Document generated on 05/02/2024 7:53 a.m.

Culture

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Volume 13, Number 2, 1993

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1083121ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1083121ar

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Publisher(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie

ISSN

0229-009X (print)
2563-710X (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Maxwell, M. & Maxwell, J. (1993). Garage Sales: Meaning and Messages of Material Culture. *Culture*, *13*(2), 53–66. https://doi.org/10.7202/1083121ar

Article abstract

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Garage Sales:
Meaning and Messages of Material Culture

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Focusing on the phenomenon of the garage sale and the cultural meaning of this type of consumer behaviour, the argument is made in a semiotic framework that the meaning of an object, what it 'signs', is conditioned by the mode of organization in which it is located. The garage sale itself represents part of the system of redistribution of consumer goods within the hidden economy, but more importantly, like the items themselves, the sales represent a new way of constituting meaning and identity which differs considerably from the usual patterns of consumerism found in modern capitalism.

En portant notre attention sur le phénomène de «vente de garage» et sur la signification culturelle de ce type de comportement de consommation, et en utilisant une analyse sémiotique nous proposons l'idée que le sens d'un objet - ce qu'il « signe » - dépend du mode d'organisation au sein duquel il se trouve. La « vente de garage » fait elle-même partie d'un système de redistribution des biens de consommation inséré dans l'économie informelle. Mais, comme les objets eux-mêmes, ces ventes sont une nouvelle façon de créer sens et identité qui contraste considérablement avec les modes traditionnels de consommation associés au capitalisme moderne.

Introduction

Although garage sales are one of the significant forms of popular culture to have emerged in North America in the last half of the twentieth century, they have been subjected to little social scientific analysis despite their continued and increasing popularity. Both their similarities to, as well as their contrasts with traditional markets and third world systems of distribution, make them an appealing cultural phenomenon for study. Their connection with the hidden economy is also significant.[1] In the popular literature there are several manuals giving detailed instruction on how to give a sale, and advising garage sale goers on what to watch out for in buying. Every spring, popular magazines and the newspapers carry articles on garages sales from a variety of perspectives as do radio and television.[2] The literature and media have 'amplified' the incidence of the phenomenon, the meanings attached to it, and institutionalized it within the larger culture. There is further evidence of penetration of garage sales into commercial and charitable activities and into the arena of high culture.[3]

Semiotic analyses of various aspects of popular culture are now becoming more numerous, but none has been carried out on the phenomenon of the garage sale. Beyond Maisel (1974), Trinkhaus (1980) and Herrmann and Soiffer (1984) and Soiffer and Herrmann (1987), who have used a traditional approach, garage sales have not received serious attention. In the semiotic approach used here we examine the phenomenon of the garage sale and the cultural meaning of this medium of the consumer society. We demonstrate how the circulation of goods creates reward and satisfaction and is essential in the social construction of personal identity, social relations and small worlds and communities. The analytical focus is on the cultural meaning of the goods, the cultural significance of the activity, and the way in which the objects themselves and the processes of acquisition and divestment give meaning to the participants' lives, and create, sustain and continuously alter their socially constructed worlds.

As the subfield of cultural studies developed in the social sciences to examine object-person relations, it has been influenced by the theoretical traditions and research of cultural anthropology, symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, ethnomethodology, structuralism, linguistics and semiotics. Baudrillard (1968), returning to the tradition of Malinowski (1922) and Mauss (1954), extended their analysis in seeing that objects constitute a coherent system of signs, especially in their consumption. Objects or goods like phonemes and words in language carry cultural meanings which must be understood in the context of the system of goods,and the corresponding set of social relations of which they are a part. Goods have a significance beyond their utilitarian or exchange value in the economist's sense, and more than the status aggrandisement value that Veblen emphasized(1912). This significance lies in their ability to carry and communicate cultural meaning (Baudrillard 1968; Sahlins 1972; Douglas and Isherwood 1979; McCracken 1990). Consumption is, in Baudrillard's terms, an active relation not only between objects but with the collectivity and the world. It is a type of systematic activity and response which is at the roots of our cultural system (1968:275). Quimby (1978), Barthes (1972; 1983), Otnes (1988) and most recently Shields (1992) have written extensively on consumption and material culture but the focus has tended to be either on 'the new' or on 'the museum properties' of objects. In this analysis, the focus is on the meaning of second-hand goods and the significance of their reconstituted meanings. The material items are neither fresh from the production lines nor enshrined and legitimated by museum curators.

The data on which the analysis rests was gathered from 1976 to the present through participant observation and interviews with individuals and families who gave or attended garage sales in Quebec City, Montreal, Kingston, Toronto, Barrie, Vancouver and Vancouver Island. In order to be as unobtrusive as possible,interview material was recorded after the interview. In addition, the data was reviewed in relation to professional and popular literature that relates to garage sales, and the literature itself formed part of the data.

A comprehensive semiotic account of all the aspects of such a complex and multifaceted social phenomenon is beyond the scope of this analysis. We intend to indicate the range of relevant aspects of the meanings of goods and the significance of this form of the market. First, we will examine the popularity of the garage sale and the concept of the garage sale itself and related activities. This is followed by discussion of the social contexts and the meanings of goods. Some of the meanings conveyed in the terms people use to describe objects sold and purchased at such sales are analyzed. The role of 'nostalgia' and the gift economy in the social organization and semiotic analysis of garage sales is also examined.

