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**Commodification of Nature and Society, Identity
and the Multidimensionality of the Anthropology of the Good**

"Perhaps oversimplifying, what I mean to say is that nothing *is*,
but everything *comes to be*." (West 2006: 27)

"Nothing means on its own" (Besky, Lecture 9/6) is a very simple and brief statement; yet, it encompasses the essence of how anthropologists view the world. In the following paper, I will situate the concept of the "good" within an anthropological framework of analysis. By looking at specific examples from a wide range of areas— conservation, food, infrastructure, and borders— I seek to answer the question of how anthropologists study the "good," how a good becomes one in the first place, and how this conception of the good works within a complex social, material and political system.

First, I will briefly explain how the different techniques and fields within anthropology provide a roadmap to unpack this multidimensional idea of the good. Second, I will explore how the commodification of nature and people has blurred the division between the social value and the economic value of goods. I will do so by looking at the issue of conservation within West's ethnography of the Gimi population in Papua New Guinea, and the issue of food and agriculture with Besky's research on tea plantations in Darjeeling, India, Soluri's analysis of bananas, and Dr. Aarti Sethi's study of farmer suicides in cotton farms in Vidarbha, India. I will also dive

deeper into the question of "humanity" within the complex social, political and economic dimensions of goods, by using sanitary and infrastructural examples such as the Peepoop bag, the dry urine diversion toilet, and trash in Jardim Gramacho, Brazil. Third, I will explore the idea of the forging of identity and its importance in the definition of goods by using the stories of migrants in De Leon's investigation of the US-Mexico border in the Sonoran Desert of Arizona, and tying this back to Besky's analysis of tea plantations. In this way, all three questions previously stated will be answered concurrently as we explore the multifaceted anthropological conceptualization of the good, ending with some concluding thoughts.

Part 1: Anthropology and the "Good"

Anthropology can be described as a mode of critical thinking, perception and interpretation. (Besky Lecture 9/6) Within anthropology, there are multiple fields and modes of research. For example, in his study of borders in *The Land of Open Graves*, Jasón de León combines multiple fields: forensic science, ethnography, archaeology and linguistics (De León 2015: 14) to be able to portray a more complete representation of the migrant population he was analyzing. Anthropologists do not look at the world's objects and spaces as having intrinsic value, but rather as forming their value by the social, economic and political relationships between goods, and the people and institutions surrounding them. We can summarize the main components of anthropologist's cultural critique of goods into the following three: history, power, and meaning. (Besky Lecture 9/8) Essentially, we must understand that with defining every good, there is a complicated set of historical events and systems of power that make a good become a good, and give it, not only an economic value, but also a socio-political value— and vice versa.

Part 2: The Commodification of Nature and its Social Implications

Commodification can be described as the process of turning particular things into interchangeable sources of value. (Besky Lecture 9/20) In *Conservation is Our Government Now*, West provides us with a description of the commodification of nature and its conservation in the Gimi population in Papua New Guinea, in places such as Crater Mountain. (West 2006: 28) An important point she makes is that the value of these lands is not purely monetary because of the extraction of the land to produce a traditional good (such as energy or food) but rather, there exists a "social production of nature" (West 2006: 24). In other words, the spatial productions are produced by the social and material relations between people within them. (West 2006: 28) Moreover, she stresses that there also exists a monetization of social relations, which gives relationships between people an economic value, accompanied with a dilution of the true meaning and message of interactions. (West 2006: 98)

In a similar way in which for the Gimi, the value of nature is tied to the social relations within it, Besky's research on tea plantations in *The Darjeeling Distinction* presents us with the concept of the "tripartite moral economy." This moral economy is composed of a triangular relationship between not only workers and managers, but also the agro-environment. (Besky 2014: 32) Similar to West, Besky seeks to further understand how social relations and ideas are commodified and mysticized for the purpose of providing higher economic value to Darjeeling tea. She explores how the Fair trade certification, the Geographical Indication tag and the Gorkhaland movement (which will be expanded on later when we talk about identity as a good) are linked as a way of giving non-economic value to Darjeeling's agro-environment. (Besky

2014: 29) Thus, using as their basis the history of the Gimis and the Darjeeling plantation workers respectively, West and Besky explore the questions of value and meaning of the good.

Expanding on the issue of Fair trade, the goal is to sell a moral economic fetish: the dream of equitable relations in unequal productive conditions. (Besky 2014: 133) Although what it claims does not actually change working conditions for tea pluckers, it is adding the value of morality and top-down White Savior Industrial Complex (Cole 2012), to be able to produce greater economic value to the crops, instead of actually improving working conditions of the female tea pluckers. In this sense, fair trade becomes both a movement and a market, adding additional power to the notion of Darjeeling tea as a social good. (Besky Lecture 11/13) In his paper on the rise of the sale of bananas, Soluri explains how similarly, the 20th century saw a huge boom in the sales of bananas, because a market demand was created (2003: 75) that added additional social value to the banana. The banana's marketing and media depictions made it more than a simple food; it was now an exotic must-have health food, that was even linked to humor, zaniness, and sexuality. (Soluri 2003: 76)

As we can see, society and the economy cannot be viewed as separate entities. Rather, they work together to create what we perceive as goods. Dr. Sethi described this analytical framework that says that there is no distinction between society and the economy as Mauss's concept of "total social fact." (Sethi Lecture 11/20) Her research about farmer suicides in India, explained that the influence of capitalism in the gift economy of Vidarbha initiated a process of transformation in market relations that brought about changes in economies of social reproduction, and became aligned towards the temporality of market debt. Thus, people turned away from each other, debilitating intimate relationships and pushing them towards the market.

