THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF ELEGANCE

There can be no theory of consumption

In recent years there has been a vast increase in the literature on consumption. From the realization that economists had somehow ignored the subject there have come numerous attempts to theorize the phenomenon, both within economics itself and recently in anthropology. For years there has been a growing dissatisfaction with the elegant but empty utility theory of consumer behavior. Attempts to enrich it within economics have become entangled in the problems of formalization. Milton Friedman’s theory of permanent income (1957) attempted to account for individual consumption choices in a more developed rational scheme but it did not address the nature of demand, only its quantitative distribution among different kinds of predefined commodities (necessary-habitual vs new-luxury). Lancaster (1971) tried to tackle the problem directly by investigating the goods themselves, that is, by trying to develop a theory of needs based on the concrete properties of commodities, such as fast and safe cars, tasty cereals, effective soap powders, calories and proteins. But such an approach was bound to run into problems of tautology since the properties of preference cannot be defined independently of consuming subjects.¹ The problems of consumption theory in modern economics are twofold. Utility theories of demand have tended to tautology: people buy what they want, and since producers by and large produce what is demanded, consumption is an asymptotic function of production. At the same time, the source of demand is entirely within the individual subject and is unaffected by social and cultural context. This implies that curious methodological individualist determinism whereby consumption is reduced to a reflex of supply (or vice versa), all of which is part of the overall rationality of the market economy, at the same time as entirely a product of the sum of independent individual demand schedules. Here the invisible hand of the macro-economy works through the micro-economics of individual utility. And the vicious circle is completed by the fact that utility is merely an abstraction from actual demand, that is, from what people buy. The origin of demand – an account of what it is that people want and how such needs and/or desires are constituted – lies beyond the realm of economics. Only recently have there been attempts to treat consumption
in terms of styles of living in which a range of factors, from emotional organization to forms of social identity, are explicitly taken into account (Earl, 1986). But here again there is the problem that the social and cultural properties of existence cannot be properly incorporated into economic theory as it stands.

Sociologists and anthropologists have approached consumption in more concrete, if not less theoretical, terms. The early work of Veblen on conspicuous consumption, perhaps more relevant to the potlatch which apparently inspired it than to the modern world, has influenced a great many social scientists. Bourdieu's theory of consumption as social distinction is the most elaborate form of this approach. Mary Douglas has in more general terms tried to orient the discussion toward grasping the way in which goods are socially defined and marked as a means of defining social relations. Appadurai et al. have also been concerned to demonstrate the cultural relativity of the definition of goods. Campbell has, in a brilliant analysis of the historical genesis of modern consumerism, argued that we must understand the way in which human desires are constituted in order to account for the formation of demand. Miller, in an important analytical comparison of approaches to consumption, from Hegel to Bourdieu, has also stressed the necessity of conceptualizing consumption as an expression of a 'process of social self-creation' (1987: 215) which is always socially specific. This is illustrated through the work of Simmel on the Philosophy of Money, where the form of modern consumption is analyzed as a product of the separation—objectification produced by the fragmentation of a formerly more holistic social universe. The formation of the modern individual, free because of a personal income, the formation of the commodity, liberated from meaningful schemes of production; the abstraction of money as a general equivalent having no other intrinsic value than its representativeness; and the abstractions of the state, science, democracy: all are interrelated aspects of the emergence of modernity as a cultural form — individuation: fragmentation: objectification: autonomization. Dealing with the formal entailments of commodification, Simmel arrives at results that are quite complementary to those of Campbell.

In all of these discussions the meaning of consumption is found in more general social processes. In the best analyses these processes are shown themselves to be culturally specific rather than universal.

The negotiation of selfhood and the consuming desires of modernity

The aim of this discussion is partly to dissolve the category of consumption into the broader strategies of self-definition and self-maintenance. Very much of the discussion of consumption is couched in a language that is dependent on the axioms of modernity, the presupposition of an autonomous rational individual inhabiting an empty space in which meaning is constructed externally, via codes, cultural schemes and paradigms, that define the world as a particular kind of stage where a universal individual takes on different roles. Consumption can thus be generated by a system of social values, preferences, utility, etc., categories that are imposed from the outside on an initially empty or random set of potential objects. Contemporary cultural models epitomize this recipe-book conception of social reality, since they are based in all their essentials on abstractions from social products, whether dress fashions or forms of discourse. As such, they merely reflect the products from which they are abstracted, but they cannot generate those products. Strategies of consumption can only be grasped when we understand the specific way in which desire is constituted. And the latter of course is an essential aspect of the constitution of personhood.

This argument parallels Bourdieu's modeling of the relation between habitus and practice, between the 'durabley installed generative principle of regulated improvisation' (1977: 78) and specific strategies of consumption. Bourdieu's perspective, however, is rationalist and economic, insofar as it reduces all practice to the accumulation of cultural capital, that is, of specific forms of power. As such it fails to account for the essentially a-rational constitution of desire. Thus, while the habitus concept might be a way of avoiding cultural determinism, it is severely circumscribed by the imposition of praxeological criteria on its very construction. This is clearly manifested in evidence in the straitjacketing of his analysis of consumption into a strategy of social distinction. In a theoretical development of Veblen, who is not properly acknowledged, he presses habitus into class position, where it serves quite mechanically to produce the cultural definition of social position:

Each condition is defined, inseparably, by its relational properties, which depend in their turn on its position within the system of conditions, which in this way is also a system of differences, of differential positions — that is, it is defined by everything that distinguishes it from that which it is not and especially from that to which it is opposed: social identity is defined and affirmed in a field of difference. (tr. from Bourdieu, 1979: 191)

