# THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY. THE ROLE OF OBJECTS IN CONTEMPORARY EVERYDAY LIFE

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I declare that the thesis has been composed by myself and that the work is my own.

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## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

### THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY. THE ROLE OF OBJECTS IN CONTEMPORARY EVERYDAY LIFE.

The thesis explores the significance of material objects in the everyday life of contemporary individuals. It is suggested that the relationship between individuals and objects in modern/contemporary society is a peculiar one. This peculiarity derives from the essential and crucial role things play: they contribute to shape and support the individual's identity in a context of fragmentation of the work experience and of the whole life, of anonymity and depersonalization of social relations, of bureaucratization and accelerated change.

In the first part of the dissertation the topic is discussed and developed mainly at a theoretical level. A revisitation of well-known authors intends to recover what has been said - explicitly or otherwise - on the social meanings and uses of objects in modern society. A review and critique of express discussions of the functions performed by objects - e.g., the literature on consumer behaviour, on possession and exchange of goods in different cultures, on the psychological and symbolical significance of things - provide the framework to understand the complexity of our relationship to things and the multiplicity of meanings and projections attached to them.

In the second part of the dissertation the results of a small-scale, exploratory, qualitatively oriented, empirical investigation of people who experience a peculiar relationship to objects are discussed. Through the analysis of this empirical material several interesting features of our relationship to things emerge quite clearly: gender

differences in the way of relating to the material world; the limited relevance of the concept of status symbol to explain the reasons why we surround ourselves with objects; the great emotional significance attached to things; the essential role objects play in providing the individual with material for the presentation of one's self and to communicate symbolically with others.

It is concluded that the analysis of the meanings and uses of objects in everyday life provides interesting elements to understand how the individual copes with the problems contemporary industrial society raises for the establishment and maintenance of personal identity.

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PREFACE

One of the main concerns of social theory has been, and remains, identifying the specific features of modern and contemporary society and pointing out the problems the latter poses for the establishment and maintenance of personal identity in the face of bureaucratization, depersonalization, accelerated change, etc. Both the works of the founding fathers of sociology, those of contemporary sociologists (such as Riesman, Berger, Luckman,) and those of social philosophers (e.g. Gehlen, Arendt,) are characterized by a long-lasting and recurrent interest in the features of modern life, in the problems the individual faces when living in a social system marked by the anonymity of relationships, the fragmentation of the work process and indeed of existence itself.

My work relates to this tradition of social thinking by focussing on a particular subject which has a certain bearing upon how personal identity is shaped and maintained in contemporary society. More specifically my own contribution consists in analyzing the relationship between the individual and objects in contemporary society. To study this relationship means to analyze the role objects play in interaction, the meanings they convey, the projections they embody. It means to shed light upon relevant aspects of social reality.

Although this is a significant topic it has been often considered too obvious and unproblematical or, on the contrary, too abstract and philosophical, to be at the centre of sociological reflection. The student willing to analyze this subject from a sociological perspective must therefore rely upon inquiries by scholars from different traditions and disciplines. This does not mean that there are no sociological studies on the subject, rather that there is almost nothing dealing

explicitly and directly with this topic. One of my goals is that of bringing to the fore those analyses and ideas which are implicit in various sociological works and which shed light upon this complex relationship.

In order to study this subject it seems important to point out some general aspects which differentiate the contemporary relationship between individuals and objects from those existing in previous or in any case in different forms of social organization.

The market economy and bureaucracy have modified the qualify of everyday life, of interpersonal relationships, by making the satisfaction of needs dependent upon more numerous and complex mediations. Since needs are culturally and socially diversified, the use-value of an object is dependent not only on its ability to satisfy natural needs but also on the cultural system. This determination of use-value by cultural meanings engenders a social process whereby men reciprocally define objects in terms of themselves and themselves in terms of objects. Objects are part of a communicative system through which individuals exchange information about status as well as about values, rituals, meanings, about their cultural system.

Since objects perform the function of making evident status differences in our society, they are subjected to an endless process of acquisition and consumption that is essential for the survival of our social system, which considers the freedom of acquisition as one of the most important values. In fact in an open society characterized by formal equality and achievable values, a syndrome of status anxiety is present, and objects, their ownership, become the most evident symbols of our social position, show the differences existing among us, who is above and who is below us in the social hierarchies.

We live in a society in which the individual does not work to produce particular objects useful for his life but to reproduce the means for survival; often, working is consequently perceived and experienced as a means more than an end. Objects therefore have a meaning only in the sphere of consumption, and the ideal of man as an active and aware manipulator of environment and nature finds expression only in the private sphere: it finds a place in marginal activities, in hobbies, in do-it-yourself activities, losing in this way any kind of public recognition. Things become goods for consumption and our relation to them is possible only in this sphere which is, as we shall see, in its turn problematic. Disappointment and discontent have their origin in consumption as well as in working experience or in public action. In a society as complex as the modern one, characterized by the multiple roles the individual has to play, it is not possible for a single domain to supply adequate grounds for the building of identity.

The fact that to-day the only way we can relate to objects is as consumers, makes our relationship with them absolutely particular and different from that typical of other forms of social organizations, where the connection between production and consumption is immediate and direct. In fact in contemporary society - the society of mass production - things are produced to be consumed and this is the only way in which we can relate to them; our rhythms of consumption have become faster and faster losing any connection with natural ones. In this perspective it is possible to explain the existence of the "latest" model, the premature, planned, obsolescence of objects, the speedy change of fashion, the production of all sorts of objects which have no "physiological" utility at all but only a social one.

What is produced nowadays is not made according to criteria of durability but, on the contrary, according to criteria of fast obsolescence. Consumption goods become extremely important both as material for the building of an identity and as supports in the interaction and confrontation with others, since objects constitute the system of signs through which we present ourselves, judge other individuals and are judged; we can (still) offend and humiliate with overwhelming benefactions, with presents which cannot be repaid by others. If we can no longer argue, as did the members of the Melanesian tribes studied by Radcliffe-Brown, that the objects we gave to somebody else are still ours because our souls reside in them, surely we have toward them an attitude that cannot be explained only in terms of economic value and status significance.

Objects perform at least another function: they contribute to the building of individual identity. With and through things we build an image of ourselves and we try to sell it on the market of interaction. Through the way in which we dress, the way in which we surround ourselves with particular objects, the way in which we organize the space in which we present ourselves, we communicate to others a series of signs through which one reads and interprets our values, power, the place we occupy in the social hierarchies. But this is not all. Through objects we communicate to others even feelings we do not dare admit to ourselves, to formalize in speech. The study of pathologies of behaviour give us useful information on this symbolic communication through things.

The goal of this work is that of clarifying some aspects and features of our relationship to objects which are rarely present in and considered by the sociological analysis but which are extremely

important if we want to grasp the significance of things in our lives.

More specifically my argument develops through three main components:

a) A revisitation of well-known authors (e.g. Marx, Weber, Simmel, Mauss) which intends to recover what they said, implicitly or otherwise, on the relationship between individuals and objects, and on the peculiarity of this relationship in contemporary society. References to these well-known authors have not, of course, an exhaustive and detailed character. My goal is to emphasize a few aspects of their analysis, which seem relevant to the development of my argument.

b) A systematic review and critique of express discussions of the social meanings and uses of objects,e.g., the literature on possession and exchange of goods among 'primitive' peoples, on the psychological uses of objects, on consumer behaviour, etc.

c) A small scale, exploratory, qualitatively oriented, empirical investigation of individuals and situations having a particular, and thus peculiarly significant, relationship to objects. More specifically three different groups of people have been studied:

   1. Collectors of valueless objects;
   2. Individuals whose houses have been burgled;
   3. Religious people bound by vows of poverty.

The first group has been chosen because its analysis sheds light upon the limited but too often overrated relevance of the economic value variables in explaining the motivations and reasons which induce people to surround themselves with objects, and upon the great importance material things have in supporting the individual's identity.

The analysis of the second group reveals the emotional and sentimental investment which marks our relationship to things, the

projections they carry, their relevance for the maintenance of a stable self.

The study of the third group supplies interesting evidence on what happens to the self and identity of the individuals when they are totally deprived of material possessions for the rest of their life.

Some other interesting elements emerge from an analysis of all three groups: e.g., gender differences in the way we relate to objects and rely upon them in structuring and supporting our identity and image of ourselves.

One of the main functions performed by things is that of being carriers of meanings. Their importance and value do not derive from their intrinsic worth but from their ability to embody meanings, signs of relationships, markers of extended boundaries of the self. Things objectify relationships and in this sense perform a self-assuring role. This implies the strong dependency of the person on things and, consequently, the great power of things over us.

# PART I

## INTRODUCTION

### The consumption ethic.

Modern society is characterized - among other factors - by the coincidence of property with wealth and of both of them with rights to things[1], by the penetration of the principles of exchange and saleability into every aspect of life. These factors have deeply modified the quality of social life, of interpersonal relationships. The division of labour and the specialization required by modern technology have caused substantial changes in the ways of living and perceiving the world.

Means and ends become separable, since we are perfectly able to perform successfully different tasks without knowing the ultimate ends of our action; calculability, precision and punctuality are forced upon life:

> "Money, with all its colorlessness and indifference, becomes the common denominator of all values; irreparably it hollows out the core of things, their individuality, their specific value, and their incomparability".[2]

The individual becomes progressively more dependent upon abstractions that cause wider distance and more mediations between persons, more mediations in the satisfaction of needs. Money is probably the most evident symbol of this character of abstraction. Apparently it is an extension of rational and logical possibilities for the satisfaction of needs but actually it is a concentration of irrationality, it hides differences and discriminations under the veil of impersonality, it makes interpersonal relations less visible and more complicated. The miser's use of money, for example, is a direct contradiction, an exaggeration, and a perversion of money's social use. He does not fulfil his needs keeping it under the bed, he starves, does not feel

security, nor experience an established social location but social isolation, mistakes means for ends since he does not realize the character of mediator typical of money.

This separation between means and ends appears quite clearly when we consider that we live in a society in which the individual does not work to produce particular objects useful for his life but to reproduce the means for survival; working is consequently perceived and experienced as a means more than an end.(3) It is in this context that Arendt speaks of the modern individual as 'animal laborans' as against 'homo faber', constrained as he is to work for the simple reproduction of the means of subsistence. What once was proper of the slave - that is working for life - has become the common condition of the modern individual. The high level of technological sophistication we have reached in productive processes, as well as many other sectors of our lives, has had as a consequence the fact that fewer and fewer activities require from the person an active and creative attitude. More and more often:

> "the person is reduced to being the occupier or the holder of qualifications, claims, characteristics, obligations, rights etc.; that is of abstract categorical determinations. ... An adaptation to spiritually meaningless, morally vacuous, and yet overpowering situations can take place in several ways: for instance as opportunism, as a surrender to the changing circumstances. .... Another fairly frequent form of adaptation consists in taking a low profile, decreasing one's visibility, playing dead. A third and very significant one consists in what could be called feminization, meaning here that one emphasizes one's consumer occupations and a kind of passivity.(4)

If permanence, stability and durability were the ideals of homo faber, abundance has become the ideal of the animal laborans and consumption is what dominates his spare time. The consumption ethic and not the work ethic becomes the prevalent one and provides motivation

in contemporary society. The self-discipline, frugality, moderation and sobriety, characteristics of the ascending bourgeois are no longer the principles driving modern individuals in contemporary industrial society. The postponement of gratifications, the strategy of saving in order to invest in productive enterprises, give way to the need for immediate gratification, to "buy now pay later". The logic of production itself becomes that of producing goods to be consumed as fast as possible, to make them obsolete in a very short time, so that they are immediately replaced by new ones. Thrift and industry have ceased to be the key to success and fulfilment. What has replaced the work ethic is the ethic of survival not in physical but in psychical terms, in terms of identity, of finding a meaning, an end in life.

As Lasch points out:

> "The new ethic of self-preservation has been a long time taking shape; it did not emerge overnight. In the first three centuries of our history, the work ethic constantly changed its meaning; these vicissitudes often imperceptible at the time, foreshadowed its eventual transformation into an ethic of personal survival".(5)

In reconsidering the Protestant ethic of the eighteenth century we cannot but stress the role played by the idea of self-improvement in two different spheres of the individual's life: the economic and the moral. Both are essential elements intertwined together. Making money was not the only aim of the Protestant who knew that self-improvement implied also "self-discipline, the training and cultivation of reason. ... Wealth is to be valued, but chiefly because it serves as one of the necessary preconditions of moral and intellectual cultivation".(6)

The good and successful man of the eighteenth century does not work compulsively since he knows that there are other important functions

to be performed in society and that he will be recognized as called to salvation on the basis of his achievements in the world, of which success in business and wealth are only two aspects, although very important ones. The concept of self-improvement, so important and central in Franklin's thought,(7) is not coincident or synonymous with self-advancement but it implies a deeper and more general effort to improve one's behaviour in many different aspects of life.

Hofstadter, in his book on Anti-intellectualism in American life,(8) shows quite clearly this transformation of the social image of the bourgeois and of the businessman in American society in the last three centuries. At the beginning there was a justification of business in religious terms, later it was claimed that business and trade served the character and culture; and when business progressively became the dominant theme of American life, and huge material wealth was growing in the new world, business no longer needed to seek a legitimation on a religious or cultural basis but found it in the rationality of business itself, in the welfare, security and comfort it produced. Material prosperity and abundance became the two pivots of the new ethic, of the new moral ideals.(9) The progressive loss of moral meaning connected with the idea of success brings as a consequence the fact that the individual measures himself, his success and self-realization in a continuous comparison with others, through a constant competition that adopts as standard not a moral ideal but other people's actions, attitudes, etc.

There is indeed in contemporary industrial society a progressive loss of institutional domains which can impart ethical sense to the individual's actions and behaviour, therefore the kind of confirmations we seek are evanescent. A phenomenon such as mobility (social and geographical) for example, has certainly been one of the consequences of industrial development and, in turn, has caused the erosion and the

loss of significance of some domains that previously were crucial for the construction of the individual's identity.

Mobility, a fairly common experience for the modern individual, leads to changes in his milieux and weakens the relationships with the primary groups which socialized him; it compels the individual to abandon the norms and values he was brought up with and to constantly redefine them. As Riesman points out when he speaks of 'other direction', the individual in modern industrial society needs more and more the approval and sharing of the new values he is "forced" to adopt by the people who find themselves in a similar social situation. This is essential to confirming and reaffirming his new identity.

This loss of stable and durable domains of identification generates a kind of insecurity and anxiety that is not linked to the problem of social standing, but involves more generally the individual's condition and the meaning of life in contemporary industrial society. The decline of 'inner direction' means that people act less and less according to internalized value orientations, principles able to impart stable orientation in a changing situation.

Competition, as we know it today, is quite a recent phenomenon that has deeply influenced interpersonal relationships among individuals.(10) This condition, quite obviously, generates a great deal of anxiety; the self-confidence of the bourgeois of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries gives way to insecurity, stress, dissatisfaction, search for identity, for a meaning in life. We can thus explain why the cravings of the modern individual have no limits, why he consumes compulsively, seeking immediate gratification and at the same time being perpetually unsatisfied. The contemporary individual is acquisitive, but in a different way from the bourgeois of the previous centuries. He seeks immediate gratification and satisfaction and not security for the future, he is not able to decipher his needs but tries to soothe the

state of anxiety that pervades his life. He does not look at the past in order to find an answer to his present questions nor is he able to postpone and give up something in the present to enjoy it in the future.

The quest for identity.

As has been previously said, the bureaucratization of careers in all sectors of public life, and more widely the increasing rationalization of the norms on which institutions are based (since they are determined by the functional requirements of the institutions as such), bring with them anonymous social relations. This happens because the easy replacement and the interchangeability of managers and of the labour force is a basic requirement of large organizations. Parallel to this phenomenon, the mechanism of competition hinders the creation of personal relationships among employees: it is not possible to speak of real involvement of the person in his work since he is compelled to perform functionally defined roles, the situation in which he acts is defined bureaucratically according to the exigencies of the production process of the agency where he works. Even subjectively the individual is forced to define himself as an anonymous performer:

> "In consequence of the functional rationality of institutional norms, the institutional domains need insist only on performance control, while taking minimal interest in the whole person or his prescriptive 'inner life'. The primary public institutions tend to seem meaningless to the individual, their functional rationality cannot be converted into individual sense". (11)

Since the public realm no longer constitutes a satisfactory identificatory domain and since, on the other hand, the private realm does not constitute for the individual an adequate sphere of self-realization, he is compelled to a search for "essential identities" on a sort of identity market. The individual becomes a consumer of identities of which some have a shorter, some a longer life, being subjected

to the obsolescence intrinsic to fashion. The very concept of obsolescence is particularly apt to describe some characteristics of a consumer society where every product must be produced and consumed as fast as possible, where knowledge, beliefs, values, are quickly outstripped by new ones:

> "Artists, scientists, etc., would operate rationally, in accordance with the spirit of the time, were they to cease striving in the work for a lasting, indeed a timeless, validity. It is in keeping with the context not only of a consumer society, but equally of a technical one where obsolescence has become a component of progress, that one should produce with an eye to speeding up turnover as does Bernard Buffet, with his 2,000 paintings in ten years. ... Since the effects themselves are so perishable, it would not make sense to expend too much effort in producing them".(12)

As Hirschman(13) correctly points out, neither the private nor the public spheres are able to satisfy people's needs and therefore the individual is alternatively shifting from involvements into the public arena (i.e. membership of peace movements, ecological movements, etc.) to withdrawal into the private ambit when public action is no longer able to answer the individual's quest. This sort of toing-and-froing between one sphere and the others is easily understandable since private life in its turn is not able to fulfil adequately our wishes but just only to sooth temporarily our dis-satisfaction.

In particular, consumption activity is unable to give a satisfactory answer to one's existential problems. New products:

> "are unable to change in any way the tragic and frightening characteristics of the human predicament, such as anxiety, sorrow, disease or death. From this existential vantage point, the frantic effort made by people to acquire "trifling" objects always seems disproportionate to the result achieved. And even when objects are acquired to keep at bay another basic human affliction, namely boredom or ennui, the situation is similar: the time during which any object can truly amuse us is strictly limited; and because objects acquired for the

> purpose of countering boredom reveal in rather short order their inability to do so in any durable fashion, yet continue to "hang around", they themselves come to exude the boredom they have been unable to conquer".(14)

On the other hand it is true that in contemporary society the attractiveness of public action resides in its ability to appear as the domain in which it is possible to fulfil the individuals' needs and aspirations to perceive themselves as socially useful, especially in a context of decline of religious fervor and values. But the motivations to be present and active in the public sphere are more and more elusive. In modern acquisitive society, there are indeed few incentives to dedicate one's time and resources to 'higher purposes' and ideals, while the creation and accumulation of wealth is strongly encouraged and considered the prime task of the individual. This is what Hirschman calls the"ultimate ideological revanche of private over public action", since the creation and accumulation of wealth are considered the objective of private action. There is little doubt that in our cultural system one has more incentives to seek self-realization in the private realm than in public action, which nowadays tends to be perceived more and more exclusively as the arena where one fights for power, and less and less as a sphere where 'higher purposes' can be realized.

What has been described so far is characteristic of, and peculiar to, contemporary industrial society, although, obviously, the process that brought about these features was not sudden or particularly rapid, and traces of it can be found in the previous centuries. As to this, it seems important to emphasize the progressive emptiness and loss of meaning and value of the institutional domains which previously gave a sense of identity and ethical significance, and a feeling of membership, to the individual. What emerges is the inability of modern society to

substitute the obsolescent ones with new domains more adequate to contemporary life. This brings as a consequence the fact that identity must be redefined apart from - if not against - the institutional roles the individuals perform in society. As Goffman has clearly asserted,(15) the individual does not actualize himself by performing a role but by keeping at a distance from it, he does not identify fully in the part. Roles come to be a sort of veil under which we hide ourself from others and, often, from our own consciousness. It is therefore mainly in the residual and interstitial areas not yet permeated by the anonymous logic on which modern society is based that the individual can seek a definition of himself.

> "Identity ceases to be an objectively and subjectively given fact and instead becomes the goal of an often devious and difficult quest. Modern man, almost inevitably it seems, is ever in search of himself."(16)

There are identity problems that are centered around the rational and formal nature of roles in a technological and bureaucratic environment: we may have a very well defined role without deriving any satisfaction from it; therefore, we will seek different experiences able to intensify, stimulate, and enrich our life, to give us some satisfaction and a feeling of self-realization. Or, on the contrary, we may absorb ourselves almost completely in work and try to find in it the self-realization we are seeking. The individual may find refuge from the depersonalization of his working condition in private life, in free-time activities such as hobbies, sports, etc., where he can express the subjective elements of his personality that do not find adequate room in his public life; on the other hand, it can happen that the individual may find refuge in the very anonymity of his work condition and that he finds unbearable the non-anonymous relationships typical of the private sphere (interaction within the family, among friends, etc.).

However, it must be evident that there is no segregation - at least in terms of consciousness - between the working sphere and other sectors of individuals' life. The same frame of mind, the same kind of bureaucratic logic, the same attitude can be transferred from the public to the private:

> "Various hobbies, particularly those of the do-it-yourself variety, express the same feature of cognitive style in the private life of the individual, but a problem-solving and deeply technological attitude may also carry over into the manner in which the individual looks at politics, the education of his children or the management of whatever psychological difficulties he may be afflicted with". (17)

As has been said, the private sphere has become extremely important for the individual who seeks to express a subjectivity that has no way and room to manifest itself in the over-institutionalized and over-bureaucratized public world. But, very often, the private realm is permeated by the same functional rationality that dominates the world of work. It is undeniable that work has always had an influence on social life. This is even truer, if possible, if one considers the tremendous, unprecedented impact of contemporary technological production upon every aspect of our lives. The enormous changes that, in a relatively short lapse of time, have taken place in the ways in which we live, work, eat, spend our leisure time, are educated, etc., have - quite obviously - modified our styles of thinking, feeling, experiencing, understanding, and relating to the outer world. The same kind of bureaucratic rationality that regulates and orders the world of work, imposes itself upon the consciousness of the individual as control upon impulsivity.(18) Self-control and the capacity to dominate one's impulses become the guiding principles of individuals' behaviour in a world in which the interaction among people becomes more and more difficult and complicated. The loss of meaning and of satisfaction that characterized the relation between the individual and work spreads also to the relation

between the individual and others. Anonymity becomes, perhaps, the most conspicuous feature of interaction in modern society, and material goods rather than human beings become the essential attributes and tools to reaffirm our identity. Our relationships with others, and ultimately with the self, come to be dominated by the same rules that define our relations with material objects.(19)

Modernity has weakened the definitions of reality, the meanings that previously ordered the social world and made life easier to bear. As has been previously said, we no longer have institutional domains which give a sense of security and of identity to the individual. Private life becomes, in a sense, the "solution" to the dissolution of meanings and of certainty, but not a very satisfactory solution. If undeniably it offers a kind of equilibrating mechanism providing meaning and affords some room for the expression of emotional and irrational feelings, it is also true that the individual is left alone and without guiding principles to invent and construct his own self-made universe. This absolute and unprecedented liberty of the private sphere leaves us quite often in a state of anxiety since we are not able and do not have the instruments to make sense of and organize our life.