The Enduring 'Fad': Popularity Undiminished

While we do not know which of our immediate ancestors were the first to get out the card tables to display their 'junk', garage sales have become part of life in North America and have become an endemic feature of our culture. Herrmann and Soiffer (1984) estimated that in 1981 there were probably over six million garage sales held throughout the United States, generating nearly one billion dollars in revenue. The magnitude of the social institution of the garage sale is enormous. Soiffer and Herrmann (1987:49) assert that there were more garage sales in the United States in 1984 than there were births and deaths, or marriages and divorces. Advertisements in the daily newspaper in Kingston, Ontario, which grew from a population of 51,400 in 1960 to 57,100 in 1991, indicated that the number of garage sale ads for the month of September rose from zero in 1960 to five in 1970 to just under 200 in 1980 and to 749 in 1990. While a significant portion of the increase would be due to suburban growth, as well as the fact that newspapers may induce customers to advertise in the local paper, these statistics provide some index of the growth of the phenomenon.

This growth in numbers is tied to the meaning of garage sales themselves. In analysing the institution of flea markets and garage sales from a framework of economic anthropology, we used the distinction between the political and moral economy (Maxwell and Maxwell, 1984).[4] In terms of the political economy the usual profit motive is involved. Although we do not want to underplay the role of profit and 'extra cash', particularly during recessionary times, the moral economy is an integral part of the garage sale institution. By 'moral economy' we mean "a system of transactions which are defined as socially desirable (ie. moral),because through them social ties are recognized, and balanced social relationships are maintained" (Cheal 1988:15). Garage sales have grown in number not only because they generate income but because they are legitimated through the value system of the society. They supposedly teach children how to handle money, they contribute to the recycling and conservation of goods and contribute to the 'tidiness' of the domestic space, they allow for spontaneous interaction with friends, neighbours and strangers. These and other types of legitimation make them part of the moral economy. The term 'garage sale' connotes and denotes important meanings for the population of North America, and their strong implicit understanding by the populace has led to their institutionalization.

As the market for used goods has developed and expanded, some material objects have almost taken on a 'career' as they move through the garage sale to the flea market and the antique store (some may take a circuitous route through the auction sale and the rummage sale or the charity-sponsored garage sale), they evoke varied meanings in sellers, buyers and 'viewers'. As we argue, they are massaged for meaning. The perceptions and meaning they evoke on their 'careers' as they move through various market settings is worthy of further detailed analysis, both from the point of view of nostalgia and *habitus* (Bourdieu 1984) in which they temporarily or permanently play a constituting role.

'Garage sale': What does it Mean?

Generic to North American culture, the term garage sale has multiple symbolic meanings. How-to manuals (Harrison 1979; Young and Young 1973) use the term 'garage sale' to designate any sale of second hand items occurring in or around a private residence, for example, yard sale, attic sale, carport sale, basement sale, and barn and porch sale. In a culture where the majority of families have cars and most single family dwellings have garages, the term signifies a common cultural element, as 'barn' may have done when the majority of the population was predominantly rural. Like barns, outbuildings and attics of the past, garages often serve as the 'back stage' area of the household. Here items no longer in use are stored. Attics appear to have become less accessible, and basements are increasingly used for living space. The term 'garage' and 'garage sale' symbolize this storage and disposal activity. Herrmann and Soiffer (1984:402) argue, without much elaboration, that the term 'garage sale' is:

> related to the rise of cultural norms emphasizing a suburban lifestyle, including the single-family home (with garage), the American affection for automobiles, and suburban organizations such as the PTA and the Girl/Boy Scouts.

They also point out that the shift in the term indicates a shift in the emphasis on what is being sold to where it is being sold (on private property) and is thus "an evocation of suburban values, a statement about self as well as an inducement to customers" (1984:402).

What is important about the garage sale in terms of social change, and what is essential about its meaning, is that it has become more or less respectable, if not perfectly respectable, for people of all social classes and residing in urban, suburban, rural and 'cottage country' locations to create a market place in their garage or on their lawn. Harken back to the 'respectable fifties', and it is obvious why some municipalities still attempt to control garage sales and even to prohibit them. The post-war economy was rapidly expanding. The cultural emphasis was on the 'new' and natural resources appeared limitless. By the mid-sixties the social movements of the time with the emphasis on communal usage and conserving and recycling helped pave the way for the acceptance of selling one's 'cast offs' and the buying of second hand goods. Now the phenomenon is widespread and enjoys legitimacy and majority acceptance. In "Lifestyle Shopping" Shields (1992) suggests, in the tradition of Baudrillard, that the modernist separation of economy and culture has failed to allow us fully to understand the meaning of consumption. He goes on to say that when consumption is viewed as production, hegemonic systems find themselves undermined. Shields and his contributors confine themselves to a postmodern analysis of conventional venues such as department stores and malls. In the case of garage sales, the venue itself is a radical statement against the hegemony of "mall culture". The activity within the venue itself is also a stronger statement against the hegemony of modern capitalism than those venues identified by Shields *et al.*