I do not pretend to deny the strategy of difference implied in distinctive consumption in capitalism, but the very fact that the class—consumption-style correlation lingers consistently in the 50 per cent range ought to make us wonder about what the other half is up to. Even if we grant that distinction plays a role in defining selfhood and thus consumption, there are more spectacular aspects of capitalist consumption in general that cannot be grasped in such an approach which assumes that the only identity is class identity, which is relatively static. Distinction as such is neither distinctively modern nor capitalist. The entire Veblenesque scheme was inspired largely by material that Veblen got from the anthropologist Franz Boas relating to Northwest Coast Indian potlatch and other models of conspicuous consumption and sumptuary-defined ranking and which he generalized to modern industrial society. What he may have misunderstood was the degree to which prestige competition in kin-organized
societies was not merely a matter of status as separable from a person's identity, but a matter of life and death. A form of social existence that permits a Veblenesque discourse is one in which a person's selfhood is not identical to his social status, thus implying a concept of role. It is an experiential domain in which all socially achieved prestige might easily be understood as false and even alienated. The practice of distinctions is bound to be more consistent and absolute in societies where prestige expressed in conspicuous consumption is the totality of social identity, that is, where the subject is equivalent to his expressed status.

Campbell's recent analysis of the relation between modern individualism, romanticism and consumerism comes to grips with the more general nature of modern consumption in which change of identity via consumption is instrumental. This would appear to be the opposite of Bourdieu's emphasis on the maintenance of difference, and yet it tells us a great deal more about the central characteristic of capitalist consumption, its continuous transformation. Consumption is driven here by a fantasy-fueled drive to establish an identity space, a lifestyle, the realization of a daydream of the good life, which always ends in deception and a search for yet other styles and goods. This process is rooted in the dissolution of fixed social identities and the formation of a complex of phenomena known as modernity, and, with respect to consumption, is dependent on the emergence of the modern individualized subject, bereft of a larger cosmology or a fixed self-definition. The peculiarities of this self are its division into a private — natural sphere and a public — cultural or social sphere, creating a fundamental ambivalence between the desire to find an adequate expression of one's self and the realization that all identity is arbitrarily constituted and therefore never authentic. This realization is fundamental. The principle of the daydream, the Walter Mitty principle, the principle of alterity, of the construction of a social self, all are specific to the modern individual and cannot be universalized: 'The dialectic of conventionalization and romanticization is the personally concrete expression of the dialectic of class and capitalist reproduction in general, a dynamic contradiction between distinction and revolution, between other-directed and self-directed images, between dandy and bohemian' (Friedman, 1989b: 128).

Acts of consumption represent ways of fulfilling desires that are identified with highly valued lifestyles. Consumption is a material realization, or attempted realization, of the image of the good life. Bourdieu's consumer defines a cultural identity by constructing a niche in the world of goods. But one may rightly ask whether or not the purpose of consumption is merely to define one's social position. Campbell seems to imply in his critique of Veblen that the goal of consumption is not difference as such, but the achievement of fulfillment by the creation of a life space. If distinction plays a role here it is as part of the strategy of self-fulfillment. Living like a king is not part of a strategy of potlatch, a political statement of relative status, but the enjoyment of the highly valued luxuries associated with such status. In this model, the practice of distinction refers to other-directed strategies of social positioning, of the conventionalization of status, which is both opposed to and contained within the more general strategy of self-directed identification with a particular set of commodities that form a life space.

The common ground in these approaches is the explicit connection between self-identification and consumption. The former may be a conscious act, a statement about the relation between self and world, or it may be a taken-for-granted aspect of everyday life, that is, of a predefined and fully socialized identity. It is from this point of departure that it is possible to envisage consumption as an aspect of a more general strategy or set of strategies for the establishment and maintenance of selfhood. Consumption, then, in the most general sense, is a particular means of creating an identity, one that is realized in a material reorganization of time and space. As such it is an instrument of self-construction which is itself dependent on higher-order modes of channelling available objects into a specific relation to a person or persons.

**Health, wealth and appearance: a short history of life-force in the Congo**

While *La Distinction* applies only very partially to modern European societies, it is perfectly suited to Central Africa and especially the Congo. Here, clothing is definitive in the practice of social differentiation. One need only visit the church, the cemetery or the hospital morgue, where the bodies of the deceased lie waiting to be turned over to their mourning relatives, to be astounded by a degree of elegance of attire and exquisiteness of taste not to be encountered elsewhere. This area of Africa has a long history of traffic in both cloth and clothing, and dress seems always to have played an important role:

In ancient times the king and his courtiers . . . wore garments made from the palm-tree, which hung from the girdle downwards, and were fastened with belts of the same material, of beautiful workmanship. In front also, they wore as an ornament, and made, like an apron, delicate skins of civet cats, martens and sables, and also, by way of display, a cape on the shoulders. Next the bare skin was a circular garment somewhat like a rochet, reaching to the knees and made like a net, from the threads of fine palm-tree cloths, tassels hanging from the meshes. These rochets which were called Incuto, they threw back on the right shoulder, so as to leave the hand free, and on the same shoulder carried a zebra's tail, fastened to a handle, according to an ancient custom in those parts. (Pigafetta, 1970: 108)

Early visitors to the area all report the highly stratified situation where only the upper ranks might dedicate themselves to such elegance:

For the most part the people went barefoot, but the king and some of his nobles wore sandals, after the antique, like those seen in Roman statues, and these were also made from the palm-tree. The poorer sort and common people wore the same kind of garments, from the middle downwards, but of a coarser cloth, the rest of the body being naked. (Pigafetta, 1970: 109)
And the introduction of European goods immediately led to further distinctions:

