropriating his messages—or that if they did, this made the slightest bit of difference? No doubt Adorno and Horkheimer overstated their case in making fascism the model for all subsequent political-economic forms, but one could equally argue that others have overstated its uniqueness.

not based on property—or, more precisely, on that very ambiguous synthesis between the two types of sovereignty—suddenly become impossible to imagine, and I think this is true because Hegel is starting from a model of possessive individualism.

At any rate, the paradox exists, and it is precisely here where the metaphor of "consumption" gains its appeal because it is the perfect resolution of this paradox[29] —or, at least, about as perfect a resolution as one is ever going to get. When you eat something, you do indeed destroy it (as an autonomous entity), but at the same time, it remains "included in" you in the most material of senses.[30] Eating food, then, became the perfect idiom for talking about desire and gratification in a world in which everything, all human relations, were being reimagined as questions of property.

Hence we return to Hegel. But I want to emphasize here that Hegel is not the starting point of this journey. He's the end. An account that focused on the actual emergence of the term "consumption" in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century would, no doubt, have to contend with the broader sociopolitical context of Hegel's day. As Susan Buck-Morss (2000; see also Fischer 2004) has recently made clear, Hegel composed his master/slave dialectic with questions of real colonial slavery—particularly, the revolution in Haiti—very much at the forefront of his mind. The reappearance of actual chattel slavery in Europe and its colonies was of course another direct result of the emergence of possessive individualism and caused endless dilemmas for its ideologists. The connections here are infinitely complicated: I have argued that capitalism is really a transformation of slavery and cannot be understood outside it (Graeber 2005). But in this essay, in this argument,

[29] Or, more technically, I suppose, synecdoche.

[30] And it has the additional attraction of being almost the only power that kings do not have over their subjects: as one sixteenth-century Spanish jurist wrote, in arguing that American cannibalism violated natural law, "no man may possess another so absolutely that he may make use of him as a foodstuff" (Pagden 1987:86).

consumption" is at its most creative, it is not really consumption at all; when it most resembles something we would call "consumption," it is at its least creative. And there is no particular reason to define television watching as "consumption" at all.[33]

Does it really matter that we use the word "consumption" when speaking of television programming as opposed to some other term? Actually, I think it matters a great deal. Because, ultimately, doing so represents a political choice: it means that we align ourselves with one body of writing and research— in this case, the one most closely aligned with the language and interests of the corporate world and not with others— in this instance, that activist literature explicitly critical of the role of television in contemporary life. Around the same time as Steve Barnett was dropping out of academia to become an advertising consultant, an advertising executive named Jerry Mander (1978) abandoned the business world to publish a book called Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television using his own technical knowledge of the industry to make a case that the common popular discourse that sees television as a mind-numbing drug and advertisers as cynical manipulators is entirely accurate. Unlike the works of exponents of the "creative consumption" paradigm, which remain largely confined to the desks of graduate students and marketing executives, this volume found a ready popular audience

such stated preferences with the statistical facts—for instance, that in the average American household, the television is on roughly 4.5 hours per day—in any other way.

[33] Lest I be instantly accused of affiliation—or at least affinity—with the dreaded Frankfurt School, allow me to provide some personal qualifications. I grew up in a Nielsen family and know all about collective working-class family viewing but also have myself had many horrific jobs from which I often returned to stare blankly at the television. I also have a certain experience of fandom, being, in fact, the first academic ever to publish an essay on the topic of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Graeber 1998), surely one of the greatest shows of all time. I think my personal attitude is typical of most Americans: television is a wasteland, except for those shows I like.

by taking things back to the eleventh century, before Western Europeans had a colonial empire and when chattel slavery was at its low ebb, I am trying to cast the net even broader to ask, What, in fact, are the origins of that attitude toward the material world that allowed people in certain corners of Atlantic Europe to create these colonial empires to begin with? If we do not ask such questions, we are left with the tacit assumption that there is nothing to be explained here, that anyone in a position to massacre and enslave millions of people in the name of personal profit would naturally wish to do so. I would hardly suggest I have offered a full explanation for this, but I think the material assembled here is quite suggestive in this regard.

Conclusions: What about Consumerism?

What does all this imply about the current use of the term "consumption"? For one thing, I think it suggests we should think about how far we want to extend the metaphor—as Wilk (2004) has justly emphasized, a metaphor is all this really is. It makes perfect sense to talk about the "consumption" of fossil fuels. It is quite another thing to talk about the "consumption" of television programming—much though this has been the topic of endless books and essays. Why, exactly, are we calling this "consumption"? About the only reason I can see is that television programming is created by people paid wages and salaries somewhere other than where viewers are watching it. Otherwise, there appears to be no reason at all. Programming is not even a commodity, because viewers often do not pay for it (and in the past they almost never did); it is not in any direct sense "consumed" by its viewers.[31] It is hardly something one fantasizes about acquiring, and one cannot, in fact, acquire it. It is

[31] Obviously, with cable, PPV, TiVo, and so on, it is more a commodity than it once was. But still it is so in a very minor sense: most television is still a medium for advertising.

in no sense destroyed by use. Rather, we are dealing with a continual stream of potential fantasy material, some intended to market particular commodities, some not. Cultural studies scholars and anthropologists writing in the same vein will of course insist that these images are not simply passively absorbed by "consumers" but actively interpreted and appropriated in ways the producers would probably never have suspected and employed as ways of fashioning identities—the "creative consumption" model again. It is the undoubted truth that there are people who design their identities around certain TV shows. In fact, there are people who organize much of their imaginative life around one particular show—Trekkies, for instance, who participate in a subculture of fans who write stories or comic zines around their favorite characters, attend conventions, design costumes, and the like. But when a 16year-old girl writes a short story about forbidden love between Kirk and Spock, this is hardly consumption any more; we are talking about people engaging in a complex community organized around forms of (relatively unalienated) production. One can imagine here a kind of continuum with this representing one extreme. At the other, we have a considerable slice of television viewing by people who work 40 or 50 hours a week at jobs they find mind-numbingly boring, extremely stressful, or both; who commute; who come home far too exhausted and emotionally drained to be able to engage in any of the activities they would consider truly rewarding, pleasurable, or meaningful; and who just plop down in front the of the tube because it is the easiest thing to do.[32] In other words, when "creative

[32] The passage above is partly inspired by Conrad Lodziak's (2002: 106–107) discussion of television viewing in his book *The Myth of Consumerism*. Such thoughts are, of course, anathema to the mainstream of media studies and will no doubt provoke the withering ire of many readers, but as Lodziak cogently remarks, empirical studies and questionnaires tend to ask what viewers find meaningful or important about television programming, not how meaningful or important they take the experience to be. Those few studies that do ask consumers how important television viewing is to them find it "the most expendable or least important of daily activities" (Sahlin and Robinson 1980). It is hard to square