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Anthropology and the commodity form: The Philadelphia Commercial Museum

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Abstract
Anthropologists working in the political economy tradition have generated a sizeable amount of work that focuses on commodities. This article discusses approaches that focus on the form and structure of the commodity, in particular the work of Lukács, Sohn-Rethel and Benjamin, and uses them to examine the Philadelphia Commercial Museum, an institution where encyclopedic statistics and anthropology were especially conditioned by commodity relations. These authors help the anthropology of commodities to grasp both the relation between political economy and culture, and the influence of commodity on the discipline itself.

Keywords
commodities, history of anthropology, museums, political economy, statistics

It was a busy weekday in early fall of 1911 at the Philadelphia Commercial Museum. Boys and girls from five public schools cavorted in the warm sun across the broad lawns and walkways leading from the street to the doors of the neoclassical-style museum buildings, escorted by teachers in high collars and wide hats. They filed into the museum lecture hall and sat down to watch a slideshow about the history and geography of commerce, presented by a scholar from the museum staff. Afterwards, they went for a tour of the museum's collections, passing through exhibits from countries and regions such as Japan and Africa, and others focused on particular commodities such as cotton and coal. The children crowded around display cases stacked like storefront windows with goods, comparing and evaluating the objects (Figure 1). There were a dozen different straw

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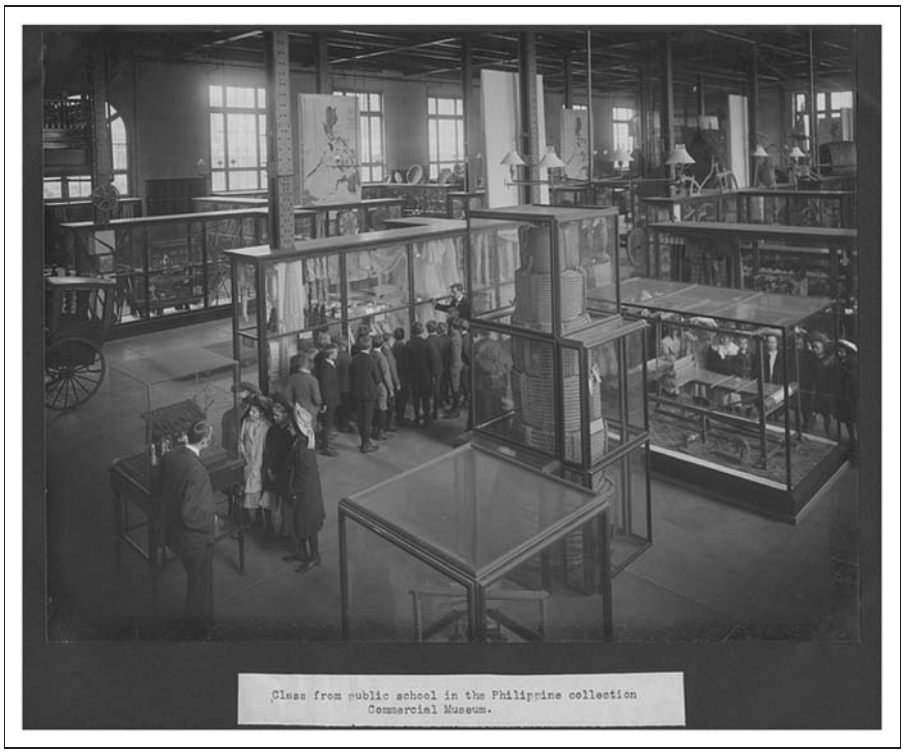

Figure 1. Class from public school in the Philippine collection.

hats from Mexico; skeins of wool from Argentina; arrays of fans from Japan; masks from Polynesia. The boys, in particular, lingered at the display of model ships. Interspersed among these goods were mannequins depicting inhabitants of particular regions of the world engaged in productive activities such as weaving, hunting, or mining. The thrill of confronting the exotic was tempered by that had by learning from the museum docent that all the people, places and things in the world were brought together by the unifying process of commerce. As they marveled at these goods, they shared the space with a class of high school girls, as well as the occasional businessman sourcing some mineral or fiber. As the children traipsed out of the building, they glimpsed through the library doors other businessmen searching the catalogues and file cabinets for contact information of overseas merchants, or using the translation services offered by the museum.[1]

This would have been a familiar experience for most of the visitors to the Philadelphia Commercial Museum. During the years from 1850 to 1930 there was a florescence of museums and related institutions such as world's fairs, expositions and department stores (Leach, 1993). These popular spaces introduced the growing urban masses to the people, places and things brought together by the

"commercial empire" (Domosh, 2006) of the U.S., and the visitors would have been familiar with such collections and displays. They lived in a world newly crowded with commodities, and the patrons of the Commercial Museum already had plenty of experience in perusing, distinguishing, and pricing. The museum, like its analog institutions, taught people to recognize and respond to these dimensions of commodity culture.