Gehlen(20) points out that the private sphere is under-instituionalized, in the sense that it lacks institutions to structure human activity and guiding principles to help the individual in the difficult job of giving a meaning and constructing his universe. We often feel a terrible sense of 'homelessness',(21) but do not know what to do about it and therefore experience a sense of frustration, dis-satisfaction, anxiety. Hence an endless quest for something that might satisfy our needs, hence the proliferation of new institutions and groups, intended to provide an answer to the quest itself, hence the changes in the functions of old institutions (for example the church and

the family) seeking to adapt themselves to the new needs of contemporary individuals.

The rise in recent times of so many new organizations, groups, clubs, associations (I am referring here to mystical sects, oriental cults, sports associations, the great variety of voluntary and recreational associations, etc.), must be interpreted as an attempt to fill the gap left by the under institutionalization of the private sphere, or better, by the lack of institutional domains able to give the individual a sense of identity.

Parallel to the loss of its identificatory significance by work is the fact that in any case the time spent working is steadily decreasing (we start working at a later stage, end earlier, work fewer hours each day and have longer holidays), not to mention the large and growing number of unemployed. As a consequence, it is more and more important for the individual to find an adequate solution to his existential problems in private life. Individuals continuously build and rebuild refuges that have the intrinsic fragility of a private solution, always tested and threatened by "the cold winds of homelessness". At the same time they create strategies for interaction with others, both in the world of work and in leisure activities.(22)

The study of the relationships between people and things in everyday life gives us several examples of the strategies they follow in constructing an image of themselves and a universe able to give them a sense of security and of identity in the jungle of human relations. Obviously there are different solutions, different reactions, different ways of seeking release from the psychological tension, from the sense of anonymity that permeates our lives. Some people may - as has been said - try to find an answer in the world of work, others in public action, others in withdrawal into a private universe made to measure

for their needs, or better, for what they think their needs are:

> "Some individuals pursue idiosyncratic hobbies or other forms of highly private activities, others make fetish out of pets; one is totally engaged in the collection and the collation of the performance records of twenty years of athletic heroes, another builds innumerable bird houses which he stores in a shed. ... Other groups organize their life around an anonymous ritualization of a given set of activites. ..."(23)

In this framework this research has sought to explore the role material objects play by contributing to the creation and realisation of these strategies.

NOTES:

Throughout the thesis I use the singular masculine form as a matter of convention to indicate both genders when I refer to the individual in general terms.

1. This subject will be developed in Chapter I.

2. G. Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' in K.H. Wolff, (ed.) The Sociology of Georg Simmel, New York: The Free Press, 1950, p.414; on this topic see also E.P. Thompson, 'Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism', Past and Present, n.38, 1967, pp.56-97.

3. H. Arendt, The Human Condition, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.

4. A. Gehlen, Man in the Age of Technology, New York: Columbia University Press, 1980, pp.50-51.

5. C. Lasch, The Culture of Narcissism, New York: Norton Company Inc., 1978, pp.54.

6. Ibidem, p.55

7. See Franklin's autobiography, above all the section "The art of Virtue".

8. R. Hofstadter, Anti-Intellectualism in American Life, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1962.

9. American novels of the nineteenth century give us several examples of the fact that success retained moral overtones that progressively disappear.

10. For a discussion of this topic see C. Lasch, op. cit.

11. T. Luckmann, P.L. Berger, "Social Mobility and Personal Identity", European Journal of Sociology, V, n.2, 1964, p.336.

12. A. Gehlen, op. cit., p.46.

13. Cf. A. Hirschman, Shifting Involvements, Oxford: Martin Robertson & Co., 1982.

14. Ibidem, p.57.

15. Almost all Goffman's work deals with these problems but E. Goffman, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969; Ibidem, Relations in Public, New York: Basic Books, 1971; Ibidem, Encounters, New York: The Bobs Merrill Company, 1961, are probably those that analyse this phenomenon more specifically.

16. P.L. Berger, B. Berger, H. Kellner, The Homeless Mind, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974, p.86.

Throughout the thesis the expression 'identificatory domain' is used with the same meaning it has in this book.

17. Ibidem, p.35.

18. On the progressive increase of control upon instincts and impulsivity, see N. Elias, The Civilizing Process, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978.

19. On this subject see Chapter II, especially the paragraph on objectification.

20. cf. A. Gehlen, op. cit.

21. cf. P.L. Berger, B. Berger, H. Kellner, op. cit.

22. cf. E. Goffman, Interaction Ritual, Garden City: Doubleday, 1967; ibidem, Strategic Interaction, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1969.

23. A.J. Vidich, J. Bensman, Small Town in Mass Society, Princeton: Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1958, pp.288-289.

CHAPTER I

## INDIVIDUAL AND MARKET SOCIETY: MODIFICATIONS OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS.

### From private to privacy.

In the introduction some important features of contemporary society have been stressed. Another relevant aspect deserves some attention: the dissolution of the private realm into the social one due to the loss of sacredness of private property.

By private property is meant here an individual's possession of a specific location where he lives with the family, is born and dies, where the individual masters the necessities of life.(1) The possession of a personal place, distinguished, in ancient Greece, the citizen from the slave, the individual who belonged to the body politic from one who had no right of citizenship. From this point of view the stranger and the slave, although they clearly occupied two different positions within the community, were both in the same condition: they had no political rights, they had no access to the public realm since they were not allowed to be or become owners of land; and this not only in the physical sense but in the figurative one of a life that is rooted in the social environment.(2)

In ancient Greece and Rome there was a clear conceptual difference between private property and wealth; between the unmoveable and the moveable property of Roman law. An individual could be a slave and be wealthy at the same time, and wealth never had a sacred meaning or character.

> "Prior to the modern age, which began with the expropriation of the poor and then proceeded to emancipate the new propertyless classes, all civilizations have rested upon the sacredness of private property. .... Originally property meant no more or less than to have one's location in a particular part of the world and therefore to belong to the body politic, that is to be the head of one of the families which constituted the public realm. This piece of privately owned world was so completely identical with the family who owned it that the expulsion of a citizen could mean not merely the confiscation of his estate but the actual destruction of the building itself. .... Poverty did not deprive the head of the family of this location in the world and the citizenship resulting from it. ... The sacredness of this privacy was like the sacredness of the hidden, namely of birth and death. ...."(3)

In this perspective, private property had a fundamental political significance very different from the modern one, since nowadays we understand it as privately owned wealth. To own property was the essential requisite in order 'to transcend one's life and enter the world all have in common', that is to transcend the private realm and to enter the public one. But, to be really free, the individual had to be wealthy enough to possess slaves who mastered the necessities of life for their master's family. Therefore, private wealth became a prerequisite of participation in public life, of the individual's playing a political role. If the property owner had chosen to act in order to get richer instead of using his property to lead a political life, he would have sacrificed his freedom and become a voluntary slave. It is exactly this attitude toward property and wealth of the property owner, so different from that of the bourgeois, that explains why ancient cities were centres of consumption rather than centres of production.

> "It was not 'greed for gain' as a <u>psychological</u> motive that was tabooed; ..... rather, it was <u>any rational</u>, continuously organized, and in this sense specifically 'bourgeois' form of acquisitive operation, any systematic economic activity that was looked upon with disdain".(4)

It is only when wealth started to be perceived and considered as capital and no longer as something to be consumed in a shorter or longer time, that private property came to be considered coincident with it.

> "The change in common usage, to treating property as the things themselves, came with the spread of the full capitalist market economy from the seventeenth century on, and the replacement of the old limited rights in land and other valuable things by virtually unlimited rights. As rights in land became more absolute, and parcels of land became more freely marketable commodities, it became natural to think of the land itself as the property. .... In fact the difference was not that things rather than rights in things were exchanged, but that previously unsaleable rights in things were now saleable; or, to put it differently, that limited and not always saleable rights <u>in</u> things were being replaced by virtually unlimited and saleable rights <u>to</u> things. (5)

Private property comes to be the right that the person has to things and, first of all, to himself as an individual, so that private property is considered an attribute of the person, the material things that he owns and exchanges, sells, buys or inherits during his lifetime. When the distinction between unmoveable and moveable property comes to an end, the sacredness of private property comes to an end too. Property loses the significance of protecting the individual from the common world, and acquires a social value, i.e. it has an exchange value; it loses its particular sacred character and becomes external to the person, who can exchange or gain it. In this process what is lost is a private realm where the individuals can isolate themselves from the outer world, where life perpetuates itself, where the rhythms and times of nature govern the flow of everyday life. But with the dissolution of the private realm comes that of the public one too and both of them are absorbed in the social one. As H. Arendt says,

> "Marx predicted correctly, though with an unjustified glee, the 'withering away' of the public realm under conditions of unhampered development of the 'productive forces of society', and he was equally right, that is, consistent with his conception of man as an *animal laborans*, when he foresaw that 'socialized men' would spend their freedom from laboring in those strictly private and essentially worldless activities that we now call 'hobbies'".(6)

The modern concept of privacy, linked as it is to subjectivism and intimacy, is completely different from the private realm as it has been described above. The public realm is no longer the world everybody has in common, where the individual realizes himself as citizen, as *homo faber* and active member of a community, and all the feelings that no longer find an external realization turn inward: the private sphere becomes the real counterpart to a public world where the individual is not able to find satisfactory identificatory domains, privacy becomes a refuge from the stress and difficulties of public life. Introspection, auto-analysis, psychologization are all aspects of the personality of contemporary man.(7) This tendency toward intimacy and subjectivism originates from the fact that social life becomes frequently more and more difficult to bear as modernity weakens the definitions of reality which previously gave a sense of stability to the individual. Since modern society no longer provides stability, the person is compelled to seek it within his own consciousness, within his subjectivity.

Modern society and modifications of interpersonal relationships.

The founding fathers of sociology have been acute witnesses to the changes which characterized the emergence of modern society and to the transformations which they have caused to interpersonal relationships. In the following pages I take into account a few aspects of their

theories which seem relevant to the relationship between individuals and objects in the modern world. This, therefore, is not intended to be a critical discussion of the thought of these authors but only a reconsideration of a few aspects and elements of their theories which offer useful insights and tools to gain a better understanding of the peculiarity of this relationship in modern/contemporary society.

Since Marx, sociology has been aware of the fact that the transformation of traditional social relations into market relations has deeply changed the quality and the functions of interpersonal relationships. What is typical of modern society is the fact that not only the goods, the products of labour, are sold on the market but human labour itself: man sells part of himself as a commodity, exchanges his labour power for means of livelihood on a free market dominated by impersonal laws. The market becomes the centre of every human activity and not only of economic ones. It changes the whole society.

From a society based on custom, on status, on authoritarian allocation of work and rewards we pass into one in which the individual is no longer considered part of a rank or order but as the owner of himself free to sell his property (his labour power as well) on the market.(8) If the market as a place in which we exchange goods has always been where people produced more than they consumed, completely new is the logic that - in modern society - regulates this interaction: the logic of rational calculation, of freedom of trade, of absence of rules to regulate consumption, production, prices: the logic of impersonality.

As Weber says "The market community as such is the most impersonal relationship of practical life into which humans can enter with one another".(9)

According to Marx the most characteristic feature of capitalist society is the fact that workers are compelled to sell their labour power on the market. The worker transfers part of his power to the person who owns the means of production. In this sense the relationships between individuals in capitalist society are relations of power. As a consequence of the compulsive transfer of power from one to another, the individual loses his human essence. Previous to market society, work was essential for survival but, at the same time, it was also the demonstration of the individual's existence. The individual produced for his personal needs and only the surplus was exchanged. According to Marx the aim of work was that of producing useful objects and goods.

With the selling on the market of his own labour the individual loses this relation between himself and his labour product. What becomes essential is not the utility of the product but the exchange value of the labour power. The maintenance of the individual's life becomes the aim of the activity and work is the only way to assure survival.(10) The worker gradually becomes indifferent to what he produces; what matters to him is the salary derived from the work. He no longer immediately exchanges his produce for the product he needs. The equivalent becomes an equivalent in money which is the immediate result of wage-labour and the medium of exchange.

> "The complete domination of the alienated object over man is evident in money and the complete disregard of the nature of the material, the specific nature of private property as well as the personality of the proprietor. What formerly was the domination of one person over another has now become the general domination of the thing over the person, the domination of the product over the producer".(11)

As a consequence of the worker becoming a commodity, the more the value of the goods he produces the less his value. Human activity

becomes something opposed to man, his work becomes something objective, independent of him and to which the worker has to be subordinated. The manipulation of the external world - what makes the difference between human beings and animals - is no longer a process through which man makes something for a precise aim but a means for the worker's survival.

The relations between individuals and between them and objects lose every qualitative aspect and tend to be replaced by purely quantitative relations; the individual is no longer the one who leads the working process; he is incorporated as a mechanical part in a mechanical system which he has to obey. He can be easily replaced by another man; his personal gifts, his qualities are no longer important: the life of the whole society is fragmented and atomized in separated and isolated exchanges among commodities.

> "Clearly in a world perceived as consisting of things the relation between the subject and such things is crucial. Since .... things can not be acknowledged as of the subject's own making, the subject can relate to them only by possessing them, accumulating them, or consuming them. ..... Since the subject does not recognize that the things he needs are of his own making, consuming and/or accumulating them does not convince him that he is reappropriating himself through them, growing subjectively by making them his own. His relation to them is purely dependent". (12)

According to Marx, then, capitalist society brings as a consequence a peculiar and typical relation between individuals and objects and between the individuals themselves.

Weber enlarges on the use of the concept of separation of the worker from his means of production: he applies it not only to the analysis of the economic sphere but also to that of any form of hierarchical and authoritarian organization.

According to Weber what really makes a relevant difference between traditional and market society is the fact that in the latter the

principle of rationalization becomes predominant. But the predominance of this process does not depend only on rational forces; charisma, for example, is an irrational element that has contributed to this phenomenon. The process of rationalization does not involve only the economic sphere of society but finds expression also in bureaucratic organization. The modern bureaucracy is just like a machine and the individual becomes only a small part of it and has to accomplish determined functions already planned. He has no choices and can be easily replaced.

> "The fully developed bureaucratic mechanism compares with other organizations exactly as does the machine with the non-mechanical modes of production. Precision, speed, un-ambiguity, knowledge of the files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of function and of material and personal costs - these are raised to the optimum point in the strictly bureaucratic administration, and especially in its monocratic form. .... Individual performances are allocated to functionaries who have specialized training and who by constant practice learn more and more. The "objective discharge of business" primarily means a discharge of business according to calculable rules and without regard for persons". (13)

The more bureaucracy depersonalizes itself, i.e., the more completely it succeeds in achieving the exclusion of love, hatred, and every purely personal, especially irrational, feeling from the execution of official tasks, the more it becomes appropriate for the full development of capitalism. "Modern culture requires (.....) the emotionally detached, and hence rigorously 'professional' expert". (14)

The efficiency of modern bureaucracy is due to the depersonalization, to the specialization of the tasks. But this process of depersonalization is common to the whole modern society and brings as a consequence a disenchantment of the world. The advanced rationalization imprisons the man in the Gehäuse der Hörigkeit of specialization:

> "the modern economic order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which to-day determines the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, (....) with irresistible force".(15)

The modern individual therefore, finds it more and more difficult to seek an answer to his existential problems in an extremely specialized and highly rationalized society based on the ethic of the market, that is, on an absolute depersonalization which is 'contrary to all the elementary forms of human relationships'.(16)

From this point of view, Simmel's work provides us with one of the most interesting analyses and reflections on the consequence of modern culture on the individual, tracing the specificity of social phenomena back to the universality of psychological explanations. In his essay on "Faithfulness and Gratitude", exchange is defined as the 'objectification of human interaction'. This occurs because when individuals exchange objects among themselves the purely spontaneous character of their relation becomes projected into the objects. This objectification, this growth of the relationship into self-contained moveable things, becomes so complete that, in a fully developed economy, personal interaction recedes altogether into the background, while goods acquire a life of their own. Men act only as the executors of the tendencies toward shifts and equilibriums of values and relations which are inherent in the goods themselves. The objectively equal, is given for the objectively equal, and man himself is really irrelevant, although it goes without saying that he engages in the process in his own interest. The relation among men has become a relation among objects:

> "Thus, if earlier, prior to the use of metal money, some handiwork was purchased with a cow or goat, these wholly heterogeneous things were juxtaposed and became exchangeable by virtue of the economic, abstract general value contained in each of them.

> This heterogeneity reaches its peak in modern money economy. Because money expresses the general element contained in all exchangeable objects, that is, their exchange value, it is incapable of expressing the individual element in them. Therefore objects in so far as they figure as saleable things, become degraded; the individual in them is levelled down to the general which is shared by everything saleable, particularly by money itself".(17)

The individual has to bear alone the consequences of the capitalist system since specialization makes every person different from the others and any comparison impossible. Simmel's man is not alienated because of the bureaucratization, he is the prisoner of sterile and frozen interactions.

Simmel's theory of value, in which the sacrifice is the condition of value as such, and therefore value is considered a subjective calculation between sacrifice and desire, is a clear exemplification of the author's subjectivism, his theory becomes the theory of the impotence and loneliness of man in modern society.(18)

In Simmel we find a witness to the collapse of the humanistic culture under the pressure of specialization. The money economy has in fact brought about the 'calculative exactness' of practical life, which corresponds to the means and ends of natural science: 'to transform the world into an arithmetical formula'.

> "Only money economy has filled the days of so many people with weighing, calculating, with numerical determinations, with a reduction of qualitative values to quantitative ones".(19)

The division of labour requires from the individual a more and more one sided competence. The reflection on values, the task of the humanistic scholar, becomes therefore an impossible undertaking: the freedom of modern man - due to the fact that he can sell and buy every thing - "often means a selling and uprooting of personal values".(20) The origin and the cause of what Simmel terms the objectification of

culture must be sought in the division of labour, in specialization; the only human product that is free from this process of objectification is the work of art because it requires "only one single person but it requires him totally, right down to his innermost core".(21)

The process of the objectification of culture involves every aspect of human life. Objects lose the meanings of tools, of instruments to be used for specific functions and made to last as long as possible. The relation between individuals and objects come to be one of dependence of the person upon things, things that are perceived as independent from us. The feeling of being oppressed by the externalities of modern life "is not only the consequence but also the cause of the fact that they confront us as autonomous objects."(22)

Modern man is surrounded by nothing but impersonal objects and all his life becomes limited only to social relationships which have the same characteristics of economic exchange. According to Simmel, every kind of interaction - even one that implies the innermost feelings - has to be regarded as an exchange. Therefore social relations are frozen in conventions and rules, the marital couple becomes a geometrical form, the dyad, a form completely depleted of every kind of feelings; the individual becomes trapped in a net of social interactions in which there is only the front region, the rule, the appearance.

While in Marx and Weber market relationships, with their impersonality, with no room for brotherliness, expand to dominate all other forms of relationship, in Simmel the objectification of culture, the subordination of feelings and objects to their exchange value are consequence of the calculating character that has its symbol in money. For Simmel the power of commodities and money is due to the objectification of the spirit.

The problem of exchange.

Since every exchange by its own nature implies an objectification of the relationships of the persons involved in it, it is interesting to understand how the individuals cope with this problem in societies where the impersonal logic of the market has not permeated every sphere of life and where the exchange is actually perceived as carrier of values in opposition to those prevalent in the cultural system. There are in fact societies in which the exchanges have to be hidden under different forms in order not to offend the feelings of brotherliness which exclude the exchange as interaction based on interests. As Weber says, 'the market is fundamentally alien to any type of fraternal relationship',(23) and presupposes the objectification of human personality since every individual projects part of himself in the object he exchanges. For this reason in the Silent Trade the two protagonists of the exchange reduce to the minimum level their social interaction: they do not speak, they hide every manifestation of their "self", they behave as if the exchange took place without them.

> "The silent trade is a form of exchange which avoids all face to face contacts and in which the supply takes the form of a deposit of the commodity at a customary place, the counter offer takes the same form, and dickering is effected through the increase in number of objects being offered from both sides, until one party either withdraws dissatisfied or, satisfied, takes the goods left by the other party and departs".(24)

In this example the person hides any expressive manifestation of his identity in order to preserve brotherliness from the egoistic relation of exchange.

Mauss in his famous essay "The Gift" gives us a description of a different way to solve the problem of brotherliness in exchange relationships. While in the Silent Trade the protagonists exclude themselves, their personal presence, from the frame in which the exchange

takes place, in the gift, what is hidden is the contractual character of the exchange. Mauss shows that under the altruistic ritual of the gift are hidden relations of power, egoistic interests. According to the French scholar the market has always existed and he wants to demonstrate how things and their exchange influence and modify the relationships among individuals and the individual identity:

> "We intended in this book to isolate one important set of phenomena: namely, prestations which are in theory voluntary, disinterested and spontaneous, but are in fact obligatory and interested. The form usually taken is that of the gift generously offered, but the accompanying behaviour is formal pretence and social deception, while the transaction itself is based on obligation and economic self-interest". (25)

His perspective is completely opposite to that of Durkheim. While Durkheim in fact, studies society to show that we can not reduce human behaviour to egoistic interest, that we can not reduce interaction to pure calculating communications, Mauss studies society to show that under the ritual of gift there is personal interest, there is competition for power. In the Potlach, for example, there is the obligation to make a return gift "under the penalty of losing mana, authority and wealth". This form of exchange does not make a person, a tribe, richer than before; its meaning is that of establishing or confirming hierarchical relationships and, at the same time, of enforcing friendship. Therefore we can say that this form of exchange reveals a concept of interest completely different from that which is at the basis of modern transactions; through the waste and the showing off of gifts the individual wants to confirm his power, his place in the social structure of society. Through the donation and sometimes the destruction of things, the potlach shows the honour which wealth itself confers.

Unlike modern transactions that are among individuals, both potlach and kula are forms of gifts exchange that involve entire communities:

> "for it is groups and not individuals which carry on exchanges,make contracts, and are bound by obligations, the persons represented in the contracts are moral persons - clans, tribes, and families, the group or the chiefs as intermediaries for the groups, confront and oppose each other. Further, what they exchange is not only exclusively goods and wealth, real and personal property, and things of economic value. They exchange rather courtesies, entertainments, rituals, military assistance, women, children, dances and feasts. ...."(26)

In spite of this apparently voluntary form, this kind of exchange is a system of 'total obligation' that involves three different duties:

1). the obligation to give gifts;

2). the obligation to receive gifts;

3). the obligation to repay the received gifts with others.

The chief who refuses to give a potlach is considered by the others as a 'rotten face'. In fact in this frame "to refuse to give or to fail to invite, is like refusing to accept the equivalent of a declaration of war, it is a refusal of friendship and intercourse". What Mauss seems to suggest in his essay is the fact that the gift exchange was a peaceable way to relate to others. In societies in which the borders between friendship and enmity can be broken very easily, in which a feast can become a massacre, the exchange of gifts plays the role of maintaining the alliances. But as the kula shows quite clearly, hidden under the form of gifts there is a big inter-tribes trade: "the trade is carried out in noble fashion, disinterestedly and modestly"(27) "pains are taken to show one's freedom and autonomy as well as one's magnanimity, yet all the time one is actuated by mechanisms of obligation which are resident in the gifts themselves".(28)

This competition to give more than the others implies a competition for more power both inside the community, in order to maintain leadership, and outside, with other tribes, to establish a new hierarchy: "to give is to show one's superiority, to show that one

is something more and higher, that one is magister, to accept without returning or repaying more is to face subordination, to become a client and subservient, to become a minister".(29) In this way through enormous destruction of wealth, through excessive gifts and consumption, the hierarchy is established. Who returns the gifts must do so in a larger amount, but this is not made to compensate the loss of the first donor but "to humiliate the original donor or exchange partner".

