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[to cite]:


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http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/15528/gender/v01/GCB-01

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Consumption and Conservation: Disposal and Gender in a Mediterranean Community

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This paper explores the association between gender symbolism and disposal behavior in the Yugoslavian insular village of Brusje. The link between the two is examined in the theoretical context of symbolic anthropology, and against the historical and economic background of an area with a long history of dependency on a larger economic system. In her seminal work 'Purity and danger' (1966) Mary Douglas proposed a theory about pollution as essentially a problem of classification: 'Dirt is matter out of place', wrote Douglas. As Douglas has shown, it is a universal feature of every culture that some things, people, and ideas are defined as 'polluting', because they do not fit the categories provided by the given culture and they are often perceived as endowed with special supernatural powers. In other words they defy classification, standing outside of a society in a class by themselves. I will show in this paper that the same kind of reasoning is found in the modern consumer behavior.

In Brusje, a village on the island of Hvar, off the Yugoslav Adriatic coast, I found significant gender differences associated with the symbolic meaning of various items that are in American postindustrial culture perceived as 'trash'. Instead of disposed, some used goods are put on display and conserved. I argue here that the reason for the conservation of these goods is in their special meaning derived from their association with the remote center of economic power. In addition to the economic history of the island, the contrast between the disposed and conserved goods illuminates some issues of gender relationships in this Mediterranean community.

Webster's Dictionary (1976) defines 'trash' as 'something worth nothing or relatively little'. However, the rules for classifying something as 'trash' or 'garbage' and the definition of 'worth' show considerable cross-cultural variation. Mary Douglas wrote: 'There is no such thing as absolute dirt, it exists in the eyes of the beholder.' (Douglas 1966: 2). This generalization of the notion of dirt as essentially disorder calls for an explanation of disposal behavior within a given economic system and social structure. As I will show here, there is also a need for the distinction between disposal and display. In this paper I look at the other end of consumption, the disposal of consumed objects. My contention is that certain objects perceived as having reached the end of consumption in the Western post-industrial society, continue their 'life' symbolically, heavily endowed with meaning. Thus disposal is just another facet of consumption when the meaning of goods exceeds their use value.

Brusje is situated on the island of Hvar, 300 meters above the sea level, on top of a low mountain ridge and it is on the main road, six kilometers from the town of Hvar, a major tourist center in the eastern Adriatic. The village consists of clusters of houses built in rows and forming narrow streets, with the farming land surrounding the settlement. All village families without exception engage in agriculture. Today the most important crop is lavender, and lavender oil is sold to a cooperative in the nearby town to be used in chemical industry. Wine, olives, figs, and rosemary oil are of minor importance, mostly produced for local consumption. In addition many villagers, both men and women, hold seasonal or sometimes permanent jobs in the tourist industry. The jobs require commuting to other towns on the island because the village itself does not have any tourist facilities.

In 1990 the village had 216 permanent inhabitants in 58 households. In addition, eight houses are maintained as summer residences for those Brusani and their descendants who live on the mainland. The steady outmigration from Brusje has left 47 abandoned houses in various state of decay. A number of the permanent village inhabitants also have a residence in the town of Hvar. Recently four families with no connections with Brusje have built new houses.

To an outsider one of the most striking features of this generally clean village, aside from the large
number of abandoned houses, are piles of garbage. There are three main garbage piles in the village, two between some abandoned houses, and one along a trail leading to the fields. Several kinds of trash could be identified: industrial packaging such as milk cartons, boxes, broken glass, metal parts of various equipment, paper, as well as some food remains. The villagers avoid burning the discarded paper products since dangerous brush fires threaten the lavender fields and olive groves.

The presence of food remains is explicable in the context of local ecology and production. Throughout the past as well as today the island’s production was mainly for exchange, and the villagers produce very little food. Some households maintain modest vegetable gardens, but the bulk of food supply comes from the only shop in the village and from the nearby town. In the past the village was too poor to discard any food, because simply everything was consumed, if not by people, than by domestic animals. Local diet consisting of vegetables with olive oil, olives, and fish, only rarely contained meat and bones did not present a problem. Chicken, as the most common meat, and eggs were cooked and served only for the sick, or at festive occasions like weddings. Since there were no food remains, the compost pit was not necessary and the chronic lack of water did not allow for extensive gardening anyway. With the more abundant food supply today the villagers are not used to dealing with leftovers and packaging. Since there is no organized garbage collection in Brusje, these remnants are piled on the informally designated places in the village.