While it relies on the material goods of modern capitalism, the garage sale exemplifies a type of do-it-yourself ethic and celebrates, in some cases, something like a medieval fair. It creates a new venue where individuals in the late twentieth century, both young and old, have new opportunities to create new meanings. It is this opportunity which is perhaps the most important meaning of the garage sale itself, and which explains its popularity. It is a self-constructed milieu as opposed to the malls and department stores, and it is widely accessible as a type of 'folk capitalism' tied to the dominant form of capitalism for its material goods, but free from it in terms of its organization. This meaning is implicitly understood by the participants, who, in interviews, frequently mentioned the various dimensions of the ethos outlined above. Most frequently, both buyers and sellers referred to garage sales as "fun". Under closer questioning they referred to them as doing something different, to finding the unexpected, to the sense of adventure / discovery, to being free from the usual commercial constraints and from pushy or indifferent salespeople. The celebratory aspects of the sales seemed to contain some of the aspects of our major holidays. While they were normatively regulated, the rules of the occasion permitted distinctly different patterns of interaction and the opportunity to recreate oneself in a different venue in a different way.

Part of the celebratory aspect may relate to the seasonal nature of the sales. Garage sales are held mainly from mid-May to the end of September when the weather in most parts of Canada can be expected to be comfortable enough to permit browsing outside over tables laid out with objects in a setting which invites handling. Indeed the term, 'garage sale weather' is also used to refer to the periods of good weather,suitable for such outdoor activity. Even if the items are displayed only in a garage, it is 'outdoors' in the sense of usually being unheated. Recently a new term has come into use, 'garage sale-ing (or sailing)' which signifies the social activity in cruising around many garage sales on a Saturday. This activity is eminently social as it usually involves a couple or couples, a couple and their children or, and very frequently, several women friends who make the rounds together. They discuss among themselves the merits of the various items offered for sale, advise and support each other on purchases, and between sites discuss and exchange judgements as to how 'good' the last site was. Usually they are acquiring items for the household as a whole, or for family members or friends to whom they present the item as a gift. Many individuals, even those who do not 'sale' ('sail' as in 'cruise', as in adventure) often acquire items at garage sales to give to family or friends at Christmas, birthdays and other ceremonial occasions. So common has this reason for purchase become that we have to view the garage sale phenomenon as an essential part of the 'gift economy'.[5] Solidarity, seasonality and celebration are thematic dimensions among many of the purchasers as well as the sellers. We shall discuss the gift economy in further detail later.

The term 'garage sale' initially signified the private sale of household and personal goods which have been owned and used by the owner of the goods and the garage.[6] Later, a portion of the sales were by families or friends who have 'gone together' on a garage sale or 'given' one jointly. Such group activity and the expressions of satisfaction which respondents frequently reported give credence to the celebratory nature of the activity as well as the cohesiveness the sales create. The sales define friendship and neighbourhood networks (as well as creating boundaries). They define and reinforce family ties. To take advantage of the connotations of the term, some churches and charities have 'appropriated' the term to relabel, advertise and to describe 'rummage sales', one of the old standbys of charitable fundraising. The process signifies the attempt of church and charitable organizations to recapture the appeal of the pre-1970 sales they held by relegitimating them with the infused moral and cultural meaning of the new term. On the other hand, not everyone's experience of garage sales is positive and affirming. Many givers found the undertaking stressful and a negative experience. Harassment by 'pushy' early bird pickers and dealers was frequently viewed as an invasion of privacy as well as harassment. Vendors also often felt demeaned by attendees who 'quibble over five cents' or exploited and 'ripped off' by occasional clients who steal or are perceived as having pressured the vendor into selling 'too low'.

Recently, the discounting of bad bank loans to developing countries was reported on the front page of the Report on Business Section of *The Globe and Mail* (December 2,1988), as a "Garage Sale of Bank

Loans". While this exemplifies the extension of the term, it was hardly a celebratory occasion for the banks. Nevertheless, it has similar connotations to those of household sales. Simply put, the goods offered for sale are no longer of value in and of themselves to the members of the household, and now are defined as having only exchange value. Garage sale items, by definition, are those which have little or no current utilitarian, aesthetic or status value for the owner who is selling them, but which offer one or more of these values to the prospective purchaser. Items are often defined as "junk", meaning useless, redundant, worn out or unacceptably unattractive to some, while to others, they may carry considerable value. Garage sales seem to call upon consumers to produce new cultural meanings from old goods (including bank loans). To those who sell there is a sense of relief if not of celebration. But, as we shall attempt to demonstrate, there is more than this to be said about the meaning of goods offered for sale and purchased.

Another meaning applied to items purchased at a garage sale is the astute purchase of an item of value at a 'bargain' or even 'bargain basement' (or 'bargain garage', which is its symbolic equivalent) price, well below current market value. This last meaning may also imply a community valued shrewdness in buying on behalf of the purchaser or the opposite, negative connotation of being "too cheap". Although the garage sale is a new market venue and a new market form, it has not eradicated old market attitudes and behaviours. There is continuity as well as discontinuity with societal beliefs and practices which gives assurance to all concerned. The characteristics of the political economy remain.

Social Contexts, Structural Divisions, Status Transition and the Meanings of Goods

It is evident from the terms used at garage sales that they signify a different type of social organization from the regular shops of the market place. Customers at garage sales are not referred to as 'shoppers'. One 'shops' in stores but one 'attends' garage sales. The latter terminology signifies that attenders see themselves, and are seen as, more like guests at a party to which they have been invited personally rather than as 'shoppers' in a store. This reflects the fact that these markets are qualitatively and quantitatively distinguished from the social forms of merchandising in retail stores and shopping malls. The notion of 'treasure hunting' was often given as a reason by inveterate garage sale attenders to explain why they spent so much of their leisure time going to these sales. One can perceive one's self as an adventurous explorer delving into the modern day middens for gems from the past.