But since this kingdom received the Christian faith, the nobles of the court have begun to dress according to the Portuguese fashion, wearing cloaks, capes, scarlet tabards, and silk robes, every one according to his means. They also wear hoods and capes, velvet and leather slippers, buskins, and rapiers at their sides. Those not rich enough to imitate the Portuguese, retain their former dress. (Ibid.: 109)

The violent history of the Kongo kingdom, the slave trade, the disintegration of Congolese society and the colonization of the area by the Belgians and French led to further bloody upheavals and radical transformations. Through all of this hell, however, certain fundamental relations were never dissolved. While the polity all but collapsed, the kinship order remained intact even if greatly transformed, from a system of hierarchically linked lineages based on generalized exchange to a clan organization dominated by councils of elders. Throughout the centuries a basic pattern of socialization remained intact, one founded on the reinforcement of individual dependence on the larger group. The pattern combines abrupt weaning, with its accompanying anxieties, and subsequent education in the power of elder kin and spirits of the dead in which the subject learns to experience himself as composed of elements or 'souls' that are originally connected to the kinship-political network through which is channeled the life-force upon which his existence depends. This kind of socialization is bound to produce a subject dependent on his social environment in order to maintain a state of well-being. If there is an internal logic to this field of strategies it might be described as follows:

1. All life-force (makinadango in Kikongo) comes from the outside, channeled into the person via the political and kinship hierarchy whose very existence is but a manifestation of degrees of proximity to its source.
2. This life-force is expressed in a degree of well-being associated with one's rank in the larger cosmological hierarchy. Well-being is both wealth and health.
3. Life strategies consist in ensuring the flow of life-force. Traditionally this was assured by the social system itself, a prestige good system in which goods monopolized at the summit were channeled down through the ranks in the form of bridewealth. When this system collapsed, it caused a crisis, not only politically but for the person as well, since the flow of force had been cut off. The primary solutions to a scarcity of life-force are witchcraft and 'cannibalism,' that is, the appropriation of life-force from others and the establishment of cult groups whose purpose is to establish a direct link to the source, Nzabi, the highest god who can channel life-force to the individual, not least in order to protect him against witchcraft and sorcery. Christianity is

one of the most important cults insofar as it promises to provide individual access to life-force without the mediation of political hierarchy. There is an unexplored ambiguity here, insofar as religious cults seem to be concerned with the maintenance of well-being and protection against evil, while political or economic success is increasingly associated with precisely such non-legitimate powers: witchcraft, sorcery and the use of magic in general.

4. When political hierarchy is re-established in the form of a colonial regime, life-force can again be procured via the strategy of clientship. And real hierarchy, just like real wealth, is the manifestation of life-force itself, but one, as we have suggested, that is more often than not associated with unusual and even illegitimate magic.

Fit for a king: food for thought

A central feature of the distribution of life-force is the implied ambiguity of real wealth, power and authority. We have suggested that manifest rank is potentially the result of illegitimate magical activity. This applies to all relations, whether they be the power of a maternal uncle or that of a minister of state. This may be related to the catastrophic history of political hierarchy in the Congo region. The legitimate authority of the chief and royal hierarchy was originally based on the understanding that fertility and general welfare flowed through the rank order. Even in this early period, however, the representation of political power contains the metaphor of consumption. There are reports of royal cannibalism in the earliest material, and one of its remarkable features consists in the self-offering of a vassal to his prince to be eaten:

It is a remarkable fact in the history of this people, that any who are tired of life, or wish to prove themselves brave and courageous, esteem it a great honour to expose themselves to death by an act which shall show their contempt for life. Thus they offer themselves for slaughter and as the faithful vassals of the princes, wishing to do them service, not only give themselves to be eaten, but their slaves also, when fastened, are killed and eaten. (Pigafetta, 1970: 28)

What is most significant in this representation is the act of self-sacrifice on the part of the vassal, the honor of literally becoming part of one's superior. Whether such cannibalism actually occurred in this period, and its mention is indeed rare, except in reference to the behavior of neighboring enemies, the logic of the image is double: powerful princes who regulate the flow of life-force to their dependents, whom they nevertheless may consume on occasion. The full force of this logic is only realized in wake of the dissolution of Kongo polity (Ekholm Friedman, 1991)

With the disintegration of the cosmological connections that guaranteed this flow, with the decentralization of wealth accumulation, with the warfare and political anarchy that succeeded the fall of the Kongo kingdom, the ensuing slave trade and colonial intervention, power, in the
sense of any form of social superiority, became increasingly associated
with the appropriation of life-force by violent means more indicative
of the world of insecurity and disaster that became the fate of the region.
The delegitimation of authority could only take on an ambivalent quality,
since force remained force, no matter how obtained. The fact that a
powerful person was a witch did not detract from his power, that is, his
ability to destroy his enemies. The fact that the current President of
the country is said to eat the hearts of children and to bathe in human blood
is a characterization of the source of his power, and it implies a healthy
respect for supernatural proficiency. Witches were not ashamed of their
power. Quite the contrary! And in the northern regions of the Congo
Basin, renowned Bangala cannibals confounded the sensibilities of their
European guests: 'When the son of the great Bangala chief, Mata Buike,
was asked if he had eaten human flesh, he said: "Ahh! I wish I could eat
everybody on earth!"' (Johnston, 1908: 399, cited in Ekholm Friedman,
1991: 221).