Aside from these remains, there are six abandoned automobiles scattered throughout the village. The cars were there in the summer of 1987, when I began my fieldwork. In 1990 the same six cars were still in their places. The difference between the first kind of trash and the automobiles was that the sites of the first showed attempts to hide it, while the cars left an impression of being prominently on display. This contrast between concealment and display suggested that the items were classified in two different categories, one as trash in its ordinary sense, the other having some symbolic value. It also evoked the well known public/private dichotomy, in anthropological literature of the Mediterranean associated with men and women respectively.

Unlike in Greece (Dubisch 1986, Hirschon 1978, 1981, Pavlides and Hesser 1986), men and women of Brusje are not rigidly confined into these domains. Gender relationships in Brusje can be characterized as equal and competitive (Milicic 1991). Partible inheritance, dowry in the form of land, and working in the fields together with men differentiate Brusje women from the Greek situation. Still, the domestic/public dichotomy exists and cooking and maintaining a clean house are women’s tasks. Women devote special care to the starched and ironed snow-white linens on display in wardrobes. The whitewear shows the diligence of individual women which is a highly prized female characteristic.

The public/private distinction serves here as an analytical tool to explore the contrasts in consumption, or in this case, conservation of already consumed goods. The pattern of consumption then serves as a conduit to capture the dependent economic relationship between the island and the larger Adriatic trade network in the past and the island’s position within the world economy today. Expressed in terms of Wallerstein’s (1976) model of coreperiphery the shift of the eastern Adriatic from the core to the peripheral area determined the changes in the island’s production and demography.

In order to understand the connection between the economy and the symbolic meaning of imported goods it is necessary to look into the island’s history and its role in the Adriatic trade network. Trade and commerce are the most salient features of the Mediterranean area (Braudel 1972, Davis 1977). Since the rise of Venice the Dalmatian archipelago and coast were indispensable for Venetian trade enabling the Serenissima to reach Levantine markets. Thus Braudel (1972) referred to the archipelago as ‘Venice’s stationary fleet’. The town of Hvar has a long history of an important port in the Venetian trade system. During Venetian domination between the years 1420 and 1796 Hvar was the second most frequented port in the Dalmatian commercial network. This caused a flow of considerable wealth into the island and an elaborate social stratification (Milicic 1991). In contemporary literature Hvar is often referred to as an inevitable port for all ships sailing to the Levantine markets (Crescentio 1981 [1607], Fortis...
Land configuration coupled with frequent need for food, water, and shelter determined Mediterranean sailing demanding frequent stopovers. Hvar’s significance lied first in its central position in this maritime route system, and second, in its production of wine and fish for crews sailing on merchant ships from Venice to the Levant.

The entire production on the island was dictated by demands in the world market. During the Venetian dominance from the 15th to the 18th century the majority of population was engaged in viticulture and wine was the second most important trade item, after salted fish. The local supply of wheat could feed the island population for only two months, and salt was in great demand for preservation of pelagic fish with which Hvar’s fishermen supplied trade ships. With Hvar’s economic orientation towards production for exchange, wheat became the basic import item and it came from Apulia in Italy. Recent research (Kacic and Grubisic 1977) on the distribution of small pelagic fish, shows that one of the three areas in the Adriatic with the highest concentration of smelt is between the islands of Pakleni Otoci and Lukavci, which are fishing posts in the closest vicinity of the town of Hvar. Salt for fish preservation was imported from Venice and other salteries in the Venetian Republic territory (Novak 1960, 1977, Romano 1951).

Thus at the peak of Hvar’s success in trade and commerce food had to be imported to the island. A 16th century observer noticed: ‘I said all this about Hvar to show how, because of the vicinity of the mainland, it is easy to obtain wheat and cattle which is abundant in neighboring lands, and furthermore to show the riches of our town because of its convenient maritime location. Willingly or not here must stop all those who navigate with their wares in the Illyrian Sea’ (Pribojevic 1951 [1532] 205).

