

Mullen college essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

It is both a history of the construction of consumer "needs" in Zanzibar in the last two centuries and an attempt to understand the ways that "political economy, cultural studies, and critical theory" may be brought "into productive dialogue with each other." (5) He contends that to understand postwar commodity culture and "African" identities in Zanzibar, it is necessary to study the prior social and cultural history of "hygiene," the development of merchant capital and manufacturing in the colonial period, and the use of advertising in the post-World War II and post-colonial periods. Although perceived as part of "common sense," contemporary "African" values of bodily cleanliness, he argues, are the result of these historical processes. 9) Drawing on neo-Marxian notions of commodity fetishism and communication, he believes that consumer capitalism exploited, to a certain extent, previous traditions of both colonial cultural hegemony and native resistance.

Yet he maintains that a domination model of cultural diffusion is insufficient, because it fails to adequately account for the construction of stable "needs" and multiple "native" forms of condensation and appropriation.

He therefore utilizes Faculty's notion of power as "both restricting and productive," but he retains Marxian analysis of the negative "political" implications of "colonial rule and capitalist domination." (7) The book is organized thematically into three parts in order to juxtapose these historical and theoretical contributions. The first part looks at the social and cultural history of hygiene from the nineteenth century to the 1980s, looking as a

Fascination would at the social construction of “ native” desires for clean bodies.

They result from notions of cleanliness that predate colonization, from colonial and missionary efforts to “ civilize” the “ African” people, and from “ native” efforts to appropriate cleanliness for multiple forms of self-advancement. Chapters three and four look at the history of manufacturing and commerce, again including pre-colonial forms, colonial (racially segregated) forms, and the development of an extensive “ African” market in the postwar years.

Attention is paid to “ native” involvement and agency, but this part is particularly neo-Marxian.

The final two chapters consider the postwar commodity culture made possible by these developments. Chapter five focuses on its hegemonic aspects: the role of advertising and market research in the “ marketing of whiteness. ” (158) The final chapter focuses on the ways that natives adopted, invented, and rejected the commodities marketed to them. Burke is careful to provide the native Zimmermann people with agency, reacting against theories, like most readings of Marx, that see domination exercised by hegemonic agents on choices, but they are actively involved in the processes.

10) Yet he is also careful to avoid “ celebrating” consumers who solely manipulate the images, objects and forms of identity that are presented to them. (7) To do so opens the “ danger” of dismissing or De-emphasizing the “ powerful political issues associated with Western global hegemony,” and

thus merely reproducing the status quo. He thus seeks to revise radical critical social theory in the light of contemporary post-structural theories of agency, without losing its project of social justice. (215-216) To make this argument, Burke assembles a truly impressive variety of sources.

In the introduction, Burke gives priority to oral history interviews made between 1990 and 1991, including both interviews of hegemonic elites such as manufacturers and advertisers, and urban individuals of various backgrounds and social groups affected by these pressures. Yet various forms of written evidence supplement these oral testimonies: archival records of government agencies and various social and business organizations, various articles and advertisements found in local newspapers, works of fiction, published works of participants, and a wide range of secondary sources actively engaged with in the text and notes.

Therefore perceptions of “needs” voiced by native informers are deeply conceptualized in larger social and cultural processes. The book is truly an impressive attempt to retain agency within a work calling for social justice. The case is strongly made for both the hegemonic practices of colonial and capitalist interests and the efforts made by native Zimmermann actors to participate in and resist these practices. His fear that to focus solely on the latter might distract from a careful attention to the former processes is plausible.

Yet one must still ask, given his evidence, how much of a role colonial and capitalist interests played in these developments. Cultural values of “cleanliness” and body presentation predated colonialism and capitalism, (23-

31) colonial efforts at “civilizing” native populations was ambiguous at best, (99-104) and capitalist efforts, especially after World War II, to a great extent expanded already established cultural values and social institutions. 63-65, 162-163) Native populations engaged in relationships with these new forms, as with forms of merchant exchange and “outside” influences for many centuries.

Modern forms may have produced more fundamental changes in native customs and practices in a shorter period of time, but it is not at all clear, especially from oral evidence, that most “Africans” felt that the new processes permitted anything other than a new range of possibilities. (esp.

. 198-202) This raises a fundamental question for oral history, but also for cultural history more generally. Oral history permits the historian to “give voice” to the people told, avoiding the misconceptions or “silences” found in previous readings.

Yet despite efforts to avoid Mart’s notion of “false consciousness,” (6-7) Burke is still confronted with informants who “fail” to see the larger implications of their values and practices. It is therefore the role of the historian, by conceptualizing these “desires,” to show ultimate “disembowelment” in perceived “empowerment.”

” To do this, Burke endeavors to participate in active dialogue with fellow scholars and social critics, but he “interviews,” rather than dialogues with, the native Seminararians.