Up to now we have seen that according to Mauss the gifts, and therefore the objects, perform two different functions:

1). the function of exchange and therefore that of division of labour;

2). the function of establishing social hierarchies and therefore of stratifying people according to their possessions.

In analyzing this essay a third function emerges: that of possessing a part of the donor's personality:

> "the obligation attached to a gift itself is not inert. Even when abandoned by the giver, it still forms part of him. Through it he has a hold over the recipient, just as he had, while its owner, a hold over anyone who stole it". .... This bond created by things is in fact a bond between persons, since the thing itself is a person or pertains to a person. Hence it follows that to give something is to give a part of oneself. .... In this system of ideas one gives away what is in reality a part of one's nature and substance, while to receive something is to receive a part of someone's spiritual essence".(30)

Objects are therefore what creates the relationship between the protagonists of the exchange: they become the point of agreement and dispute between individuals. Mauss'individual is always engaged in fights, in competitions for power, for personal interest. The gift offers a possibility of replacing the confrontation which would otherwise take place through the showing off of objects, through the

fights, through war. Therefore things have a moral meaning, an emotional value as well as a material one; and according to Mauss they still have this quality. We still have with objects a relationship that is not only economic - in terms of purchase and sale - but a personal one. Objects still are the element at the basis of our interaction with others; we can still offend and humiliate with charity, with presents that cannot be repaid by others.

From Mauss' analysis of the gift the norm of reciprocity emerges as an essential element of the exchange (according to him there is a universally recognized obligation to reciprocate gifts which have been accepted). This concept is central to the analyses of many other social scientists: it is present for instance, in Parsons' and Merton's analyses, it is at the basis of Homans' theory of exchange, it is central to Malinowski's interpretation of Trobriand culture as well as to Levi-Strauss' theory of the exchange of women. The principle of reciprocity is indeed often stressed as the basis on which the social and ethical life of civilizations rests. Simmel, for example, emphasizes that cohesion and social equilibrium exist only if the reciprocity of service and return service is also present and if 'all contacts among men rest on the schema of giving and returning the equivalence.'(31) This principle implies a system of interdependent parts engaged in mutual interchanges.

The norm of reciprocity does not give a satisfactory explanation of some forms of interaction and exchange among individuals: phenomena such as charity and beneficence, for instance, cannot be explained within this theoretical framework. As Gouldner correctly argues the weakest strata of the population (the old, the sick, children, etc.), that is many who need help, might never get it if the norm of reciprocity were the only one to guide human action. As he says "Reciprocity is the

norm of the 'realistic' world of work. Something for nothing is the ideal of the world beyond work, the world of fantasy and imagination".(32) The relation between reciprocity on the one hand and magnanimity, beneficence, charity, etc., on the other is a contradictory relation between two different ethical ideals: the first establishes that one gives because of what has been or will be received from others; the second establishes that help must be given because others are in need. Although the principle of reciprocity is the prevalent one in contemporary society, we have still to acknowledge that to give something for nothing stimulates and stirs up greater emotion in the receiver just because of the extreme rarity of such actions:

> "there is no gift that brings a higher return than the free gift, the gift given with no strings attached. For that which is truly given freely moves men deeply and makes them most indebted to their benefactors. In the end, if it is reciprocity that holds the mundane world together, it is beneficence that transcends this world and can make men weep the tears of reconciliation".(33)

Although rare and marginal in modern society, 'the principle of giving something for nothing' is a very important one since it clearly shows that a utilitarian approach is not able to give an adequate explanation to the norms and principles on which modern society (as well as many past ones) is based. As I shall try to explain and show in the next chapters there are other important motivations and rules that influence our relationships to objects and among ourselves. Phenomena such as the free giving of blood and organs, the adoption of children, etc., as Titmuss(34) has magistrally pointed out - would not find a satisfactory answer if all relations were restricted to the principle of utility, or to that of exchange of equivalents.

Some conclusions.

From what has been argued up to now some conclusions can be drawn:

In the first place the fact that in modern industrial society the relationship between individuals and material objects is particular and peculiar, different from those which characterized other forms of social organizations. In the archaic societies described by Mauss, for example, the exchange was a transaction concerning not only things but moral meanings and symbols too. The individual and the things were deeply bound together, there was a sort of sacredness both to the individual and to the thing. In contemporary society, on the other hand, there is a separation of the individual from the thing just because the relationship between persons has become a relationship between things and we have lost the sacredness of the person: money, the impersonal object, has permeated all our relationships, has become our instrument of communication, the measure of every thing. In the next chapter we shall discuss and analyze this topic in greater detail.

In the second place the fact that the modern individual is not yet completely trapped within the logic of calculating and of functional rationality and therefore his relationships toward objects should not be considered relations based only on the economic value, as concerning only the quantity, the cost.

Nor is it possible to define the relationships between man and objects only in terms of status symbols, of symbols of power. Firstly because in to-day's complex society the criteria of differentiation and of social stratification are based on many other variables, secondly because objects may still have for us an emotional value even if, probably, no longer universally recognized. Indeed, as we shall see

in the second part of the dissertation, we can speak even to-day of emotional feelings that link and create bonds among individuals and between them and the objects, but they have become far weaker and manifest themselves in more private contexts.

Moreover, the multiplicity of messages conveyed by objects is more and more confused and covered up by the economic value that tends to be the predominant one and to objectify every relationship in the form of commodity, of exchange value. The task of the next chapter is to discuss and explain these processes and phenomena.

NOTES:

1. On the concept of private property see H. Arendt, The Human Condition, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958; F. De Coulanges, The Ancient City, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956; C.B. Macpherson, (ed), Property, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978.

2. On the condition of the stranger in society see G. Simmel, The Stranger, in K.H. Wolff (ed), The Sociology of Georg Simmel, The Free Press: New York, 1950, pp.402-408.

3. cf. H. Arendt, op. cit. pp.56-57.

4. M. Weber, Economy and Society, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968, vol. II, pp.1205-96.

5. C.B. Macpherson, op. cit. pp.7-8.

6. H. Arendt, op. cit., p.101; in this quotation the author is discussing Marx's thought in the German Ideology.

7. On this subject see A. Gehlen, Man in the Age of Technology, New York: Columbia University Press, 1980; C. Lasch, The Culture of Narcissism, New York: W.W. Norton Company Inc. 1978; R. Sennett, The Fall of Public Man, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974; P.L. Berger, B. Berger, H. Kellner, The Homeless Mind, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books Ltd., 1974.

8. On this subject see C.B. Macpherson, The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962.

9. M. Weber, Economy and Society, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968, vol. II, pp.635-36.

10. Marx's concept of use value will be discussed in more detail in chapter II.

11. K. Marx, "Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher" (1843-44), in L.D. Easton and K.H. Guddat, Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society, New York: Garden City, 1967, p.276.

12. G. Poggi, Images of Society: Essays on Sociological Theory of Tocqueville, Marx, Durkheim, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972, pp.127-29. On Marx's earlier writings see also G. Lukacs, History and Class Consciousness, London: Merlin Press, 1971; L. Goldmann, Toward a Theory of Novel, London: Tavistock Publications, 1975; ibidem, Recherches Dialectiques, Paris: Gallimard, 1959; A. Giddens, Capitalism and Modern Social Theory, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971. We shall develop further Marx's theory of value in the next chapter.

13. M. Weber, in H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills,(eds.), From Max Weber, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1948, pp.214-15.

14. Ibidem, in M. Rheinstein, ed., Max Weber on Law in Economy and Society, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1954..

15. Ibidem, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1930, p.181.

16. Ibidem, Economy and Society, op. cit., vol. II, p.636; on M. Weber see also R. Bendix, Max Weber An Intellectual Portrait, London: Methuen & Co., 1966; A. Giddens, Capitalism and Modern Social Theory, op. cit.

17. G. Simmel, in K.H. Wolff, ed., The Sociology of George Simmel, New York: The Free Press, 1964, pp.390-01.

18. Simmel's theory of value will be discussed in more detail in chapter II.

19. G. Simmel, op. cit., p.412.

20. Ibidem, The Philosophy of Money, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978, p.404.

21. Ibidem, p.455.

22. Ibidem, p.460.

23. M. Weber, Economy and Society,op. cit., vol. II, p.637. The literature on exchange is very large both in sociology and anthropology. In this context I shall stress the works of P.M. Blau, Exchange and Power in Social Life, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1964; G. Homans, "Social Behaviour as Exchange", American Journal of Sociology, vol. 62, 1958, pp.597-606; ibidem, Social Behaviour: its Elementary Forms, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974; C. Levi-Strauss, The Elementary Structures of Kinship, Boston: Beacon Press, 1969; R. Titmuss, The Gift Relationship, Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1973.

24. M. Weber, Economy and Society, vol. II, op. cit., p.637; on Weber's interpretation of market and exchange cf. P. Maranini, La Società e le cose, Milano: I.L.I., 1972.

25. M. Mauss, The Gift, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966, p.1.

26. Ibidem, p.38.

27. Ibidem, p.11.

28. Ibidem, p.20.

29. Ibidem, p.21.

30. Ibidem, p.72-73.

31. G. Simmel, in K.H. Wolff, op. cit., p.387.

32. A.W. Gouldner, For Sociology, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975, p.268.

33. Ibidem, p. 277.

34. R. Titmuss, The Gift Relationship, op. cit.

CHAPTER II

## THE SYMBOLIC MEANINGS OF THINGS

In every form of social organization culture patterns the exchanges among individuals and between them and the environment. In every society the symbolic structures expressed in cultural forms define ideas of utility, of value. They organize the choice and the manipulation of natural materials in order to produce particular objects, particular goods.

What is peculiar to Western culture is the fact that economy has become the most important site of symbolic production: hidden under the abstract equivalence of objects - their exchange value - that finds its expression in the universal means of exchange (money), there is the fact that needs, desires and objects of desire (i.e. commodities) are organized according to cultural determinations. In societies organized according to different criteria - I am referring here to the so-called 'primitive societies' - the main locus of symbolic production and differentiation is not to be found in the economy but in other social relations, mainly kinship, and the other spheres of activity are dependent upon and ordered by kinship status.

Even a superficial analysis of the immense anthropological material that deals with the problem of exchange and its relation with the structure of power[1] shows that the criteria on which exchanges are based are dependent upon particular and rigid rules whose origins must be sought in the social system as a whole and not only in the economic one. In particular it is important to emphasize that if competition for power and prestige is present, it finds expression in the possession, ostentation, destruction of particular objects only, and does not amount to a generalized competition based on every kind of goods. There

are many societies in which the exchange of goods is strictly regulated and separated in two or three different channels of exchange, each dealing exclusively with particular objects and products, each with clear and rigid boundaries. There is no common denominator - a universal currency - able to establish the value of any object or product of human labour whatever. Rather, in each of these spheres of exchange everybody knows with what a particular item can be bartered; each sphere of exchange plays a distinctive role in the organization and in the structuring of social life.

If we follow Salisbury's analysis[2] of Siane People, for example, we find that exchange takes three different forms to which correspond three "nexusus of activity", of production. The first form of exchange includes everyday food, clothing, housing and tools. These are the products that ensure a minimum level of subsistence. They are derived from relatively abundant natural materials. The exchanges of these goods take place only among members of the same clan and in this way intra clan obligations are fulfilled. Barter is the traditional form used in these transactions.

The second form involves the exchange of what Salisbury defines as luxury goods - snake skin, tobacco, salt, etc. These goods are produced or anyway provided by the personal initiative of individuals and are exchanged among the people only with other goods belonging to the same nexus of activity. They are used privately or when there are guests. In these transactions clan obligations are not involved.

The third form concerns the production and the exchange of ceremonial goods, that is of objects or products essential for the performance of public rituals such as weddings, initiation ceremonies, etc. These goods are bartered at public events. These exchanges take place both in intra clan and inter clan situations and they necessarily impose a return obligation.

The boundaries between these spheres are quite rigid and (therefore) there is very little crossing of them in the exchanges of goods. These barriers, that prevent the interchange of objects from one sphere to the others, reflect and embody the features that structure social relations.

> "Food, (for instance) is the commodity most often used as a token or a symbol of continuing relationships, for reciprocating gifts of labour, services, or material goods. Most commonly it indicates common membership in a group. ..... Food given to strangers indicates that the stranger is, momentarily at least, treated as a member of the same group. .... Food, then, is given by individuals to preserve their membership in productive groups; its acceptance by other individuals serves to maintain or enlarge the group itself".(3)

But not all foods are utilized to symbolize group membership since "it is not the mere fact of edibility or the universality of use that makes them into subsistence goods with this symbolic meaning"(4): products like pork and salt - universally used by Siane People - are not part of subsistence goods. Salisbury suggests that we could draw a line between indispensable goods (those of the first sphere) and dispensable goods (those of the second and third spheres). But "indispensable" does not simply refer to the mere physical subsistence of the individual, rather to the social one too. The concept of social subsistence implies that one is able to live according to the social status of the people who use determined goods, since their possession and manipulation is an essential indicator of status and, at the same time, a basic requisite for maintaining one's position in the hierarchical structure of power. In this sense one can say that subsistence goods are used not only to satisfy every social obligation that an individual has to fulfil to be a member of the clan, but also to show that his fellow members accept his position in the society.

Therefore it is possible to assert that subsistence goods are essential for the maintenance of the existing organization of the whole society, of the relationships within it.

It seems to me that from this brief and partial summary of Salisbury's study one can grasp interesting ideas and elements in order to understand the relations that connect individuals with things and the role things play in shaping interpersonal relations. Salisbury shows how limited is an approach that concerns itself only with the use-value and the exchange-value of objects. The way in which things are organized in the three spheres reflects the way in which social relations are shaped. The hierarchical structure in which things are assembled reflects the hierarchy of values on which social life is based. The three different nexusus of activity and the consequent different grouping of things reflect the understanding of human needs according to Siane People: those related to the individual physical and social subsistence (first sphere); those related to the personal status and wealth of the individual (second sphere) and those related to ceremonial rituals (third sphere).

Since there is such a rigid separation between the three nexusus of activity and of exchange there is no reason to increase the production of subsistence goods that cannot be exchanged with goods belonging to the other two spheres. Therefore a technological innovation that enables the same amount of goods to be produced in a shorter time (the steel axe introduced in Siane territory by Europeans) does not stimulate an increase in the production of food but in the amount of time that the individuals can dedicate to social life, to interpersonal relationships and to other activities. The increased free time is absorbed almost completely in extending the sphere of prestige competition (luxury goods) by producing and exchanging the material tokens

of prestige.

On the whole it can be argued that among Siane People the relation between goods and their social uses is far more clear, and that the social meanings of objects are far more transparent than in western modern culture where we do not have different spheres of exchange, where everything can be bought or sold on the market and there are no restrictions concerning particular categories of goods or people. This does not imply that goods in modern society do not perform all the three roles that we recognize in the example concerning the Sianes, but rather that exchange value hides under its veil all the other meanings, roles and functions performed by things. There are no longer clear boundaries. All is mixed up and confused - exchange value becomes the only value immediately perceived, all the other meanings and characteristics of the objects are no longer clearly grasped. This implies that the products of human work have lost the material and concrete qualities typical of a thing made to fulfil a particular need, to submit to a particular obligation, and their enjoyment is no longer possible if we do not confront the necessity of accumulation and exchange, if we do not pass through the market.

## The problem of objectification

Marx deals explicitly with this transformation of the products of human labour in commodities when he asserts that:

> "A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. ... So far as it is a use value, there is nothing mysterious about it, whether we consider it from the point of view that by its properties it satisfies human needs or that it first takes on these properties as the product of human labour. It is absolutely clear that by his activity, man changes the forms of the materials of nature in such a way as to make them useful to him. Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands on the ground, but in

> relation to all other commodities it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will".(5)

This mystic character that the product of work takes on as soon as it attains the form of commodity - according to Marx - is due to the fact that things no longer represent only the use-value, but the use-value itself becomes at the same time the material support of the exchange-value. Since commodity presents itself in this double form of utility and value carrier, it is something abstract and immaterial. It is from this double significance of the produce of human labour, whereby it shows one side or the other without giving the individual the possibility to grasp both at the same time, that the fetish character of the commodity emerges.

It has been correctly argued(6) that Marx does not devote enough attention to the concept of utility, but he takes for granted that there is a clear and direct relation between human needs and use value of goods. But this relation is not at all clear and direct. We have to consider the symbolic value that every culture, every society attributes to objects, making them into important carriers of meanings. Marx in his approach to this question is very much within a utilitarian perspective that considers the enjoyment of use-value as the natural and the original relation between human beings and objects. In this way, he misses the opportunity to take into consideration a relation between individual and things that goes beyond the enjoyment of use-value and the accumulation of exchange-value.

In spite of this fact, Marx's analysis of the fetish character of commodities lays stress on important aspects of the relationship that connects individuals and things in modern society and has extraordinary similarities with the psychoanalytical explanation of fetishes that are the objects of perversion. There is indeed something more than a

terminological commonality between the two different phenomena: in the case of commodities there is an overlap between exchange value and use value, in the case of fetishistic perversions there is an overlap between a particular symbolic value and the normal meaning and use of the object. And as the fetishist is never able to possess completely his fetish since it is the emblem of two contrasting realities (the fact that the woman does not have a penis and the refusal to acknowledge the absence - if we follow Freud's analysis), in the same way the individual who possesses a commodity is not able to enjoy it at the same time as utility and as value. According to Marx the fetishist character of commodities derives from understanding as autonomous reality what actually is the symbolic expression of a relationship among individuals and from giving to the first the social effectiveness and meaning which pertains to the second one. To Marx the fetishist denies a reality, to Freud an absence.

Marx was in London when in 1851 the first World Exhibition was opened in Hyde Park, and he may have been struck and influenced by it in his analysis of the fetish character of commodities.(7)

Indeed this and the following exhibition (Paris 1867) were among the first events that attracted a large number of people to specific places for the purpose of admiring industrial commodities:

> "World exhibitions were places of pilgrimage to the the fetish commodity. 'All Europe has set off to view goods' 'L'Europe s'est deplacee pour voir des marchandises) says Taine in 1855. .... The world exhibitions glorified the exchange value of commodities. They created a framework in which their use value receded into the background. They opened up a phantasmagoria into which people entered in order to be distracted. The entertainment industry made that easier for them by lifting them to the level of commodity. They yielded to its manipulations while enjoying the alienation from themselves and from others".(8)

In a context like that of the Exhibition the use value of the object has almost completely disappeared while that of exchange becomes the dominant and prevalent one. In the exhibitions the objects are shown to be enjoyed only by looking at them, not by using them. One could perhaps hypothesize that the period in which these exhibitions took place constituted a sort of threshold separating two different ways of perceiving and relating to objects. This is suggested quite convincingly by Benjamin when he explains the meaning of Grandeville's art:

> "The world exhibitions erected the universe of commodities. Grandeville's fantasies transmitted commodity character on to the universe. They modernized it..... The literary counterpart of this graphic Utopia was represented by the books of Fourier's follower, the naturalist Toussenel.
>
> Fashion prescribed the ritual by which the fetish Commodity wished to be worshipped, and Grandeville extended the sway of fashion over the objects of daily use as much as over the cosmos. In pursuing it to its extremes, he revealed its nature. It stands in opposition to the organic. It prostitutes the living body to the inorganic world. In relation to the living it represents the rights of the corpse. Fetishism which succumbs to the sex-appeal of the inorganic, is its vital nerve; and the cult of the commodity recruits this to its service".(9)

The circulation of a wide range of industrial commodities, the progressive enlargement of the public who had access to them, the penetration of fashion in a field (say of everyday objects like forks, combs, etc.), that had not been touched by it before, must have caused a certain uneasiness in the most perceptive witnesses of this process. Grandeville has certainly been one of them, Baudelaire another. It is not by chance that the phenomenon of 'dandyism' and the Beau Brummell style were very much appreciated by Baudelaire. The Dandy style is indeed the most conspicuous example of a relation toward things that goes beyond the use-value and the exchange-value of objects: the dandy deprives the object of its commodity character

and places it at the level of a god to be venerated. To be fashionable and to occupy one's life with absolutely useless activities is the dandy's religion. The dandy wants to redeem himself and things from the shameful condition of commodities. He wants to establish a new relationship with objects; by rejecting the conspicuous and the opulent element that characterizes the relation with things of the upper classes. His elegance is sober, simple, the dandy does not want to attract the attention of the passers by. His refinement, under the veil of simplicity, gives him the possibility to distinguish from the others. Lord Brummell, the forerunner of dandyism, seems to embody all the aspects that the bourgeois of his time hated most in the aristocrats: an unrestrained selfishness, an absolute absence of work ethic, an irreverent attitude towards morality. But Brummell, in spite of being a model for the noblemen who emulate and admire him, isolates and distances himself also from his aristocratic fans and followers by his cool and arrogant behaviour and narcissism. Once he acquires his standing among the aristocracy, he immediately begins to show an absolute indifference for the principles on which the aristocratic world is based: he despises titles of nobility, prebends, etc.(10). The dandy denies and refuses all the most important institutions and values of society of his time: work, family, money, etc., his lifestyle is opposed to them; unproductive, without stable personal relationships, careless about time and money.

The Marxian analysis of the fetish character of commodities is based upon the presupposition that no object can have a value if it is not useful, that is to say if it does not satisfy human needs. Therefore to Marx production should be directed toward the use-value and not to the exchange-value. The enjoyment of use-value is hence opposed to the accumulation of exchange-value, as something natural is opposed

to something aberrant. The dandy, on the contrary, wants to free the object both from its use-value and its exchange-value in order to place it into a sort of sacred position, he wants to annihilate his own needs, his own wishes, he wants to become an object. It is in a similar way - through the dehumanization of the work of art in the sense of reducing the artist himself to the condition of a commodity facing another commodity - that Baudelaire tries to overcome the problem of the objectification and reification of human relations and of art as a product of human labour: "I am an old boudoir full of faded roses'. (Baudelaire, Les Foules)

Sacrifice, waste, unproductive expenditure

It is through this process of transcendence of the use-value and the exchange-value of commodities that the individual tries to free himself from the objectification of human life. This attempt to destroy any kind of utility and exchange-value of objects has some aspects in common with the archaic forms of economy which show quite clearly that human activity related to objects is not limited only to production, conservation and consumption. Several examples in which 'archaic man' follows different criteria can be found: those of destruction and unproductive wastage. I am referring here to such phenomena as the rituals of prodigality, the sacrifices and the potlach, that cannot be explained if a utilitarian approach is used. As has been already suggested Mauss' analysis of sacrifice and of archaic forms of exchange shows that in 'primitive' societies the object is never only an object of use but is endowed with a power, a mana, and is deeply connected with the religious sphere. The sacred character embodied in an object is not implicit in its intrinsic qualities but it is added to it. Therefore when a thing loses this sacred character

rituals of sacrifice (destruction) and of giving with prodigality (gift, potlach) restore it. Sacrifice is therefore a very important kind of relation connecting individuals and things; and certainly this way of relating is not less relevant than that of utility.

