

**CULTURA E CONSUMO: UMA DISCUSSÃO SOCIOANTROPOLÓGICA**

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**CULTURE AND CONSUMPTION: A SOCIOANTHROPOLOGICAL DISCUSSION**

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**RESUMO:** O artigo objetiva efetuar uma revisão bibliográfica capaz de expor e explicar as principais categorias e conceitos desenvolvidos por estudiosos do fenômeno do consumo, a fim de evidenciar, em um primeiro momento, o pensamento antropológico desenvolvido por Marshall Sahlins acerca do porque os agentes sociais consomem, contrapondo-o com a visão utilitarista e, em um segundo momento, realizar uma discussão socioantropológica sobre o consumo através de uma síntese das contribuições de Jean Baudrillard, Mary Douglas, Pierre Bourdieu e Arjun Appadurai.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Consumo. Mercadorias. Antropologia.

**RESUMEN:** El artículo pretende hacer una revisión bibliográfica capaz de exponer y explicar las principales categorías y conceptos desarrollados por los estudiosos de lo fenómeno del consumo, con el fin de mostrar, al principio, el pensamiento antropológico desarrollado por Marshall Sahlins sobre por qué los agentes sociales consumen, contrastando con la visión utilitarista y, en un segundo momento, conduciendo una discusión socioantropológica sobre el consumo a través de una síntesis de las contribuciones de Jean Baudrillard, Mary Douglas, Pierre Bourdieu y Arjun Appadurai.

**PALABRASCLAVE:** Consumo. Mercancía. Antropología.

**ABSTRACT:** The article aims to carry out a bibliographic review capable of exposing and explaining the main categories and concepts developed by scholars of the phenomenon of consumption, in order to show, in a first moment, the anthropological thinking developed by Marshall Sahlins about why social agents consume, contrasting it with the utilitarian view and, in a second moment, conducting a socio-anthropological discussion on consumption through a synthesis of the contributions of Jean Baudrillard, Mary Douglas, Pierre Bourdieu and Arjun Appadurai.

**KEYWORDS:** Consumption. Merchandise. Anthropology.

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## Introduction

The relationship between culture and consumption appears as a relevant theme, within the scope of human and social sciences, from the end of the second world war, intensifying in the final decades of the twentieth century. If, on the one hand, the social sciences have always attributed greater analytical importance to issues related to work, production and rationalization in the modern world, on the other hand, the expansion of practice and consumption in Western capitalist societies, established the urgency of theoretical and conceptual formulations about the sense and meaning of consumption and, also, of material goods and commodities. Thus, this article aims to carry out a bibliographic review that presents the categories and concepts developed by scholars of the phenomenon of consumption, in order to show, in a first moment, the anthropological thinking developed by Marshall Sahlins about why social agents consume, contrasting it with the utilitarian view and, in a second moment, to carry out a socio-anthropological debate aiming to establish a synthesis of the contributions of Jean Baudrillard, Mary Douglas, Pierre Bourdieu and Arjun Appadurai in the contemporary debate on the theme.

The context in which consumption starts to characterize an object of study for the social sciences alludes to what several authors called the transition from the production society to the consumer society (BAUMAN, 2001), in the early sixties, when there was an intense process of valuing the intimate life and personal experiences of individuals, as well as the multiplication of models and lifestyles to be followed, which finally established what the Italian political philosopher Remo Bodei (2013) understood as a “great catalog of parallel lives” that can be chosen and acquired. The search for the “real me”, personal preferences and emotionality became public affairs, consolidating the market forces that - in Western capitalist societies - started offering a range of personal services to individuals.

In a period of increasing capital flexibilization and the end of shared political utopias, with the decline of the old political geometries of the first modernity<sup>2</sup>, we move into a historic time when private fantasies and private desires are on the rise, increasing the capacity for diversification. of the productive process and consequently generating an increasing variety of new goods.

In this unprecedented scenario, “the sense of personal value is no longer just a problem of private happiness or unhappiness, but a public problem of justice summarized by the slogan

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<sup>2</sup> We understand that modernity is constituted by different phases and forms. The first modernity - 18th century until the second half of the 20th century - corresponds to industrial and national society.

"people are political"<sup>3</sup> (EHRENBERG, 2012, p. 198). Late twentieth century were also marked by social movements that fought for civil rights, afro-descendants and sexual liberation, making equality of rights recognized together with the personal value of individuals, consolidating a series of new lifestyles a be experienced.