It should be stressed, nevertheless, that the economic aspect of garage sales is explicit from the point of view of the 'givers' or sponsors/vendors and the buyers. The economics of the institution are such that virtually everyone in the society is able, if they so choose, to participate financially by buying a material object that is 'new to them'.

The meaning of an object, that is what it 'signs', is conditioned by the mode of organization in which it is located. Thus, different and sometimes contradictory meanings may be found in the gift economy from those that are usual in commercial exchange in the political economy. For example, the cultural meanings of an object purchased by a 'dealer' will often differ significantly from those of a non)dealer. The former sees the exchange value of the item, the object may evoke the picture of the contribution to his or her display of antique washstand sets and the enhancement to the selling potential of the pine stand on which it is to be displayed. The acquisition signifies the dealer's business acumen and may enhance the standing of his 'carriage trade' business. To the person who purchases the same item for his/her own home, it may signify the relationship with the grandparents (both living and dead), and the attempt to keep alive family memories and generational continuities because the item is "just like your grandma's favourite china wash stand set".

As with other forms of social activity, garage sales and their goods reflect the wide range of structural divisions of society. Class differences are clearly discernible in the advertising, display, goods, pricing practices, management styles and etiquette of the vendors. Likewise, ethnic divisions, religion, gender,[7] age, family life cycle status and regional differences are apparent in the form, relations, and content of garage sales. Class differences were illustrated in an upper class neighbourhood where champagne was served on the deck beside the hot tub. At such sales, the goods are set up in displays similar to upscale store displays, with each table, covered in a white cloth, having its own theme (kitchen items on one, linens on another etc.) and prices clearly marked. In some working class neighbourhoods, items may appear randomly placed on a bare table and on the ground, and the items are not always priced. Liquid refreshment is rarely provided.

Objects express class relations through class aesthetics, and these patterns are evident in most garage sales. Not only are the goods offered at upper class garage sales likely to be of higher quality, but class tastes in, for example, furniture styles and preferred colour combinations are also reflected in the goods. At one sale sponsored by an upper class family, the goods included a set of acrylic demitasse cups and saucers, a crepe pan, 'upscale' vases, and a 1920's wicker furniture set. Absent from such sales are items common in working class culture sales such as hamburger presses, plaster wall plaques, paper napkin holders, 'novelty' crockery salt and pepper sets and recliner chairs with large plaid-patterned upholstery.

The items offered for sale signify the discarded identities and the network of social relations of the sellers. For the person who purchases the items, they signify the acquisition of sought-after identities and social relations. In consumption, the buyers essentially consume not the object but the identity and the social relations. However, at upper class garage sales, one does find items from other class levels. Some of these would be categorized as having been 'unfortunate' or 'unsuitable' purchases or gifts. The garage sale is a way of disposing of items deemed inappropriate to the holder's current or projected life-style.

McCracken (1990), Bourdieu (1984) and others have demonstrated that goods and tastes in cultural products pass through the status system by the "trickle down effect". An important medium for this passage down through the status system in this process is the second hand markets. While all status groups cast off items that are no longer relevant for their age and life cycle position, the higher status groups also get rid of items that have become unfashionable. Lower status groups can acquire these items inexpensively at garage sales and follow the fashion trends of their status superiors. Goods are one of the cultural means by which we claim or authenticate status (McCracken 1990:32). We may follow the *avant garde* and accumulate secondhand experience through secondhand goods. Moreover, goods also move up the status ladder when members of higher status categories purchase items at garage sales; sometimes solely for amusement. Of course, goods also move laterally in the class structure.

As we indicated above, it is clearly apparent that the meanings of goods encompass more than economic utility. Douglas and Isherwood have argued that the economists' view of goods is inadequate, resting as it does on two main assumptions which are dubious and inadequate:

> Instead of supposing that goods are primarily needed for subsistence plus competitive display, let us assume that they are needed for making visible and stable the categories of culture. It is standard ethnographic practice to assume that all material possessions carry social meanings and to concentrate a main part of cultural analysis upon their use as communicators. (1979:59)

It is not sufficient to say that items are put up for sale when they no longer have economic utility for the owner. We consign to our garage sales items that no longer 'fit' or are incongruent with our *habitus* (Bourdieu 1984) or 'lifestyle'. We have ceased to define them as carrying the meanings and messages that are appropriate to and support our social identities and our relationships to others. The comforter that decorated one's bed in university residence may be no longer appropriate to signify one's new status of newlywed. The nineteen-fifties style teak furniture may now signify that we are not adapting to the fashion demands of the nineties for either financial or psychological reasons, a social definition of ourselves we may not wish to signify.

