

ANTH 3100-02, Global Transformation and the Human Condition, Spring 2016

Research Paper: How The Things We Use Make Us Part of this World

Paper Due: May 10; **Presentations:** May 3 | **30 points** (10 draft, 15 final paper, 10 pres)

Specs: 1750-2000 words, 12-pt, double-spaced, spellchecked, sections

Due dates: **Commodity - 2/2, Bib - 2/23, Draft paper - 4/5, Final paper - 5/10**

Introduction to Project

Commodities (i.e., any “thing” that is exchanged) offer a microcosmic view into the domain of globalization and development. When we buy a commodity under capitalist conditions, we usually do not know anything or much at all about who has produced it, under what conditions and where it was produced, the form of organization of humans and nature that made it possible, and how the commodity traveled from its place of “birth” to our hands, bodies, mouths, etc. Thus, under capitalist conditions, the conditions of production and distribution of commodities are concealed from the consumer. This property of concealment at the point of exchange and consumption makes commodities appear to consumers as possessing a “magical” property to satisfy our needs, wants and desires, a magical object worthy of worship. What is lost is the recognition that it is the particular conditions of production and distribution of the commodity that makes possible our needs, wants and desires. This phenomenon is called *commodity fetishism* by Marx (“fetish” refers to a magical object, such as a talisman).

Objectives of Project: The main objectives are:

- a) To show how globalization as process underlies the existence of the production, distribution and consumption of commodities in everyday life
- b) To illustrate how the commodity implicates its consumers in political and philosophical problems (i.e., ethical choices about benefits and costs, equity & justice implications, and epistemological problems of how we claim to “know” what is “efficient” and why and to whom that matters) and hence, that each one of us who uses that commodity is drawn into and implicated in this process and the making of our world.
- c) To build a non-violent multidimensional perspective (philosophical strategy and political campaign) which addresses one ethical “problem” associated with your commodity

The Project

Your project will focus on what anthropologists call the “social life of things.” This phrase refers to the ways that meanings, values, contestations, power, social relations and human-nature relations are part of the “life” (and “death”) of every commodity. You will trace the journey of one commodity of your choice – from its “birth” (how it gets produced, frequently in faraway places from the user), through its distribution network, and to the ways in which it is consumed and finally enters the realm of “waste” (or recycle?) – and in this process develop your view of development as process.

Five Steps to help you write the paper: Use visual representations where indicated below and wherever possible. Remember, you are telling the story of the commodity. For a good example to get you going, watch the popular film “Story of Stuff” <http://www.storyofstuff.org/> and the essay by an anthropologist on the “Political Economy of a Twinkie” http://faculty.plattsburgh.edu/richard.robbins/political_economy_of_twinkies.htm. Use library and scholarly resources for your paper. You may additionally interview a producer or a distributor of the commodity if you have access.

1. **Pick your commodity** from one of the following categories (**DUE: 2/2 in BB**)

- a. *Food System*: e.g. cereals (e.g., rice, wheat, millets), pulses, meats, vegetables, fruits, sugar, salt, cooking oils, cooking fuels, water, fertilizers, pesticides
- b. *Personal Durables*: e.g., clothes, footwear, jackets, bags, household items including cleaning items, personal grooming and hygiene products, etc.
- c. *Home & building materials*: e.g., housing materials such as cement, concrete, wood, steel, iron, glass, roof tiles, floor tiles different forms of fuel, water, paints
- d. *Infrastructure*: e.g., materials for roads, modes of transportation, and power generation such as various minerals and metals (e.g., aluminum, copper, bauxite, iron, steel), glass, cement, wood, plastics, chemicals, machinery, rubber, etc.
- e. *Communication*: e.g., paper and stationery items, cell phones, computers, video games, televisions, other gadgets, etc.
- f. *Healthcare*: e.g., medicines, physician instruments, surgical tools, etc.
- g. *“Prestige or “non-Essential”*: e.g., tobacco, arms/ammunition, drugs, sports equipment, photo films, precious metals (e.g., gold, diamond), etc.

Your commodity must be approved by me before you begin your project; in case of a “complex” commodity (i.e., one that is made up of many component commodities, then select one of the components as your commodity; e.g., if it is a bus, then pick steel, if a phone, then pick a mineral in the phone, if a shirt, then pick cotton as your commodity)

2. **Gather Production / Distribution / Consumption data:**

- a. Place/Region: Using the library databases and the web, find out the major regions/ countries where the commodity is produced (if agricultural then where is it grown, if industrial then where is it manufactured, if mined then where it is mined). Select one region/country.
- b. Using US economic data (<http://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/statistics/country/> - NAICS; <http://www.fas.usda.gov/gats/default.aspx> for agricultural data, or <http://guides.wpunj.edu/globalization> - prepared by WPUNJ librarian Kathy Malanga specifically for this class) find out how much of this commodity is *imported* into the US (if it is a compound entity such as a “burger” or a “car” or a “shoe” you may focus only on some components / elements of the commodity instead of the whole commodity). For some items such as “arms” you may wish to focus on *export* (consult with me for any export items). Use the Library Information Help Desk for this.
- c. Capital / Corporations: Next, find out the major corporations that produce / manufacture and/or distribute this commodity (if agricultural commodity, then look for corporations that own the land which may have been leased to farmers, or corporations that control distribution). Use any industry level manufacturing association to learn more about the corporation (its headquarters, where production of the commodity actually occurs, its sales and profit, number of employees, and importantly – any controversy or violations of law that it is involved with). Check <http://www.globalsources.com/>, www.corpwatch.org, <http://multinationalmonitor.org/> and <http://www.hoovers.com/>