The period is also characteristic of the consolidation of the mass industry which, since the 1920s, with the appearance of cinemas, has disseminated new models and patterns of behavior, health, sexuality and beauty, changing the collective imagination of individuals. Regarding the sphere of consumption, Bauman (2008, p. 37) highlights the fact that it has always been a trivial human activity. Human beings consume every day, "prosaically, routinely, without much advance planning or reconsideration"<sup>4</sup>, which is a characteristic of different social backgrounds and in different cultural, political and economic contexts. Consumerism - which rises in the second half of the twentieth century - however, is related to the fact that consumption takes the leading role previously attributed to work, in the society of producers.

We start from a succinct characterization of historical time and social space in which discussions and research on consumption emerge to highlight that contemporary societies can only be better understood through the study of the world of goods and its structuring principles. We believe that anthropology, through the study of cultural meanings and also of ethnography, can contribute to a better understanding of the motivations, causes and consequences of the act of consuming, advancing in today's debate on the subject by not dissociating, in its interpretation of such a phenomenon, the economic dimension of human activity, the symbolic dimension.

### **Marshall Sahlins: utility or symbolic reason?**

The thinking developed in the seventies by the American anthropologist Marshall Sahlins caused an inflection, within the contemporary anthropological debate, by proposing a theory of history capable of breaking and overcoming the usual dichotomies within the human sciences, such as, for example, those of structure and history; stability and change and system and event. The author, who was influenced by the movement known as linguistic turn - who attributed a new conception to the notion of sign and language, which ceases to be apprehended as what is inserted in the world just to name objects, as if they were things given, starting to be

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<sup>3</sup> "o senso de valor pessoal não é mais apenas um problema de felicidade ou infelicidade privada, mas um problema público de justiça resumido pelo slogan "o pessoal é político"

<sup>4</sup> "de modo prosaico, rotineiro, sem muito planejamento antecipado nem reconsiderações"

assumed as a mediator, constitutive of the world - established, in his work entitled *Islands of History*, that history is culturally ordered, in different societies, according to schemes of meaning of things, the opposite being also true: Cultural schemes are historically ordered because meanings are permanently reassessed when done in practice.

Although Sahlins' contributions are diverse in the field of social sciences, this article aims to rescue the work *Culture and practical reason* in which the author makes “an anthropological critique of the idea that human cultures are formulated from practical activity and utilitarian interest”<sup>5</sup> (SAHLINS, 2003, p. 07) in order to rescue the way in which classical ethnography studied consumption and, later, transpose the discussion into contemporary anthropology.

Contrasting with the utilitarian notion that human relations are restricted to the mere maximization of resources and satisfaction of needs and that culture derives from the purely rational activity of individuals in the pursuit of their own interests and logical equations between means and ends, costs and benefits - which consolidated what became known in the West as a practical, formal and instrumental reason - the North American anthropologist presents “a reason of another kind: symbolic or significant”<sup>6</sup> (SAHLINS, 2003, p. 07). This form of rationality does not give primacy to the fact that men live in a material world, nor does it establish that the decisive quality of culture is to conform to the pressures of the material order. The fact that historical subjects live according to a significant symbolic scheme, created by themselves, deserves greater emphasis, according to Sahlins.

Continuing in his book, the author engages in a theoretical debate with historical materialism that “by treating production as a natural and pragmatic process of satisfying needs, you run the risk of allying yourself with the bourgeois economy in the work of increasing the alienation of individuals”<sup>7</sup> (SAHLINS, 2003, p. 166). Sahlins illustrates that when conceiving the creation of material goods only from their pecuniary amounts - or exchange value - historical materialism ignored the cultural codes of concrete properties that govern “utility” (SAHLINS, 2003, p. 167), promoting incomplete analyzes of the production phenomenon. Our author emphasizes that the use value - of goods - cannot be defined at the natural level of human needs and wants, since people do not produce, for example, merely a “dwelling” - they produce specific types of shelters (SAHLINS, 2003, p. 169), that is, there is a symbolic dimension that

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<sup>5</sup> “uma crítica antropológica da ideia de que as culturas humanas são formuladas a partir da atividade prática e do interesse utilitário”

<sup>6</sup> “uma razão de outra espécie: a simbólica ou significativa”

<sup>7</sup> “ao tratar a produção como um processo natural e pragmático de satisfação de necessidades, corre o risco de se aliar com a economia burguesa no trabalho de aumentar a alienação dos indivíduos”

characterizes the form of cultural existence and that is specific and intrinsic to each society. We understand, therefore, that use value is as symbolic as exchange value.