The frequency of stopovers at Hvar caused an elaborate social stratification with the distinctive endogamous social classes. Moreover, this differentiation was not only manifested in the town of Hvar, but in the village of Brusje as well. The villagers were not in the archetypal position of food producers catering to the needs of Hvar’s nobles and citizens. To the contrary, the village produced wine, complementing the town’s production of salted fish. These items were in high demand as much needed supplies for Venetian trade ships. In addition, the characteristics of Adriatic sailing dictated frequent need for food, drinking water, and shelter making the port of Hvar an inevitable stop in the network. Thus the village of Brusje was since its very beginning of existence involved in this highly dependent trade system. However, when the Mediterranean shifted from its core position to the semiperiphery, the importance of the island significantly diminished. Especially after the fall of Venice and a succession of French, Austrian, and finally Yugoslavian rule, the island, together with the rest of the Dalmatian archipelago, retained a marginal position.

In the mid 19th century these conditions have somewhat changed due to the changes in the Mediterranean wine market. Two viral diseases, powdery mildew (oidium) in 1845 and phylloxera in 1868, appeared in French vineyards, and finally in 1878 downy mildew (Plasmopara viticola) destroyed the crops. In 1852 oidium began spreading in Hvar as well but M selecting species resistant to the disease, the disaster was temporarily postponed. Because of the powdery mildew epidemic in Italy and France, wine from Hvar was exported to Italian and French markets. Between 1870 and 1890 France imported the island wine which was praised for its color and bouquet. In 1890 Hungary began to import the wine from Hvar. However, in 1894 phylloxera spread in Dalmatian vineyards causing a deep economic crisis in the whole coastal and insular Dalmatia.

The first Brusani settled in the village around the end of the 14th Century as shepherds, and soon took up agriculture. For the year 1673 records show 108 inhabitants in 18 households. In the year 1921 Brusje had 910 inhabitants in 182 households, while the 1971 census shows the population of 339 and 98 households. The census of 1971 shows the island population of 11,390. In the last census of 1981 the island's total population was 11,059. The negative population growth of -10 for the whole island (Rudan et al. 1982) shows a steady decline due to migration. This general demographic trend of depopulation is replicated in Brusje as well. The major targets of emigration from Brusje were South America in the 1900s, North America between the world wars and West Germany, Holland and Sweden within the last two decades.
The economic emigration from Brusje began in the 1900s with the complete breakdown of Adriatic trade, and intensified between the two World Wars. There were two reasons for that, the neglect of Austrian bureaucracy and the epidemics of powdery mildew which destroyed Hvar’s vineyards. The emigrants’ destination was primarily Argentina and Chile, while after World War II the exodus continued to the United States, mostly to California. The people from Brusje usually found work as farmers and some of them are able to buy their own farms. It was mostly men who left and after they establish themselves, the wives and fiancés followed. Thus the economic hardship introduced differentiation between men and women who used to equally participate in local agriculture.

Within the last two decades many people from the village went to work in West Germany, mostly as unskilled laborers. Some villagers are successful in restaurant business there. They bring their savings to the village where they use it to buy appliances, furnishings, cars, or to build new houses in the nearby town hoping to attract tourists. Cash used to purchase the automobiles came from the earnings by men in emigration. Even when discarded as useless for transportation, the cars retain their symbolic value. These remnants symbolically represent the complex world of technology, with which the people of Brusje can be in touch only through exchange. It is the world which decided the island’s destiny, the remote center of power largely incomprehensible to the islanders. The islanders’ lives were directly dependent on the changes in the world market dictated from this center. Through migration men are those who serve as mediators between this outside world and the island.

Wallerstein’s core-periphery model provides the background for the socioeconomic history of the island. Based on an effective social division of labor (Wallerstein 1984:3) the boundaries of the world-system as an economic entity expanded steadily since the 16th century and finally today includes the whole world. The size of a world-economy is a function of the state of technology, the possibilities of transport, and the communication network within its boundaries. It consists of ‘commodity chains’, a communication network on whose linkages processes and persons involved in them are dependent. In Wallerstein’s view the expansion of world-economy is an outcome of the combination of historical events and ecological constraints. For world economy to emerge, it is necessary that different modes of organizing labor exist at the same time: slavery and feudalism in the periphery, wage-labor and self-employment in the core, because each mode of labor is best suited for particular type of production to bring profits.