Ekholm Friedman (1991) has argued that the violent upheavals of the
mid- and late nineteenth century, which featured both rampant witchcraft
in the southern Congo and cannibalism in the north, can be accounted for
by variations of a unitary strategy whose goal is the appropriation of life-
force in a situation in which the usual channels have broken down. And
cannibalism appears to be a satisfying if not perhaps satisfactory means of
solving the problem: 'I never saw natives exhibit so much fondling and
affection for each other as was shown among these erstwhile cannibals'
(Weeks, 1913: 78). Eating in the current framework is not consumption,
as we know it, of meat, or animal protein, not even of a tasty meal, but
the ingestion of the power that animates the living universe, that is, the
source of health and of well-being, which is constantly in danger of
vanishing.

In yet another domain we might similarly argue that the millenarian
movements that opposed the colonial regime during the early and middle
decades of this century were concerned not merely with the expulsion of
the whites but with the appropriation of their life-force. The cargo-like
nature of such movements is merely a displacement of the general strategy
into a new domain. Such movements have today become a vast array of
therapeutic cults whose goal is precisely the transfer of the force vivante
of God to those in need. This is consumption in the deepest sense of the
word.

We have moved briefly between clothing and religious cults, between
cargo and cannibalism, arguing that there is a connection among these
different forms of consumption – more perhaps than a mere connection,
an identity of demand distributed among different fields but expressing a
unitary structure of desire. It is here that one may speak of a continuity
with the past, not a continuity of cultural meanings or categories, but of
the conditions of constitution of personal experience. If we concentrate on
dress in what follows, it is because it represents the generalized form taken
by the strategies we have discussed and because, due to its potentially
symbolic nature, its capacity to represent something other than itself, it
has come to play an unexpected political and perhaps transformative role
in Congolese society.

Clothing as cargo

The French colonial regime reinforced, and the political and economic
dominance that has continued into the post-colonial Franc Zone era
reinforces, the kinds of structure that we have discussed above. While
cannibalism, itself a mere historical episode, has disappeared, if not in
time, the system of life-force has been elaborated throughout the entire
period. Paris as the exemplary center and Brazzaville, its extension in the
Congo, are two levels of a concentric and hierarchical model of the world.
The Congolese capital is itself a typical colonial space of power, with an
old colonial center, la ville des blancs, fitted with all the trappings of
modernity, surrounded by black bidonvilles, cramped overflowed villages.
The organization of space is both a product and expression of the social
hierarchy and its distribution of life-force. And the French did much to
cultivate a model of a cultural continuum from black to white, referring
to those more integrated into the modern sector as évolutés.

The Bakongo are the major population that became involved with the
commercial and administrative development of the colony; and as ‘involved’
implies evolved, this emergent ethnic group dominated the rank
order of the civilizing process: ‘While the groups belonging to the Teke
have maintained their ancestral style of raphia clothing, based on square
patches sewn together and worn like a "toga" by men and a "pagne" by
women, the Kongo very early on abandoned this for imported cloth’ (tr.
from Soret, 1959: 43). This dominant expression of status is comple-
mented by an entire range of imported European goods: ‘In Bakongo
country there is a façade of modernism that is not nearly as evident in
most of the other regions of Congo-Gabon’ (tr. from Balandier, 1955: 43).

Needless to say this transformation of the Bakongo created an ethnic
division as well, between the south and the north of the region. The latter
zone, more conservative and culturally defensive, referred, not without a
certain admiration, to the Bakongo as kogo minkelle, white Congolese. The
art of dress, as we have emphasized, was and is the ultimate means of self-
deinition and the strategies of clothing the body have a generalized effect
on all Congolese that was clearly documented as far back as the 1950s:

The city dweller makes his appearance as a new kind of personage expressed
and clearly marked by his very European clothing; this is the sign recognized by
the Whites and acknowledged in none too pejorative terms by the designation
evoluté or detribalized. Still dependent upon exclusivity of appearance,
the Central African invests a significant part of his/her income in the latter, on
average 20% according to estimates made by M. Soret in 1951. The prominence
of imported cotton cloth (ranked second after ‘machines and parts’ in 1950,
ranked first by a large margin in 1938) and the large numbers of tailors established in urban centers (1 for every 300 inhabitants in Poto-Poto and 1 for every 95 in Baecongo) are a clear indication of the interest in cloth and clothing. (tr. from Balandier, 1955: 22)

The importance of imported cloth, which in the 1950s was made into clothing by tailors who represented a significant proportion of the population of the city, had a powerful impact on the trade statistics of the colony. And the density of tailors was also of a distinctive nature, since Poto-Poto, which was inhabited primarily by northerners and non-Bakongo, had only one third as many tailors per capita as the cultural elite of Baecongo.

One might be tempted to interpret this consumption of modernity as an expression of the colonial complex discussed by Fanon, Manoni and others (Gandoulou, 1989: 27–8), but, at least in the Congolese case, it is more a question of complementarity in which a colonial regime maps on to an already existing hierarchical praxis. Thus the specific form of the strategy of consumption is organized in accordance with the racial hierarchy, that is, an appropriation of all that is associated with white status, but it is not reducible to some form of colonial culture or the inferiority complex of the colonized.