It is important to emphasize that, behind the appearance of objectivity and practicality, the economy - in Western capitalist societies - is the result of the meanings that active subjects attribute to it in their cultural schemes, being “[...] a social organization of things , a cultural project of people and goods”<sup>8</sup> (SAHLINS, 2003, p. 167) and all material production comes from a cultural intentionality. For this reason, Sahlins points out the impossibility of understanding societies called "tribal" with the historical materialistic or utilitarian intellectual apparatus. This is due to the fact that these approaches universalize cultural and economic assumptions that are valid only in Western capitalist societies. In assuming that use value would meet all human needs, Marx himself ignored the fact that human needs are not universal, but relative to each cultural scheme.

We exemplify this point with a brief description of the essay **Cosmologies of capitalism: the trans-Pacific sector of the world system**, in which Sahlins addresses European trade in the 18th century, which included England, China, and the Polynesian islands, in order to demonstrate that the expansion of the West and, consequently, the westernization that reached different geographical areas and different cultures, had not been passively assimilated by native peoples, but had been reframed according to the ways in which people attributed meaning to existence through the symbolic (their cultural and cultural schemes set of codes and cultural signs), featuring a new way of seeing the relationship between the global - which is constantly reframed - by the local.

**Cosmologies of Capitalism** also illustrates how the cultural schemes characteristic of each people are responsible for defining the values and uses of things, that is, what is useful and valuable in a given social order. In this sense, Sahlins' text demonstrates how the English, in their quest to obtain tea - from China - went to the Polynesian islands to acquire sandalwood, a product coveted by the Chinese, in order to finally negotiate with the Chinese empire. Sahlins also portrays that between Chinese and English cosmology there are substantial differences, given by the set of cultural codes that guide each of these societies.

We emphasize, therefore, that the very notion of "utility", so dear to neoclassical and utilitarian economists, is a construct valued and established through cultural schemes in the West. Social life appears, then, as a constant process in which people and objects define each

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<sup>8</sup> “[...] uma organização social das coisas, um projeto cultural de pessoas e bens”

other, and all material production derives, first, from a *cultural intention* (SAHLINS, 2003).

According to the author:

The product that reaches its destination market constitutes an objectification of a social category and, thus, helps to constitute the latter in society; on the other hand, the differentiation of the category deepens the social aspects of the goods system. Capitalism is not pure rationality. It is a defined form of cultural order (SAHLINS, 2003, p. 185).<sup>9</sup>

The author emphasizes that it is the symbolic logic - of different cultures - that organizes the demand for consumer goods, and not the quantity or material quality of such goods. For the anthropologist, the exchange value is given by the cultural meaning attributed to the objects, and such objects are interpreted as means of communication, in which the “[...] cultural order reflects itself in the production of objects, establishing, thus, an ‘order of goods’”<sup>10</sup> (SAHLINS, 2003, p. 178).

### **The contemporary socio-anthropological debate on consumption**

In analyzing the phenomenon of consumption in contemporary societies, including French and North American societies, French sociologist Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007) highlights the importance of the symbolic dimension in the economic sphere, criticizing, like Sahlins, for the practical and utilitarian reason that interpreted the act of consuming - goods and merchandise - as purely rational, individual and linked to the maximization of personal satisfactions. For the author:

Consumption can be conceived as a characteristic modality of our industrial civilization, the condition to separate it once and for all from its common and current conception: that of a process of satisfying needs. Consumption is not that passive mode of absorption and appropriation that opposes the active mode of production to balance naive schemes of behavior (and alienation). It has to be clearly stated, from the beginning, that consumption is an active mode of relationship (not just with objects, but with the community and the world), a mode of systematic activity and global response on which our cultural system is based (BAUDRILLARD, 1969, p. 222<sup>11</sup>).

<sup>9</sup> O produto que chega ao seu mercado de destino constitui uma objetificação de uma categoria social e, assim ajuda a constituir esta última na sociedade; em contrapartida, a diferenciação da categoria aprofunda os recortes sociais do sistema de bens. O capitalismo não é pura racionalidade. É uma forma definida de ordem cultural (SAHLINS, 2003, p. 185).