In Wallerstein’s model core-states are those political units with strong state machinery including centralized bureaucracy and law reinforcement. Conversely semiperiphery and periphery are those areas with weak state organization ranging from nonexistence to a low degree of autonomy in the case of colonialism and neocolonialism and providing cheap labor. Throughout history the Mediterranean has been in various places on this scale and certain parts of the Mediterranean have been more central, or closer to the core, than the others. This situation is described by Wallerstein as ‘layers within layers’. In the Mediterranean Spain was, albeit briefly, a core state. However, due to the strengthening of the state machinery, France and the Netherlands took this role, and later the center shifted to England. The areas that had a slight edge specializing in, for example, grain production, became core states. The inclusion of Eastern Europe and America into the world economy not only provided capital, but also liberated some labor in the core areas for specialization in other tasks. For Wallerstein this is a dialectical process in which each stage triggers new relationships between particular areas.

Dependency on larger systems has been a mark of the eastern Adriatic at least since 14th century. The above described dialectical process can be observed on a smaller scale, within the eastern Adriatic subsystem of the Mediterranean. The shifts on the world market directly determined Hvar’s production for exchange, first of goods and services for Venetian ship crews, later of lavender, and most recently of services for tourists. The changes in the market caused demographic changes on the island with a steady depopulation since the 1900’s.

The export of cheap labor-unskilled workers, agricultural products, and raw materials from periphery, necessary for the capitalist world-economy to exist, is a major contemporary political issue. When looked at in the light of
Wallerstein's model, it becomes clear that it is an end product of a long 'chain of commodities' in time and space. These factors result in relations of production which, in turn, shape and reshape ideologies.

McCracken (1988) has suggested that each culture must deal with a discrepancy between the ideals and reality and one way of doing it is the strategy of displaced meaning. This is achieved partly through obtaining objects and consumer goods. For an individual the ownership of such goods serves as a bridge symbolically linking the owner to some ideal emotional or social circumstances. Thus the symbolic meaning of these goods transcends their mere use value. The kind of goods that serve as symbolic 'bridges' are 'high involvement' goods, such as cars, watches, clothing, perfumes, or special foodstuffs (McCracken 1988:111). Through the purchase of these goods an individual lays claim to a small part of another time and place, or social circumstances, that the individual aspires to.

The very fact that the meaning of goods is not vested solely in their use suggests that these goods can convey the displaced meaning long after their use value has been exhausted. When 'trash' is studied in the light of this proposition we can decipher the logic of displaying certain used items and concealing others. At the same time the association of these discarded goods with gender reveals the important facts about gender relationships in this community depopulated by migration of men. In Brusje many households contain imported objects such as empty tins of biscuits, coffee beans, sugar, liqueurs, and cosmetics from the early 1900's, the time period when the large number of people emigrated from the village. The packaging of these luxury items are saved not for their use value, but for their symbolic connection with the centers of production of these rare goods.

Today the everyday disposal of objects and food leftovers is assigned to women, as a part of their traditional symbolic role of keepers of the purity of the house and mediators between the house and the village domain. In contrast, the automobiles, both those in use and the disposed ones, serve to establish a limited kind of symbolic access to the rich industrial world of the core area. Unlike other kinds of trash, the disposed cars are associated primarily with men and their role as mediators between the island and the larger system throughout Hvar's long history of economic dependency. The cars are linked to men who purchased them through their earnings in the core area and this is a lasting symbolic connection that does not cease when the goods' use value is exhausted. Thus the connection between the private and public domains within the village is symbolically replicated on the more inclusive level of the island/the world system relationship and associated with women and men respectively.

Anthropologists (Levi-Strauss 1963, Douglas 1966, 1979, Rosman and Rubel 1971, Bourdieu 1984) who have studied exchange as symbolic systems recognize not only the economic value, but the symbolic value of exchange as well. Mediterraneanists have examined consumer behavior in its cultural context and with references to gender (Costa, 1989a, 1989b). The symbolic value is closely linked to social status and the import of foreign goods can considerably change both social and gender relationships within a given culture. The case of Brusje shows that in a Mediterranean community standing in a long-lasting dependent economic relationship to a larger system, imported goods, being in a class by themselves, are given a special symbolic meaning. It also demonstrates that a finer distinction of disposal behavior is possible in terms of men's and women's association with different goods. Implicitly the symbolism involved reflects the pattern of gender relationships which are embedded in the local social structure and shaped by the economic system. In the light of these factors the link between gender and socioeconomic history reveals the meaning of disposal and display in Brusje.

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