Existentialisme à la mode

In the 1950s there appeared a number of youth clubs whose identity was tied to the French institutions introduced in the colonial capital of Brazzaville. The cinema had been introduced and was frequented by les évolués on a regular basis; images of modern life à la Parisien were diffused via the new media and the cafés, themselves associated with the new lifestyle. The new groups which developed primarily but not exclusively in the quartier of Baecongo came to be known as existentielistes or ‘existos.’ This was not due to any explicit adoption of Sartre’s philosophy but to the fact that it was associated with a dominant mood and mode in Paris after the war:

The Congolese clubs adopted the colors black and red, among others, which they imagined to be the colors of their Parisian peers. In fact this was no more than the construction of an image at a distance of what was conceived as the Parisian existentialist since there was no correlation between the latter and black and red clothes. (tr. from Gandoulou, 1989: 33)

These youth clubs, in which the average age was eighteen, were also mutual aid associations in which members contributed to each other’s expenses and to the furthering of the goals of the group. Identification with a Parisian lifestyle was part of a strategy of hierarchical distinctions in which different clubs competed with one another for status expressed entirely in the realm of clothing: ‘Baecongo was both feared and admired for its clothing. There was a kind of reverence for this quartier’ (tr. from information quoted in Gandoulou, 1989: 34). Clubs had their own couturiers who were key figures in the fashioning of status. In spite of the lack of interest in existential problems, the entire existence of the ‘existos’ was predicated on such problems, and fashion as a project was a self-evident solution to personal survival in a colonized population where selfhood was identical to the appropriation of otherness.

The strategy of dress in the 1950s might also be contextualized in terms of the general transformation of Congolese society: rapid urbanization, the increase in the wage-based sector and the monetization of the economy, the formation and spread of new forms of sociality – numerous associations for mutual aid, common projects and the maintenance of emergent ethnic identity. These transformations did not, however, succeed in dissolving the kinship networks that linked urban and rural areas and absorbed a large part of the new urban income, as well as providing food for hard-pressed urban dwellers. The opposition between the developed south dominated by the Kongo and the underdeveloped north, represented increasingly by the Mboci, came increasingly to the fore. The concentric hierarchy as represented by the Kongo is one in which Paris > Kongo > Mboci > Pygmies > Nature. Another group, the Teke, are tricksters in the system, straddling north and south and making alliances with both. The Teke are often considered traitors insofar as it is they who made the original treaty with De Brazza that surrendered the region to the French. Thus the strategy of dress parries of and even demarcates a set of ‘tribal’ or ethnic distinctions that animate the political history of the Congo.

La sape

If the ‘existos’ were into clothes, they were also family men with jobs, well integrated into the developing urban culture of the country. The decade of the 1950s was one of economic expansion in which salaries rose faster than prices. This decade also led to the independence movement and the establishment of a national state all within the framework of a growing socialist ideology. During the 1960s these clubs declined, along with religious cult activity. Numerous spokesmen for the socialist movements attacked the clothing cults as offensive to African identity and the new social revolution. Instead, political engagement in the future and the simultaneous revival of traditional culture as nationalist spectacle became dominant. The former ‘existos’ disappeared and from 1964 to 1968 there were only a scattering of youth organizations, called clubs des jeunes premiers, who carried on the tradition of dress which had become a sign of Kongo identity in the new multi-ethnic struggle for political power.

The new Congolese state, like other African states, had emerged as a class structure where, instead of white colonials, local politicians now occupied the same hierarchy, imbued with the same values. In a system
where consumption defines identity and where the trappings of modernity not only represent but are the very essence of social power, the social structure tends to take on the attributes of a perfect scalogram of conspicuous consumption:

If the Occidental meaning of the adjective ‘rich’ qualifies individuals in terms of their possession of large properties, means of production, or having high paying positions, in the Congo... the idea of wealth is measured in terms of consumption power whose only value comes from the degree to which it is identified with Western consumption. (tr. from Gandolou, 1984: 41)

In 1968 the Kongo were displaced by the Mbochis as the result of a military coup. From the point of view of Kongo ideology this represented a barbarian invasion. At the same time the economy began to stagnate in a way that, in spite of the oil boom of the late 1970s and early 1980s, left a permanently crippling mark on the prospects of future growth. In this period a second and more intensive wave of fashionable consumption made its appearance, located again primarily among the southern groups from Bacongo who had now been successively deprived of their political and bureaucratic positions as well as their leading ideological role in the country.

La sape from the word se saper, meaning to dress elegantly, connoting the élégant of our own society, takes on an especially powerful meaning as it emerges among the youth clubs of Bacongo. As an institution, La SAPE refers to La Société des Ambianceurs et Personnes Élégantes. While the earlier ‘existos’ were employed family heads who had their own tailors and competed as groups or teams, the sapeurs are largely unemployed and unmarried youth who rank local couturiers on the bottom of a scale that progresses upward from imported ready-to-wears to the ranks of haute couture, and who compete individually in their strivings to attain the position of a grand. La sape is a network of individuals who form ranked hierarchies by building reputation and clienteles in the larger arena of the urban night-spots. Yet the ranked hierarchies that are the clubs themselves are a perfect mirror of clan organization: it is not unusual for sapeurs to use the word “family” when referring to the club; they have a tendency to perceive the other members as real kin’ (tr. from Gandolou, 1989: 90). Each club generally has a name, a territory, a set of ranked sub-groups, specialized appellations and a division of labor. There are special rules and regulations for how members are to address one another, special linguistic usages and rituals that are symbolic of group identity.

The practice of elegance and the production of structure
The sape is a ritual program for the transformation of ordinary unranked youth into great men. It begins and ends in Bacongo, with a ‘liminal’

phase in Paris. It consists in the continual build-up of a wardrobe and ritual display at organized parties and dance bars. In Brazzaville one can begin to accumulate lower-ranked clothing, ‘non-griffés’, copies and ordinary ready-to-wear. The move to Paris, l’aventure, is the beginning of the real transformation of the ordinary sapeur into a person of higher status, a Parisien. Paris is, as in the liminal phase of many rituals, a time and space of ordeals, where life consists of scrounging, by hook and crook, to obtain the cash and credit needed to accumulate a real haute couture wardrobe, called la gamme, that is, the scale of great names in clothing. In one sense, Paris, as the center of la sape, is a kind of heaven, but in terms of hardship it is closer to hell. This contradiction is understood as the result of the low rank of blacks in the sacred abode of white power. The rank order of dress greatly elaborates on the earlier home-based range of the ‘existos’; from lowest to highest clothing, it is ranked as in Figure 9.1.