<sup>10</sup> “[...] ordem cultural reflete a si própria na produção de objetos, estabelecendo, assim, uma “ordem de bens”

<sup>11</sup> “Em efecto, se puede concebir el consumo como una modalidad característica de nuestra civilización industrial, a condición de separarla de una vez por todas de su acepción común y corriente: la de un proceso de satisfacción de las necesidades. El consumo no es ese modo pasivo de absorción y de apropiación que oponemos al modo activo de la producción para poner en equilibrio esquemas ingenuos de comportamiento (y de alienación). Hay que afirmar claramente, desde el principio, que el consumo es un modo activo de relación (no solo con los objetos,

Baudrillard, from a semiological perspective and with a strong influence of Roland Barthes' philosophy and structuralism, points to the existence “of a kind of fantastic evidence of consumption and abundance, created by the multiplication of objects, services, material goods, originating as a category of fundamental mutation in the ecology of the human species”<sup>12</sup> (BAUDRILLARD, 1995, p. 15). Understanding society as a system of signs, the author studies the system of meanings established by objects in capitalist societal arrangements. For him, objects constitute a spoken system and have relational meanings, defined by the context in which they are inserted. We emphasize that the economic value of things is also seen as something relational. In his work entitled **The System of Objects**, the sociologist learns that:

Consumption is neither a material practice nor a phenomenology of abundance, it is not defined either by the food that is digested, nor by the clothes you wear, nor by the automobile that someone uses, nor by the oral and visual substance of the images and messages, but by organizing all of this into significant substance. It is the virtual totality of all objects and messages constituted since now in a more or less coherent discourse. As long as it has a meaning, consumption is a systematic manipulation of signs (BAUDRILLARD, 1969, p. 224, our translation<sup>13</sup>).

Approaching consumption from a perspective that goes beyond the “metaphysics of needs and abundance”<sup>14</sup>, Baudrillard (1995, p. 59) highlights that the true social logic of consumption is the logic of the production and manipulation of social signifiers. It is not, therefore, about the appropriation of the use value of the goods, nor about satisfaction. In this sense, we understand that “the object itself is never consumed (value of use) - objects are always manipulated as signs that distinguish individuals”<sup>15</sup> (BAUDRILLARD, 1995, p. 60), acting as reinforcers of bonds, hierarchies and social places. In this way, consumption no longer refers to objects simply, it designates a set of signs that have their own functionality, so that consumed

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sino com la colectividad y el mundo), un modo de actividad sistemática y de respuesta global em el cual se funda todo nuestro sistema cultural.” (BAUDRILLARD, 1969, p. 222).

<sup>12</sup> “de uma espécie de evidência fantástica do consumo e da abundância, criada pela multiplicação dos objetos, dos serviços, bens materiais, originando como que uma categoria de mutação fundamental na ecologia da espécie humana”

<sup>13</sup> “El consumo no es ni una práctica material, ni una fenomenología, de la “abundancia”, no se define ni por el alimento que se digiere, ni por la ropa que se viste, ni por el automóvil de que uno se vale, ni por la sustancia oral y visual de las imágenes y de los mensajes, sino por la organización de todo esto en sustancia significante; es la totalidad virtual de todos los objetos y mensajes constituídos desde ahora en un discurso más o menos coherente. En cuanto que tiene un sentido, el consumo es una actividad de manipulación sistemática de signos.” (BAUDRILLARD, 1969, p. 224).

<sup>14</sup> “metafísica das necessidades e da abundância”

<sup>15</sup> “nunca se consome o objeto em si (valor de uso) – os objetos manipulam-se sempre como signos que distinguem os indivíduos”

objects - as signs - cease to be related to established needs or defined functions, configuring themselves arbitrary and not consistent with any concrete relationship.

It is also important to emphasize that, concerned with the proliferation of these consumer objects in all spheres of human life, Baudrillard understands that the goods would have joined the signs, forming *sign-goods*, which would be distancing themselves from the real and concrete, beginning to characterize, increasingly, the symbolic and non-utilitarian dimension of goods. For the author, in consumer societies the signs start to characterize an excess of signifiers (that is, of shapes and images) with little significance. We say, therefore, that in contemporary corporate arrangements, we find an excess and predominance of forms - of objects, goods - at the expense of content. The author denounces capitalism, warning of an impoverishment of human and significant relations, showing that consumption acts as a reinforcer of the system's logic.