3. **Uncover the Conditions and Contradictions** of production & distribution of the commodity

- a. **Flows/Connections**: What and who flows across what borders in the making of your commodity? Identify the people who are involved in the life of this commodity. For this point, you will need to **create a visual map** that captures your narrative visually. Samples will be provided under BB

- b. **Conditions and Social relations:** How does the commodity / component move from there to here and into your hands? What *processes* and *institutions* enable these flows (think *processes* such as extraction of natural resources, appropriation of land, displacement of people, migration of people, organization of production process, import/export of raw materials & machinery, labor conditions, capital infusion, and *institutions* such as governments and transnational institutions, security forces, banks, distribution networks, free trade / fair trade regulations, advertising, transportation)
 - c. **Problems / Paradoxes:** What, if any **problems** do the production, distribution and consumption of the commodity **create**? For whom? What, if any **problems** does it **solve**? For whom? Are these two sets of people the same? Are the problems solved and created related to each other? How?
 - d. **Power / Violence:** Are there ways in which the social life of this commodity involved **violence**, inequality, dependency, injustice and unfairness? If so how? If not, why not? Be explicitly conscious of how you use the term – violence.
 - e. **Resistance:** Do the producers of this commodity seek to better their lives? What social movements, protests, struggles and campaigns exist around this commodity? Check the sites on #2 above and other cool websites on your syllabus
4. **Construct the Context** of consumption and **Campaigns** around your commodity in the USA
- a. **Advertising:** How are ‘consumers’ (demands, desires) constructed for this commodity via advertisements? What **meanings and values** are associated with consuming this commodity? Who decides? What are debates around this commodity?
 - b. **Commodity Fetishism:** How does this commodity **connect** different parts and people in this world? Are these connections visible to consumers? Why not?
 - c. Outline a **non-violent strategy/campaign** for consumers of your commodity to address the problems of **sustainability, equity and justice** linked to your commodity.
 - i. **Activism:** What can we do to become more aware of the hidden realities of your commodity? Are there examples (from local, regional, global spaces including WPUNJ) of alternative ways of consumption?
 - ii. **Participatory Democracy:** How can you/we be in solidarity with producers anywhere? (tie with 4.e above) **Outline a campaign around the corporations involved with your commodity.**

Final Paper Format

Approx. 1750-2000 words (7-8 pages double spaced, includes 1 visual map)

Due: May 10, 12 noon in Journals

Rubric: Level of arguments (3 pts), Descriptive richness of sections 2 and 3 (3 pts), Conclusion (2 pts), Descriptive richness of Maps (2 pts)

Section 1: Brief introduction of your commodity – why did you choose it, what is one key issue surrounding consumption of your commodity (could be health issue, labor issue, political issue, environmental issue, or cultural issue), summary of your main thesis (what do you say finally about consuming this commodity – what should we be aware of, what can we do / what is being done, why) – **1-1.5 pages**

Section 2: Conditions and Contradictions of production and distribution of your commodity – brief descriptions of where it comes from, import/export data, amounts consumed in US or elsewhere, corporation details, production process (how is it made), conditions of labor, how is it distributed and ends up in consumer hands; what is/are key contradictions (or problems) of consuming this commodity – do the costs of producing this commodity get evenly distributed, who pays, who gains, who gains most, who does not benefit; – **2-3 pages**

Visual Map: 1 page

Section 3: Context of consumption and Campaigns around your commodity – brief analysis of advertisements for your commodity – what kinds of ads do you see for this commodity (if there are no ads, then what does it say), do they capture any of the contexts of production and distribution of the commodity, how does it make people want to consume it (what meanings does it hold for people); what does the campaign seek to have consumers do or citizens do, reflect here upon your understanding of violence and how non-violent actions could be undertaken to address at least partially the above contradictions – **2-3 pages**

Section 4: Conclusion – reflect upon your commodity here – what has this project taught you, how does it fit in with the class topics (tie it in with at least 2 concepts/arguments that you learnt in this class) – **1 page**

References: You need to have 5 scholarly works cited (at least 3 journal articles from the library online databases or books/book chapters; maximum of 2 internet sources that are one of the following types - *.edu, *.gov, or *.org – no other type of webpage will be acceptable). In case you are citing information about a company/corporation from a *.com site, that is allowed but not counted towards your citation number.

No late assignments accepted