The same kind of hierarchy exists in all domains of body ornamentation. Labels play a crucial role. Weston shoes, for example, are ranked among the highest. There are other less well known English and French names and even copies, etc., all the way down to local sandals. Rank is essential, and therefore no substitution is possible. This is the fundamental principle of la sape. An excellent example of the strength of this constraint is the case of a factory producing imitation Capo Bianco crocodile shoes the originals of which cost 5200FF in 1984. The copies, quite excellent, cost only 900FF, which enticed some Parisiens to buy them. When the word got around, the reaction was positively deadly:
Ah non, za fua zé... you have to buy real shoes. Even if the article is high quality, the moment it becomes known to be an imitation all is lost, affaires zi fuidi. The cheapest pair of croc(dile)s cost 2,000FF. Za fua zé—‘that’s it, it’s finished,’ affaires zi fuidi... ça ne va pas, affaires zi fuidi. La paire croco la moins chère coûte 2,000FF. (tr. from Gandoulou, 1984: 75)

The accumulation of la gamme is not merely about appearance as we understand it. It is not enough to have a certain look, for the look must be authentic and the only sure sign of authenticity is the label. Copies are not unacceptable but they have a lower rank in the system. Elegance is not, then, merely about looking elegant, about appearing in clothes that look like haute couture. It is about wearing the real thing and, in this sense, of being the real thing.

Another domain related to the transformation of the body is the practice of maquillage à outrance, the use of a mixture of strong chemicals, including bleach, to lighten the skin. The expression se jaunir refers to such widespread practices, but also means to become wealthy and powerful, that is, to become more white. While this is one of the least expensive activities of the adventurer, the products used are variable and also ranked on the scale of elegance, according to their efficiency. The Lari (a Kongo dialect) kilongo, which has a strong connotation of 'medicine,' is the general term for this 'makeup.' While we do not have the space to discuss this very elaborate domain, it is noteworthy that its logic is identical to that found in other domains, that is, the use of 'medicine' in the accumulation of life-force, expressed in the true beauty of light skin as much as in the elegance of clothing.

The parisiens maintains a continual contact with sapeurs at home, telling them of his adventures and, most important, of his acquisitions. At some point in this process he makes a descente, a return to Brazzaville to display his status rank. La descente is usually performed several times, and with constantly renewed ensembles, before the final return and attempted reintegration into Congolese society. This process is the making of a great man or un grand, a true parisiens, the highest category in the rank order. It is accomplished by means of the ritual gala, an expensive affair in which contributions are made from the entire club for hiring a dance restaurant and a band, and buying food and drink. Invitations are made, and the night of the trial is a veritable potlatch of elegance in which the candidates must, as is said, se saper à mort. An official panegyrist introduces each star or hero, carefully listing his qualities and the entire gamut of his ensemble, clothing, shoes and makeup. His girlfriend, also dressed to the teeth, publicly embraces him and offers a gift, after which others come forward with similar offerings. This is followed by a signal from the eulogist to the orchestra and several bars of intensively rhythmic music during which the sapeur displays himself for the public. The next sapeur is introduced, and this pattern continues until all the presentations are made. The function of this phase is the initial frime or pretense, here in the sense of ostentation. After the presentation begins the dance itself and the festivities are formally opened. What is referred to as la danse des griffes consists in the meticulous display of the entire array of labels on one’s person during the dancing. This difficult task must also be accomplished with the utmost refinement. As there are several great sapeurs present at any one celebration, there are bound to be status conflicts. These are expressed in the exchange of elaborate gestures of disdain, superiority and studied indifference. A particular act of humiliation has been described by Gandoulou (1989: 115) in which a man steps on the toes of his adversary's Weston shoe, signifying, Ngé za fua zé,' meaning, 'You [familiar!] That won't do,' interpreted as, 'You've got no place here.' A sapeur must be very sure of his superiority before engaging in such acts. It is, furthermore, not uncommon that his adversary will slip out, change his clothes and/or shoes and return to defy his opponent (ibid.). Such celebrations of beauty generate an entire mythology of great men and are the intergroup condition of intragroup hierarchy in the clubs.

The structure of relations produced by these activities is one where a set of leaders or great men function as the equivalent of lineage chiefs in a vast network of clientship and exchange. A great man attracts dependents, who are eager to work as his slaves in order to gain access, however temporary, to his prestige goods, the lower orders of which are quite sufficient to build up junior hierarchies. The organization of the clubs becomes a hierarchy of great men, seniors and juniors. A sapeur may often have what is referred to as a tissin, named after the well-known minister of Louis XIV, who functions as a personal servant and messenger. A network of clients emerges out of the prestige accumulated through the adventure of the sape. Clients, novices with great aspirations, are able to gain access to social connections as well as borrowing the great man's apparel for use in their own exploits. There is also exchange and borrowing of apparel among great men themselves, a veritable circulation of prestige goods reminiscent of traditional Congolese polities.

