7

Consuming America

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The archaeological anthropologist has a problem—how does one reconstruct the richness of human life from the things that humans leave behind?Cultural anthropologists can help with this problem, since they have the opportunity to study the ongoing interaction of people with things, and yet this is seldom the explicit focus of ethnography. As Richard Wilk points out in this article, this dearth of research is apparent even in the United States, where people are arguably more involved with more things than people in any other society. Dr. Wilk uses a history of the La-Z-Boy chair to demonstrate that a greater awareness of the everyday can yield a wealth of knowledge.

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The hardest thing to see, according to George Orwell (1968 [1946]: 122–126), is something right in front of your nose. Anthropologists have always had an easier time focusing on the distant and exotic. We have been less successful in finding the exotic close to home, especially in those mundane and vulgar symbols of the middle class that surround and frame everyday life, which millions take for granted. But the things middle-class Americans consume in such abundance, which they also take very much for granted, have fascinating social histories. Finding out how these things became so ordinary can be an engrossing intellectual journey. It may also be one of the most important contributions that anthropologists can make to help solve the global environmental crisis.

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The Comforts of Home

The North American middle-class way of life is centered on the home. In houses which are growing in size every generation, Americans now consume more resources per capita than any other people in the history of the planet. But instead of seeing themselves as living a life of almost unimaginable luxury, the word Americans use to describe their standard of living is *comfortable*. Where did this notion of comfort come from? And how did it become so focused on material culture, the basis of constantly rising levels of consumption?

One way to answer these questions is to learn the social histories of the peculiar things that have come to furnish the American dream. Following the theme Ralph Linton (1936) pioneered in his famous essay on the American Breakfast, we can disclose the cultural nature of consumption in the average home by tracing the origins of mundane items back to their exotic origins. Take, for example, the reclining chair.

The Seat of Power

In 1996 the La-Z-Boy Company was the third-ranked manufacturer of furniture in the United States, with $947 million in sales. Introduced as "novelty furniture" in 1927, intended for outdoor use in the backyard, the La-Z-Boy recliner did not find a market niche until it became a symbol of working-class domesticity and respectability. It was advertised as a way to lure a man home after work; furnishing the nest where the upwardly mobile male relaxed from his daily struggle. Sales took off after WWII, when the "recliner lounge chair" became part of the domestic dream of single-family suburban homes full of nuclear families. When television, the electronic hearth, took over the domestic evening, Dad's recliner often landed the best spot.

There were no clear cultural antecedents for the recliner chair; early American furniture was known for its spare simplicity. From the perspective of symbolic boundaries, the big soft chair could be seen as dangerous and transgressive. It is, after all, furniture for the public part of the house that transforms into something very much like that most private of places, the bed. In a culture that values hard work and conviviality, the recliner encourages dozing and sleep, even while others in the room stay awake. Elite social critics fastened on the recliner as a symbol of an overstuffed, morally-lax working class, the "couch potatoes" who actually used their leisure time in a leisurely way, instead of uplifting themselves in museums or other cultural pursuits. In the 1960s the middle class was exhorted by the *New Yorker* magazine to "get out of your La-Z-Boy long enough to do something!"

The La-Z-Boy was accepted, despite its ambiguity, when it became part of a radical reformulation of American leisure, attitudes toward work, and engagement in the home and family as a cultural project. It was enmeshed in a movement that built a country around the polarities of work and home, undercutting all the civil spaces and social groups in between.

Together but Separate

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, middle-class family life was not built around shared leisure. Working days were long, and even on the farm there were separate male and female

work groups. When work was over, people wanted to party, talk, drink, ride, do something active, usually in all-male and all-female groups in setting like bars, sewing circles, social clubs, sports, churches, and lodges. Despite today's nostalgic images of Victorian parlor conviviality, families rarely spent their evenings sitting around the fireplace together, except perhaps on holidays and other special occasions (Hawes and Nybakken 2001).

Until the twentieth century, Americans never imagined that the reward for hard work was lying still and passive on an overstuffed chair for hours, surrounded by members of the nuclear family. When at home they were always doing something—knitting, playing cards, crafts, or some kind of assembly work. The idea that work and stress requires long evenings of passive relaxation is a recently invented tradition. It was part of a program of nuclear family togetherness and shared leisure pushed on the rest of the country by twentieth-century social reformers. They waged war upon what they saw as the unruly and destructive entertainment, and the informally mixed-up family arrangements of the "lower classes." As with so many dramatic changes in American life, the "wedge" issue was health. Extended families and sex-segregated raucous public amusements were labeled unhealthy and pathological. A healthy society of thriving individuals could only be built in a conjugal setting in which the nuclear family rested daily from the rigors of disciplined work.

The Good Life?

The reclining chair, like any other piece of material culture, is not just a passive reflection or indicator of social change. Major advances in the anthropology of consumption, in the hands of theorists like Appadurai and Bourdieu, have shown us that objects are much more deeply embedded in social process. Material culture has been part of a major transformation of middle-class family life over the last thirty years.

Leisure is now a project for the whole family, engaging more and more time and energy. Home furnishings are tools of transformation, and manufacturers have responded with new images and designs. In the1980s and 1990s, recliner makers embraced the new label, "motion furniture." Gliding across increasingly blurred class distinctions, the overstuffed chairs were no longer exiled to the den, TV room, or rec room. "Motion Modular Furniture Groupings," in which several sections of a sofa-group recline separately, now include fold-down trays, pull-out drawers, phones, and a "multiple motor massage system" with optional heater. Advertising and marketing, once focused on Dad after a hard day at the office, now puts Mom and the babies together in a chair, and a whole happy family reclining together in their living-room module. Popular kid-size recliners promote true family democracy and "personalized comfort." There are special chairs for fat and thin, and units can be "customized to match any décor, family size, or lifestyle" (from La-Z-Boy's annual report). *Consumer's Digest* reports that, with all this diversity, one in four American homes has at least one reclining chair.