Indeed, many of the items that go into garage sales are objects whose significations are not consonant with the life cycle stage we are now in. Those who have passed the babyhood of their last child sell the baby clothes. To keep them may sign that one has not firmly decided not to have more children. On the other hand, we may keep some special items of clothing or toys as cherished reminders of the childhood years, and with the intention of passing them on to the next generation. Life crises, such as birth, educational transitions from elementary to high school and to college or university, moving out of the natal home, marriage, divorce, moving, and death are periods when we acquire and divest ourselves of a substantial number of worldly goods. This is because our definition of ourselves in our own eyes and that of others is altered,and thus the context of the significations of our cultural goods has changed. Unlike many non-Western cultures that place more emphasis on marking status transitions ritually and symbolically, we tend to do this resignification by means of the externalia of consumer items. In this way we 'are' what we own (Lasch 1979).

Of course goods do not just change the meanings that they are culturally assigned with our status transitions. Fashion also plays a large role. Through garage sales, individuals cast aside and part with items which are "perfectly good but dated", that is, out of fashion. Sometimes they donate these items to charities or give them to family members of the succeeding generation on non-ceremonial occasions. Our culture considers it appropriate for young couples "starting out" to have cast-off, less fashionable items of household use. These, like the notion of a 'starter house' are viewed as temporary and make no claims as to the eventual material status that they will someday 'be able to afford'.

'Junk', a term frequently applied by vendors and purchasers alike, to items offered for sale, is associated with mess, being out of order and, as we know from the work of Mary Douglas (1966) and others, things out of order are easily perceived as polluted as opposed to pure. Thus for many people referring to garage sale items in general as 'junk' (or to particular items as junk), the notion involves some level of disgust at the polluting connotations of 'junk'. Used goods can readily be seen as contaminated and polluting in the sense they have been handled and used by other people, and people who may be strangers and to carry their alien social attributes. For some people, the notion of attending a garage sale, let alone purchasing an item, is polluting. We are all aware that the 'junk dealers', the 'rags, bottles and bones' men driving their carts through the city streets were considered to be in a polluting occupation. In the early days of this century and before, those who sorted 'rags' were felt to be polluted by the activity and were more susceptible to getting the infectious and often fatal diseases of scarlet fever, smallpox, diphtheria and the like. Modern medicine and immunization have greatly reduced this fear of contagion from second hand merchandise in the general population. Despite this, garage sales and their items are not totally free of notions of pollution. Some people still rationalize their revulsion at the idea of handling and purchasing second hand goods at garage sales as due to the fear of physical contagion. Moreover, many, if not most people who buy items at garage sales, engage in what can be referred to as 'purification rituals'. The intent is to banish, at least symbolically, the possibility of disease contagion by washing or cleaning objects before using them. The garage sale holders may also claim that an item has been washed or drycleaned. This pre-purification of pre-owned material indicates that the nature of pollution is clearly understood socially.

However, garage sale items are also symbolically contaminating in the sense that they are in a state of transition. They are no longer fully the seller's and not yet fully the buyer's. They still contain the meanings of the original owner, and until they are ritually divested of the former owner's meanings and invested with the new owner's identity, the boundary between the owners is unclear. The item does not properly 'belong'. It is for this reason that, in the manuals, vendors are urged to clean all items to remove signs of previous use and ownership. These "divestment rituals" allow "the new owner to avoid contact with the meaningful properties of the previous owner and to 'free up' the meaning properties of the possession and claim them for themselves" (McCracken 1990:87). We can see that transitional, transformative 'liminality' can be applied to a commodity as well as to a ritual phase or an actor's status (Turner 1969).

This symbolic contamination of goods is one of the reasons there is a taboo on giving one's own used goods to friends and family. It is more difficult to divest items of the previous owner's properties when one knows the person well. Moreover, giving one's own goods to friends may carry status implications about a relationship that are considered inappropriate, such as implying that the item is not 'good enough for me but it is for you'.

There are also "grooming rituals" typically associated with the acquisition of items. They are often rewashed, polished, painted or modified in some other way to put the stamp of identity of the new owner on the item.[8] Items may be reconstituted semiologically through grooming rituals by the setting of the item in a new context, for example, painting a wheel-barrow, planting flowers in it and integrating it into the garden landscape. In so doing, we redefine the items' meanings in relation to other goods and the new network of social relations and universe of meaning of which they are apart. As McCracken points out:

> Grooming rituals help draw the meaning out of these goods and invest it in the consumer. ...Both rituals suggest a concern that the meaning of goods can be transferred, obscured, confused, or even lost when goods change hands (Douglas 1966). The good therefore must be emptied of meaning before being passed along and cleared again of meaning when taken on. What looks like simple superstition is, in fact, an implicit acknowledgement of the movable quality of the meaning with which goods are invested. (1990:87)

Analysing the phenomenon of garage sales, in the tradition of Douglas and Isherwood's "metaphoric understanding" (1979), one astute anthropologist, who frequents garage sales, argues that despite the conserver ethic, garage sales and flea markets are not part of the anti-materialistic culture at all, but indeed a ritualized way of "massaging the material world for meaning".[9] We would stress the temporal dimension of this process; shopping in boutiques and department stores limits the massaging to the present. Garage sales and flea markets allow the past to be evoked in terms of the material triggers for memories; they are in themselves folk museums of the recent past with displays and items changing by the hour and week.