The fledgling discipline of anthropology found early institutional support in world's fairs, expositions and museums, where the discipline's practitioners arrayed and displayed people and artefacts to be compared, considered, and eventually consumed by the public. Historical studies of world's fairs and expositions discuss some of the ways anthropology participated in these institutions, especially through the portrayal of particular cultures of the world in mock villages inhabited by live natives (Baker, 2010; Conn, 1998; Corbey, 1993; Penny, 2002; Richards, 1990; Rydell, 1987; Stocking, 1985; Tenorio, 1996). Other scholars have noted the centrality of objects and artefacts in these representations of the world's diversity, but most fail to understand the nature of these objects as commodities. Steven Conn (1998), for example, argues that museums were guided by an "object-oriented epistemology," but does not delve into the social relations involved in the production, collection, and display of those objects. Thomas Richards (1990) shows how, during the Victorian period, the commodity came to express and shape, through expositions, advertising and other techniques of the spectacle, relations within England, and those between the English and the rest of the world. But Richards doesn't explore the connections between the commodity form of the expositions, and the social sciences that were nurtured by them. Anthropologists working in the political economy tradition have published many studies of particular commodities and the social relations involved in their production and consumption (Ferry, 2005; Fitting, 2010; Mintz, 1985; Roseberry, 1983; Striffler, 2005; Walsh, 2008a; Wolf, 1982). But despite the consolidation of commodity studies within anthropology, the importance of the commodity form in shaping statistical and anthropological knowledge in institutions such as the Philadelphia Commercial Museum has not been addressed.

In this article I use Marxist theory about the commodity to discuss the Philadelphia Commercial Museum. I draw on the perspectives of thinkers working during the first three decades of the 20th century, who were engaged directly with the cultural and intellectual dimensions of the explosive profusion of mass-produced commodities, and their display in the new institutions of commercial empire: the department store, the museum, and the world's fair. From about 1910 to 1940, Georg Lukács, Alfred Sohn-Rethel, and Walter Benjamin – scholars associated with the Frankfurt School – confronted the relation of the commodity to consciousness as a principal theoretical issue. Each in his own way described how people's minds were given form or structure through participation in the mass production and consumption of commodities. Furthermore, each argued that the form of the commodity lay at the heart of the knowledge that was generated in the context of the new institutions.

Through a discussion of one institution – the Philadelphia Commercial Museum (PCM) – I show how social scientific, statistical knowledge about peoples, places and things was produced and given its particular commodity form. The PCM had a clear pedagogic mission to teach the schoolchildren of Philadelphia about the world's diversity, and the museum was filled with maps, photographs, and glass cases stuffed with commodities, as well as life-sized mannequins simulating the production of those commodities. But what is more important than the content of these displays was their organizational form, and the way that museum guests were taught to engage with them. Through techniques of display such as uniformity of scale and standardized containers, the museum presented the unique qualities of each object, and at the same time encouraged the observer to see the objects as representations of categories of things, and to discern commensurability and exchangeability between them. Through this technique of sampling, all sorts of people, places and things – the subject of both encyclopedic statistics and it successor, anthropology – were submitted to a calculus of comparison in the Philadelphia Commercial Museum. In the discipline of anthropology some ideas supported by the commodity form of consciousness, such as race and nation, were recognized and criticized early on in the 20th century, while other effects, such as conceptions of cultures as discrete, bounded, comparable entities, went largely unquestioned until more recently.

Statistics, anthropology, and the culture of the commodity

At the beginning of the 20th century Marxist scholars grappled with political culture in trying to answer the question of how to mobilize the working class. While Marxist-communist revolutionaries succeeded in taking over the state in Russia, they failed to do so in Germany, Italy, and elsewhere. Scholars questioned the inevitability of the proletarian revolution proclaimed by communism, and culture and psychology were identified as key arenas for understanding those failures. It was during this decade of 1910–20 that Lukács and Benjamin set upon the task of determining the relation between political economy and culture. They started, as Marx himself did, with the commodity, and followed Marx's suggestion that the dynamic of production and exchange at the economic core of capitalist society was the key to understanding sociality and consciousness as well.[2] They arrived, by the 1930s, at a thorough critique of the complicity of social science with commodity relations in capitalism.

Lukács used the notion of ''reification'' to describe the way that commodity relations are determinate ''both for the objective evolution of society and for the stance adopted by men towards it'' (1988: 86). The commodity ''stamps its imprint upon the whole consciousness of man; his qualities and abilities are no longer an organic part of his personality, they are things which he can 'own' or 'dispose of' like the various objects of the external world'' (1988: 100). Taking a cue from Weber, he argued that mechanization and rationalization were the vectors by which the consciousness of the proletariat was integrated into capitalism.