We note, in a brief synthesis, that the denunciation of capitalist society and consumption was also present in the critical Frankfurt theory, fundamentally represented, in its first generation, by thinkers like Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. Having a strong influence on the thought developed by Karl Marx, critical theory operates according to two principles: (1) the orientation towards emancipation and (2) critical behavior, and already in the 20th century, it already pointed to the dangers of the cultural industry that, far from signifying a spontaneous culture of the masses, it represented a manifest ideology as a set of objects made to attract the masses in their consumer conditions, adapting and fixing their state of consciousness, reifying the entire social fabric (HORKHEIMER; ADORNO, 1973). In such a way that reality and appearance started to get confused in the middle of the expansion of technological reality.

Anthropologist Mary Douglas, in her joint work with economist Baron Isherwood, entitled **The world of goods**, studies the phenomenon of consumption as a distinctive mark of the spirit of our time, interpreting it as a constituent part of the cultural structure of societies. The author focuses on the attempt to formulate a universal concept of consumption, which is not limited to Western capitalist societies.

At first, like Baudrillard and Sahlins, Douglas (1994) distances herself from purely economic and utilitarian concepts of consumption, revisiting the classic notion that the consumer's choice is his free choice, even though “[...] he can to be irrational, superstitious, traditionalist or experimental: the essence of the economist's concept of individual consumer is



that he exercises sovereign action”<sup>16</sup> (DOUGLAS; ISHERWOOD, 2004, p. 101), which prevents consumption from being imposed and also, the notion that consumption starts where/when the market ends, which promotes a private and individual consumer, in order to show that, differently from what these assumptions affirm, consumption practices start from social rules and cultural codes that make them a public act, because they are collectively shared. As a cultural phenomenon, consumption appears as the appropriation of goods, spaces, services and practices, which may or may not dispense with monetary intermediation. Mary Douglas defines consumption as the use or appropriation of material possessions that are beyond trade and free within the law, which allows it to consolidate itself as a concept applicable to societies other than Western ones.

The author also criticizes the hedonistic view of consumption, which explains it as essential for personal fulfillment and individual happiness, interpreting it as a realm of pleasure through a highly ideological discourse and widespread advertising, which confers to the infinite possession of goods the status of success, fame and distinction. Douglas, furthermore, moves away from the moralistic view of consumption, which blames him for a wide range of social problems, denouncing the family, economic, ecological and cultural woes of contemporary societies as a consequence of consumption practices.

Everardo Rocha, in the presentation of **The world of Goods**, illustrates that, in the moralist discourse, the idea of consumption appears as “[...] a privileged object of accusation - alienating as a disease -, reinforcing the moral superiority of (goods) production. Consumption is not to be thought about, it is to be condemned as consumerism”<sup>17</sup> (ROCHA, 2004, p. 12). Another recurring framework used in explaining consumption is the naturalist, who perceives it as “biologically necessary, naturally inscribed and universally experienced”<sup>18</sup> (ROCHA, 2004, p. 14), assessing consumption through the responses it gives to the physical needs of individuals and for the satisfaction of the desires it provides.

In order to establish and consolidate an anthropology of consumption, Mary Douglas and Isherwood understand this phenomenon as “the very arena in which culture is the object of struggles that give it shape”<sup>19</sup> (DOUGLAS; ISHERWOOD, 2004, p. 103), emphasizing that we

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<sup>16</sup> “[...] ele pode ser irracional, supersticioso, tradicionalista ou experimental: a essência do conceito de consumidor individual do economista é que ele exerce uma ação soberana”

<sup>17</sup> “[...] objeto privilegiado de acusação – alienador como doença –, reforçando a superioridade moral da produção (de bens). Consumo não é para ser pensado, é para ser condenado como consumismo”

<sup>18</sup> “biologicamente necessário, naturalmente inscrito e universalmente experimentado”

<sup>19</sup> “a própria arena em que a cultura é objeto de lutas que lhe conferem forma”

should stop seeing consumption only as an objective result of work, recognizing it as an integral part of the same social system that explains labor relations, thus the author suggests that:

Rather than supposing that goods are primarily necessary for subsistence and competitive display, suppose that they are necessary to give visibility and stability to categories of culture. It is standard ethnographic practice to assume that all material possessions carry social significance and to focus the main part on cultural analysis in their use as communicators (DOUGLAS; ISHERWOOD, 2004, p. 105).<sup>20</sup>

As *communicators*, goods are necessary to give visibility and stability to the categories of culture, acting as part of a system of signification, which supplies, above all, symbolic needs. Douglas and Isherwood (2004) points to the fact that the main problem of social life is to fix the agreed meanings, so that it is the rituals that help to contain the variation and fluctuation of social meanings, acting as conventions that delimit socially public definitions accepted and practiced.