Meanings of Object Descriptors

Of course, these meanings of objects offered and purchased or even 'gifted' at garage sales do not exhaust the meanings of items and the terms used to describe them. The range of terms used to describe objects offered for sale at garage sales, as at retail outlets for new items, is virtually inexhaustible but include descriptors such as 'neat', 'cute', 'real kitsch', 'smart', 'pretty', 'good', 'useful', 'a great buy', 'very handy', 'historical', 'an antique', 'really attractive' etc. Items that the potential buyer rejects may be described as 'ugly', 'real kitsch', 'dirty' etc. And, of course, there are the stories of 'real finds'. One woman we interviewed had purchased an 'old mat the dog slept on by the back door' for five dollars. She had it cleaned and a lustrous Persian carpet worth over a thousand dollars emerged.

Some people describe their purchases by phrases such as "I love it," "I could really use that," or "It will look great on the coffee table." But to decode the meaning of the object, we must examine what the object signs in a particular social context and set of relations. Few people offer us extended statements which point to some of the messages encoded in the object. One good example of a revealing statement is found in an article by David Warren (*Whig Standard*: December 11, 1990), who in describing an open dish dresser or cupboard, that he saw and promptly bought at an antique dealer, wrote:

> ... and it speaks and speaks and speaks to me. Indeed it blazes with kindness and humanity: with real spiritual heat, perceptible the moment you enter the room, radiating from the man who is inside it. The maker was a person you can know: a tender, humble god-fearing man, who walked under the stars in religious awe and made this crude earthly prototype of the furniture that is in heaven. Probably some half-crazy Methodist farmer, tilling the eastern Ontario rock.

McCracken suggests three advantages material goods have over language in communicating meaning: material culture is charged with the responsibility of carrying certain messages that cultures cannot or do not entrust to language; these messages are less overt and their interpretation less conscious than those of language; and it differs from language in the relative universality of its codes (1990:68-69). He points out that linguistic descriptors fail to convey much of the meaning of goods. "Material culture undertakes expressive tasks that language does not or cannot perform." (1991:68) While material culture, unlike language which can express irony, scepticism, reverence etc.

> "allows the representation of only a very limited number of things in only a very limited number of ways ...it is apparently possessed of semiotic advantages that make it more appropriate than language for certain communicative purposes. (1990:69)

The axes of description vary as well, and may relate to the physical appearance ('practically new', 'worn out', 'chipped'); utility ('useless','handy'); price ('way out of line', 'a bargain', 'cheap', 'a steal' — usually said *sotto voce* so the vendor does not hear); to the collecting values ('would complete the set', 'worth far more', 'rare') or historical or local interest ('from Sir John A.'s time'). Several axes are typically combined in the meanings ascribed to an item and of course, there is great variation in the descriptors people use for the same item. As we have mentioned, the relationship to material objects from the more distant past, and especially copies of mass-produced objects that the potential purchaser's family possess or possessed in the past, is often particularly salient. We explore this further in the following section.

Nostalgia, Displaced Meaning and the Moral Economy

In his extensive analysis, Fred Davis (1979) has defined 'nostalgia' as "a positively toned evocation of a lived past in the context of some negative feeling toward present or impending circumstance". Nostalgia is an emotion, which, while deeply personal is also eminently social. It is "one of the means - or, better, one of the more readily accessible psychological lenses - we employ in the never ending work of constructing, maintaining, and reconstructing our identities" (1979:31). Nostalgia's source is "the threat of identity discontinuity" (1979:55) and its "chief aim is to assuage the uncertainties and identity threats engendered by problematic life transitions" (1979:69). It serves the purposes of continuity of identity by:

(1) cultivating appreciative stances toward former selves,

(2) screening from memory the unpleasant and shameful, and

(3) rediscovering and, through a normalizing process, rehabilitating marginal, fugitive, and eccentric facets of earlier selves." (1979:45)

Recently, McCracken has extended the analysis of nostalgia by the concept of "displaced meaning" and the role of consumer goods:

> Displaced meaning ...consists in cultural meaning that has deliberately been removed from the daily life of a community and relocated in a distant cultural domain. Consumption is one of the means by which a culture reestablishes access to the cultural meaning it has displaced. (1990:104)

Either the past or the future can be locations for the displaced meaning of cultural ideals. McCracken points out that "Goods serve both individuals and cultures as bridges to displaced meaning. They are one of the devices that can be used to help in the recovery of this meaning" (1990:109). The past as a location is clearly linked to the purchasing of second hand goods at garage sales and the future as a location for those who offer their goods for sale because they are in the process or have already 'traded up' in the style, fashion or cost of household goods. New consumer goods (and sometimes merely new to us) are most frequently the bridges to displaced meaning located in the future (as when one splurges and makes what McCracken refers to as "an exceptional purchase" in anticipation of a future, grander lifestyle, by taking possession of a small concrete part of the style of life to which one aspires.) Second hand goods permit a tangible relationship to the past as a source of displaced meaning.

Material goods have the advantage over other cultural products in acting as bridges to displaced meaning in the past because these signs are concrete and enduring, have the advantage of appearing to exploit a rhetoric trope (a figure of speech in which a part us used to represent the whole), have a special efficacy due to their plenitude and the economic value of the objects helps give them symbolic value (McCracken 1990:114).