"The abstract, quantitative mode of calculability" (1988: 93) that enables acts of investment or consumption is also present in the labor process of an industrial worker and the "contemplative" reflection of the bourgeois intellectual. Calculation is a part of human thought that has become reified like a commodity – objectified and functionalized by capitalism; alienated from the individual and subjected to the imperative of exchangeability. Lukács found the link between production and consciousness in the minute studies of time and motion conducted by F.W. Taylor, and the implementation of his findings in the "scientific management" of workers in steel plants in Pennsylvania.

In the rationalization of the work process and worker consciousness, science was the overarching cultural formation that bound together capital, management, and labor. Lukács saw statistics as the form of thought that defined and contributed to the increasing rationalization of production by shaping of the consciousness of the worker.

> With the modern 'psychological' analysis of the work-process (in Taylorism) this rational mechanization extends right into the worker's soul: even his psychological attributes are separated from his total personality and placed in opposition to it so as to facilitate their integration into specialized rational systems and their reduction to statistically viable concepts. We are concerned above all with the principle at work here: the *principle* of rationalization based on what is and *can be calculated*. (1988: 88, italics original)

Alfred Sohn-Rethel, another scholar orbiting the Frankfurt School, pushed the analysis of reification further toward the moment of exchange and consumption. For exchange to transpire, merchants and markets must protect the commodity from all acts of use. But "while exchange banishes use from the actions of marketing people," he wrote, "it does not banish it from their minds. However, it must remain confined to their minds, occupying them in their imagination and thoughts only" (1978: 25–6). The rupture between use and exchange leads to the increasing individuation and abstraction of human consciousness.

Walter Benjamin, another scholar orbiting the Frankfurt School during the first decades of the 20th century, continued the critique of commodity culture and statistical thought. He identified in the 1920s:

> [a] perception whose 'sense of the universal equality of things' has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction. Thus is manifested in the field of perception what in the theoretical sphere is noticeable in the increasing importance of statistics. (1969: 223)

In his "Arcades Project," Benjamin focused on the small covered shopping district typical of mid-19th-century Paris; "the original temple of commodity capitalism" (cited in Buck-Morss, 1991: 83). In the passageways of these metropolitan arcades Benjamin found constellations of outmoded objects such as the luxury

commodities, advertisements, architecture and artwork of an earlier form of capitalism. Following Marx's discussion of fetishism, he described this world of commodities as a "phantasmagoria," in which use value and exchange value were eclipsed by the representational value of display. By the time of Benjamin this phantasmagoria had expanded throughout much of the urban landscape, thriving especially in the department stores that embraced the new consumerist masses, and the outmoded images, objects and styles present in the arcades provided him with a visual shock that put this 20th-century consumerism in sharp relief. The epitome of the phantasmagoria – the commodity on display – was located by Benjamin in the universal expositions and world's fairs that thrived between 1850 and 1930.

The statistical mode of thought that these scholars focused on was not the academic discipline recognized by that name today. Statistics was, since 17th century, a wide-ranging mode of inquiry that produced "general, useful knowledge" with the explicit goal of supporting national governments and economies. At its heart, this early statistics was an encyclopedic project interested in populations, places, and resources, and its practitioners employed fieldwork, narrative description, and visual imagery to produce and present their information. By the mid 19th century statistics was digesting a "vast avalanche of numbers" generated by governments and businesses, but encyclopedic statistics did not disappear (Hacking, 1982). Rather, this earlier form of statistics moved to academic disciplines such as anthropology and geography that calved off as statistics became a narrower discipline that was increasingly enumerative in its methods and language (De la Peña and Wilkie, 1994; Hacking, 1990; Walsh, 2008b). Despite the turn to numbers, all statistics shared some basic principles from the original encyclopedic project: it was an effort to bring together, make commensurable, and compare the diversity of the world's people, places, and things.

The first generations of anthropologists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were self-consciously hewing as closely as possible to the lines drawn by the great explorer-statisticians such as Alexander Von Humboldt (Penny, 2002). Expositions and museums, in particular, were modeled as encyclopedias; collections of all the world's things, where intellectuals could compare and contrast objects and reach conclusions about the nature of humanity. They were designed to, first, serve as a classroom for the education of the masses and, second, to serve as a marketplace for the goods of the world. These functions were fused, so that visitors were educated in the evolution of productive technology and the diversity of commodities at the same time they were taught to respect that technology and desire those commodities. In these institutions the wealth of the world's people – and the people themselves – appeared as the "immense collection of commodities" mentioned by Marx in the opening salvo of *Capital*. Many expositions had anthropological exhibits displaying people and their material culture, arranged according to a spatial narrative of unilineal social evolution that enabled the visitor to walk from the most "primitive" cultures to the most "civilized", comparing the people and their goods. This exercise of comparison trained the public in the "techniques of the observer" (Crary, 1992) needed to evaluate the multitude of people and items on

the same register of equivalences, structuring the vision of the observer to respond to the commodity form. These institutions were schools for educating the populace in the visual sensations, sensuousness and sensibilities of the commodity. Anthropology's specific representational practices emerged within the context of these institutions, and the commodity form permeated the discipline.