This structure can only be maintained by the constant circulation of people from Brazzaville to Paris and back, with the continual accumulation of haute couture that defines the rank order of elegance. The objective limits of this process are determined by the economic conditions of the Parisian adventure. And the end point of this process reveals the precarious fate of sapeurs when they make the final return to Brazzaville. For the ultimate paradox of the entire project is that it begins and ends in consumption, yet generates no steady income. This question is more complicated than it might appear from a simple economic point of view. For insofar as the accumulation of labels gives rise to patron/client networks, there is often a means of converting such networks into income-generating operations in the intricate informal sector characterized by long chains combining the sale and rental of just about everything. While many former sapeurs fall into oblivion, others manage to transform their
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elegance into real economic advantage. There are even extreme examples where the refinement of la saper has been recognized internationally, enabling some to ascend the sacred heights of fashion's French Olympus, where they have become true gods of the movement. A recent sacred priest descended to Brazzaville in March 1990, where he threw a real bal des sapers at the Hotel Mbamou Palace. The latter is frequented only by the really wealthy elite of the state class and their European guests. This event, then, marked in no uncertain terms the capacity to convert image into reality. While only the 'real' elite could afford to be present, the act itself legitimizes the entire project of prestige accumulation in its modern context.

Personhood and the social self: elegance as politics

We have argued, thus far, for a certain unity in Congolese strategies of selfhood. Clothing is more than property or the expression of one's already existent self, or the fulfillment of an imaged self. It is the constitution of self, a self that is entirely social. There is no 'real me' under the surface and no roles are being played that might contrast with an underlying true subject. One of the continuities in the nature of Congolese consumption, whether it be of people, the power of God or clothing, is the effect of fulfillment that it produces in the individual. Sapers often describe their state as drugged or enchanted. They participate in an all-encompassing project that absorbs them completely: 'I am the happiest man in the world. I am driven by a superiority complex. You can walk right in front of me, but I don't see you. I ignore you no matter what your social rank expect if you are my kin, of course' (tr. from Gandoulou, 1989: 162).

The experience of the sapere is not equivalent to that of the finaneur, as I suggested at the start of this discussion, for the simple reason that it is entirely authentic. No tricks are played on reality. The strategy is not to fool the audience, to use appearance as a means to status that is not rightfully attained. In a world where appearance tends to fuse with essence rather than merely representing it, dressing up is not a means but an end in itself. And yet there is certain overlap in the very experience itself. On the one hand, we know from our own experience the way in which consumption can be used to overcome depression, how the visitor to the solarium may account for his or her activity in terms of the feeling of well-being attained. If white is beautiful for them, tan may be beautiful for us, and for some in a way that appears similar on the surface. Some studies of working-class youth culture in England have also stressed what would appear to be the stronger sense of identification with consumed products: 'The mod saw commodities as extensions of himself, rather than things totally independent of their maker or user and shrouded in a set of rules for their use' (Herman, 1971: 51). The fact remains that the Western consumer, no matter what his or her class, seems primarily engaged in the construction of an identity space that is by and large his or her own product, his or her own project. But it might be argued that there is a correlation between the weakening of the self, increasing narcissism and the increasing dependence on other-directed consumption.

The sapere, in confronting the social reality of state power that considers her/his very activity a threat to the social order, that is, a threat to the identity of power and appearance, may begin to realize a difference between her-/himself as a subject and her or her elegant image. Conversely, the cynical finaneur may become so absorbed in his or her own image that s/he loses all contact with the reality of her-/himself as subject. The union of these two spheres, one characterized by the modern individual, the other by the holistic self, occurs in the realm of a more fundamental narcissistic condition. In our discussion of Congolese selfhood we have suggested that a specific kind of socialization in which individual initiative is everywhere thwarted, and where the child is imbued with a cosmology in which s/he is represented as a set of elements connected to a larger kinship structure of life-force, tends to generate an experience of self as totally dependent on the larger group. This is a social situation that reinforces the narcissistic state of childhood with a secure cosmological identity that functions in lieu of what in modern capitalist society are designated as ego functions. The modern individual socialized to experience her-/himself as a self-directed organism, controlled by the projects of his or her own ego, can only regress to a narcissistic state when his or her ego projects totally fail. But this is not the secure narcissism of an interpreted universe. It is a state of total insecurity, the anguish of non-existence, that can only be solved by capturing the gaze of the other who can affirm one's own being. By contrast it might be said that, for the holistic subject, the 'gaze of the other' is always upon one; God is always watching.

The Western narcissist who dresses in order desperately to confirm his or her own being and value through others is, in such terms, the abnormal extreme of the normally more self-conscious finaneur, who has lost his or her ego and become dependent on the other. The behavior of the sapere, on the other hand, is an extreme variant of the normal other-directed self-adornment of the Congolese, a behavior that may inadvertently engender a sense of autonomous selfhood even if it begins as an attempt to accumulate the life-force embodied in elegance. This tendency, however partial, is present in the self-understanding, even cynicism, of the sapers as expressed in the texts of their invitations to parties (see text box).

From the moment when, in the field of physical appearance, its esthetic, in other words, in the realm of the 'social masque,' one attains a perfect adjustment, almost too perfect, an absolute match with the grand monsieur, a rupture occurs: exaggeration, excess, 'hyperconformism' ends by subverting the very norm that it strives to attain. (tr. from Gandoulou, 1989: 170)
Invitations to parties

The following text indicates the degree of cynical self-knowledge expressed in la sape:

‘Gaul was a Roman province for more than 400 years. The Gauls imitated the Romans – they dressed and lived like them – learned their language, Latin – gradually one could no longer distinguish the Gauls from the Romans, all the inhabitants of Gaul were known as Gallo-Romans.’

LES AZURIENS
[‘People of the Riviera, Rivierian’]
In Ecstasy

P.D.G. Pamphil Yamamoto Mwana Modé na Molété na yé, V.P.D.G. Oistinct Yarota, P.D.H. Jeff Sayre de Vespucci who sows the sape and harvests success

For their first appearance in the booming candy shop [a great scintillating party] the 3 Sicilians of the Riviera invite Mr or Miss . . . to the super Blast that they are organizing on the 19th of March at Cottage [Hut] CI modern Bacone at 14:30.