In this new economy, gift debts were transformed into commodity debts (Sethi Lecture 11/20), economizing social relations, similar to West's description of the Gimi, creating a mental health crisis for farmers. As we can see in this example, when farmers were stripped of their sense of social value, and were merely seen as economic transactions, their sense of self was destroyed. Even though viewing a person as exclusively of economic value is different than that of a physical good such as a crop, this shows us how important looking at the multidimensionality of goods is.

Additional to the commodification of both nature and of individuals, a topic that is very relevant in this discussion of the social and human value of goods is that of humanity in regards to sanitation goods. The Peepoo bag in Kenya (Besky Lecture 9/8) and the dry urine diversion toilet (UDDT), presented to Argentinians in Villa Lamadrid (Morales, Harris, Öberg 2014: 2820) are two examples of how sanitation and waste can illustrate the debate of the social implications of alternative waste depositories which are manipulated and disposed of by the individual. If traditional forms of waste management are "implicitly anti-poor technology" then, is it acceptable to provide a more this good even if it doesn't abide to the urban sanitation imaginary which implies that your waste is "not your problem"? (Morales, Harris, Oberg 2014: 2817) Although an economist might say that it makes sense from a profit standpoint, anthropologists would take a look at how these goods are also tied in a web of social judgement given the associations between poverty and poor hygiene, and the relationship that individuals would have with their own waste.

On a similar note, not only human excrement, but also any form of excess garbage normally implies associations to marginality and poverty. Hence, it is interesting to look at the

example of trash in the population of Jardim Gramacho, which is described as the "periphery of the periphery" of the city of Rio de Janeiro. (Millar 2012: 66) This community transformed trash, traditionally seen as wasteful and disgusting, into a good with economic value. In spite of the negative implications, Jardim Gramacho became the workplace of about two thousand people (the *catadores*) who reclaim recyclable and reusable materials on top of the dump for a living. (Millar 2012: 65) On the other hand, in contrast with the use of garbage as an economic good in Jardim Gramacho, the belongings of migrants found in the border in the Arizona desert are many times referred to as migrant "trash," and have become the physical evidence used by anti-immigrant activists to demonstrate that Latino border crossers are "destroying" America. (De León 2015: 170)

Part 3: The Formation of Identity

We have now looked into how anthropologists define and analyze the concept of the good, and how social, economic and political value of goods is intertwined. De León's book provides an even more abstract way of looking at goods given that it analyzes the question of migration and borders, and its implications on identity. As mentioned before, migrants leave many prized possessions such as pocket Bibles, family photos, and love letters (De León 2015: 170), which are later considered "trash." Migrants are dehumanized, not only by institutional measures such as Prevention Through Deterrence (De León 2015: 5), which brings them to have to cross the desert under insanely dangerous conditions, but also by stripping them from their individuality. This loss of personhood can be seen in the way in which those who are found wandering or dead in the desert are recorded into databases as Unknowns. (De León 2015: 29)

Going back to the previous section, these migrants are commodifying themselves, but they are leaving their physical goods behind; in consequence, there is yet again a social dimension to the good given that, in a sense, the migrants themselves become goods. Moreover, when stripped of their physical possessions, migrants are forming a new identity when coming into a new country. When crossing the border, they are considered illegal, and even inferior, yet they are taking the risk to achieve greater economic opportunities. They struggle with their sense of self because there exists a rigid border between the US and Latin America, which breeds a sense of separation. In a similar way, going back to Besky's analysis of Darjeeling, the Gorkhas have an unstable sense of identity between their Nepali and Indian cultural and territorial mix. After the 1950 Indo-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship which helped Nepalis have Indian citizenship and encouraged more of a "partnership" between countries, this less rigid border have the Gorkhas an unstable complicated their conception of themselves; they belong in both, but they belong in neither. Additionally, in Govindrajan's piece on monkeys in India's Central Himalayas, she explains how there is such anxious public discourse around what is called the "monkey menace" (an overpopulation of "foreign" monkeys) is that it has coincided with regional politics of identity and cultural meaning, (2015: 259) wanting to distance the *pahari* from the *non-pahari*. (2015: 248) Lastly, going back to Dr. Sethi's lecture on farmer suicides, the clash in traditional social identities and the newly economic exchange identity of farmers– which might be the cause of the rise of suicides– is yet another example of how this sense of personhood manifests as an abstract good within each individual person. In a way, this sense of belonging that each one of these populations strives for in very different ways, can be seen as a good with social and economic value.

Concluding Thoughts

In Teju Cole's article, he reminds us that to be able to truly understand the world and issues in the developing world, we cannot have a closed pigeon-holed mind, but rather should strive to "think constellationally." (Cole 2012) Essentially, that is anthropologists' goal: to be able to observe populations and cultures and understand the complex system of power relations, and meanings within them, while also being situated in historical context. Throughout this paper I have shown how anthropology teaches us to observe, and think about different angles, focusing on the framing of the concept of the "good." Using a variety of examples, mainly from three ethnographies which focused on conservation, tea plantations, and borders and migration, I illustrated how the economic and the socio-political value of goods is intertwined, and how the commodification of both nature and people play a role in the understanding of goods. Moreover, I explored how the sense of identity is another form of looking at goods at a personal level, which is intricately tied to social relations surrounding the individual. Both of these aspects help us further understand the "relationships between relationships" (Besky Lecture 9/6) and their meaning, which is the heart of anthropological analysis. (Besky Lecture 12/6) We must remember that no good intrinsically "is"; goods are constructed by a multidimensional process involving material, political and social relationships between nature and people.

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