The Philadelphia Commercial Museum

Towards the end of the 19th century a kind of exposition appeared that is emblematic of the fusion of market and museum. The ''permanent exposition'' was a space in which national governments rented or were given room to exhibit the products of their countries year round. Port towns in Europe such as London and Le Havre had permanent expositions, which enabled investors to make decisions about commodities such as copper, coffee or wool based on visual appraisal. These institutions were based on the model of the encyclopedia, and offered ''general useful knowledge'' to government officials and businessmen who were interested in promoting commerce and business. The Philadelphia Commercial Museum was one such permanent exposition, but as well as displaying commodities it offered a variety of other activities and services, including educational outreach in public schools, a library, a press that published books, pamphlets, and a newspaper, and a translation department.

The Philadelphia Commercial Museum thrived under director William Wilson from its founding in 1894 until the First World War. Wilson, an academic biologist, came upon the idea for the museum when visiting the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, where Franz Boas, who was Chief Assistant for Anthropology, oversaw the construction of the dioramas and displays of Native Americans and their material culture (Baker, 2010; Bronner, 1989; Conn, 1998). Wilson arranged for the shipment of much of the content of the Chicago World's Fair to Philadelphia, and received subsequent shipments from fairs in Guatemala, Liberia, Paris and elsewhere. Wilson was very successful at fundraising, quickly gaining the support of wealthy Philadelphians, and securing a warehouse from the railroad for a nominal rent. In 1899 the directors of the museum organized the First National Export Exposition, which brought the products of the nation before the public, businessmen and state officials from all over the world. This exposition attracted some 1.25 million paying visitors over three months, and these proceeds went toward the construction of new neoclassical buildings for the Museum on a 17 acre plot next to the University of Pennsylvania. Another $350,000 was apportioned by the United States Congress, for the construction of the buildings and the purchase of the permanent collection (National Export Exposition, 1899: 15). The museum was a fixture in Philadelphia's cultural life, and would serve the schoolchildren of Philadelphia for some six decades, providing free tours and shipping didactic exhibit cases for educational purposes.

The Philadelphia Commercial Museum exalted commerce as a mechanism that would ensure economic justice and equality among the people of the world, and at

the same time promote the interests of the United States. At the opening ceremony of the 1899 Commercial Congress, hosted by the museum, Assistant Secretary of State David J. Hill declared commerce to be the driver of world prosperity and peace. ''Commerce spreads the white wings of her peaceful sails on the barren sea, and the joy of mutual exchange and reciprocal service springs up in the hearts of men'' (PCM, 1899: 1). In the public rhetoric of the museum's boosters and the promoters of American business overseas, ''Commerce'' was halfway between an animate spirit something akin to a Greek god and a mechanism of unilineal social evolution. Trade, it was imagined, would be carried out in an apolitical spirit of fairness and freedom that would benefit everyone involved by distributing goods to the needy, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked and housing the homeless.

Museums at the turn of the 20th century were connected to business in many very direct ways. Through the free exchange of directors and curators, the creation of design as an art form, and the focus of late 19th-century and early 20th-century museums on presenting the ''industrial arts'' of the world, the modern museum and the department store developed hand in hand. Stewart Culin, an anthropologist and friend of Franz Boas who served as curator of the Brooklyn Museum, and John Dana, curator of the Newark Museum, both believed that museums needed to present as well as shape culture in the commodity form, to attract visitors and promote the larger goals of civilization and progress (Leach, 1993: 167). Culin believed that ''commerce is the center of life,'' and his expeditions to acquire collections were funded by department store pioneer John Wannamaker (Bronner, 1989). Wannamaker, for his part, was on the Board of Directors of the Philadelphia Commercial Museum.

Because the museum was created to provide general useful knowledge to businessmen seeking to facilitate the flow of commodities around the world, it was focused principally on goods. The displays followed the standard evolutionary narrative of the rise of civilization still regnant at the turn of the 20th century, and depicted the growth of technology and commerce over the course of human history. ''Serially arranged in uniform cases are the important products of commerce in the order of their entry into the world's demand,'' a 1910 pamphlet stated, ''while maps in contemporary order show the development and changes in trade routes and the concomitant rise and fall of nations'' (PCM, 1910: 2). The history told in these exhibits culminated in and celebrated the extraordinary profusion of commodities in the late 19th century, and simultaneously justified and naturalized U.S. imperialism. Of course, in these exhibits the rise of Europe and the U.S. as the world's latest commercial hegemon was not accompanied by any prediction of inevitable demise. The content of the displays provided an ''object-lesson'' (Bronner, 1989) about the superiority of the developed nations and the logical triumph of capitalism.