If, on the one hand, “to live without rituals is to live without clear meanings and, possibly, without memory”<sup>21</sup> (DOUGLAS; ISHERWOOD, 2004, p. 112), on the other hand, consumption is understood as a ritual process that establishes symbolic boundaries (fences) and links of belonging (bridges) between social groups, serving to fix public meanings and categories and consumer goods, in this perspective, are the ritual accessories that give meaning to the flow of events, enabling greater security in the social order.

Consumption, as a cultural practice and as a ritual process, is connected to a larger structural system, whose meanings attributed to goods go far beyond the category that refers to economic exchanges, with consumable goods and goods qualifying milestones of collective existence in time, forming a system that attributes reality to social life. Mary Douglas, therefore, looks at consumption not as a practical function that aims to meet practical needs, but as a symbolic function, a ritual activity in which goods operate as communicators, restoring convictions, reinforcing bonds and establishing, then, that relationships pass by the objects.

Far from ignoring the dimension of mercantile interest inherent in the capitalist system in relation to the practice and consumption of goods and merchandising, the author puts a microscopic look that aims to understand the meanings that people are attributing to everyday life and that, many times, escapes from merely mercantile sieve. When it is learned that

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<sup>20</sup> Em vez de supor que os bens sejam em primeiro lugar necessários à subsistência e à exibição competitiva, suponhamos que sejam necessários para dar visibilidade e estabilidade às categorias da cultura. é prática etnográfica padrão supor que todas as posses materiais carreguem significação social e concentrar a parte principal na análise cultural em seu uso como comunicadores (DOUGLAS; ISHERWOOD, 2004, p. 105).

<sup>21</sup> “viver sem rituais é viver sem significados claros e, possivelmente, sem memória”

consumer objects act by restoring collective convictions, reinforcing bonds, stabilizing meanings and mediating social relations, a theoretical and conceptual framework is constructed that allows us to understand, in more depth, why it is not easy to fight consumerism.

French post-structuralist sociologist Pierre Bourdieu is an important thinker who assists us in understanding various social issues. In developing a theory capable of dialoguing with the three classic authors of sociology: Emile Durkheim, Max Weber and Karl Marx, he presents us with the need for articulation, dialectics, between the social actor and social structures, contributing to the socio-anthropological debate by inserting, in his theory, concepts such as social fields and habitus. In his work entitled **Distinction: the social critique of the trial**, he conducts a study of the economics of cultural goods in a way that goes beyond a purely economic approach to such goods, assigning to them two functions: to meet needs and to establish symbolic relations.

Contrasting the view of what he called “charismatic ideology”, which considers tastes as a gift of nature, Bourdieu argues that scientific observation demonstrates that cultural needs are characterized as a product of education, in which the level of education of each social actor associates with their preferences and cultural practices. Thus, the author emphasizes that taste and look are socially constructed, serving to maintain - and legitimize - social inequalities. In this sense, we can understand taste as being what classifies the person who precedes the classification, and the social subjects are differentiated by the distinctions that they themselves operate between the beautiful and the ugly, the right and the wrong, the appropriate and the inappropriate, and that end up translating into the position that these subjects occupy within the objective classifications (BOURDIEU, 2007).

With this, Bourdieu intends to elucidate that the “legitimate” taste is given by the dominant social actor within a given social field - the concept of the field being understood as a social and symbolic space constituted by agents and institutions in constant dispute for legitimacy, where the struggle between social classes appears as a classification struggle. We learn, therefore, that “taste is the practical operator of transmuting things into distinct and distinctive signs, of continuous distributions in discontinuous oppositions; it makes the differences inscribed in the physical order of bodies have access to the symbolic order of significant distinctions”<sup>22</sup> (BOURDIEU, 2007, p. 166).

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<sup>22</sup> “o gosto é o operador prático da transmutação das coisas em sinais distintos e distintivos, das distribuições contínuas em oposições descontínuas; ele faz com que as diferenças inscritas na ordem física dos corpos tenham acesso à ordem simbólica das distinções significantes”

In a brief summary, it is possible to state that one of the central theses present in the work *Distinction* is the interpretation of consumption as a distinctive strategy. From this, Bourdieu points out that the dominant class is distinguished, from the other dominated classes in its social field, from “three consumption structures distributed in three main goods: food, culture and expenses with self-presentation and representation - clothing, beauty care, hygiene articles”<sup>23</sup> (BOURDIEU, 2007, p. 174), which demarcate the class.