Nostalgia, and second hand goods, also help to collectively define social generations and "can foster strong symbolic bonds between generations" (Davis 1979:61). Indeed, it is not even necessary to make a purchase at a garage sale or other secondhand market to draw meaning from the objects offered. Just viewing it can trigger memories which indicate, for example, that the object signifies social links between the generations. One frequently overhears comments at these markets like "Your Aunt Emma had one of those. My, she was a nice person. Remember when she came to stay with us for a week when we were living in Sudbury." Nostalgic recollections of items found at garage sales are one of the ways parents and grandparents teach their children and grandchildren about the material culture of the past. As well, they evoke the social relations of the senior generations' past and bind the generations in their symbolic appreciation of the elder generations. The past and its links to the present and future are brought together through both their children's knowledge, and the actual artifacts purchased at garage sales that are to act as talismans of the extended families' past, and its generational continuity.

Nostalgia may also serve as the means

> for holding onto and reaffirming identities which have been badly bruised by the turmoil of the times. In the 'collective search for identity' which is the hallmark of this postindustrial epoch - a search that in its constant soul churning extrudes a thousand different fashions, ecstasies, salvations, and utopias - nostalgia looks backward rather than forward, for the familiar rather than the novel, for certainty rather than discovery." (Davis 1979:107-108)

Thus, it is evident that much of the appeal of garage sales and secondhand goods lies in their semiotic properties to serve as bridges to displaced cultural and personal ideals. As Rosaldo has recently pointed out in his examination of imperialist nostalgia, the recovery of the past can represent an attempt to redefine and purify the historical experience (1989:68-87). The items 'reclaimed' in the garage sale experience may carry far more meaning than is explained by those who use them as touchstones. This is an aspect of nostalgia which is significant but which we cannot explore fully in this context. Nevertheless, what is evoked but not explained in the transmission of meaning is worthy of more detailed examination.

Gift-Giving, Gifts and the Garage Sale: More of the Moral Economy

In addition to being cheaper than new goods, we argue that second hand goods have other sources of appeal which explain why the 'gift economy' and the garage sale are so strongly interrelated. We have already noted (Maxwell and Maxwell 1984) the not infrequent practice of 'giving' items to shoppers who could use an item and seem to have difficulty paying for it or who seem 'deserving'. Items from garage sales that were received as gifts and those items purchased for gifting are commodities that have been recycled from the market economy into the gift economy. That people are said to 'give' a garage sale as they may 'give' a party reveals the very social characteristic of these sites of market exchange and indicates that actors view them as encompassing more than just facets of the political economy.

In interviews, a significant portion of purchasers said that they were giving the item as a gift to a family member or friend. Even the dealers and pickers reported that they sometimes buy to gift. Buyers bought gifts for ceremonial occasions such as for Christmas, anniversaries and other ceremonial occasions in the cultural and family calendar. Others were purchased spontaneously - "just a gift - I saw it and knew she would like it" - a phrase and versions of which we heard over and over again. People also 'gift' to themselves when they say that they "treated" themselves by a purchase. Such purchases reflect the meshing of the items with the recipient's identity.

Moreover, we found that many of the items for sale in a large percent of the garage sales we attended had themselves originally been received as gifts from family or friends. At one large sale with excellent quality items we attended in Kingston in the fall of 1989, we determined that almost all of the items had been received as gifts from the couple's children or friends and some they had given as gifts to each other. The remainder of the items had been purchased by the family as souvenir items on their travels to South America. The range of items included expensive pottery vases, sets of demitasse cups and saucers, coffee makers, a dough mixer, fondue plates, and leather belts and travel pouches. They found that they were no longer using the items and in some cases never had used the gifts. This underscores the redundant character of many gifts in terms of purely utilitarian criteria (Cheal 1988).

Haas and Deseran (1981) point out that gifts, the voluntary transfer of wealth, is a social act which symbolizes the diffuse nature of a close relationship. Cheal notes that it is for this reason that "showing love to others by giving gifts to them is a highly valued ritual in intimate ties (Cheal 1987). As Goffman (1971:194-9) showed, gifts are examples of that class of events he called "tie-signs", that is they are transactions that contain evidence about the nature of the relationship between donor and recipient. According to Cheal

> ...what is most distinctive about a modern gift economy is the struggle to institutionalize feelings of solidarity as the basis for social interaction. ...Gift transactions are best understood as outcomes of generalized structures of the moral economy. ...Gift morality takes many forms, but there can be little doubt that one of the most common is the desire to give to others as an expression of love for them. (1988:39)
>
> the time and thought put into the selection of a gift are symbolic of caring for the other. (1988:77)

Gifts signify the nature of the relationship between the giver and the receiver or the relationship the giver wishes it to be. For example, when parents give a set of cookware to a grown child they are signifying that they now view the child as a mature adult with domestic responsibilities, with adult executive competencies, and in the stage of initiating their own independent household. The gift thus serves to redefine aspects of the parent/child relationship. A single gift given to two or more people acts as a tie-sign of the relationship that exists between them. Often, a young couple 'know' that their relationship has been accepted by friends or parents and given social legitimacy (even before or without a marriage and wedding presents), when they receive their first joint gift.

Gift giving is a critically important aspect in the reproduction and sustaining of social worlds of kin, friendship networks and communities and at many levels, garage sales are elements of this moral economy. The objects given as gifts signify one or more aspects of the relationship.