It was the form of the display that gave that story the weight of fact, however. Uniform cases and serial arrangements imposed a visual standardization on the objects much like the standardization of form imprinted on the commodity by mass production. These techniques of display trained the observer to compare the

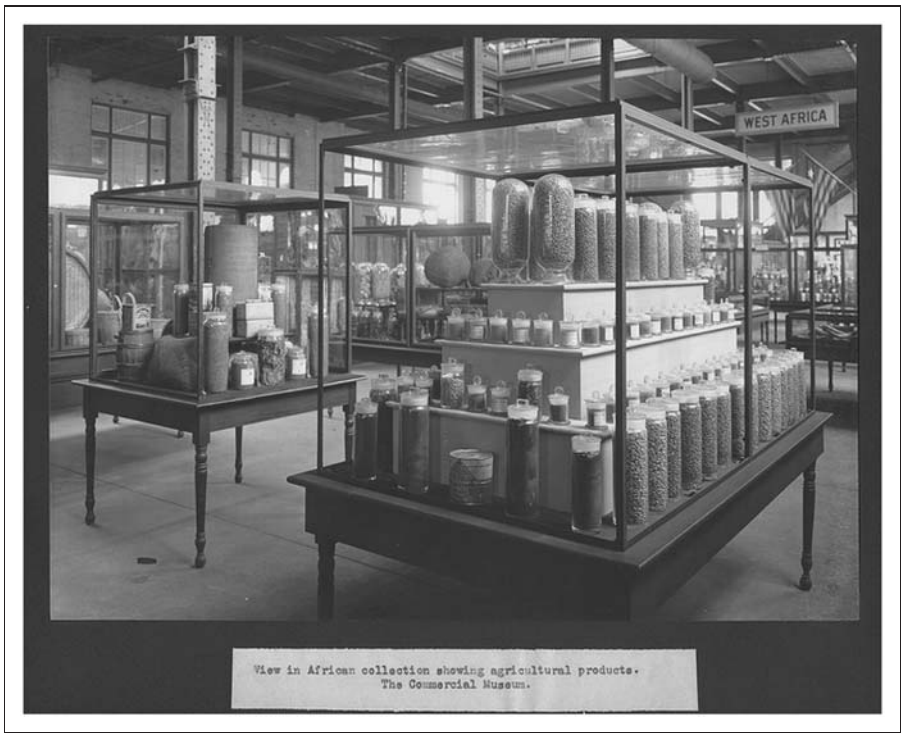

Figure 2. View in the African collection, showing agricultural products.

objects systematically and to establish an overall understanding of their relative positions on the arc of social evolution. The objects, torn from their original contexts, were relocated in a setting that accentuated their exchangeability and commensurability. Take, for example, the cases of agricultural products from West Africa. Agricultural products such as peanuts were placed in glass jars of uniform size, so as to abstract attention away from the act of consuming the commodities themselves, and redirect it to the contemplation of their exchange (Figure 2). There was also an "exhibit of history of commerce, showing models in uniform scale of commercial ships of all periods of history" (Figure 3). In this exhibit too was the uniformity of scale that enabled the calculus of difference and similarity that was so characteristic of the commodity form of consciousness and statistical modes of thought. Objects that had likely never before met in a workshop, marketplace or ocean were now carefully brought together to enable comparison, co-measurement, and valuation. These commodities were not actually available for sale at the museum. Rather, the samples presented in these glass jars were representative of entire classes of commodities, distinguished by size, quality, price, etc. Their role in exchange, accentuated by the techniques of display, suspended the material possibility of consumption and use, and converted the act of consuming into what Alfred Sohn-Rethel called "real abstraction."