It is evident that the accumulation of certain goods constitutes a cultural and symbolic capital that is not found in all individuals. The differences that the unequal cultural capitals demarcate are responsible for distinguishing certain social groups, to the detriment of others, as well as serving to promote identifications among equals, contributing to the perpetuation of the existing social order.

We thus point to two conceptions of the phenomenon of consumption, on the one hand, presented as a reinforcer and reproducer of the logic of the contemporary capitalist system, denounced in the critical theory of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno about the cultural industry and, also, in the works of Baudrillard and the proliferation of sign-goods and, on the other hand, as a cultural and ritual practice that codifies and orders different societies, as well as serving to distinguish social groups, legitimizing positions and hierarchies between different individuals.

Other important thinkers in the field of social sciences and humanities have also looked into consumer practices. We briefly highlight the thought of the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, who in his work entitled **The social life of things**, in confluence with the thinking of Mary Douglas and Marshall Sahlins, establishes that consumption has several meanings besides that which deals with an instrumental rationality. The author presents as a study proposal the discussion of the definition of the concept of commodity, through an articulation between authors such as Marcel Mauss, Karl Marx and Georg Simmel.

Appadurai points out that goods can be “provisionally defined as objects of economic value” (1991, p. 17). In order to substantiate the definition of economic value in detail, he uses the work *Philosophy of money*, by Simmel, elucidating that for the German sociologist “value is never an inherent property of objects, but a judgment about them issued by the subjects”<sup>24</sup> (APPADURAI, 1991, p. 17). It is interesting to recall that:

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<sup>23</sup> “três estruturas de consumo distribuídas em três bens principais: alimentação, cultura e despesas com apresentação de si e com representação – vestuário, cuidados de beleza, artigos de higiene”

<sup>24</sup> “o valor nunca é uma propriedade inerente aos objetos, mas sim um juízo acerca deles emitido pelos sujeitos”

In exploring this intricate domain, which is neither entirely subjective nor totally objective, where value arises and works, Simmel suggests that objects are not difficult to acquire because they are valuable, “but we call valuable those objects that resist against our desire to own them”. What Simmel calls economic objects in particular, exists in the space between pure desire and immediate enjoyment, which implies a certain distance between them and the person who desires them, a distance that can be saved. This distance is covered in and through economic exchange, where the value of objects is mutually determined. That is, someone's desire for an object is achieved by sacrificing some other object, which is the center of another individual's desire (APPADURAI, 1991, p. 18).<sup>25</sup>

It is possible for us to apprehend, therefore, that what defines the value of an economic object is the relationship, the interaction, the context that encompasses it, as well as the sphere of sacrifice and exchange. The author illustrates that economic objects circulate in different value regimes in a given historical time and social space, so that the demand for a consumer good, reciprocal sacrifice and power, interact together to create economic value, in situations always specific social (APPADURAI, 1991).

Thus, for him, things have - just like human beings - a social life. Pointing to the fact that, in contemporary Western societies, there is a strong opposition between *words* and *things*, in which the world of things is considered “as inert and mute, which is set in motion and animated only through people and their words”<sup>26</sup> (1991, p. 19), Appadurai shows that:

Although our own approach to things is necessarily conditioned by the idea that things have no other meaning than those conferred by transactions, human attributions and motivations, the anthropological problem is that this formal truth does not illuminate the concrete, historical circulation, of things. Therefore, we must follow the same things, since their meanings are inscribed in their forms, uses and trajectories. It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that animate things (APPADURAI, 1991, p. 19).<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ao explorar este intrincado domínio, que não é totalmente subjetivo nem totalmente objetivo, onde o valor surge e funciona, Simmel sugere que os objetos não são difíceis de adquirir porque sejam valiosos, “senão que chamamos valiosos a esses objetos que se resistem contra nosso desejo de possuí-los”. O que Simmel denomina objetos econômicos em particular, existe no espaço compreendido entre o desejo puro e o desfrute imediato, o qual implica certa distância entre eles e a pessoa que os deseja, distância que pode salvar-se. Esta distância se cobre em e através do intercâmbio econômico, onde o valor dos objetos está determinado reciprocamente. Quer dizer, o desejo de alguém por um objeto se alcança mediante o sacrifício de algum outro objeto, que é o centro do desejo de outro indivíduo (APPADURAI, 1991, p. 18).