The concept of sacrifice is indeed strongly present in every culture and it is questionable whether it can be subordinated to that of utility. By the sacrifice of wealth, of people, of animals, of things, the individual establishes the social structure of a society, values and beliefs, he establishes relations with gods and other individuals. In the rituals of sacrifice there are two important elements: the first one is the communion that takes place not only between human beings and gods - to whom the sacrifice is dedicated - but also among the individuals taking part in it. Durkheim, Mauss and Weber(11) emphasize the importance of this element. Sacrifice must be understood as a communion, a ceremony of eating together - of alimentary communication - which is important in order to produce a fraternal and solid communality between the sacrificers and between them and the god.

The second but no less important element is that of donation, of giving. The sacrifice in fact implies both an act of communion and an act of renunciation. It is a mistake to undervalue the importance of donation in the sacrifice(12) since it is not true that donation comes as a consequence of the principle of property that materializes everything it touches and alters the idea of sacrifice making of it a market between gods and human beings. This element of giving is in fact always present in every sacrifice: the sacrificer communicates with his god by giving an offering to him. The two elements are interdependent and both are fundamental aspects of the sacrificial act.

The idea of sacrifice and that of unproductive expenditure are very important in Bataille's work[13] as two relevant characteristics of human attitude toward things. In "La notion de dépense" he claims that

> "classical economics thought that primitive exchange took place under the form of barter; it had no reason to suppose that a way of acquisition such as that of exchange could have had as source not the need of acquisition ... but the opposite need: that of destruction and loss".[14]

According to Bataille - who relies to a large extent on Mauss' analysis - the gift and not the barter has been the archaic form of exchange; and together with the gift the conspicuous destruction of wealth (i.e. potlach) has been another very important aspect of primitive forms of exchange.

I am not concerned in this context with the problem of verifying Bataille's assertion; I want only to emphasize the importance - too often forgotten - of sacrifice and of economic loss in the analysis of the relationship that connects the individual with things.

> "It is the attribution of a positive quality to the loss - from which nobility, honour and status derive - that gives to this institution (the gift) its significance value".[15]

Wealth is oriented to loss in the sense that the power of a rich person is characterized and made visible as the power of wasting. Honour and power are linked to the destruction of wealth and not necessarily to the accumulation of wealth for accumulation's sake. We can find several examples of this kind of conspicuous and unproductive expenditure not only in the anthropological field but also in phenomena such as the evergetism of ancient Greek cities and of republican and imperial Rome, in the behaviour of noblemen and sovereigns in past centuries.[16]

In P. Veyne's extremely interesting work on evergetism,[17] it is possible to find several very striking examples of unproductive expenditure. In ancient Athens and Rome the idea of charity did not exist, while that of magnanimity was very important as a virtue of the rich; personal wealth was considered as a sort of fideicommissum, as a possession on which the whole community had some rights. Evergetism is to be understood as a private donation to the public's benefit. It implies that the community (the city mainly) expects the rich to contribute to public expenditure. There is not a formal obligation but a strong expectation: the individual will not deserve honour if he does not perform acts of evergetism. At the same time there will be a certain degree of competition among the rich to outdo one another in magnanimity. These gifts or donations are not given to particular sectors of the population only (like charity or the donations that are given with the purpose of helping specific groups or institutions - cultural, religious, etc.) - but to the whole society. Evergetes are individuals who help the community with their personal wealth, they are mecenates of public life.

Although evergetism stimulates a general consensus among the lower strata of the population, it can not be defined as a sort of social redistribution enacted under the pressure of class struggle, nor would it be correct to ascribe to this phenomenon a religious meaning. It has a civic one. But which, then, are the reasons that cause acts of evergetism? "Evergetes give in order to achieve social distance or for patriotic or civic ideals, in any case for an interest in this world", (that is, for motivations opposite to those of charity).[18]

In discussing evergetism it is necessary to emphasize the fact that honour, social distance, recognition of the individual's position in the community are all acquired through the extremely generous gift of

part of the person's wealth to the community, through individual sacrifice and the loss of personal belongings. To a certain extent it could be argued that to give a potlach, to make an act of evergetism, or to consume conspicuously are the same thing: in order to perform all these actions the person has to be rich and in all the three cases he wishes to make visible, to prove and to communicate his position in the social structure of prestige, he wishes to manifest the social distance that separates his standing from that of the majority. All these three acts have become common praxis in different societies because they satisfy not only the specific needs of those who give a potlach or an act of evergetism or consume conspicuously, but also some needs of the public. People expect these behaviours, they openly demand the circus or the feasts, they expect the rich to make their wealth visible. All these three forms of consumption are less relevant in order to obtain esteem from the others than to maintain one's own rank in the social hierarchy.

Though there are common elements among them, important differences cannot be overlooked. One of the most relevant is the fact that a potlach implies a total obligation since it is the whole community that participates in the ritual through the chief. The clan brings its contribution to the chief and he says "Since this will not be in my name. This will be in your name and you will become famous among the tribes when you will be told to give what you have for a potlach".(19) Every member gives his contribution and therefore the potlach is the ritual destruction of common goods performed by the chief (who must himself contribute conspicuously with personal possessions) on behalf of the whole community; evergetism, on the other hand, is characterized by the donation of particular goods or services to the whole community by a single member in order to thank his people for the honour done him by choosing him to hold an important public position

within the society.[20] In this case, furthermore, we are faced by an act of individual ritual prodigality within the individual's community, while potlach, on the contrary, takes place in an inter clan situation.

The phenomenon of conspicuous consumption is different from the previous ones because it is characterized by individual consumption for the individual's sake, it has nothing to do with conspicuous magnanimity and generosity, nor with the competitive destruction of wealth and goods in order to fulfil a spiritual constraint (potlach). Both potlach and evergetism imply the direct involvement of the whole community even if in different ways: in the case of potlach all members cooperate collecting goods to be sacrificed but, at the same time, they benefit from taking part in the ceremonies, feasts and exchanges that the potlach enacts. There is a rigid reciprocity, therefore what one clan has sacrificed will be - in a short time - sacrificed by members of another clan. The chief proves his power and prestige to his people, each clan member tries to outdo the others in a competition of generosity. Gifts bind together the giver and the receiver, "souls mingle with things, things with souls".[21] There is a clear obligation to give and indeed such an obligation is the very essence of the potlach. The chief who is not able to perform this ritual of prodigality loses his authority over the clan, the village and the family; he loses his rank among the chiefs, his social credibility. The evergete is not formally obliged to give a donation - if he were, this act would have the character of a redistributive tax - but he is strongly expected to do so by the population. It is exactly this particular character that gives to this phenomenon a special and peculiar quality.

The social pressures which drive the rich Greek or Roman citizen to pay for a monument or to offer a circus to the city are different from those which oblige the chief of a clan to give a potlach, and far stronger than those that induce conspicuous consumption in modern individuals. This is quite clear if we take into consideration the fact that evergetism is after all the reciprocation of a received privilege or honour. Certainly in it there is a fair part of ostentation, of self-realization, of expression of personal superiority, of a desire to overcome others in prodigality and munificence. Still, it is quite different from the phenomenon of conspicuous consumption that we know in modern society. Evergetism is different also from mecenatism since it involves munificence towards the whole society and not towards one sector only (i.e. the arts).

The materialistic character of modern society

In the modern market economy exchanges have mainly an acquisitive purpose. Conspicuous waste still has the meaning of maintaining and showing the person's position in the social hierarchy, his power of expenditure, but it no longer has the aim of destroying somebody else's wealth and degrading his position in the social structure of power and status when he is not able to reciprocate, to fulfil the obligation, to return the gift, or the destruction and wastage of goods, in an equivalent or possibly greater style as in the potlach. Nowadays unproductive expenditure in such a wide and conspicuous form as that characterizing the socio-economic structure of previous social organizations is no longer present. This does not mean that this form of spending has completely disappeared: it is still present although in a more limited and reduced form. In modern society it is no longer possible to find the orgiastic, the extremely generous and incommensurable aspect that characterized competition for power and wealth.

Notwithstanding this fact, we have to recognize that the principles of loss and of sacrifice are still present when we analyze the way in which individuals compete for status and prestige.

The difference between the contemporary manifestation of the phenomenon and previous ones lies in the fact that the forms that this competition takes on nowadays are far more discrete, private and limited than those we find in situations like potlach, medieval feasts, or the court life-style during the absolutist period. There is no longer <u>destruction</u> of wealth, there is no longer wastage (in the sense of the examples just listed) but <u>acquisition</u> of luxury goods that have the task of showing off our unnecessary expenditure capacity. Social standing is still connected - although not in the same way it used to be - with the fact that wealth must be partially sacrificed to unproductive social expenditures like entertainments, sports, etc., but social obligation towards expenditures for reasons of prestige is far less strong and compelling than it was in previous times.

The shift in the ways of competing for social standing, in the extent to which the individual sacrifices part or all of his wealth to this purpose, has paralleled the shift in the meaning of property, of possession. Indeed it can be argued that in a social environment characterized by conspicuous destruction of wealth and by a high level of sacrifice - as, for example, the societies in which rituals of destruction such as potlach were present - the emphasis must have been on the ability to accumulate in order to destroy, in order to give away, without any relation with productive investments, or accumulation for accumulation's sake. Greed must have been dis-associated from the idea of preserving, of keeping. The idea of saving and devoting the bulk of personal income to productive investments and only a small part of it to luxury and unproductive expenditures is after all quite

recent, and it is connected with the beliefs and values of the ascending and ascetic bourgeoisie.

Various factors explain why people in different social and historical periods devote part of their wealth to luxury expenditure, and the differences in the ways in which luxury manifests itself. If we dedicate a church to a saint or a library to the city, or if we buy a diamond, we make in all three examples a luxury expenditure, but there is quite a difference between the first two examples and the last.(22) It is possible to distinguish between an idealistic or altruistic kind of luxury and a materialistic or egotistic one. This second kind - according to Sombart - spread all over Europe during the period of the first capitalism (from Giotto to Tiepolo).(23) The sources of this materialistic luxury are to be found in the development of the modern state with the princely courts, in the diffusion of wealth, the formation of private patrimonies, and in the creation of big cities.

It is above all since the end of the XVII century that luxury expands among wider sectors of society. Proof of this can be found in an analysis of household bills and inventories which are very interesting documents and which give an understanding of the diffusion and the distribution of wealth among the population.(24)

The stratum of nouveaux riches that grew progressively had no other means but money to distinguish themselves, therefore they led a luxurious life based on a materialistic concept of luxury. If luxury in the middle ages showed itself mainly in a public context (tournaments, public banquets, feasts), with the spreading of wealth among those who were not of the noble class, it develops more and more widely in the private sphere, in the domestic life. In this way luxury loses the character of periodical event that it used to have not only in medieval times but also in manifestations such as potlach and evergetism.

This phenomenon reaches its apex in the eighteenth century:

> "The desire for luxury turned towards furniture: an infinity of wrought delicate pieces, less clumsy than the old furniture, adapted to the new dimensions of boudoir, drawing room and bed chamber, but also highly specialized to meet the new requirements of comfort and intimacy".(25)

At the same time this privatization of luxury brings as a consequence a progressive disappearance of the character of waste and destruction typical of previous luxury expenditures, and a progressive tendency towards what we call an acquisitive - or to follow Sombart's terminology - a materialistic character.

Besides - and this is quite relevant to us - if in the middle ages the most important manifestation of individual power and wealth was displayed by the ability to support a large retinue and several servants, luxury is later identified with the individual possession of luxury goods. This change has obviously been parallel to that in the mode of production, since the demand for these goods, even if for a long time quite limited (there were very few people who could afford these luxuries),required wider and faster production. In this sense Sombart is quite right when he stresses that "the objectification of luxury is extremely important for the development of capitalism".(26) As we said, luxury loses its periodical and ritual character and becomes a constant and continuous aspect of the life of the wealthy. The times of consumption of luxury goods get shorter, fashion makes its appearance and dictates its laws:

> "fashion is not only a matter of abundance, quantity, profusion. It also consists of making a quick change at the right moment. It is a question of season, day and hour. In fact one cannot really talk of fashion becoming all powerful before about 1700. At the time the world gained a new lease of life and spread everywhere with its new meaning: keeping up with the times".(27)

The individual wants to satisfy his wishes as quickly as possible. And the satisfaction is based mainly on the consumption of material things.

As long as wealth had been hereditarily transferred within the same household, the single individual enjoyed the material privileges linked to his rank without feeling an exclusive love for wealth. He was not afraid to lose it and he grew up in such a state without even imagining the possibility of a different way of living. As Tocqueville[28] rightly points out, in aristocratic societies material welfare is not the aim of the nobleman's life, it is a way of living. It is for this reason that the acquisitive character that marks contemporary life-style was absent or anyway weaker. In this respect it is of some interest to analyse the history of edicts and laws that tried to regulate the use of luxury goods within the society. Their analysis is interesting because it shows both the attempt of the aristocracy to oppose the rising of the nouveaux riches, and with them of different values and life-styles, and the progressive changes made by the aristocrats since, these legal restrictions, being generally unsuccessful, they were compelled to fight and compete with the rich bourgeois at the same level, on the same ground. It is clear that this shift in the aristocrats' life-style is not due only to the competition with the nouveaux riches but also - and perhaps above all - to the centralization of the state: this caused the birth of a court life-style that strongly stimulated competition among noblemen based on the display of conspicuous and luxury goods and on the access to particular privileges.[29]

In this respect it is important to emphasize an essential difference between aristocrats and bourgeois: that is the fact that the

bourgeois, even the richest, save part of their income and invest it, while the aristocrats dedicate all their income (land revenues mainly) to consumption without investing any money. In the aristocratic society any activity connected with "earning" was considered dishonourable. Therefore it is quite obvious that with the increasing role played by the bourgeois in society the character of waste, of glamorous consumption that characterized previous social systems has gradually disappeared. Luxury expenditure loses not only the orgiastic character typical of potlach but also the compulsory one it had in the absolutistic period.

The acquisitive character of modern society

In contemporary society the process of destruction of wealth and goods in the sense previously explained has almost disappeared and the ideas of waste and loss (in the sense of unproductive ways of spending money) are very often related to the acquisition of conspicuous items to be kept, preserved and displayed but not to be sacrificed, not to be destroyed. Actually if we think of the position of antiques among what is considered valuable, we see how strong is the emphasis on preserving, on keeping, on acquiring in order to display not to destroy, not to give with magnanimity. The sacrifice we make when we decide to acquire something that is not necessary for our survival (in social terms) is a sacrifice different from that of the individual who gets involved in a potlach, who makes an act of evergetism, who dedicates a church to a saint or a building to the city.

The former and modern idea of sacrifice is present in Simmel's definition of value and exchange:

> "Every value has to be acquired by the sacrifice of some other value. ... To recognize value as the result of a sacrifice discloses the infinite wealth that our life derives from this basic form. Our painful experience of sacrifice and our effort to diminish it leads us to believe that its total elimination would raise life to perfection. But here we overlook that sacrifice is by no means always an external obstacle, but is the inner condition of the goal itself and the road by which it may be reached. We divide the enigmatic unity of our practical relation to things into sacrifice and gain, obstruction and attainment, and since the different stages are often separated in time we forget that the goal would not be the same without impediments to overcome".(30)

The fact that sacrifice is defined as a 'painful experience' implies a definition of giving - also in the case of giving to obtain something else - as something opposed to the individual's instinct and a definition of keeping or acquiring as positive qualities. Simmel's analysis of this phenomenon is very much influenced by a way of understanding exchange through cost benefit analysis, as a situation in which the individual has to consider merely his personal convenience to acquire or to give away a product and in which the counterpart does just the same and no other feelings are involved. In this sense Simmel's approach to the problem is very close to that of marginal utility economics.

The definitions of value and exchange that we find in Simmel's work are those of the modern bourgeois individual who is supposed to behave in an impersonal and objective way, who has no longer deeply solidary relations with other individuals but an individualistic attitude. As has been argued, Mauss' approach to the problem of exchange is completely different.(31) According to him giving is something more than an evaluation of the convenience to sacrifice something in order to attain something else, giving, in fact, is an extension of the self and

therefore the obligation to give is strictly connected and tied up with the notion itself of social bonds and roles. It is just for this reason that a refusal to give is a refusal of friendship and alliance, it is the equivalent of a declaration of war. The exchange of gifts, "of things which are to some extent parts of the persons" are at the same time exchanges of objects and of acts endowed with social meaning. The gift is an extension of the giver's personality, for this reason it is not inert, it is not neutral. Mauss thought that this particular character of exchange had been progressively weakened by the development of modern economic life, by the progressive predominance of the exchange value on all the others, by the progressive orientation of the individual toward a rational and calculating attitude in relation to the external world, by the cold and impersonal character of individual relations, by the competition that marks our relationships with others. However we could still grasp a symbolic meaning in exchanges since irrational and emotional behaviours and feelings quite often determine our way of relating to others, of entering an exchange. The motivations according to which one exchanges, buys, sells, destroys or accumulates cannot be explained only according to the rationality of the market, according to the economic convenience to sell or purchase.

Psychological and psychoanalytical analyses of modern individuals seem to confirm Mauss' approach to the problem:

> "to the extent that "our possessions are projection carriers, they are <u>more</u> than what they are in themselves, and function as such. They have acquired several layers of meaning and are therefore symbolical, though this fact seldom or never reaches consciousness. .... When therefore I give away something that is "mine", what I am giving is essentially a symbol, a thing of many meanings; but owing to my unconsciousness of its symbolic character, it adheres to my ego, because it is part of my personality.

> Hence there is, explicitly or implicitly, a personal claim bound up with every gift. There is always an unspoken "give that thou mayest receive".(32)

Simmel too seems to recognize a symbolic value in the relationships which connect individuals and things when he claims that:

> "It is a basic fact of mental life that we symbolize the relations among various elements of our existence by particular objects; these are themselves substantial entities, but their significance for us is only as the visible representatives of a relationship that is more or less closely associated with them. Thus, a wedding ring, but also every letter, every pledge, every official uniform, is a symbol or representative of a moral or intellectual, a legal or political relationship between men. Every sacramental object embodies in a substantial form the relation between man and his God. The telegraph wires that connect different countries, no less than the military weapons that express their dissension, are such substances; they have almost no significance for the single individual, but only with reference to the relation between human groups that are crystallized in them. .... The projections of mere relations into particular objects is one of the greatest accomplishments of the mind; when the mind is embodied in the objects, they become a vehicle for the mind and endow it with a livelier and more comprehensive activity. The ability to construct such symbolic objects attains its greatest triumph in money. For money represents pure interaction in its purest form, it makes comprehensible the most abstract concept, it is an individual thing whose essential significance is to reach beyond individualities".(33)

The symbolic character that Simmel describes and discusses is quite different from that present in Mauss' analysis of the gift or in Jung's discussion of 'Transformation Symbolism in the Mass'. What Simmel calls symbolic significance is in fact the objectification of a relationship in an object; it is the freezing and crystallization of social relationships and their embodiment in a thing that becomes their emblem. The object is dead, is inert, since it is not the extension of the giver's personality; it is just the marker of a relationship. If we follow Simmel's analysis we can

replace the emblem (i.e. the wedding ring) with another one and the symbolic significance that is embodied in it will still be present; if we take into consideration Mauss's analysis this will not be possible since what gives the object its particular meaning is the relation between the persons who actually exchanged it and not the objectification of a relation. The lost gift cannot be replaced by an identical object bought on the market since its particular meaning depends upon the relation between persons, not upon the cultural meaning embodied in the object. The two interpretations do not exclude each other but are complementary. Simmel deals with a cultural meaning given to the object that in fact transforms it into an emblem, a sign, that is understandable by every member of that particular culture; Mauss deals with a subjective personal meaning that makes the object a symbol of a bond, of a relation between particular individuals. Simmel's analysis of money and of modern culture is very close - in this respect - to Marx's analysis of the fetish character of commodities: as the fetishism of commodities implies the covering and neglection of use-value, thus objectification entails the obscurity of its significance. Exchange-value dominates the individual life and money has become the form in which objects are expressible: 'the significance of money is substituted for the significance of things' and this process has permeated every form of exchange, even the most personal and private ones such as that of gift giving:

> "Presents are often valued only if the giver has spent money on them; to make a present out of one's own possessions seems to be shabby, illegitimate and inadequate. .... the awareness of a sacrifice on the part of the giver develops in the receiver only if the sacrifice is made in terms of money". (34)

I think it is important - at this point - to emphasize that notwithstanding the fact that the fetish character of commodities has covered up all the other significances, values and roles that things have and perform in our lives, they are still important and relevant for the individuals. The problem is that this process of objectification has made them more complex and their understanding more difficult. Objects convey at the same time different meanings and values and perform different roles. Today we no longer have at our disposal rigid distinctions and boundaries between things that fulfil a particular role and things that perform another one. Unlike Siane people, who have a diversified system of communication and of exchange, in modern western culture we can use a single channel to convey all our messages; and there is little doubt that the exchange value, which has in money its expression, has become the essential vehicle we have at our disposal.

This process has brought as a consequence the fact that in modern society it is more and more difficult to perceive the complexity of our relation to things, their significance in our life; all tend to be confused with the exchange value of commodities, with their monetary expression, with the material possibility for us to acquire a particular product, to sacrifice part of our income in order to achieve something. This fact has produced also a confusion in the perception of needs, in the understanding of wants. Modern industrial society with its emphasis on impersonal relationships, individualistic behaviour, competition, working relations between employer and employee based on strictly economic grounds, is a clear manifestation of this phenomenon. But nevertheless it is important not to underrate the individual's capacity to react against this trend. We have seen what was the Dandy's reaction and answer to this problem, Baudelaire's

attempt to deny and oppose the objectification of art; other less glamorous attempts can be found in the life of normal individuals.

In this sense Mauss is right when he claims that "homo-oeconomicus is not behind us, but before, like the moral man, the man of duty, the scientific man and the reasonable man".(35) He is right when he emphasizes that although our relationships with fellow human beings and with the external world have generally changed, still the modern individual has not been reduced to the state of a thing facing another thing but tries to assert himself as a human being.

It is often in the peripheral areas of our everyday life, in the marginal activities and hobbies, in our private contexts that we try to establish a satisfactory relationship with the world, that we try to recover aspects, feelings and meanings we have been gradually deprived of. If we analyze in this perspective, phenomena such as the diffusion and the expansion of do-it-yourself activities, the increasing interest in crafts- (weaving, pottery, leatherwork, etc.), in collecting, etc., we realize that all these are attempts to find an answer to a feeling of uneasiness and dissatisfaction that permeates the existence of modern individuals. These are attempts to satisfy needs and wants that do not find any fulfilment in the public life of the individual. In this way we try to avoid the objectification that permeates our relationships and our lives. From this point of view it is important to pay more attention, than is usually given them, to these residual activities. They in fact constitute a way of relating to things that tries to avoid the impersonality of the market, the objectification of relationships, the overlap of different meanings and their confusion.