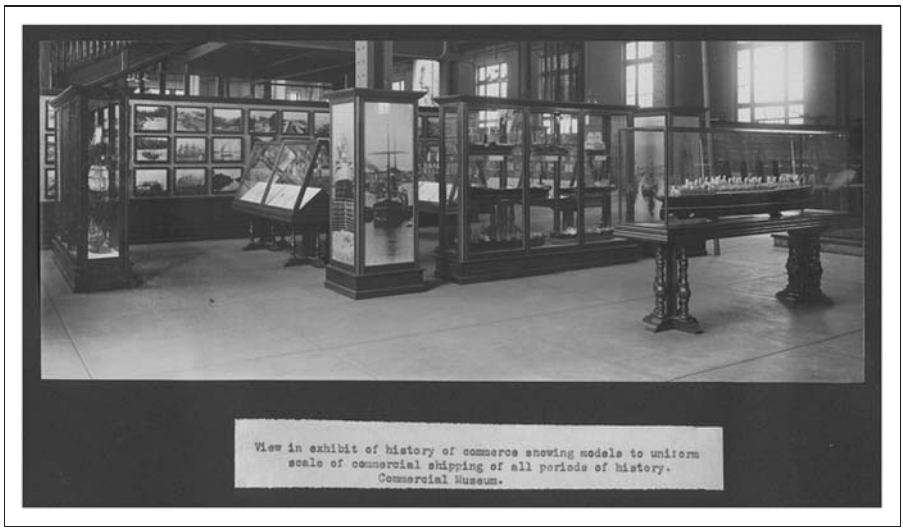

Figure 3. History of commerce exhibit, showing models to uniform scale of commercial shipping of all periods of history.

Alongside evolutionary orderings, the museum organized displays according to geographical area, juxtaposing the products and people of one area with those of another. People from around the world were represented in the exhibits, and mannequins were integrated into the displays alongside goods, often depicting cultural practices and productive activities. As the publication of the museum, *Commercial America* put it:

> the collections, now on exhibition, comprise materials of great variety, all arranged in such a manner as to illustrate graphically the habits and customs of other lands, their resources and articles of production, the character of their commerce, their chief items of consumption, and their race characteristics. (*Commercial America*, 1904: 10)

There were also exhibits focusing on particular commodities that used the same techniques of presentation (Figure 4). In all these displays a wide variety of objects, bodies, images, and other things were brought together and subjected to the reified gaze of the observer, establishing a register of equivalences necessary for an encyclopedic effort at classification.

The dual anthropological-commercial character of representation was defined in the mission of the museum ''to promote the commerce of America with foreign lands and to disseminate in this country a wider knowledge and appreciation of the customs and conditions of other nations and peoples'' (PCM, 1910: 1). Wilson was a biologist for whom the evolutionary account of the triumph of commerce made obvious sense. He was also, however, a regular participant in congresses on ''colonial sociology'' and ''commercial geography,'' and was involved in a number of

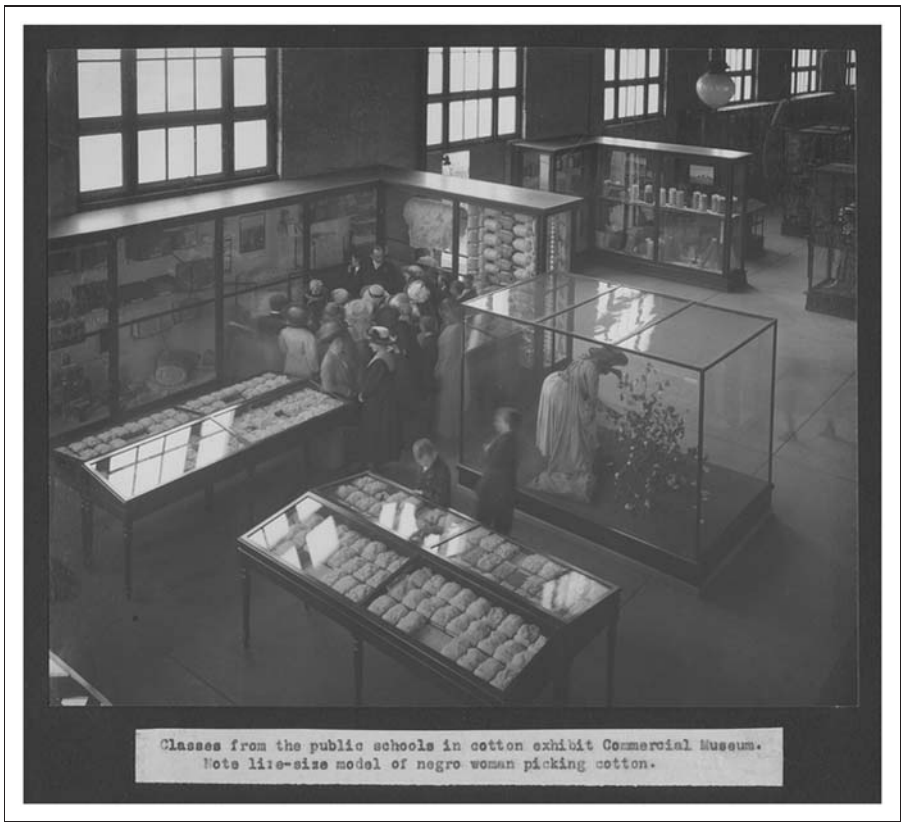

Figure 4. Classes from public schools in cotton exhibit; note the life-size model of a negro woman picking cotton.

efforts to create ethnic villages in expositions. In 1899 the Commercial Museum sponsored the National Export Exposition, which, alongside all the goods, created a ''Chinese Village... populated with 450 men, women and children, brought from China for the purpose. The business, industry and home life of the Chinese [was] completely illustrated'' (National Export Exposition, 1899: 14). The Export Exposition organizers promised other such shows with ''people from some of our newly acquired possessions, and their customs, dress, recreations and amusements'' (1899: 14).