Note: Indigenous people shall not be permitted entry, because the Society of Ambianceurs and Elegant Persons (SAPE) detests indigenes. Come and see the beautiful labels of the finest haute couture (Zibélé).

Imaginary power and the subversion of the real

The parody of elegance turns the sapeur into a delinquent, an intolerable sociopath, a danger to the very foundations of society. The amount of propaganda directed at destroying a group of youth who merely dress elegantly is indicative of the real threat that they pose to the state-class. The dangerous success of their project consists in the demonstration that one can reach the ‘top’ without passing through the accepted channels of education and ‘work.’ This is the great crime against the identity of prestige and power. But it is by no means easily dealt with by the authorities. They cannot simply ignore this illegitimate elegance any more than they can give it up themselves, on the implicit understanding that clothes, after all, do not make the man. There is, then, an even more deadly logic at work in this subversion of symbolic hierarchy.

One of the most popular singers among Congolese youth is Boundéziki Rapha, known for two songs, the first ‘Le Parisien refoulé’ and a year later ‘Le Parisien retenu.’ The first deals with the failed Parisian adventure of the hero, who ends up in jail and is sent home, where he decides to dedicate himself to the ways of his ancestors, that is, to ‘work in the

fields.’ This song ends with a clearly religious tone emphasized in the music. The second song takes up the question of the return to the old ways. It begins religiously again with the wise man instructing his child in the proper ways of life. The hero follows his directives but does not believe in them. This is followed by a set of old Lari proverbs: ‘You search for your child, but he has been thrown away,’ ‘You search for grass [a field that can be sown], but it is gone,’ a series of allegories expressing the desperate impossibility of survival. Then suddenly the main chorus bursts forth: ‘But I am beautiful, and people love me because of it, and if I am beautiful it is because I use kilongo (that is, I bleach my skin); refrain: kilongo c’est bon, kilongo c’est bon.’ The cult of elegance, as cargo cults elsewhere, simultaneously rehabilitates the self and inverts the structure of power. It totally absorbs the subject into the project of the group, yet tends to produce an image of the unbound individual.

Throughout our discussion we have assumed that the practice of la sape was somehow an attempt to capture power via the accumulation of the symbols of power. We did indeed argue that these symbols, la haute couture, were not expressions but definitions of power, of the life-force whose form is wealth, health, whiteness and status, all encompassed in an image of beauty. But, in understanding the world in modern terms, we failed to trace the logic through to its conclusion. The very discourse of symbolism legitimizes the materiality of power and wealth. Yet the logic of the political economy of elegance implies the converse, by undermining
the significance of such regalia. The state class became great men of
elegance by means of political violence and maintain that elegance by
means of the theft of the state treasury, and even this can only be
ultimately understood in terms of witchcraft and the magic of evil. As the
accumulation of life-force is the principle of the system, there is no
essential difference between *la sape* and other techniques of accumulation.
In this logic, the *sapeur*’s reply to the accusation of delinquency is simply,
‘We are no different from you, even if our methods are less violent.’ Thus,
in some deeper sense, *la sape* is all there is.

Notes
This chapter is a revised version of ‘The political economy of elegance: an African cult of

1 As utility is deduced from actual preferences, people always buy what they want, by
definition. Economists, of course, are not terribly concerned with the explanation of demand,
so they cannot rightly be accused of failing to explain it adequately. But one may still
question the empirical adequacy of the kind of theory they propose.

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NARCISSISM, ROOTS AND
POSTMODERNITY

Is there a relation between the world system, roots and postmodern
culture? Can one ask such a preposterous question? This is certainly
nothing for an anthropologist! Certainly not, it would appear, in today’s
world of ‘writing culture.’ I have on several occasions made a plea for
exactly such an exercise (Friedman, 1987b, c, 1988, 1989a), and I shall
continue to indulge in this vein in what follows.

Anthropology has shifted broadly, as reflex of changes in the specular
relation between the West and the Rest, from a position that was
explicitly theoretical and ethnographically ‘realistic’ to one that has
narrowed itself increasingly to a discourse limited to the ethnographic act
itself. This has been accounted for very generally by a decline in ‘ethno-
graphic authority’ (Clifford, 1983) and a general critique of many of the
taken-for-granted categories of anthropological description. Now there is
no doubt that this internal critique has been positive for our under-
standing of the previously little discussed issues of translation, writing and
the social context of representing the other. But little has been said about
the context itself, about the historical conjuncture in which such questions
emerge as crucial. I have suggested elsewhere (Ekholm and Friedman,
1980; Friedman, 1987b) that the context is indeed pertinent, since the
issues debated by anthropologists are generated by problems of anthropo-
logical identity. Thus, as much as one might agree that a more dialogic
approach to the representation of others is a potential improvement over
Baron von Munchausen ethnography, our change of heart is not an act of
pure altruism or of methodological or even epistemological supersession,
and not therefore a process of intellectual development. The decline of
ethnographic authority is an immediate expression of the fragmentation of
the hegemonic structure of the world system. This is a question of politics,
of the politics of ethnography as well as the politics of identity in a more
general sense than the mere ‘writing of culture.’ As ethnographic
description is the practice of writing the other for us, here at home, it
precludes, by definition, the voice and the pen of the other. Ethnography,
thus, embodies the authority to represent and, by logical implication, the
authority to maintain the other in silence. Now this is a serious political
act since it identifies the other for us. It also, ultimately, through colonial
and post-colonial apparatuses, returns that identity to the other so that it
becomes, by hook or by crook, the latter’s own identity. So the issue is