NOTES:

1. See for example R. Firth, Primitive Polynesian Economy, (II ed.) London: Routledge, 1965; M. Sahlins, Stone Age Economics, Chicago: Aldine, 1972; W.R. Bascon, "Ponapean Prestige Economy", Southwestern Journal of Anthropology, vol.4, 1948, pp.211-221; ibidem,"Social Status, Wealth and Individual Differences among the Yoruba", American Anthropologist, vol. 53, 1951, R.F. Salisbury, From Stone to Steel,Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962.

2. R.F. Salisbury, From Stone to Steel, cit.

3. Ibidem, p.103.

4. Ibidem, p.139.

5. K. Marx, Das Kapital, Capital, Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1976, vol. I, pp.163-64.

6. On this topic see J. Baudrillard, Le Systeme des objets, Paris: Gallimard, 1968, ibidem, Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe, Paris: Gallimard, 1972; ibidem, La societe de consommation, Paris: Gallimard, 1974; M. Sahlins, Culture and Practical Reason, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976.

7. This interpretation is suggested by G. Agamben, Stanze, Torino: Einaudi, 1977.

8. W. Benjamin, Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism, London: New Left Books, 1973.

9. Ibidem, p.165.

10. See for example J. Barbey d'Aurevilly, Du dandysme et de George Brummel, Paris, 1845; W. Jesse, The Life of George Brummel,Esq., London, 1844; G. Scaraffia, Dizionario del Dandy, Bari: La Terza, 1981.

11. M. Weber, Economy and Society, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978, vol. I, pp.422-24; E. Durkheim, Les formes elementaires de la vie religeuse, Paris: F. Alcan, 1912; H. Hubert et M. Mauss, Mélanges d'histoire des religions, Paris: Alcan, 1909.

12. This is what W. Smith argues in : The Religions of the Semites, Edinburgh, 1889, and in "Sacrifice" in Encyclopaedia Britannica, 10th edition, Edinburgh, 1875-1903.

13. G. Bataille, "La notion de depense", La Critique Sociale,n. 7, 1933, pp.7-15.

14. Ibidem, p.10.

15. Ibidem, p.11.

16. P. Veyne, Le pain et le cirque, Paris: Seuil, 1976; N. Elias, Die Höfische Gesellschaft, Darmstad und Neuwied: Luchterhand Verlag, 1975.

17. P. Veyne, op. cit.

18. This analysis of evergetism does not claim to be complete; it is indeed very partial and limited. I want only to emphasize few aspects of this very complex phenomenon that seem to be very relevant for our discussion.

19. F. Boas, "Ethnology of the Kwakiutl" in XXXV Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, VII, p.1340.

20. Acts of evergetism can be made also for different reasons but we are not concerned here with them in this context.

21. M. Mauss, The Gift, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969.

22. Obviously there is a difference also between the first two: the donation of a civic building to the city emphasizes worldly interest, while charity or the donation of a sacred building to the Church denote a preoccupation for the destiny of one's soul after death.

23. W. Sombart, Der Moderne Kapitalismus, Berlin: Duncker & Humbolt, 1916.

24. J.W. Halliwell, Some accounts of a collection of several thousand bills, in Accounts and Inventories,, London, 1852.

25. F. Braudel, Civilization and Capitalism, 15th - 18th century, vol. I; The Structures of Everyday Life, London: Collins, 1981, p.308.

26. W. Sombart, op. cit.; see above all the chapter on "needs of luxury".

27. F. Braudel, op. cit. p.317.

28. A. de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, London, 1840, see above all, chapter 10.

29. N. Elias, op. cit.

30. G. Simmel, The Philosophy of Money, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979, p.129.

31. M. Mauss, op. cit.

32. C.G. Jung, "Transformation symbolism in the mass", in V. de Laszo (ed.), Psyche and Symbol, A selection from the writing of C.G. Jung, New York: Doubleday, p.206.

33. G. Simmel, op. cit. p. 129

34. Ibidem, p. 269

35. M. Mauss, op. cit.

CHAPTER III

## CONSUMPTION GOODS: WHY DO PEOPLE BUY?

### Consumption as a communicative system

What makes the relationship between individual and objects in contemporary society a peculiar one is the fact that objects nowadays become the main channel through which to communicate to other people information about values, status, etc. They are signs through which we can assess the standing of people in society, the individuals' reference groups, their values and beliefs. As has been argued, in every form of society objects perform the function of making apparent the social differences among persons, and conspicuous consumption and waste often play an important role in confirming and legitimizing the social order, the structure of power. Wasteful expenditure has been indeed a traditional way in which the aristocrats affirmed their predominance. If therefore it is possible to argue that objects have always had a symbolic value it is also necessary to stress that in previous societies this quality was related to other elements such as ceremonials, lineage system, etc.

A particular feature of modern society is the fact that all these previous elements and systems have progressively disappeared and therefore objects, their ownership and conspicuous use, become the most important system of signs through which we are able to signal our and decipher other people's social position, determine our and other people's self perception. Through things we distinguish ourselves from others, and since rigid criteria of class and estate differentiation no longer exist[1] it is mainly through objects that we build a universal system of signs by which we analyze and understand the world.[2]

It is a universal system because - at least formally - everybody can own and use all the objects he wants, but, at the same time, this universalization carries as a consequence an oversimplification and reduction, since the individual is more and more defined only by his objects. This phenomenon induces the person to an endless process of differentiation from others through his belongings. It could be said that this universal system promotes anxious competition over material possessions.

In this framework, consumption activity becomes a way in which we relate not only to objects but also to other people, to the world, and therefore it must be studied and analyzed as an important and fundamental aspect of our society and not as a particular and limited sphere, as a well defined activity. What really makes unique the meaning of objects in our society is the fact that they become signs and in this way their functional utility, their use-value, tends to be less and less significant while they obtain their meaning from being consistent with the abstract system of signs in which they confront themselves with other objects. As Baudrillard says "at this point the object is consumed not in its materiality but in its differentiation".(3) If one accepts this interpretation it follows that our relation to objects, which have value for their quality of signs, is a relation quite different from that we have to objects which have value as concrete products. The logic according to which we buy and consume objects is that of the manipulation of signs, it is not that of need and satisfaction. It is in this perspective that we can speak of an endless process of consumption since there are no limits to this competition through signs.

People have always owned, wasted, exchanged in any kind of society and objects have always had a symbolic value; in this way they have

enforced and legitimized the authority of the leaders, of the sorcerers. What has changed in modern society is the fact that things no longer display the authority and the power of the person to whom they belong, by whom they are wasted; they just classify and establish the hierarchical structure of purchasing power. Today everybody can have a crown as long as he can afford to buy it, therefore the crown has lost the meaning of symbolic representation of power and the ascriptive values it possessed in different social and historical contexts.

Moreover, objects have been gradually losing the character of sacred things that in previous societies was connected with all objects that symbolized power (religious, magical, political) and authority. That sacredness made people experience their social ties more strongly. Nowadays this sacredness is less and less present. We can still perceive its presence - but in a faint and vague form - only in rare and extra-ordinary situations. Shils and Young in the essay on 'The meaning of Coronation' give us an example of it.

> "The coronation of Elizabeth II, like any other great occasion which in some manner touches the sense of the sacred, brought vitality in family relationships. The coronation, much like Christmas, was a time for drawing closer the bond of the family, for reasserting its solidarity, and for re-emphasizing the values of the family - generosity, loyalty, love - which are at the same time the fundamental values necessary for the well-being of the larger society". (4)

Rituals and sacredness are more and more marginal in our society. The significance of objects from this perspective is decreasing. Things are less and less able to render visible the ties that are at the basis of the social system. Thus, notwithstanding, I think that we can still speak of a sacred meaning of objects when we refer to the special ties that we have with certain objects, or when we think of the exchange of gifts that, just because they are gifts, put

themselves outside the territory and the logic of economic exchange, of exchange of equivalents.(5) The fact is that nowadays these are exceptions, while the "normal" relation between individuals and things tends to be more and more a relationship based on the objects' property of classifying the hierarchical structure, of emphasizing values and standing. This is what characterizes our society as a society of consumption. From this perspective it seems interesting and useful to our purpose to understand how the phenomenon of consumption has been studied and explained. Through the analysis of this literature we can in fact grasp a better understanding of the motivations, reasons and needs which induce contemporary individuals to surround themselves with objects.

Consumption goods and needs satisfaction.

The analyses social scientists have produced on consumption reflect the characteristics this phenomenon takes on in contemporary society. There are several different approaches to the problem of consumption, each contributing in some way to a better understanding of the question why do people buy. A question that is of essential importance if we are to answer the more general problem of the meaning of objects in everyday life. By analyzing the literature on consumption it is possible to point out several different approaches. I do not intend to review the literature on this subject but only to summarily analyze some contributions which shed light on problems relevant to understand the meaning and role things play in everyday life.

The utilitarian approach.

The traditional economic model - grounded in utilitarian theory - is based on the presupposition that the individual buys and consumes according to his convenience. Implicit in this idea is the concept that human beings have needs and their aim is the satisfaction of them; consumption is equivalent to the process of needs satisfaction. Since human beings are never satisfied, this process of consumption is endless:

> "accomplishment tends to raise levels of aspiration. Having achieved what we want, we often raise our sights. It is not the gratification of needs but their failure and frustration which make us renounce further goals and ambitions".(6)

Goods - in this theoretical framework - cease performing any function, playing any role as soon as they are bought; since in this way the need is satisfied and the utility of the objects disappears. The aim of human action is the search for welfare, for happiness, which is the satisfaction of needs. The individual works, produces, in order to be able to consume. The satisfaction is only in consumption not in work; production therefore is dependent on and subordinated to consumption.

The fact that consumption is identified with needs satisfaction, implies a restrictive conception of needs since they - in this framework - find expression only in the form of goods, of commodities, whereas they manifest themselves in a process of indefinite development of which consumption is only an aspect. There is no definition nor discussion of what needs are and of what satisfaction means. Goods are considered products for the satisfaction of needs, for consumption. There is no attempt to verify whether they perform different roles besides that of satisfaction of individual and personal exigencies, nor an attempt to analyze these concepts. There is no attempt to

analyze and decipher needs, their complexity, the way in which they manifest themselves, the different modalities of satisfaction.(7)

As Hirsch points out:

> "satisfaction is derived from relative position alone, from being in front, or from others being behind. Command over particular goods and facilities in particular times and conditions becomes an indicator of such precedence in its emergence as a status symbol. Where the sole or main source of satisfaction derives from the symbol rather than the substance, this can be regarded as pure social scarcity.
>
> Such satisfaction may also be associated with absolute physical scarcities. Thus to at least some people, part of the attraction of a Rembrandt, or of a particular landscape is derived from its being the only one of its kind; as a result, physically scarce items such as these become the repository of pure social scarcity also".(8)

To limit the analysis of consumption goods to that of the individual's satisfaction is inadequate, since goods perform different roles besides this one and anyway satisfaction is not absolute and individual but relative and social.

Concepts such as utility, scarcity and value cannot be uncritically used but must be discussed and analyzed since it is the cultural system which defines the utility of goods, their exchange value and the relationship between value and scarcity. Scarcity in fact does not automatically imply an increase in the value of the goods. What we spend for an ox tongue, for example, is proportionally less than for a steak even if from a single animal we obtain only one tongue but several steaks. Social and cultural elements determine the value and utility of goods. If the analysis is limited to the level of the single individual, some relevant aspects of the problem are missed. The utilitarian approach neglects important elements in the explanation of consumption activity; in particular it fails to grasp other uses goods have besides that of satisfaction of specific needs.(9)

Induced needs.

A different interpretation of consumption is available in that sociological tradition where an important weight is given to the individual's need of conformity with reference groups, with social values. Riesman's analysis of 'other-direction', that is the tendency of individuals to be increasingly influenced by their peers, is probably the most popular contribution to this perspective.(10) The relationship between individual and objects present in the utilitarian model is replaced, in sociological analysis, by the relation between individuals and norms; mainly the norm of conformity, of 'keeping up with the Joneses'.(11) While in the utilitarian model the individual is considered essentially free and independent, according to this second model he is dependent on a society that conditions personal choices and creates new needs. This interpretation is quite evident in the work of authors such as Packard, Dichter, and in Galbraith's economic version.(12)

In these works there is present an image of society that in a way reduces the individual consumer to a sort of puppet, obedient to the will of the producers. Implicit in these analyses there is the idea that if hypothetically producers did not stimulate consumption on purpose and create new needs, it would be possible to reach a sort of equilibrium between wants and needs. As has been said, it is restrictive to identify needs with goods, with commodities. It is meaningless to speak of a single need related to a single good since the reasons for which people want goods are more complex and needs constitute an indefinite system that cannot be satisfactorily related to the process of consumption which has to do only with the moment of satisfaction and often, as we shall see, with a very precarious satisfaction. In fact not all our needs can be satisfied through the

consumption of goods. Consumption, therefore, may often constitute a palliative which soothes temporarily our uneasiness, anxiety, etc., which cannot find a real and complete attainment. To speak of a situation of equilibrium does not make sense; it is not possible to consider needs as commodities, as one as the reciprocal of the other; as Riesman pointed out the criterion according to which we want objects is 'objectless craving'.

Objects as symbols of status.

Through objects people define themselves as part of a community, a group, a society, a culture. Through objects people communicate to others their position in society, their values. In every social environment objects play these roles, but in industrial society they become more important as markers of the individual's standing since the person has no longer at his disposal other systems (birth, caste, etc.) to define his position in the social structure. Things, their display and ownership, constitute an essential communicative system. Through the consumption of goods both a system of social differentiation and a system of social integration are built. Through things, in fact, individuals differentiate themselves from others, but since objects are also expressions of the culture in which they are produced they, in this sense, constitute a common denominator, an element of integration among the people who use them. Goods constitute a basic device for making sense of the world around us, they are the common ground on which individuals interact and engage in rituals.

Consumption is not an activity pursued only in order to reach satisfaction and enjoyment; it is an activity of communication, the person does not consume for himself, for his pleasure, but for what consumption means in general terms in his relation with other indiv-

iduals. It is a social activity, an activity that has sense only in terms of relation among individuals.

Veblen's analysis of the leisure class still remains, in this respect, a very important contribution to the understanding of consumption and more generally of the uses of objects.(13) His concept of vicarious consumption shows very clearly that people do not buy, possess things for private enjoyment but to make evident their standing and power in the community. This concept is very useful for the understanding of leisure, that must be considered as another compulsory activity that finds its sense only if considered as a social 'occupation'. Veblen aims to demonstrate that objects have always had - even in the most primitive forms of society - the quality of distinguishing signs which enabled individuals to attribute to things specific qualities, specific meanings that became attributes of their possessors. According to him goods have little to do with the satisfaction of needs and their physiological utility:

> "The motive that lies at the root of ownership is emulation, and the same motive of emulation continues active in the further development of all those features of the social structure which this institution of ownership touches. The possession of wealth confers honour, it is invidious distinction'.(14)

This process becomes progressively more common and predominant as the number of the members of the society increases, as social mobility becomes a common pattern of modern society, as other systems of identification and definition of people's position in the hierarchical structure disappear, and consequently it becomes difficult to appraise a person without referring to objects in their quality of status markers.

According to Veblen the wealthy people create life styles, patterns of consumption, through display and ostentation of particular expen-

sive goods, through vicarious consumption and leisure. The imitation of these models is the common attitude of the individuals who are immediately behind them in the ladder of social stratification and this imitation carries on down to the bottom of the system. Objects - in this theoretical framework - are considered in their quality as signs of prestige, of authority. A person is defined by the objects he uses, displays and possesses. Appearance replaces reality: we are what the objects we display show, what we appear to be. It is extremely useful to analyze the function performed by objects as positional goods, as status symbols, because in this way the social character of consumption and the basic importance of the role it plays in the interaction among individuals stands out very clearly. There is in fact quite a difference between raising our standing while our friends and acquaintances remain at the previous level and the contemporaneous raising of everybody. The value and the differentiating meaning of positional goods, that is of those objects or services that make social differences evident, are relative since they result from the comparison with other consumption goods.(15)

Two objections can be moved to this approach to consumption and more specifically to Veblen's theory.

In the first place, it does not pay enough attention to the fact that different models of economic and consumption behaviour correspond to different social contexts. The bourgeois concepts of equilibrium between debit and credit, of productive investment, of accumulation, saving, profit, are completely unknown and absent in previous social organizations. From this point of view Polanyi's works on the role of economics in ancient societies shed light on very important aspects.(16) As Elias correctly points out in his book on absolutistic courts(17) Veblen seems to be still largely influenced by

bourgeois values which he takes for granted and applies uncritically to the analysis of the economic behaviour of different societies. But in so doing Veblen does not perceive the social constraints that strongly influence consumption activity aimed to prestige. I am not denying that in contemporary industrial society, within certain limits, a social pressure induces individuals to conspicuous consumption and to competition through the purchasing and the display of status symbols. But it seems important to me to emphasize the substantial difference that exists between this conspicuous expenditure and those typical of different periods of our history or of different social and cultural contexts. In fact contemporary forms of conspicuous consumption have a far more private and individualistic character than they had, for example, in the absolutistic court societies. The link between consumption and the struggle for power in modern society is definitely weaker. The social constraints on expenditure for prestige reasons are therefore far less strong.

In the second place Veblen's analysis is not very convincing when he asserts that the upper class creates life-styles which are progressively taken up by individuals of lower standing. Within the upper class itself there are in fact diversified models of consumption that in their own turn distinguish the various strata of the bourgeoisie. The big merchant has different tastes and consumes differently from the industrialist, and different again are the consumption habits of a businessman, of a professional. As Bourdieu points out(18) life-styles depend upon a considerable number of variables such as social origin, economic capital (which influences differently consumption behaviour according to whether it is inherited or personally achieved), educational capital (which can derive only from the school system or also from socialization within the family), place of residence,

(big city, agricultural setting, etc.).

Life-styles are not created by the élite and progressively transmitted to the lower strata. Tastes, consumption models, are not mechanically transmitted from a social group to another following a pyramidal hierarchical order. Social differentiation does not manifest itself essentially in a conscious and endless competition based on status; it is above all an unconscious process. Social differentiation is produced and maintained in the most private and personal behaviours (such as the way in which one eats, the books one reads, the music one listens to, etc.), in the activities one perceives as the most significant and creative.

Goods as differentiating elements

The phenomenon of fashion is a demonstration of the role goods play in differentiating people, in creating visible distinctions among individuals. According to Simmel fashion represents an anxious effort of élite groups to set themselves apart by introducing ephemeral insignia to which corresponds a parallel effort by non élite classes to identify themselves with the upper strata by adopting these insignia.

> "Fashion .... is a product of class distinction and operates like a number of other forms, honor especially, the double function which consists in revolving within a given circle and at the same time emphasizing it as separate from others. ... Thus fashion on the one hand signifies union with those in the same class, the uniformity of a circle characterized by it, and, uno actu, the exclusion of all other groups'.(29)

According to Simmel fashion arose as a form of class differentiation in a relatively open class society. In societies where social mobility is absent fashion does not exist because there is no reason to distinguish oneself from others: everybody knows his place

and that of the other members of the society, in some cases specific laws or regulations prevent part of the population from using determinate objects,[20] from carrying on particular tasks, consuming certain food or drink,[21] In these situations our need to differentiate from others through fashion does not exist, but nevertheless objects perform the role of making visible the hierarchies, the structures of power, the social differences of the system. There is no fashion in the sense that these objects - signs of social differences - maintain their social meaning through centuries since the permission or prohibition to use them is dependent on specific, and in some cases, rigid rules that often find their origins in religion.[22] Therefore they lack the basic characteristic of fashion: the fast death: what is fashionable today cannot be fashionable tomorrow. The phenomenon of fashion is present only in open societies, where it becomes an important element. The presence of fashion therefore is the clearest sign of a society in which objects are used in a competition by means of differentiating markers.

Patterns of consumption and identification processes

Nowadays fashion is present in every aspect of consumption, either consumption of goods or of culture, of ideologies, etc. I believe it is restrictive to explain such a complex phenomenon only in terms of envious imitation in a contest of status competition as Simmel and Veblen seem to believe. They do not explain for which reasons envy should be the spring of human action.

As Alberoni points out, the aping of other people's patterns of consumption is not necessarily an expression of emulation and envious imitation of the better off.[23] In particular he emphasizes the important role played by the 'powerless élite' i.e. stars and famous

personalities of the film and the television world, etc., in creating models and patterns of consumption that are imitated and followed by people having different social positions. This concept is important because it shows that individuals do not identify themselves only with people of their same standing, or immediately next to them in the hierarchy of social stratification, but also with others who are completely different from them in what concerns both social position and occupation. The imitation of other people's patterns of behaviour and consumption is not necessarily based on the envious competition for social standing. This concept of 'powerless élite' contributes to clarify the role played by goods in building the individual's identity and the role of mass media in spreading new models of behaviour and patterns of consumption among the public.

As Burns says:

> "The primary characteristics of mass society are the gradual sealing of the individual from consensus through immediate relationships into a more self-regarding, autistic, form of living and the derivation of cultural norms from élite groups. By élite is meant not an aristocracy, or Wright Mills's oligarchic power élite, or even the minority of leaders of thought, values and behaviour - Bagehot's ten thousand -. The word is used here much more in the literal sense of the chosen, chosen in the way pin-ups are chosen". (24)

They are 'powerless' because they are an élite as long as people recognize them as such, that is to say as long as people consider them a valid model of self-identification. As soon as they are no longer adequate to this task they cease to be part of an élite, they are simply forgotten. This process of fast consumption of the 'powerless' élite is easily understandable if it is related to the phenomenon of fashion of which it is part. As has been said, fashion - by definition - cannot last. Modern industrial society based on rapid and endless consumption of every aspect of life, (information, culture, leisure,

goods, etc.) finds in the fashion system one of its most important and essential elements.

> "People who consciously follow the fashion do so because of the separate prestige of the élite group. The fashion dies not because it is the fashion and not because it has been discarded by the élite group but because it gives way to a new model more consonant with the developing taste. The fashion mechanism appears not in response to a need of class differentiation and class emulation but in response to a wish to be in fashion, to be abreast of what has good standing, to express new tastes which are emerging in a changing world". (25)

The fact that somebody buys objects that look like those used by a famous star and tends to dress in the same way, shows that in some respects, this celebrity is his model, and he wants other people to know that the celebrity is his reference for what concerns some patterns of behaviour. In this example emerges very clearly the role played by objects in communicating to others the ideal membership of a person in a world of conformity and differentiation that is not based on the criterion of standing, of hierarchical social position.

Objects are organized in a communicative system not only to emphasize and signal status but also membership or conformity to determinate values and cultural models. In some environments a book by Marx lying conspicuously on the bookshelf is intended to communicate the ideological adhesion of the owner to a given tradition, and whether or not the book has been read is not relevant at all. What really matters is the value of the object in its quality of sign that establishes attachment or affiliation to particular values, ideologies, groups.