Conclusion

In applying a semiotic analysis to examine the significance of the popularity of garage sales, we have attempted to demonstrate that material objects carry or signify a wide range of meanings and that the meanings assigned or attributed to an object are determined by the social context in which they are situated. The contexts themselves are likewise socially constructed. The disposal of goods in these markets is influenced by many factors, but semiotically we get rid of items we have ceased to define as carrying the meanings and messages that are appropriate to support our social identities and our relationships with others. People purchase items that are consonant with their current social identities, as they define them or as they wish them to be defined. Western culture is frequently 'written off' as materialistic. It is possible to argue that what we have described represents the penetration of petty capitalism into domestic space, that the phenomenon is trivial, and that garage sales are only a convenient excuse to purchase more consumer goods. We assert that material culture bears a much heavier burden than we usually assume in defining identity, signifying status changes and in challenging the modes of production and distribution which characterize the economic order. The institutionalization of garage sales offers another venue and distinct normative patterns and meaning frameworks for the construction of identities and social worlds. Garage sales offer the opportunity to massage and manipulate the material culture of both the past and the present for meaning. This type of consumption has a richer and a more celebratory base for work in the production of meaning than many of the conventional modern forms. This, rather than strictly economic explanations, accounts for the institutionalization of this type of consumption.

Notes

1. In analyzing the nature of the hidden economy under its many names, economists have primarily described how market bartering in labour and goods erodes the tax base of the state. Garage sales and flea markets mainly involve the exchange of goods and not labour, and there is little overlap with that other portion of the *marché noire*. However, labour may be transformed into goods by the independent entrepreneur, and some items such as handicrafts and furniture may be sold without charging sales tax. Similarly, new items produced anywhere in the world are not infrequently sold at flea markets. In some jurisdictions regulations exist as to how many garage sales may be held by a person in a year, and they are partially designed to regulate the tax aspects. Whatever the relationship of garage sales to the hidden economy, it is the non-economic factors which facilitate and sustain this segment of the economic subsystem which concern us.
2. Among the best known manuals, all American, the classics are Bursten and Norris (1978), Harrison (1976), Hitchcock (1987), Petty (1979), Ullman (1973) and Young and Young (1973). There are subsequent editions of both Harrison and Ullman. A recent example of advice on garage sales in the print media appeared in *The Globe and Mail* on Saturday April 3, 1993, called "Garage Sale Junkies".
3. Real estate companies provide 'free' signs for garage sales and newspapers sell garage sale kits or provide them free for those who use their advertising services. Paul Theroux (1980) wrote a short story "Yard Sale". Copeland wrote a story called "The Garage Sale" for *Toronto Life* in 1979.
4. The 1984 paper focused on the exploitation of, and resistance to, certain aspects of modern large-scale consumer distribution and marketing. It related the social alienation often associated with shopping in supermarkets and large shopping centres (each of which has basically the same items for sale and little sociability in its transactions) to the growing popularity of garage sales. Subsequently, we have analyzed the garage sale as a system of redistribution and focused on various aspects of both the political and moral economies of the institution, and its articulation with other systems of redistribution and the value system of North American society.
5. In the anthropological literature, much has been written about the 'gift economy' (Malinowski 1922; Mauss 1954; Schwartz 1967). Recently, David Cheal (1988) has analyzed the contemporary gift economy in the city of Winnipeg. Cheal defines the gift economy as "a system of redundant transactions within a moral economy, which makes possible the extended reproduction of social relations" (1988:19). While we have some difficulty with the definition of "redundant", the gift aspect of the moral economy is important both in terms of the source of many of the items offered for sale at garage sales, and the reason for purchases at these sales. Cheal maintains that the gift economy is characterized by the principle of redundancy in that there are several ways in which they may be redundant. First, "gifts may be redundant transactions insofar as they are not due to conformity to norms" (1988:12). "Gifts may also be redundant in the sense that they bring no advantage to their recipients .. (or) no net benefit to their recipients.. (or) the objects received from others in gift exchanges are things which the recipients could have provided for themselves if they had really wanted to .. (or) redundancy in gift giving occurs as the result of a pragmatic tendency to make many ritual offerings where one might have sufficed for the purposes of interaction courtesy." (1988:13)
6. Herrman and Soiffer (1984:402) believe that in the United States prior to 1967 the common term for a

householder-managed residential sale was "rummage sale". After that date, the term garage sale (or its variants such as lawn sale, yard sale) became the most common term. 'Flea markets' on the other hand, involve many vendors who bring second hand goods to a common site and typically pay a rental fee for the space. Parking lots, vacant lots, community centres and church halls and warehouses are common locations for flea markets in North America where, particularly in the winter, covered and preferably heated space is essential in a significant portion of the continent. Flea markets may be organized or sponsored by individuals for personal profit or by church, community, or other groups which use them for fund-raising. Although occasionally they may be organized by several families as a collective endeavour in a neighbourhood, garage sales are usually small-scale operations. They are seasonal operations in most parts of North America, and although they are small, they must have some critical mass of goods, otherwise the 'Miscellaneous for Sale' columns or the newer radio market places are used. Sometimes, churches, playing on the popularity of the phenomenon and the name, call their rummage sales, 'giant garage sales'.

7. Gender is very significant in the political and moral economy of the garage sale. Further research on the role of gender is in progress.
8. In the case of very old goods, however, they possess a restored charisma (or 'patina' to use McCracken's (1990) term), which makes them even more valuable if they have not actually been restored.
9. Vandra L. Masemann, personal communication.

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