<sup>26</sup> “como inerte e mudo, o qual é posto em movimento e animado apenas mediante as pessoas e as suas palavras”

<sup>27</sup> Apesar de que nosso próprio enfoque das coisas esteja necessariamente condicionado pela ideia de que as coisas não têm outros significados senão aqueles conferidos pelas transações, as atribuições e motivações humanas, o problema antropológico reside em que esta verdade formal não ilumina a circulação concreta, histórica, das coisas. Portanto, devemos seguir as coisas mesmas, já que seus significados estão inscritos em suas formas, usos e trajetórias. É apenas mediante a análise destas trajetórias que podemos interpretar as transações e cálculos humanos que animam as coisas (APPADURAI, 1991, p. 19).

Thus, it is interesting to point out that, if from a theoretical point of view, it is the social actors that encode the meaning of things, from a methodological perspective it is the things that, in constant movement, illuminate the social and human context (APPADURAI, 1991). It is possible to apprehend that, for Appadurai, when we follow the path of circulation of things, we will face the fact that their respective meanings are found in the use we make of them, and this is because, for the author, the value of use of things is symbolic, as is exchange value. We also emphasize that things have a cultural biography.

For economists, traditionally, commodities “simply are”, so that “certain things and rights over things are produced, exist and circulate through the economic system, while being exchanged for other things, usually for money”<sup>28</sup> (APPADURAI, 1991, p. 89), making the goods mean only an article that has use value and exchange value. For Appadurai, however, the production of goods can be interpreted as a cultural and cognitive process, “[...] where goods must not only be produced materially as things, but must also be culturally marked as a particular type of things”<sup>29</sup> (APPADURAI, 1991, p. 89), so that there is a moral economy of things, behind the appearance of objectivity of the economy.

We rescued the Indian anthropologist's idea that Western thought would be mistaken in taking for granted that things - physical objects and rights over them - represent the natural universe of goods while people would represent individualized beings and endowed with singularities and specificities, once that, throughout the trajectory of the human civilizing process, people were - and can be - commodified, just as slaves were centuries ago, and commodities, in turn, can assume a specificity in their existence that is not part of their conception as a simple commodity. Commodities thus represent a stage in the life of economic goods, which can take on several other meanings throughout its existence. The goods, in turn, are not mere products of the subjects, they are producers, since things have agency.

We also emphasize that a distinctive leap presented in **The social life of things** is the conception that people do not consume because they reproduce a social logic that manipulates them to consume, but because the practice of consumption presupposes an agency, a choice, a way of standing in the world that gives pleasure to those who consume.

## Final considerations

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<sup>28</sup> “certas coisas e direitos sobre as coisas são produzidos, existem e circulam através do sistema econômico, enquanto são trocados por outras coisas, usualmente por dinheiro”

<sup>29</sup> “[...] onde as mercadorias não apenas devem se produzir materialmente como coisas, mas também devem estar marcadas culturalmente como um tipo particular de coisas”

Through the socio-anthropological debate on the phenomenon of consumption in contemporary societies, this article sought to demonstrate the causal nexuses present between the thought of Marshall Sahlins, Jean Baudrillard, Mary Douglas, Pierre Bourdieu and Arjun Appadurai. We highlight, as a first similarity between the authors, the fact that everyone understands consumption objects as signs, cultural codes, systems of meanings and communicators, which attribute to the act of consuming a symbolic and collective dimension, and not merely private and individual. The authors in question also criticize the practical and utilitarian reason that, usually, was present in the writings of classical and neoclassical economics on consumption, reducing it to a simple satisfaction of desires and maximization of needs, completely ignoring its symbolic, cultural and shared dimension throughout the corporate arrangement.

We also show that, in addition to a critical contribution - along the lines of Baudrillard and frankfurtian critical theory - to consumption understood as a reproducer of the logic of the capitalist system, authors such as Mary Douglas and Bourdieu contribute to see it in its greatest complexity, demarcating it that people consume to reinforce social bonds, links of belonging, cultural codes and, also, to make distinctions and hierarchies. Appadurai, in turn, explains that the commodity is a phase of the life of the goods, and that consumption, assuming an agency of the subjects, is a pleasurable act.

We believe, finally, that the aforementioned authors are of fundamental relevance, conceptual and theoretical, for a deeper understanding of today's capitalist societies, in which the phenomenon of consumption - the increase in the tertiary sector, the supply of services and goods - is still, often interpreted based on moralistic, hedonistic and naturalistic frameworks.

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