We do not buy goods only in order to satisfy personal needs, nor because producers continuously induce new needs and wants, but also because goods are essential if we are to interact and communicate with others. If it is true that in modern industrial society objects often perform the function of 'status-symbols' it is important also to clarify

that anxiety concerning status is not the sole element to influence peoples' choices. Goods can be consumed in order to pursue other aims, and envy and competition are not always the motives according to which individuals decide to buy things. This applies even in an environment characterized by generalized competition among people, as in modern society. In this sense Veblen's idea of invidious distinction as the spring at the basis of consumer behaviour in every kind of social organization (from tribe to industrial one) is not always correct. Envy and competition are not necessarily eternally present in the interaction among individuals, emulation does not always imply envy of the model. Saying this I do not seek to undervalue the role that these feelings and attitudes play as incentives to consumption but to point out that there are other aspects and elements which must be taken into account. As Lasch points out:

> "The propaganda of consumption turns alienation itself into a commodity. It addresses itself to the spiritual desolation of modern life and proposes consumption as the cure. It not only promises to palliate all the old unhappiness to which flesh is heir; it creates or exacerbates new forms of unhappiness - personal insecurity, status anxiety, anxiety in parents about their ability to satisfy the needs of the young. Do you look dowdy next to your neighbors? Do you own a car inferior to theirs? Are your children as healthy?, as popular?, doing as well in school? Advertising institutionalizes envy and its attendant anxieties". (26)

Consumption goods as communicative channels.

For Baudrillard and Douglas & Isherwood, (27) consumption entails above all exchange not only of goods but also of cultural and social meanings. The 'utility' of an object must be understood not only in terms of use - value and exchange-value, but also in terms of the cultural meanings that govern the use of objects. Both contributions emphasize the essential role played by objects in making visible and defining the

values, rituals and hierarchies of society. Goods are basic elements that allow people to make sense of the world, to understand what is going on, and to establish and maintain social relations. They constitute an essential communicative system that allows the exchange of information among members of society.

Any approach that does not take into consideration these important aspects cannot grasp the real place that things have in our life: why, what and according to what criteria, we buy. If one analyzes objects and the way in which individuals use them from the perspective adopted by Baudrillard and Douglas & Isherwood, a redefinition of concepts such as goods, consumption and waste becomes necessary. At the same time explanations of the phenomenon of consumption, based on needs satisfaction and envious emulation as the most relevant elements to explain such behaviour, become inadequate.

Goods assume meaning as markers that communicate in a visible way the values of the person to whom they belong. The whole environment of objects must be considered in order to understand the logic according to which things are assembled together to communicate their message.

Consumption is seen as a process through which the individual constantly defines and re-defines a hierarchy of values, makes sense and establishes an order within what surrounds him. The logic of buying and consuming is that of manipulating markers, signs, it does not rest merely on the functionality of the single objects, or on the satisfaction of the single need.

In this theoretical framework the concept of waste loses its moralizing negative connotation. In specific situations conspicuous consumption and waste can find an explanation as essential elements of legitimation of the power structure of society, of social differences; as compulsory rituals that it is necessary to perform in order to

demonstrate that one fittingly occupies one's social position. It is not a matter of differentiating and distinguishing oneself from others but of demonstrating that social distinctions based on various criteria are still meaningful and perpetuating them. As has been already pointed out several examples of this attitude toward wealth and goods can be found both in the destruction of goods in potlach, in the luxurious and sumptuous display of medieval feasts, and in the conspicuous life-style of noblemen in past centuries. These ways of relating to objects cannot be interpreted as behaviour originated from a personal need for distinction nor from envious competition for status.

I think it is worth analyzing in some detail both Baudrillard and Douglas and Isherwood's contributions to the understanding of the phenomenon of consumption and of the roles and meanings of goods in society because of the wide perspectives and deep insight of these studies.

a) Baudrillard's analysis

According to Baudrillard the relationship that ties individuals to objects in modern society is peculiar and different from any kind of relationship present in other forms of society. In his opinion objects have always constituted a system through which people make sense of the environment in which they live, define their hierarchies of values, communicate them to others, etc. But in previous forms of society, this was coupled with, or subordinated to, other systems of social identification (status, caste, rituals, birth, etc.). In modern society, on the other hand, all these criteria have been gradually absorbed into a single one of social standing. Consequently, we now possess a system of communication, through the exchange of objects, that is accessible to everyone. It is universal. No one is formally excluded from the manipulation of any object. Formal constraints on ownership

are absent. This universalization has the further consequence of obliging the individual to define himself through objects, through his ability to manipulate them. In this way the individual is pushed toward a stronger and stronger wish to differentiate himself from others through things.

Differentiation is the basic element explaining why we buy and how we choose the goods with which to construct the environment we live in. Thus, in modern society, objects are not consumed primarily for their use-value but are manipulated as distinctive signs. Differentiation in Baudrillard's work, has two meanings, two ways of being expressed: conscious and unconscious. The first expresses itself in the conscious competition for status or standing. The second reflects the fact that the rules people apply in order to differentiate themselves are written in a code they are not personally aware of. Individuals may think they act freely and in accordance with their personal taste and need when they buy a certain item, but actually their choice follows the rule of the code.

Consumption activity is thus a form of sign manipulation. For objects to become consumption goods, i.e. objects-signs of difference, they must lose their connection with their practical utility. They become relevant because of their capacity for differentiation. In this sense the logic of consumption is the logic of difference. An object is exchanged with another because of their meaningful difference. All objects hide in themselves the logic on which relations among individuals are based.

According to Baudrillard when we speak about the relation between individuals and objects we must take into consideration that four different logics are present in it.(28)

They are:

1). the functional logic of use-value, of practical action, of utility;

2). the economic logic of exchange-value, of equivalence, of market;

3). the logic of symbolic exchange-value, of ambivalence, of the gift;

4). the logic of sign-exchange-value, of difference of standing, of consumption.

The functional logic is the only one present in an environment characterized by isolation, where exchanges and interactions are absent. Objects in this environment can only fulfil the function of physiological utility. Even if, for us, objects continue to have a use-value, i.e., their physiological function, this is subordinated to the making of distinctions. Consider, for example, a piece of antique furniture. It can have utility as a piece of furniture but the most important aspect is its age which conveys prestige: it is a prestigious sign. As to the logic of exchange-value and that of symbolic exchange-value, according to Baudrillard they cannot co-exist with that of sign exchange-value. The latter is the logic of difference and cannot co-exist with that of equivalence or ambivalence.

Baudrillard's concept of symbolic exchange-value is derived from Mauss' concept of gift. It is characterized by the fact that in this context the object becomes the manifestation of a relationship among individuals that commits them to a 'total obligation'. The object must be given and it must be reciprocated with a bigger one. The individuals are bound in a total relationship. The object in this context receives part of the donor's personality: 'the obligation attached to a gift itself is not inert. Even when abandoned by the giver, it still forms a part of him. ....'(29) This bond created by things is one between persons 'since the thing itself is a person or

pertains to a person. Hence it follows that to give something is to give part of oneself'.(30)

The exchanged object, in this context, has a symbolic value that is different from the mere functional or economic one.

The object in consumption society has become a sign, it no longer gets its meaning from the actual relation and interaction between people. Instead its meaning is grounded on a difference in relation to other object-signs. An example will illustrate this point:

Everybody needs a shelter (use-value) but according to one's place in the division of labour, in the social hierarchy, one has a council house, a hut, a flat, a palace, etc., (exchange-value). It is possible to have ambivalent feelings towards the place in which one lives because one was born there, built it, inherited it, etc., (symbolic exchange-value). It is also possible to regard the place in which one lives as a demonstration of standing, as any other object that is subject to the rules of fashion, as a sign of differentiation (sign exchange-value).(31)

Baudrillard argues that the logic of differentiation, of sign-value, is the predominant one in modern society and characterizes it as a consumption society. According to him the criterion of 'standing' tends to permeate every communication, every interaction. Relationships and differences become based on a system of object-signs and the reading of social position is more complicated and less visible than in previous forms of society. There has been a shift from a relation between persons in which the object exchanged abolishes itself in the relation that it has created and acquires from it a symbolic value, to a situation in which the object is no longer the expression of a relationship between individuals but something to be manipulated in its quality of sign, of difference. Baudrillard gives the example of the

gift, other examples can be found in those rituals which, still today are able to create 'mana', bonds between persons.

It seems to me that Baudrillard presents a very interesting theoretical framework within which to analyze consumption activity in modern society but I find it restrictive to identify 'standing' as the prevalent criterion in the process of differentiation through things. As has been previously said, anxiety toward status, competition for social standing definitely induce us to use objects in their quality of status symbols, of signs of status differences. But the criterion of standing is not necessarily the prevalent one, or, at any rate, other motivations different from those linked to the wish of signalling status, may induce people towards a differentiation through the use of objects. Surely status differentiation has a great relevance in contemporary society when one compares it with situations characterized by less competition and where legal or customary impediments to formal equality are present. In this sense I do believe that Baudrillard is right in saying that the logic of sign exchange-value is the prevalent one in the interactions and communications among people in contemporary society, but I do not see any reason to reduce it exclusively to communicative exchanges about social standing. The object-sign communicates not only information about standing and social differences, it can also communicate affiliation to specific groups or subcultures, adhesion to particular ideologies, membership of determinate institutions or organizations. The same object in different contests and situations can assume two completely different connotations and in this way makes evident the differences. See for example the use of safety pins in Punk subculture and their use in the dominant culture: the same object gets two different meanings and has two different uses. The logic used by the Punk is that of

differentiation, it uses objects in their capacity as differentiating signs. A safety pin is usually treated as a makeshift device to keep together two pieces of cloth; it should not be visible, the use is private, personal. It would be embarrassing if someone should discover that we use safety pins instead of sewing on buttons or whatever must be mended. In the Punk context the safety pin is exhibited, displayed, it takes on a decorative function, its use is public. In this example the logic underlying the use of the pin is a logic of differentiation of sign value. But the Punk does not want to differentiate himself from his neighbour who is more successful, he wants to differentiate and keep at a distance from the social system as a whole; he symbolically rebels and refuses the dominant cultural and social values. He challenges, at a symbolic level, the inevitability of the dominant culture stereotypes (which are taken as "natural").

b) Douglas & Isherwood's contribution.

Douglas & Isherwood's interpretation of consumption is quite different from that of Baudrillard. Indeed for these two authors the aim is to provide a definition of consumption general enough to be applied not only to the study of modern society, but also to that of tribal ones: "... so if we define consumption as a use of material possessions that is beyond commerce and free without the law, we have a concept that travels extremely well, since it fits parallel usages in all those tribes that have no commerce". (39) While Baudrillard sees a cleavage, an essential difference between contemporary consumption society based on the prevalence of the exchange sign value and all others, Douglas & Isherwood look for common ground, for analytical categories that make possible an understanding of consumption activity in very different forms of social organizations.

They find that in every society, in every culture, a difference exists between objects that can be freely bought and exchanged and others that cannot be given to anyone indiscriminately. The present difference between a cash payment and a gift exemplifies this for us. One uses cash to pay for professional services, but gifts as thanks for personal ones. As Gouldner says "the donor gives because of what the recipient is, not because of what he does".(33) In Baudrillard, this distinction is reflected in his logic of exchange-value as against that of symbolic exchange-value. The relation between recipient and donor is total, constituting a refusal of the logic of equivalence, of exchange value.

A basic problem for every society is that of acquiring common meanings so that people understand each other without having to re-define the meaning of objects for every interaction. For Douglas and Isherwood rituals play an important and essential role in this respect. They are the "conventions that set up visible public definitions".(34) Things very often have a big part in ritual performance. Consumption itself is a form of ritualistic behaviour through which one builds an intelligible universe, and redefines social categories. In this sense consumption activity is a way of exchanging information. Through objects an individual creates his personal environment, gives information, establishes a relation with others. At the same time, through the acceptance, refusal, offer or denial of objects, meanings and values are confirmed or undermined.

The aim of the consumer is, therefore, that of gaining control over, and keeping under his power, this information system as much as he can. Strategies of exclusion and intrusion for the purpose of control are different, of course, according to the social structure of various societies. To analyze the strategies utilized in different

social organizations, Douglas & Isherwood utilize 'grid-group' analysis.

Briefly, we may say that weak group societies are characterized by strong individualism, almost non-existent control by groups over individual choice. People pursue their own personal interest. Strong group societies, on the other hand, are characterized by subordination of the members of the society to group interests. Thus the interest of the individual coincides with that of the group of which he is a member. While strong grid societies are characterized by insularity, i.e. lack of interaction and exchange, weak grid societies are just the opposite.(35)

The aim of 'grid-group' analysis is transcultural comparison among societies that, despite extreme differences (e.g. from tribes to modern industrial society), otherwise reveal similarities within this analytical framework. According to the type of social organization, control over the information system can be pursued either by a prominent group or by single individuals competing among themselves and, of course, also the strategies of exclusion and intrusion are different.

In modern industrial society (weak grid-weak group), where ascriptive advantages are largely absent, income becomes the relevant, even the determinant, variable explaining access to or exclusion from the control of the cultural values, of the meanings of interaction. Since one needs objects to know what is going on and to interact, a lack of marking goods means isolation. Poverty <u>is</u> isolation, marginalization. The manipulation of marking goods becomes more and more problematic and difficult in modern society because there are many more things than in any other form of society and the individual has to increase very rapidly his knowledge of them to maintain his position in the system. At the same time it becomes progressively more difficult to find marking goods since "each item sends its signal but each also

represents a special field of social relations with its appropriate consumption activity".(36)

Douglas& Isherwood consider personal availability - that is the possibility to use one's time and resources quite freely - a basic element, a prerequisite, of control over the marking goods system. This means that ownership of goods enabling an increase of personal availability is a relevant aspect in the analysis of consumption. Such availability requires freedom from high periodicity tasks like cooking, tending the sick, minding the children. These kinds of tasks have always been associated with low status for the people in charge of them. Their high periodicity means they must be carried out every day and more than once a day. Associated with these tasks are low status objects - characterized themselves by high periodicity of use - (e.g. common china set as against the 'good' set used only on special occasions; margarine as against butter, etc.). "Periodicity of use does not merely sort out the upper class of people. .... To be poor is to be periodicity constrained in the process of household management".(37)

According to Douglas & Isherwood then, any explanation of consumer behaviour that sees in objects only the answer to needs is inadequate: "goods are now to be seen as the medium, less objects of desire than threads of a veil that disguises the social relations under it".(38)

In some respects, this approach is close to that of structuralists. For them, as for Levi-Strauss, things are good to think, and this explains their place in the cultural system.

> "Levi-Strauss distinguished among three communication systems constituting social life: the communication of goods, the communication of women, and the communication of words. .... The argument here is that they can never be synthetized without becoming part of a theory of consumption. The meanings conveyed along the goods channel are part and parcel

> of the meanings in the kinship and mythology channels, and all three are part of the general concern to control information. Only when they are scanned together will they yield their meanings to cultural anthropology".(39)

Douglas & Isherwood's analysis contributes to the explanation of the essential role played by things in defining and providing information on the cultural system in every society: through goods and their uses it is possible to understand the differences between sexes, ages, public and private situations, conception of time, family and kinship relations. If this role played by things is usually recognized and studied in anthropological works, it is usually undervalued in the sociological approach to the problem of consumption. What emerges from this study is the idea that an analysis of consumption is an analysis of culture, of social values, of relationships among individuals; "consumption is the very arena in which culture is fought over and licked to shape".(40)

Some conclusions

The various perspectives that have been examined suggest different considerations in order to understand why people buy things and which are the 'uses' of goods. One can summarize them as follows:

1). goods are bought and used to satisfy individual needs;

2). goods are bought and used to satisfy needs that are induced by the producers in order to sustain production;

3). goods are bought and used in order to satisfy the need of differentiation, of distinction for what concerns status;

4). goods are bought and used in order to create and communicate differences, to signify membership or exclusion, adhesion or refusal;

5). goods are bought and used because of their quality of making visible and evident the structure, the values, the rituals of the social and cultural system.

From a logical point of view none of these interpretations excludes the others; actually what emerges from an analysis of the literature on consumption activity is the necessity of approaching the problem from a perspective that takes into consideration the various and complementary elements. No adequate explanation can be found in just one of these interpretations. In particular I would like to analyze in some detail the concept of 'differentiation', of distinction. To differentiate oneself from somebody else means an implicit refusal of a certain kind of model, of ritual, of behaviour. There can be several reasons that drive people to this. Those connected with the problem of standing are only some; others may be found in the wish to oppose and differentiate from the dominant values of the society. In this context to differentiate oneself from others through goods means to give particular connotations to determinate objects, connotations that do not correspond to those common in the prevalent cultural system and that do not have anything to do with the functional use of the object in itself. Several examples of this phenomenon can be found in the literature that deals with the problems of subcultures. All the groups that for very different reasons do not share some values prevalent in the society utilize objects giving them particular meanings, make of them insignia of their beliefs. These objects become signs of affiliation, sources and public demonstrations of identification with specific values.

This means also that the dominant cultural system attributes meanings to objects, behaviours and rituals. The fact is that the 'prevalent style' is so deeply rooted in society that one is not aware of it and takes it for granted. In this sense Baudrillard is right when he says that the differentiation process takes place at an unconscious level as well as at a conscious one. The consumer

perceives his choices as independent and taken according to his personal taste, but the process of differentiation is irresistible, and it follows the rules of a code of which he is not aware.

The study of consumption cannot be reduced to supply and demand, to needs and wants, to envious competition, to imitation or differentiation. Consumption is a complex phenomenon that involves all these aspects and must be considered as such. Objects not only make evident and communicate the status of a determinate person, they also provide us with more general information about the cultural system. Their production reflects the culture of the society in which they are made and, at the same time, through this social production the social individual is created.

The relation between individuals and objects is a complicated one, we do not use things only for their physiological utility but for the different connotations objects assume in our culture. The process of production itself, therefore, is subordinated to something more than material necessity. The utility of an object is not a quality intrinsic in it but it is related to external and objective connotations. As Sahlins says:

> "It is by their correlations in a symbolic system that pants are produced for men and skirts for women, rather than by the nature of the object <u>per se</u> or its capacity to satisfy a material need.
>
> ... No object, no thing, has being or movement in human society except by the significance men can give to it". (41)

NOTES:

1. In various different social systems the property and use of determinate objects and the way of dressing were regulated by specific and rigid rules. Cf. for example the laws which regulated the use and the possession of luxury goods.

2. On this subject cf. J. Baudrillard's analysis of consumption in La societe des consommation, ses mytes ses structure, Paris: Gallimard, 1974.

3. Ibidem, Le systeme des objects, Paris: Gallimard, 1968.

4. E. Shils and M. Young, "The Meaning of Coronation" in E. Shils, Center and Periphery, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975, pp.135-52.

5. On the concept of sacredness see E. Durkheim, Elementary Forms of Religious Life, London: Allen & Unwin, 1915; M. Mauss, The Gift, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966.

6. G. Katona, The Powerful Consumer, New York: McGraw Hill, 1960 p.24.

7. This topic will be discussed in more detail in chapter V.

8. F. Hirsch, Social Limits to Growth, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977, pp.20-21.

9. For a discussion on consumption see, besides F. Hirsch, op. cit., C. Napoleoni, 'La posizione del consumo nella teoria economica', Rivista Trimestrale, n.1, 1962, pp.3-26: see also L.H. Clark, (ed.), Consumer Behavior, New York: Harper, 1968; J.H. Cohen, Behavioral Science:Foundation of Consumer Behavior, New York: The Free Press, 1972; R.D. Blackwell, J.F. Engel, D.R. Kollat, Consumer Behavior, New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1968; S.H. Britt, (ed.), Consumer Behavior in Theory and Action, New York: J. Wiley & Sons, 1970.

10. D. Riesman, The Lonely Crowd, a study of American changing character, Yale: Yale University Press, 1950; ibidem, Individualism Reconsidered, New York: Collier McMillan, 1954.

11. On this topic see for example D. Riesman, op. cit.,; J.S. Duesenberry, Income Saving and the Theory of Consumer Behavior, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949; E. Katz, Lazarsfield, P., Personal Influence, New York: The Free Press, 1955.

12. V. Packard, The Waste Makers, London: Lowe & Brydone, 1961; E. Dichter, The Strategy of Desire, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1960; K.J. Galbraith, The Affluent Society, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1958.

13. T. Veblen, The Theory of Leisure Class, New York: New American Library, 1953.

14. Ibidem, p.35.

15. On the concept of positional goods cf. F. Hirsch, op. cit.

16. Cf. Karl Polanyi, The Livelihood of Man, New York: Academic Press, 1977.

17. N. Elias, Die höfische Gesellschaft, Darmstad und Neuwied: Luchterhand Verlag, 1975.

18. P. Bourdieu, La distinction, critique sociale du jugement, Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1979

19. G. Simmel, Fashion, in D.N. Levine (ed.), George Simmel on Individuality and Social Forms, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971, p.297.

20. I am thinking of the laws that regulated the use of luxury items in Europe during the XV and XVI centuries. On this argument see the chronology of Laws on Luxury in E. Gallo, Il valore sociale dell' abbigliamento, 1914.

21. On this argument there is an enormous amount of anthropological literature: see for example L. Dumont, Homo Hierarchicus, London: Palladin, 1972.

22. See for example the interconnection between Hinduism and Caste System in Indian Society.

23. F. Alberoni, Consumi e Società, Bologna: Il Mulino, 1964.

24. T. Burns, 'The Study of Consumer Behaviour, a Sociological View', in European Journal of Sociology, bd. 7, 1966, p.327.

25. H. Blumer, 'Fashion: from class differentiation to collective selection' in The Sociological Quarterly, bd. 10, 1969, p.282.

26. C. Lasch, The Culture of Narcissism, New York: Norton Books, 1978, p.73.

27. J. Baudrillard, Le systeme des objets, Paris: Gallimard, 1968; ibidem, La societé des consommation, ses mythes, ses structures, op. cit.; ibidem, Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe, Paris: Gallimard, 1972; M. Douglas, B. Isherwood, The World of Goods, Towards an Anthropology of Consumption, London: Allen Lane, 1979.

28. see J. Baudrillard, Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe, op. cit.

29. M. Mauss, The Gift, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969, p.9.

30. Ibidem, p.10.

31. A demonstrative example of sign-exchange value in this respect can be found in D. Riesman's description of the American middle class in Abundance for What? And Other Essays, London: Chatto & Windus, 1964.

32. M. Douglas, B. Isherwood, op. cit., p.57.

33. A.W. Gouldner, 'The importance of something for nothing' in For Sociology, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975, p.270.

34. M. Douglas, B. Isherwood, op. cit., p.65.

35. For a more detailed explanation of 'grid-group' analysis see M. Douglas, Natural Symbols, London: Barrie & Jenkis, 1970. Originally 'grid-group' analysis was elaborated by B. Berstein in Class, Codes and Control, vol. I, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971.