In a world where so many fashions begin with the elite and then trickle down the social scale, recliners stubbornly swim against the flow. At the high end of the scale, better chairs cost $800 or more, and the owners of La-Z-Boy "Galleries" report that expensive fabrics including cashmere and leather are extremely popular. There is even a market for an exotic imported Norwegian "stressless" recliner, which offers an "infinite number of positions." Prices start at more than $1000.

The transformation of middle-class domesticity has been anything but peaceful. Behind the happy advertising images that show harmonized living rooms, happy families, and the joy of togetherness, are millions of divorces, incidents of domestic violence, and other kinds of conflict. Some sociologists think that the allocation and spending of money in middle-class households has become a focus for highly charged issues of entitlement and authority raised by dramatic changes in work and gender roles (Cheal 1989, England and Farkas 1986). Consumer goods usually become emotionally and socially important as gifts, tools, and even weapons in negotiating and renegotiating domestic life.

Even La-Z-Boy advertisements acknowledge the problem of couples who are always "arguing about who gets the La-Z-Boy." In the working-class family, the recliner was "Dad's chair"; after all, Dad was the breadwinner and he deserved his relaxation. Advertisements in the 1940s showed Mom guiltily enjoying a rest in the chair while Dad was at work. Mom and the children may now have their own recliners, but this does not mean that Dad has given up his position. Men still tend to have the most elaborate models, and as a trade journal puts it, "These custom-built 'cocoons' become the director's chair in home theater ensembles." From his self-contained throne, Dad now rules by remote control.

Just Rewards?

Most Americans who own recliners do not see them as badges of potato-hood, sloth, or passivity. Instead, the theme word for reclining motion furniture is "relaxation." The folklore of the middle class is that life is hard and everyone needs compensation, times when they can "lie back and take it easy." That time in the chair becomes a virtue, a necessity for health in a world of business, stress, and the continuing drain of work and responsibility. La-Z-Boy imagines their customers as "people who have made it through the lean years and have earned the right to enjoy their success." They deserve a reclining chair, their "Grand Snuggler" or "Dreamland," or even their "Avenger." Motion furniture is sold as just compensation for the toils of "all the hard-working people who make America hum." But are there limits to how much material compensation Americans "deserve" for their hard labor? And, is material abundance, an overflowing cornucopia of consumer goods, really providing Americans with the happiness they expect?

Repeated surveys find, on the contrary, a negative relationship between wealth and self-reported happiness (see Princen 2002). According to Juliet Schor's book, *The Overspent American* (1999), many people feel trapped in a work-and-spend cycle, frustrated with technology, drowning in abundance. Voluntary simplicity groups and "simplicity circles," are spreading and expanding, while foundations like the Center for a New American Dream try to envision a less materialistic society.

American family consumerism is not just a moral or intellectual issue, it is one of the world's most pressing environmental problems, one of the most important fundamental causes of global warming and climate change. The average American, according to recent estimates by the Worldwatch Institute (2004), annually consumes 50–60 times more resources than an average resident of sub-Saharan Africa does. Americans consume energy and materials at a profligate rate unmatched by any other country, and as the energy crisis recedes into the past, our cars, houses, and bodies are once again getting more bloated

every year. Yet the material lives of the American middle class are less known to anthropology than Trobriand jewelry.

Take a Chair

My example of the recliner chair is meant to make a simple point; the consuming world of middle-class Americans is rich in meaning, and bears much closer scrutiny by anthropologists. When Harold Wilhite and I began research on energy consumption and household decision-making in the middle-class of northern California in 1981, we found only one other anthropologist (Willett Kempton) doing consumption-related work in the U.S.A. While few anthropologists seemed interested, many in the energy conservation community found our ethnographic approach innovative and useful (Stern et al. 1997).

In Europe, particularly in England, anthropologists are key players in a renewed field of "material culture studies" that takes the consumer world of the middle class seriously. They have provided rich ethnographies of shopping, housing, and everyday material culture from the Sony Walkman to Woolen carpets. There is nothing like it here in the U.S.A., where few anthropologists work on middle-class consumer culture, and those who do find a much more receptive audience in the Association for Consumer Research than in the American Anthropological Association. Monographs like archaeologist Michael Schiffer's *The Portable Radio in American Life* (1991) are few and far between. Ironically, the key social theorists of American consumer culture are Europeans like Baudrillard and Barthes.

It is hard to explain this peculiar indifference to an important issue that is literally right in our faces (or perhaps under our buttocks). Isn't it striking that the very thing that most defines American culture, a love of technology and material abundance, is the thing we most stridently ignore? Over the years, graduate students in my seminars on consumer culture have produced fascinating, ethnographically rich work on topics like fishing tackle, lawn ornaments, ketchup, and mountain bikes. But then, facing the reality of the job market, they head off to do their dissertations on something more "exotic." Perhaps it is time for us to sit down, lean back, and pay some more attention to what is happening at home.

Exercise

Though wanton consumption can be hurtful, there are many positive ways that material goods figure in our lives. Two anthropologists did a study of favorite objects, comparing people in the United States with rural farmers in the country of Niger. They concluded that in the United States, favorite objects are most important because they are "symbols of other people and social experiences, rather than being enjoyed for their own attributes." In other words, favorite objects were important because they connected people to each other—they symbolize important relationships. They hold our memories of important people and social events in our lives. This was a surprising finding, considering how much we have been led to believe that Americans are materialistic and love having stuff because they enjoy the stuff itself.

Discuss your favorite object. Why is it important to you? What is the history of your relationship with the object? Does the observation above hold true?