In 1904, Wilson was appointed by President Taft to oversee the Philippines exhibit at the St. Louis Louisiana Purchase Exposition, which served as a temporary home for nearly 1200 Filipinos. In this exhibit, Wilson had the Filipinos enact their native ways to the delight and horror of progressive-era middle Americans, who were also treated to displays of the region's natural resources and products. Wilson worked under William McGee, Director of the St. Louis expositions' anthropology exhibits, who promised an array of ''types and freaks from

every land'' (''To Exhibit Man,'' *New York Times*, 1 Nov. 1903). As Robert Rydell observed about the Philippines exhibit, ''nonwhites on display at America's turn-of-the-century fairs were linked most closely to the natural world and were displayed as natural resources to be exploited as readily as mineral deposits'' (1987: 196). Again, what is of fundamental concern here is not so much the content of these anthropological exhibits – these have attracted a good deal of analysis by scholars (Hinsley, 1991). Rather, the argument presented here concentrates on the form of the exhibits, and the way that human bodies, behaviors, practices, and ideas were arrayed on a register defined by the commodity.

Business and anthropology hung closely together in the projections of the museum, but not entirely comfortably. Wilson was quite clear that he had to present all the objects and people in his museum to a public in a way that it would recognize:

> the main purpose of the exhibit is to portray in vivid fashion the products and people of foreign lands. The installation and arrangement of the exhibits have been done with an eye single to the best results from the standpoint of the observer.... The daily life of the people, their particular habits, their dress, cooking, agricultural and manufacturing implements, are arranged in classified array and are most attractive to the visitor, apart from what he can learn touching economics. (PCM, 1910: 2)

Critics questioned the possibility of presenting at one time the larger truths of human history as well as the most up-to-date information needed for successful business decisions. The evolution of commodities and commerce seemed to be a different kind of topic from the ordering of geographical areas, their people and their products. Finally, however, the tension that existed between geographical and evolutionary orderings was less important than the fact that they both contributed to and reproduced the visual culture of consumption through the serial consideration of objects ordered according to the commodity form.

What unified the Commercial Museum's displays of commodities, commerce, culture and people was their common ancestry in encyclopedic statistics. The power of statistics resided in its ability to make very different kinds of things commensurable. This earlier more inclusive form of statistics gave way to the creation of academic disciplines with narrower methodological and thematic purviews, and what remained in the field of statistics was a much more quantitative and mathematical science. Anthropology, geography, and other humanistic approaches in the social sciences inherited much of the content and representational style of encyclopedic statistics, and museums such as the Commercial Museum directly reflected this

The Philadelphia Commercial Museum had a research branch that was dedicated to the generation and collection of statistical information. The head of this Scientific Department, Gustavo Niederlein, was a German who immigrated to Argentina at the end of the 19th century, and worked in that country for a time as a biologist in the Ministry of Agriculture. His collections and publications on

Figure 5. Translation department.

Argentina were displayed at the Paris Exposition of 1889 and the 1893 Chicago Exposition, and he then worked conducting research for the Philadelphia Commercial Museum, where he produced a series of monographs about the people, geography, cultures, races and products of Central America (Niederlein, 1898a, 1898b, 1898c). This research falls squarely into the long intellectual tradition of encyclopedic statistics typified by explorers and curators such as Alexander Von Humboldt and Adolfo Bastian (Penny, 2002: 18–21). In Niederlein's publications, and in the displays of the Commercial Museum where he worked, the cacophony of people, places, languages, and other symbolic and social dimensions of human societies throughout the world were tamed by submission to a serial and statistical form of visual representation that imposed an overall framework of equivalence.

The exercise of establishing equivalences was even more evident in another area of the Philadelphia Commercial Museum, the Foreign Trade Bureau, which provided enumerative statistics to businessmen making decisions about investment and trade. The Foreign Trade Bureau amassed and ordered the "vast avalanche of printed numbers" (Hacking, 1982) that governments began producing in the 19th century, and the museum boasted that "the official commercial statistics and

similar documents of practically every country issuing such information are on file'' in the Bureau Library, ''making possible a good first hand knowledge of the character and sources of foreign purchases'' (PCM, 1912: 15). If this information wasn't enough, the Commercial Museum gathered information from U.S. consuls and businesses around the world, much of it descriptive and ethnographic in nature. The translation department offered to translate documents into English, but also provided cultural translation to clients (Figure 5). The museum boasted that its library could provide answers to questions such as: how to pack goods destined for tropical India; whether to label or stencil boxes going to Valparaiso; cultural assumptions about who is responsible for paying import taxes; the accepted system of weights and measures in Asia; and so on. Thus the goal of the museum was to provide a more general process of translation, in which living, working, thinking people and their social relations were known through statistical representations of their bodies, their activities, and, principally, the products of their labor. Like the arrangements of objects in the museum's display cases, the statistics gathered in the Foreign Trade Bureau Library made the diversity of the world legible and commensurable. Statistics was the ''strong language'' (Asad, 1994) of equivalence that represented very different things in the commodity form.