36. M. Douglas, B. Isherwood, op. cit., p.144.

37. Ibidem, pp.120-121.

38. Ibidem, p.202.

39. Ibidem, pp.87-88.

40. Ibidem, p.57.

41. M. Sahlins, Culture and Practical Reason, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976, p.170.

# PART II

CHAPTER IV

## COLLECTING: A PRIVATE SOLUTION TO IDENTITY PROBLEMS

Our interactions with others are cool and impersonal, the purely and deeply personal traits of one's life, are mostly absent from social contacts with other individuals. As Simmel correctly pointed out:

> "It is tactless, because it militates against interaction which monopolizes sociability, to display merely personal moods of depression, excitement, despondency - in brief, the light and darkness of one's most intimate life".(1)

Discretion is at the basis of sociability and implies the restraining of human interaction within precise boundaries. The individual has to control his behaviour, he plays the role of the sociable person hiding his individuality under the impersonal freedom of a mask. The fact is that our interactions and relationships are imprisoned by cool and impersonal rules which prevent the expression of personality and the finding of a satisfactory sphere of identification and self-expression. In this sense one can speak of the unsociable character of sociability, of the fact that no individual, even the most successful and integrated in the social system, can entirely solve in it the problem of his own identity. A feeling of "selflessness" as Goffman puts it permeates the individual's life, and the multiplicity of roles one has to play makes even more difficult the solution of this problem. This explains why the quest for identity is a universal problem in contemporary society.

Disappointment and dissatisfaction are indeed common aspects of the individual personality whatever one's success in professional life, whatever his working conditions, status, education, etc. As I have said,(2) in contemporary society it is highly probable that the individual will look for remedies more in private than in public life. It is for this reason that we will take into consideration

those attempts to solve one's identity problems which are carried out in the private realm. As Goffman clearly observes, it is often in the 'cracks', in the apparently less significant and important spaces that our self resides:

> "Without something to belong to, we have no stable self, and yet total commitment and attachment to any social unit implies a kind of selflessness. Our sense of being a person can come from being drawn into a wider social unit; our sense of selfhood can arise through the little ways in which we resist the pull. Our status is backed by the solid buildings of the world, while our sense of personal identity often resides in the cracks". (3)

The immersion in private life is perceived as a liberating experience, as the only way to express oneself without being constrained by social rules and rituals. Obviously, immersion in private life means very different things according to the personality, sex, age, education, status, etc., of the single actor. Anyway it is above all in the free time activities that one tries to find an answer to boredom, routine, frustration. One wishes foran escape, an area where he can abstract from everyday reality and construct an identity from new symbolic material. The existence of these areas is socially accepted and legitimate; their existence is institutionalized not because the individual perceived them as such but because society recognizes their importance as safety valves and for this reason regulates and monitors them and, because sectors of the leisure time industry exploit them by creating a wide market of products related to these activities.

The hobby is one of these free areas. Under this label an incredible number of different activities finds its place: modelling, collecting, gardening, do-it-yourself activities, etc. What distinguishes a hobby from a normal working activity is sometimes only the fact that the hobby is voluntarily undertaken,

the time dedicated to it is not sold on the market, and it is perceived as an adequate opportunity for self-expression. Nevertheless it can have many aspects similar, to or in common with the world one tries to escape from: routine, repetition, etc.

What interests me in the hobby is the fact that it is focussed on a world of non-human objects: one has to deal with paint, wood, glue, butterflies, stamps, flowers, etc. In almost every activity that finds its place under the label "hobby" a great deal of time is spent in searching, buying, classifying, organizing, arranging, and mastering this inanimate world. It is a small and fragile world made of material things, and the interaction between the individual and this world is not alien to obsessive and ritualistic features. All these activities have a solitary character; the individual, in this way, tries to isolate himself and to suspend consciousness, since there is no human being to interact with, to respond to. Often, the only people the hobbyist interacts with are the dealers of useful tools and, in some cases only, other individuals who share the same passions and with whom he makes exchanges, comparisons, etc. Both these categories (dealer and hobby-mate) have essentially a functional role more than a social one.

Most of the hobbies are pursued at home, a private and safe place, and quite often in a particular and specific place within the house that delimits space further, creating a sort of home within the home, a solid defence against the external world. But these precautions are not sufficient to prevent the infiltration of the external world into the hobbyist's den. As has been said, hobbies are socially accepted and institutionalized; they generally coexist peacefully with people's everyday life. But precisely the fact that these

activities are carried out within normal life-plans brings as a consequence a contamination of these free areas by the very features one wants to escape: routine, intrinsic banality of the activity, ritualization of the experience by mass media, commercialization of all that concerns the hobby (specialistic magazines, clubs, shops, etc.).

> "Anyone of these enclaves can be invaded by the same awareness which makes for cynicism and distancing about the 'non free' areas of our lives. The tenuousness of these free areas arises from their coexistence with other phenomenally dissonant worlds. They represent the attempts of man to preserve an area of 'natural' behaviour at a time when the multiplicity of roles and activities available threatens to render everything relative".(4)

I would like to develop further the analysis of the hobby, of the role it plays in the individual's life by taking into consideration a specific but, at the same time, particularly significant example for the understanding of the role things play in our life.

The collector's world

A discussion of the phenomenon of collecting may shed light upon important aspects of these private enclaves of free expression and upon the meanings, functions and roles that things take on in everyday life.(5)

A hobby so widely spread and popular as collecting(6) involves people from every background, with different working experiences and levels of education. I have deliberately chosen to study collectors of objects of little or no economic value. By keeping under control the "economic value" variable one can understand better which motivations and reasons compel so many people to surround themselves with material objects that have nothing to do with the communication of their spending power and status.

Through this analysis one may gain a better understanding of the meanings, roles, values, functions, projections that people attribute to the material world with which they build their refuges against anxiety, insecurity, feelings of "selflessness." By separating oneself from the extended world and building one's private universe through the collected objects, the individual transfers himself to an imaginary made-to-measure world which reflects and responds to his most intimate needs, wishes and passions. A collector of war memories, for instance, at the same time half-ashamed and half-proud of himself, showed me a portrait of himself wearing an old military uniform. This is perhaps an extreme example of how through their beloved collections these individuals escape from everyday life and live - at an imaginary level - fantastic experiences, which respond to their needs and desires. In this sense, one can say that collections are, at least to a certain extent, personal phantasmagoria of the world. Schematically, one can say that there are four main motivations at the basis of collecting; a) the desire of possessing; b) the need of free expression, of spontaneous activity; c) the need to test oneself; d) the need to keep the world under control.

The desire of possessing

The tendency to accumulate and keep large amounts of objects, many of them of little or no use, is a typical feature of several individuals and is probably due to a sense of insecurity, it is in a way a sort of defensive behaviour against an unpredictable (and therefore unsafe) future. It is quite common to meet people who store used wrapping paper, empty jam jars, boxes of every shape, etc. But this is not enough to make collectors out of them.

Collectors love their objects and collecting means to them the possibility to project in them particular needs, to expand their personalities. They do not perceive their behaviour as a transitory attempt to find satisfaction to their needs but they in a way embody themselves in their collections. They are not able to give a rational explanation of this activity, of why they hoard a specific kind of object. Usually they tend to rationalize their behaviour by saying that in this way they preserve from destruction and disappearance these humble but beautiful products of human genius, in order to transmit them to future generations. But then, the collectors themselves, are the first to admit that this is not the real motivation, they just do not really know from which springs their behaviour originates, they stress that for them collecting is not a means to an end but an end in itself. The collected items are devoid of any trace of functional value: the can of beer is carefully emptied because the liquid can damage the beloved container, the packet of cigarettes is opened, reduced to a unidimensional state, and religiously located in a plastic envelope, wine, spirits, mineral water, soft drinks labels are carefully detached from the bottles and kept in albums, etc.

Possessing the objects is what really matters, not their usefulness. Actually, if the item is new - that is it has never been touched by other hands - it is more appreciated. The collector is deeply jealous about his collection, he does not generally like to show it and does not like the idea of lending, even if temporarily, a piece or two to somebody else. Jealousy is a feeling strictly linked to the idea of property since it arises when something belonging to us, i.e. in which we have particular rights, is taken or used by somebody else who has no rights in it.

> "....For a collector - and I mean a real collector, a collector as he ought to be - ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects. Not that they come alive in him, it is he who lives in them."(7)

It is crucial to understand the great importance that possessing has for the collector. There is a long list of anecdotes about collectors - extremely respectable individuals - who stole or commissioned thefts of particular objects possessed by other collectors or by institutions such as libraries, etc., in order to own the objects.(8) These objects, whatever they are, are desired because they satisfy important needs, such as that of self-expression, of ownership, of testing oneself, because they represent and embody personal meanings and values. In this way they supply important material for the integration of the individual's personality.

These considerations, that in the case of collectors arise and stand out in an extreme way, are more generally valid in order to explain some aspects of the general relationship tying individuals and objects in everyday life. In the case of collectors the relevance and emphasis are simply stronger:

> "The sense of ownership, in fact, is a special form of positive - animist feelings, ....Freudian psychology has made us familiar with this feeling and process under the name of 'ego identification': the soul of the object is an imaginary partial projection of the libido of the ego, and we value the object just because part of our ego is narcissistically incorporated within it.
>
> Examples of this possessive animistic aspect of the sense of ownership are to be found by any close observer of the manner in which children regard their property objects, their toys, schoolbooks, badges, possessions."(9)

A number of examples of this attitude towards things can be found in everybody's life; our car, armchair, etc. In all these cases other than utilitaristic considerations influence our relations with personal belongings.(10)

The need for free expression

Something has already been said about the need of private enclaves for the individual's self-expression. But it is necessary to add some further remarks. Variables such as routine, repetitiveness, alienation from work, do not seem to be relevant in order to explain why people need these free areas. One can find collectors in almost every possible occupation: from the industrial designer, to the successful painter, from the worker in the large factory to the architect, etc. Both extremely rich people and people of modest means collect the same kind of objects with the same determination and emotional involvement.

Variables such as gender and age seem to be far more important in order to explain this phenomenon. In fact the great majority of collectors are middle-aged males.(11)

We can therefore say that there are modalities of relating to things that are more typical of one sex and of a particular age. (On this more below).

There are types of collection such as stamps, coins, etc., that probably share some elements with the speculative character of the accumulation of money. In fact both stamp and coin collecting can be pursued - and indeed often are - as forms of investment more than as an area of self-expression. In the interviews the collectors often criticized these forms of collecting as speculative and therefore alien to the mentality of the "true" and "pure" collector, who is far from the idea of accumulating objects as a form of investment. Other forms of collecting such as art, ancient books, etc., may have an ambiguous flavor, since the two motivations (collecting and investing) can coexist. For this reason I decided to limit this enquiry to collectors of valueless objects; in this way one can analyse the

relevance that things have in our life apart from utility and value. From this point of view I think that the "pure" collector is an interesting character since we find in him amplified characteristics of our own ways of relating to objects.

Collecting is, as I said, a spontaneous activity since the collector acts for the sake of his personal satisfaction, neither for economic interest nor for conspicuous display nor for prestige reasons. His activity is not imposed on him by anybody. It is undertaken voluntarily often against pressures and derision - above all from the family - to abandon it or - at least - to devote to it less time and resources (emotional, economic, etc.). Indeed, collecting if it is not restrained and kept under control, can become the dominant interest and passion of the collector's life:

> "It is a sort of disease. When it affects you it transforms your life, everything - work, family, etc., - comes after it. One has to build barriers and obstacles in order not to be completely possessed by it. ....I think the family is a good antidote because one has duties to his children and has to devote some time to them." (Interview no. 3)

On the other hand, for collectors their passion is something absolutely essential for personal survival; an unbelievable emotional investment is made in it. Many of them dream of reaching the age of retirement to dedicate themselves full time to their beloved activity:

> "I pity people that have no hobbies, passions, because they do not know what to do. I have the opposite problem. I never have enough time. I spend all evenings, week-ends, holidays busy with it: searching, restoring, classifying, corresponding with other collectors..... And then, in the most difficult periods of my life collecting has given me the strength to keep going." (Interview no.7)

The need to test oneself

Oddly enough, the stimulus to a continuous enlargement of the collection has to be sought more in the solitary challenge of the individual to himself, in order to reach an abstract ideal of completeness, than in competition with other collectors. I say "abstract ideal of completeness" because the collector deliberately chooses his hunting territory in order to avoid the risk of completing the series of objects too easily. Actually, quite often, there is no possible logical end to his collecting and anyway, when seldom it happens, the collector immediately starts a new collection. The great majority of collectors then, maintain several collections at the same time although they have a favourite one.

The criteria according to which they consider one more important than the others are not usually related to the size of the collections but to biographical and personal reasons; the oldest, the most beautiful, etc.

In a way it is possible to say that collecting is an endless challenge to oneself, to reach a target that it is almost impossible to reach and, if reached, is moved further on; to acquire a sophisticated and deep knowledge of the field in which this challenge takes place and of all the necessary techniques to preserve the fruits of the chase.

This effort to continuously surpass oneself more than to compete and confront oneself with others makes collecting a solitary activity, where others come into play above all because of their functional roles: to make exchanges, to barter or to buy when the items collected are present on the market. It is very rare for collectors to make friends with other collectors.

They usually keep their collections jealously apart from the world, they do not like to talk about them. Female collectors seem to be even more reticent than men, they keep their passion under a deeper blanket of secrecy, they do not like bartering, making exchanges, showing their collections in exhibitions, etc.

Collectors generally do not like to show their "treasures" above all to other collectors and this, I believe, must be interpreted as a preventive defence against the jealousy, competition, terrible hatred that comparisons will inevitably set in motion. The direct competition with other collectors is frightening and therefore avoided in order not to suffer too much. To see a collection larger, more complete, than the one possessed, is such a dreadful experience that it is carefully avoided.

> "I have lost friends in this way; I used to correspond and exchange information about my discoveries, my researches, then when they asked me to see my collection I accepted. But after the visit they disappeared completely. I wrote them but had no reply, no telephone calls, etc. Then I have been robbed of several objects that could have been of interest only for a collector. So I decided not to show it any longer to anybody. Now I am the only one authorized to enter my kingdom, not even my wife can enter it because I arranged the objects according to a certain order and I am the only one to understand it." (Interview no. 9)

Others, in order to exclude competition from their activity chose to collect items that are not commonly gathered by others (cfr. mineral water labels).

Competition is deliberately kept at the margins of this activity probably because the emotional investment in collecting is so strong that if one started to compete with others one would be completely overcome by passion and collecting would become more a suffering than a way to express and find an answer to one's needs.

The need to keep the world under control

To complete the analysis of the most important characteristics of collecting one has to take into consideration the need to give order and a sense to the world, to classify, to keep the universe under one's control, to eliminate uncertainty. The single object for the collector is not important in itself but as a part of a series, of a whole.

According to the people interviewed, to classify, that is to give a logical order to the collection, is one of the greatest pleasure, together with the discovery and the possession of a new object. Every item is religiously registered, catalogued, ordered according to various criteria. In a word, their private world must be under control, neither uncertainty nor doubt can enter the collector's kingdom. Every item is a distinct element that has its proper place.

This aspect of classification is indeed extremely important - if not essential - to distinguish a collection from an assemblage of similar things. "The collection is a logical class of items accumulated and rationally ordered according to various criteria".(12) In this concept the idea is implicit of a systematic and methodical plan to be pursued with extreme precision.

> "I have organized my collection in a libidinous way; I like to organize, I have a penchant for organizing. In a way I could say that I have a double collection; wine labels coming from foreign countries are classified both according to the criterion of nationality and of wine brands; then I have the Italian wine labels that are classified both according to the alphabetical order and according to the name and kind of wine. I recently made photocopies of all my labels and I classified them according to the wine brands. But since the photocopies are in black and white near each of them I wrote the description of the colours". (Interview no. 6)

Classifying "is a manifestation of a taxonomic propensity akin to bureaucratic rationality".(13) It is therefore an expression of a way of relating to the world that is typical of modern society.

The originality of the collector lies in the creation of his own unique taxonomy.

The pure collector

All the characteristics we have described in discussing collectors are indeed present, with a different intensity, in our way of relating to the world. We are all aware of the importance that certain particular objects have for us and of the difficulty with which we part with them just because we identify in them, and through them we build our identity; at the same time we know how it is important sometimes to isolate ourselves in a personal world in order to assemble together our identity; how annoying and embarrassing it can be to find ourselves in an environment where things and people are out of place, and the sense of anxiety it can stimulate.(14) There are then, persons that, although they are not collectors, have strong similarities with them in their way of relating to objects. In the miser personality, for example, one finds a similar need of possessing, a similar tendency to emphasize quantity. But the prevalent feeling in the miser's personality is the insecurity that induces the person to hoard money or other valuables because of the uncertainty of the future. In a sense the miser's need of possessing is similar to that of the collector, but what the miser seeks is the accumulation of money and not of particular (and often cheap) objects. There is no hunting for the beloved and wished objects, but a rigid control of personal consumption in order to save and accumulate as much as possible.(15)

Both in the miser's accumulation of wealth and in the conspicuous hoarding of precious objects, typical of some rich people (above all the nouveaux riches who have to legitimize through consumption the recently acquired status), many important elements typical of the

"pure" collector are lacking: there is no personal effort in seeking and "hunting" the objects, no passion and love towards them since they are appreciated only for their exchange-value. For this very reason they will be more easily sold or exchanged with new ones while, in the case of the collector, the real end is their mythical completeness.

An attitude towards objects similar to a certain extent to that of the "pure" collector may be found in the amateur collector. Both the amateur and the collector are practitioners with a definite and ending purpose about them. Both of them pursue their activities because they enjoy them and their pursuit is enduring. They are serious about their leisure activities. Still there are important differences between their personalities: what attracts the amateur towards the acquisition of objects is above all an intellectual interest, it is a search led by a cultural interest which one has in particular objects, for their rarity, oddity or whatever other quality. It is not a desperate effort to reach completeness; quantity is not a relevant feature of his pursuit. He does not consider his objects as part of a series, but appreciates the particular qualities of a single object, its uniqueness.

> "The amateur is very different from the collector. He seeks perfection, harmony and beauty. He loves objects not in function of their place within a series, but rather, for their differences that attract him". (16)

Collecting: a male activity

As has been previously said, collecting is mainly a male activity. This aspect of the phenomenon deserves some attention since it implies that there are gender differences in the way in which we relate to the material world of objects.

In a kind of list[17] of collectors of objects of little or no economic value made in Italy in 1977, out of 1229 collectors only 86 (7%) were women. From an inquiry I made on advertisements in a specialized magazine in 1981[18], it emerges that out of 454 collectors 48 (10.6%) were women.

Besides, all collectors interviewed stated that women were a small minority among them and this is asserted also in all the literature on the subject.[19]

Furthermore, the universe of collectibles is divided into female and male objects. There are in fact "feminine objects" such as hat pins, perfume bottles, thimbles, dolls, fans, etc., which are the classical objects of female collections, while walking sticks, war medals, war memories, car and train models, etc., are part of the male world of collectibles. Of course, there are also objects with a neutral state, in the sense that they are collected by both sexes (post cards, commercial cards, matches, etc.). This sexual segregation of objects can be explained by considering that each sex is more attracted by objects that are in some way related to their life experience and that collections are, to a certain extent, extremely mediated phantasmagorias of the world. So the train ticket collection, for example, might have some relation with desire and love for travelling, the idea of adventure and so on.

Apart from the differences in the items collected by the two sexes, another element of diversity may be found in the way in which males and females organize their collections. Men find great pleasure not only in hunting and possessing their beloved objects but also as we have seen in organizing and classifying them according to various and personal criteria. Women, on the contrary, tend to be more accumulators than collectors, in the sense that they usually hoard large quantities of things of the same kind but do not

classify them, do not order them according to any logic, nor, generally, become experts in studying, restoring, repairing, etc. of them. Unlike men, they do not like to exchange any object they possess even if they have more than one copy of it; they usually keep their collections in private places (bedroom, drawers, etc.) so that they are not accessible to the sight of strangers and guests. Many women chose to meet me for the interview in a "neutral" territory (cafeteria, place of work, etc.). They did not like the idea of showing their collections, while men usually were very proud of displaying them and talking with somebody who had no competitive interests in collecting, but showed curiosity toward their activities and took them seriously (often collectors have to submit to the derision of relatives and friends).

Another interesting difference is related to the period of life in which the two genders collect. Men, as I have said, usually become collectors around the age of forty even if some of them have been collecting in their youth too.(20) Female collectors, instead, do not pursue this activity while they have young children but later on in life, when children are grown up and when they retire from work (if they had outside employment). Usually women say that they had no time for any hobby while the children were 'at home', they had a lot of housework, and, sometimes, an outside job. Some of the women I interviewed started collecting just when they retired. Others, who were collectors in their youth and adolescence, interrupted it for about thirty years (from twenty to fifty), that is when they got married and started a family, and resumed collecting at about fifty-five, when they had more time at their disposal.

Time is indeed a necessary requirement for collecting, since a considerable amount of it has to be devoted to the search for the beloved objects, to going to exhibitions and specialized markets, to particular meetings points where collectors of specific objects periodically meet and exchange their materials. Then time is needed to correspond with collectors living in other cities and countries in order to obtain new material, etc.

For a married woman with children, housework and often a job it is indeed problematic to find the time to accomplish all these actions which are necessary if one wants to pursue an activity such as collecting. It is not by chance that the only woman I interviewed who was collecting with a "male style" was unmarried and without any domestic duties. In fact for a married woman it is extremely difficult to have a rigid timetable so that she has the certainty of some time for herself in a given day, at a particular time. Certainty that is necessary if she wants to go to those particular markets and to attend those meetings that happen only once in a while and for a few hours only. Her duties towards the family prevent her from dedicating time to this activity:

> "I would have felt guilty if I had got up early every Saturday morning to go to the collectors' meeting point. I would have woken my husband, then there were the children....." (Interview no. 15)

Besides, one has to dispose not only of time but also of money in a very free way, since it is spent for buying useless and almost valueless objects (many of these objects in fact have a value and a price only in the collectors' world and nobody would give a penny for them in the "normal" market). Therefore, it is difficult - if not impossible - to justify the purchase on rational grounds. (Some of the women confessed to retaining some of the household

budget so as to have some "secret money" to be spent on collecting.) Even when both husband and wife work, the woman tends to be less free in the use of money. Male collectors quite often do not communicate to anybody in the family how much money they spend in this activity unless it is a great expenditure (the purchasing of a whole collection from another collector). Women feel always guilty toward the family if they use their money and time for personal and private purposes:

> "I think that I can spend this money for something more useful, for the house, for the family, etc....." (Interview No.17)

These two elements - time and money - contribute to explain why less women than men collect. But I do not think that they give a wholly satisfactory explanation of this different behaviour. There are gender differences in the way in which one interacts with the material world, in the meanings that one attributes to objects, in the projections one makes.

In the case of collecting, for example, there is not only a difference in the sense that it is mainly a male activity, but also in the ways in which the two sexes pursue their collecting.

As I have said men - in this activity - show a greater propensity to classify, to organize their collections according to a bureaucratic order. Condet in his work on collecting emphasized this fact by arguing that "woman's character will push her to seek above all the intrinsic qualities of the collected object, and it will make of her a dilettante".(21) But still one has to explain why, from this point of view, women behave differently. I would argue that the answer must be sought in the fact that men, being more involved in public life, have absorbed far more than women the principles and the logic on which modern industrial society is based.