Conclusion

Modern academic anthropology in the United States was founded around 1900 by Franz Boas, who shifted the content of anthropology, its representational narratives, and the institutions in which the discipline was nurtured. He parted ways with the circus-tent anthropology of William McGee, and established the discipline on a firmer scientific and institutional footing. His critique of museum studies, in particular, is recognized as a pivotal moment both in his career and in the reformation of the discipline. Boas rejected the established strategy, deployed by Otis Mason, of showing objects arrayed by functional form and unilinear evolutionary logic, outside of the cultural contexts of their production, use, and circulation. He advocated instead the use of dioramas that showed how people use material culture in meaningful ways, but this plan ''was constrained also by the goal of attracting large, appreciative crowds'' (Jacknis, 1985). Like that of Wilson, Culin and other curators, Boas's work at the Museum of National History was shaped by the fact that he needed to present the material in a way that the public would understand – a public that was already trained to respond to the visual commodity form, and which enjoyed ethnographic spectacles such as mock villages at world's fairs, or the Buffalo Bill Cody Wild West Show (Baker, 2010). So while many anthropologists were keenly aware of the complex character of relations between ''primitive'' peoples and the modern world, the presentation of anthropological knowledge in institutions such as expositions and museums was often not subtle.

Between 1900 and 1940, American anthropology would be characterized by a rejection of the evolutionary narratives that naturalized the exploitative and destructive experience of the world's peoples with regard to commerce

and capitalism. Museums shifted to depicting people and their lived cultures, and particularist, relativist ethnography dominated until the resurgence of neo-evolutionism in the 1950s. Much of anthropology during this period was aimed at salvaging what was left of decimated languages and cultures, often filtering out that which commerce and capitalism had wrought. While the evolutionary narratives were abandoned, salvage anthropology's project of reconstruction actually reinforced the existing tendency to represent the world's cultures as a series of more or less discrete objects. This tendency to stress internal coherence and organic relations was strengthened by functionalist and structural functionalist orientations which reached their apogee around 1950. By mid-century, then, statistical modes of representation based on the commodity form were still operating in the field of anthropology to assemble discrete cultures for perusal and classification. Even those studies that focused on modern society often chose the unit of the nation-state for analysis, and reached the condition that each nation-state had a distinct irreducible ''character'' (Benedict, 1946). While the classificatory inflection may have changed, the focus was still on objects rather than the processes or relations that brought people together in shifting political and economic assemblages.

The commodity form in the heart of anthropological understandings of culture hindered the development of a critical understanding of the commodity relations that bound people together in the modern world. When Eric Wolf, Sidney Mintz and others delineated a Marxist anthropological project after the Second World War, they criticized the tendency of anthropologists to conceive of the world's peoples and cultures as discrete, isolated and bounded things: ''billiard balls'' in Wolf's apt phrase (1982). But the criticism was carried out as history rather than philosophy, and the methodological, analytical grindstone was processual rather than structural. History was, at first, a convenient way to narrate the global connectivity of capitalism and colonialism. By the 1960s, however, the processual approach gained further momentum as a theoretical riposte to the excesses of structuralism (Thompson, 1978; Williams, 1977), once again pushing anthropological political economy toward history, rather than structural or formal analysis (Roseberry, 1989; Smith, 1999). During the last few decades a more explicit theorization of structure and form has re-emerged in anthropological political economy (Harvey, 1989; Roseberry, 2002; Wolf, 1990, 1999). Lukács, Sohn-Rethel, Benjamin and others working on the issue of statistics and the commodity at the beginning of the 20th century have much to offer to this research project.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. This is an historical reconstruction based on a set of 98 photographs of the Philadelphia Commercial Museum taken sometime around 1910: see: http://www.flickr.com/photos/

phillyseaport/sets/72157623471094505/ (retrieved 17 October 2011). All images in this article are from the same source.

2. In *Capital*, Marx began his critique of bourgeois thought with the commodity: ''the wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an immense collection of commodities.'' (Marx, 1990: 125). Of course, for Marx appearances were deceiving, and the appearance of commodities as things that enter into relationships in the market makes it difficult to envision the social relations of the people that produce those things. ''It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves,'' he wrote, ''which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things'' (Marx, 1990: 165).

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