Contemporary society requires from the individual specific qualities, particular ways of behaving which emphasize bureaucratic, technical, instrumental, functionally rational requirements.(22)

> "From the process of industrial production comes a tendency to view objects and relationships as mechanistic components that fit together interchangeably and whose quality and efficiency are subjected to quantitative measurement. Technical and even social aspects of bureaucratic and industrial systems are thus rationalized. A 'taxonomic propensity' to organize the world is both required and nurtured by bureaucratic rationality".(23)

This kind of attitude toward the world has permeated men more than women who have been traditionally segregated from the public sphere and relegated in the private realm, where they are encouraged to play an expressive more than instrumental role. And even when women have a public life they are expected to behave in an expressive more than instrumental way.(24) This different attitude toward the world, this different attribution of meanings to material objects as well as to human beings emerges quite clearly, as we shall see, also from the interviews made to people who have been robbed.

If among male collectors the irrationality of collecting is compensated for by the rationality of the method through which the end is pursued, among female collectors this opposition does not exist: neither rationality of the end nor rational strategies in order to pursue it, nor rational order are present in their hoarding of objects. For this reason one is inclined to say that women tend to be more accumulators than "true" collectors.

All the above considerations induce us to consider male collecting as more contaminated by the logic, criteria and principles that are predominant in public life; exchange, functional rationality, taxonomic propensity, emulation, etc., are all fundamental elements of male collecting activity and permeate and mark these

private enclaves. Female collecting is, in a certain sense, more passional, more irrational and emotive.

Furthermore, some needs that in the case of men find an answer in collecting (such as the need of order, of keeping the world under control), in the case of women probably find satisfaction in other areas such as compulsive tidying up of the house ( a number of female collectors declared this attitude), which are more "natural" to the kind of socialization they received, and therefore women do not need to look for a safety valve in other spheres.

What I argue is that the different socializations of the two genders within society induces them to find satisfaction in different directions, in relating to the world (animate and inanimate) in different ways. In particular - since we are concerned here with the individual's relationships with the material world - it should be stressed that the two genders interact with objects in different ways, find diverse solutions to satisfy similar needs, attribute various and different meanings to the world that surrounds them.

Moreover, the need of order, of keeping reality under control, is linked to the anguish that the ideas of transience and uncertainty produce. In this context the creation of a personal universe of objects, clearly defined in time and space, built according to rigid and precise criteria, becomes an attempt to circumscribe and keep under control one's anxiety. This explains the emotional involvement that is present in collecting. The individuals consider their collections as their creatures; they are no longer an assemblage of material inanimate things, they are perceived almost as living entities. This personification well represents the objectification of the need of possessing and love and emerges quite clearly

in the way in which collectors talk of them.

As I have suggested, women have other domains where to give vent to their anxieties and find an answer to these needs. Besides, probably, maternity in itself gives an answer to the anguish related to transience, to death. (Several collectors told me that this activity had some, although confused, relation with the fear that the idea of death generated in them). The emotional involvement present in collecting is expressed in the anxiety - common to all male collectors - concerning the destiny of their objects after the collector's death. They are terrified by the idea that their collections might be split and shared among several people, or that they might be sold to somebody who lacks the competence to understand and appreciate them.

> "I gave my life to these objects and I would like them to keep on living after my death". (Interview No. 6)

For this reason it seems that several collectors - when they think they are close to death - separate themselves from their collections by giving or selling them to other collectors, so that they are sure they will be rightly appreciated and loved; or when it is possible, (that is when the collections have particular characteristics), they decide to give them to museums or other institutions.

Women, on the other hand, do not seem concerned about the destiny of their collections; they say they do not care about it.

Age and collecting

A few remarks on collecting by children seem appropriate,[25] since interesting analogies and differences with adult behaviour can be found. Collecting appears to be a quite popular activity among children of both sexes, being equally frequent among boys and girls.

As among adults, there are objects collected prevalently only by one sex and objects attracting above all the other one. Age too plays an important role in the definition of the objects that are collected; there are collections that are an adolescent affair while others are pursued during infancy.

> "The collection of miscellaneous trivial things, - buttons, spools, strings, glass, beads, pins, broken dishes, etc., - begins at about three or four years of age, and lasts to about seven or eight years. The collection of picture-buttons is an adolescent affair, together with badges...." (26)

Since the collected objects represent an extremely mediated phantasmagoria of the world, it is clear that according to the age, sex, place in which one lives, personal history, etc., it will alter the kind of object on which one's attention is fixed, phantasies are reflected and needs projected. Apart from differences in the kinds of objects which are collected, there are differences related to the size of collections; the influence exerted by friends, the love for quantity in the pre-adolescent period, (from eight to eleven or twelve years), collections reach their height in quantity and genuineness. There is more interest in the things themselves, as well as in the collecting of them. The interest is more directed, more purposeful, answers the call of inner needs more strongly. The imitative element is very strong at this period. With regard to 'inner need' we notice that the play interest reaches its height here, as shown in the marble, doll, etc., collections. The interest in nature too is more prominent at this age than at any other, shown in the collection of flowers, stones, mosses, butterflies, shells, eggs, etc. As regards 'imitation' we find that there are some types of collections more wide-spread at this age than earlier or later. At this age, too, the 'possession' idea of childhood seems to develop into love of quantities. The largest collections come now.

Collecting progressively dies out in adolescence giving way to other interests such as 'the sentimental and social, the hunting and the trading'.(27)

Although collecting among children is evenly distributed between sexes, there are different ways of carrying out this activity. Boys seem to play a more active role in order to enlarge their collections (seeking, exchange,etc.,) while girls rely more on other people's cooperation and help (the objects are given to them). This characteristic is reflected in adult collecting. While men are very active and enjoy very much searching, hunting, bartering and trading, women very often declare that they enlarge their collections through gifts and the cooperation of relatives. When they buy objects they do it in their husband's company, so that the purchase itself has almost the flavour of a gift.

Among children the interest in quantity and the imitative behaviour seem to be the two most important motivations toward collecting, while competition with others seems to play a minor role. In contrast with imitation, or doing as others do, rivalry, or doing more than others do, seems to hold a comparatively small place, and in contrast with interest in quantity, interest in variety, in kind, is insignificant. The fact that imitation among children is an important element of collecting is interesting. It shows the sociable character of this activity, since they do what others do and interact by exchanging, trading, etc. Since competition plays a minor role it does not engender anxiety as among adults and therefore does not produce isolation, anti-social attitudes and so on.

A last remark on this subject. Classification and organization of the collection according to some criteria are not relevant characteristics of children's collecting.

> "The large majority of the collections are simply "kept together", with more or less care. They may be in "no order", just "mixed together", "arranged anyway", kept "in a pile", or, as may be stated more definitely, they may be kept in the barn or the shed, in a drawer, a box, bag, envelope, book, trunk,....." (28)

This low interest in classification that we find in children is remindful of the behaviour of female collectors. For both of them one could say that obtaining a large quantity of a particular kind of object is more important than organizing them according to a criterion, than reaching completeness (since, if the collection is not "ordered", it is not possible to know which are the missing objects). In the case of children and women the desire to possess is by far the predominant and most relevant one. The methodical perseverance typical of collecting is essentially an adult male attitude. This kind of attitude is linked to and derives from a way of perceiving the world that is produced by modern society and that gradually permeates every aspect of the individual's life. Children and women are affected by it to a lesser degree, since they have been traditionally asked to play a more expressive than instrumental role.

Some conclusions

The deep reasons of this quest without end must be sought in an attempt to address anxieties and dissatisfaction of different origin, which make human relationships difficult and problematic. What the collector asks of his beloved objects is the possibility of an absolute and exclusive identification. Objects, from this point of view, answer in a better way than human beings these demands, since - for their nature - they are passive recipients of the collector's passion. Once possessed, they cannot escape and you are their only

master. You can build a personal world with precise rules - you can create a personal sphere in which to feel safe. Each collector establishes rules and laws (kind of object, period of production, place of production, kind of material, etc.) which govern this world, and can autonomously and freely make a plan and work for its realization. Sometimes it may be the only chance the individual has to test himself in such a complete task since it implies both the planning and the actualization of a project. It is, in a way, a personal and private attempt to achieve that completeness (though only in abstract terms) which has almost disappeared from everyday existence.

Hunting, discovering, possessing, classifying, are all essential and basic aspects of collecting and all extremely important ones. The universe built to measure by each collector is perceived and experienced as a safe space since it is obsessively ordered according to criteria established by the single collector. There cannot be unpredictable events, nor uncertainty nor insecurity; actually, collecting is certainty and security. The collection is the most faithful creature the person can possess. It has precise spatial and temporal borders and therefore it is free from anxiety connected with the sense of transience.

In collecting there is an overturning of the rules of the game governing everyday life where the individual has to submit to the obligations and constraints typical of social life, where the bureaucratic order imposes itself on our existence, where insecurity, competition, anxiety, hurriedness, struggle against time characterize our daily lives. Collecting therefore seems to be, within certain limits, a constraint-free area where it is possible to express oneself freely, to overturn the rules that dominate public life. But in fact, it is deeply contaminated by these very rules:

it is threatened by routine, compulsion to repeat, monotony. It reflects, to a certain extent, the world from which one wants to escape, it is an odd mixture of irrationality (the attraction and fixation to a particular kind of object) and rationality (the criteria according to which one classifies), of passion and cool precision, of loneliness and creativity. The collector talks to and interacts with things; his passion is a solitary one, others are excluded and the collection itself becomes a substitute for human relationships, and a far more docile and tranquillizing one as the collector himself establishes the limits of his world, the rituals to be respected.

NOTES:

1. G. Simmel 'Sociability' in K.H. Wolff, The Sociology of Georg Simmel, New York: The Free Press, 1950, p.46.

2. On this subject cf; the excellent book by A.O. Hirschmen, Shifting Involvements, Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1982.

3. E. Goffman, Asylums, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968, p.280

4. S. Cohen, L. Taylor, Escape Attempts: The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Everyday Life, London: Allen Lane, 1976, p.99.

5. The following reflections on collecting are based on a research I have carried out on this subject. For more details cf. the methodological appendix.

6. Although one cannot have statistical evidence on the dimensions of the phenomenon, the large number of specialized magazines, the clubs and organizations that deal with it in many European countries and in the United States may give a general idea of the expansion of collecting in modern society.

7. W. Benjamin, Unpacking my Library, H. Arendt (ed.) Illuminations, Glasgow: Fontana, Collins, 1969, p.67.

8. See, for example, M. Rheims, La vie etrange des objet, Paris: Librarie Plon, 1959; H. Condet, Essai sur le collectionnisme, Paris: Jouve & C. Editeurs, 1921.

9. E. Beaglehole, Property, A Study in Social Psychology, London: Allen & Unwin, 1931, p.300.

10. We shall develop further this subject in the next chapter when we discuss robbery victims.

11. All the literature on collecting confirms this fact. See, for example, H. Condet, op. cit., M. Rheims, op. cit. The interviews with collectors point in the same direction.

12. D. Dannefer, "Rationality and Passion in Private Experience: Modern Consciousness and the Social World of Old-Car Collectors", in Social Problems, vol. 27, n.4, 1980, p.402.

13. Ibidem, p.401.

14. On this topic see M. Douglas, Purity and Danger, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966.

15. On the miser's attitude toward the world see G. Simmel, The Philosophy of Money, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978, above all pp.238-47.

16. M. Rheims, op. cit., p.4; on this subject see also R.A. Stebbins, "The Amateur", in Pacific Sociological Review, vol. 20, n.4, October 1977, pp.582-606.

17. Il Brogliaccio, Elenco volontario del collezionismo minore italiano, Vito Arienti, Lissone, 1979.

18. cf. the methodological appendix.

19. see H. Condet, op. cit., M. Rheims, op. cit., D. Dannefer, op. cit.

20. The phenomenon of collecting among children and youngsters is a very common one, and popular with both sexes; this does not necessarily imply that a child who collects will be a collector later on in life. Many of the most fanatic collectors never collected in their infancy and adolescence.

21. H. Condet, op. cit., p.29.

22. I am referring here to the analyses of B. Berger, et al., The Homeless Mind, New York: Random House, 1973; A. Geheln, Man in the Age of Technology, New York: Columbia University Press, 1980, etc.

23. D. Dannefer, op. cit. p.393.

24. On this subject see L. Glennon, Women and Dualism, New York: Longman, 1973; T. Parsons, The Social System, Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1951.

25. The following remarks on Children's collecting are based on an analysis of secondary literature on the subject. Among others I would like to mention the following works: C. Burk, "The Collecting Instinct", Pedagogical Seminary, vol. 7, 1900, pp. 179-207; M. Rheims, op. cit.; S.E. Wiltse & Hall, "Children's Collections", Pedagogical Seminary, vol.VI, 1891, pp.234-35; D.W. Winnicott, Collected Papers; through paediatrics to psychoanalysis, London: Tavistock Publications, 1958; Ibidem, Playing and Reality, Penguin Books: Harmondsworth, 1971; M. Wulff, "Fetishism and objects choice in early childhood", Psychoanalytic Quarterly, vol. 15, 1946, pp.450-475.

26. cf. C. Burk, op. cit., p.191.

27. Ibidem, p.193

28. Ibidem, p.202.

# CHAPTER V

## SELF AND THINGS: A NECESSARY RELATIONSHIP

### Deciphering needs

In the previous chapter we discussed the role played by objects in building a private world where the individual attempts to satisfy needs and aspirations that do not find an answer in other spheres of the person's life. We stressed the importance that an activity such as collecting has in relieving feelings of anxiety, insecurity, and in creating a sphere where self-expression and subjectivity can freely manifest themselves. The objects, in this context, are projection carriers, are necessary building material for constructing and maintaining the individual's identity. Although, collecting is, after all, a fragile and private universe which is, to a large extent, itself contaminated by the logic and by the functional rationality typical of and prevalent in the external world, it is subjectively perceived as an area of freedom, as a safe realm, as an answer to 'homelessness'.

> "Collecting helps me to insulate myself from this world. I created my world and my life and I want to go on in this way till the end of my life .... In this way I feel free." (Interview no. 19)

One can find several other examples of individual behaviour showing the enormous importance that things have as projection carriers, as substitutes for human relationships, as essential material for achieving a sense of identity. Winnicott's[1] analysis of transitional objects is, from our point of view, particularly significant. It shows in fact the importance objects have, in child development, as part of the process of understanding the outer world as something separate from the self; in

achieving the ability to carry out exchanges with others in symbolic codes. The child projects particular feelings and meanings on to the object, and uses it in a symbolic way.

Fetishist relationships to things provide a different example of the emotional involvement that may be externalized into objects, of the different needs that may find satisfaction in the possession of particular objects. Following Freud's analysis one can understand which are the needs that seek satisfaction in fetishist fixations:

> "We can now see what the fetish achieves and what it is that maintains it. It remains a token of triumph over the threat of castration and a protection against it. It also saves the fetishist from becoming a homosexual, by endowing women with the characteristic which makes them tolerable as sexual objects. ...."(2)

It is possible to find several examples of behaviour that clearly constitute (often confused) attempts to soothe the anxiety and feelings of dis-satisfaction through a particular relationship with material objects. The unhappy housewife who consoles herself compulsively buying the latest products is a stereotype containing in itself a certain amount of truth. We give a present to ourselves to relieve our depression, or, just for opposite reasons, we reward ourselves with a prize because we succeeded in overcoming an obstacle, a difficulty. It is in a way a process of personality splitting: we are, at the same time, the giver and the receiver, there is no strengthening of relationships in this way. In this case buying is a palliative, it has nothing to do with real satisfaction of personal needs, nor has it any social character. It simply eases, temporarily, our dissatisfaction.

In psychoanalytic literature(3) we find numerous examples of the fact that spending calms anxiety and depression; it increases

trust in oneself and diverts the individual from his anguishes. And the purchases are usually objects of little value and no utility whatsoever. This 'solitary' consumption activity is linked to the difficulties one meets in seeking gratification in everyday life, in seeking an antidote to loneliness and social isolation. In this sense, it may be argued that it is a phenomenon typical of modern industrial society with its stress on consumption as the solution to any problem.(4) But, at the same time, in the society of mass consumption it becomes more and more difficult to perceive and decipher one's needs, to understand the best available means to satisfy them. Needs and wishes constitute, in fact, a complex set of feelings, and the relationship between them and the possible kinds of satisfaction is very often ambiguous. Besides, industrial society has generated a continuous process of creation and fast replacement of goods with new, more sophisticated and specialized ones. This has brought as a consequence a continuous adjustment of the individual to these new modes of needs satisfaction.(5)

Yesterday's needs and wishes are not necessarily those of today. The way in which they manifest themselves changes, as well as the way in which they are satisfied. In contemporary society the relationship between needs and modes of satisfaction tends to be more and more complex. The individual is faced by an ever increasing number of goods and is compelled to choose among them according to his economic and cultural resources. This process of selection implies an effort to interpret and understand one's needs in relation to the goods which are available.

Secondly, but no less importantly, one is often unable to understand the origin of the sense of dissatisfaction or of anxiety that characterizes his life. Therefore, it is impossible for him

to interpret correctly the relation existing between a presumed need and the way in which it can possibly be satisfied. As to this aspect, one can find everal examples in daily life. I am referring here to needs which find expression in activities such as collecting, consuming enormous quantities of food (typical of certain forms of psychological obesity), or the opposite refusal of food by the anorexic person, shoplifting by well-off middle-class people, etc.

The motivations and reasons which induce these patterns of behaviour must be sought in an unsuccessful or deficient satisfaction of different needs, such as those of acceptance, security, approval, love, etc. Often the individual is not able to understand the cause of his sense of dissatisfaction; he perceives only his inability to find what he seeks and needs on the market in the form of goods and services. At the same time, he often realizes that there are no solutions at his disposal, and buying, hoarding, collecting, stealing, become ways of relieving him of anxiety, depression, even if, quite obviously, only temporarily.

An exemplification: the phenomenon of shoplifting

Shoplifting, in this context, is an example of these desperate and confused attempts to seek an answer to psychological needs through the illegal appropriation of objects.(6) One has to distinguish between shoplifting performed by adolescents and shoplifting by adults. Among young people, in fact, shoplifting is quite common. The youngsters, of both sexes, who practice these actions seek in them excitement and adventure. There is no doubt that daring and desire to maintain prestige among friends, or daring involving self-reassurance and 'proving' oneself, are common characteristics among adolescents. Shoplifting and other small thefts have a place in many subcultures of juvenile bands and find in them their legitimation.(7)

Among adults, the great majority of shoplifters are women:

> "They are female, always middle-class, well off, aged between 46 to 60. The object they steal is very often quite useless to them. It obviously isn't nicked for gain".(8)

It seems that the motivations that induce this behaviour have little to do with excitement (as among young people); rather, they arise from tension, anxiety, depression. Some authors(9) stress the importance of a sense of inferiority that would find in the theft an overcompensation. Indeed, we find some confirmation of this hypothesis in the literature on the subject.

Depression and a general state of dissatisfaction seem to be the commonest background to shoplifting. In many cases, in fact, shoplifting is the equivalent of a cry for help:

> "It is like a miniature suicide. .... It similarly draws the attention of a negligent husband".(10)

Another important element to be taken into account in order to explain this phenomenon is resentment. The connection between resentment and theft has been often pointed out in the psychoanalytic literature and it has been associated with an attempt to find a substitute for love withheld by parents, and, at a desperate level, to replace the primordial sense of satisfaction provided by the mother's breast.(11) Indeed, from studies on shoplifting motivations it emerges that after a loss (such as the death of the husband) a deep and bitter resentment may lead to shoplifting. This seems to suggest that the loss has awakened an earlier sense of deprivation.

Resentment as a cause for shoplifting is fairly common too among children.

> "(Resentment) is common in children in whom theft often combines a substitute satisfaction as well as a wish to hurt those who have deprived them".(12)

A third common motive is connected with the desire to maintain our standing in the eyes of the public or in our own eyes; to feel that we are adequate, in the sense that, for example, we can afford to give presents to our children.

A fourth set of motives has to do with meanness:

> "They were generally honest women who had a passion for saving, whose budget was completely organized, and for whom any avoidable payment was painful. This restricted form of avarice in a meticulous individual, has deep roots in the personality".(13)

Possessing is comforting for the individual and relieves anxiety. Many people, as I have said, buy just for these reasons; others appropriate themselves of objects through illegal means. In this way the original needs are not satisfied, they are simply temporarily soothed and will emerge again and again.

Shoplifting is usually carried out by women who would never steal from a private individual. This is the only anti-social act they accomplish. Much of it is impulsive, "the suddenness and strength of the desire may cause a breakdown in what was felt as a comforting but legitimate (shopping) expedition".(14)

Still, one has to explain why shoplifting is prevalently a female behaviour. An explanation could be found in the fact that women spend far more time than men in shops and shoplifting is the most gentle anti-social action possible in a sphere that is prevalently a femine one. Secondly, it seems important to stress that shoplifting is an extremely impulsive and irrational behaviour that has some resemblance with the modes in which women hoard their collections. There is no planning, no pursuing of a project, but the

instinctive and irresistible need to possess, accompanied, perhaps (in the case of shoplifting), by the excitement of doing something against the law carries.

Men, probably, have at their disposal different and multiple areas to express similar feelings: I am thinking of sports, or fast car driving, where one reaches excitement, gives vent to aggression, etc. Women have far fewer domains at their disposal to ease their fears and anxieties. Compulsive consumption and shoplifting are different ways to soothe similar types of stress and dissatisfaction. At the basis of both manifestations there is the fact that, in our society, possessing relieves anxiety and comforts the individual. Women, probably, for cultural and social reasons are more inclined to express their feelings in certain ways, men in others. Anyway, the fact remains that traditionally men have had and have far more spheres and opportunities to vent their needs and their dissatisfaction; women, having been traditionally relegated in the private sphere and in a subordinate position, have had fewer opportunities available to express and manifest their needs.

Identity and Things: the robbed

If possessing relieves anxiety, to be suddenly deprived of one's belongings triggers off strong emotional reactions. From them it is possible to understand the meanings and projections reflected on material objects, the importance they have for people. In this context, the analysis of people's reactions to burglary should provide interesting insights into this subject.(15) The majority of the victims, of both sexes, react with anger, fear and upset at discovering the crime, but the emotional reaction of women is far stronger and lasts longer. They are shocked, become afraid of

remaining alone in the house, some of them have recurrent nightmares for months after the burglary. Women telling of their experience tend to use stronger and emotive language: "I was petrified,.... I was deranged, ....I cried loudly, etc.," and report having uncontrolled reactions (panic, weeping, trembling, etc.).

> "When I discovered the theft, it was as if I had had a stroke, I thought I was going to die, I just ran out of the house crying loudly, I went to a neighbour". (Interview no. 1)

> "It was a horrible shock, the worst of my life. My husband had to call the doctor. Even now (after eight months) any time I come back home and open the door I feel uneasy, I am afraid it might happen again". (Interview no. 3)

> "I went icy cold, I was petrified. I did not want to move from the house because I wanted to defend it, but, at the same time, I wanted to run away immediately in order to forget and cancel from my mind this horrible fact because it was too much for me. ... (Interview no. 11)

Men's reactions, although they show distress, are on the whole far less emotional. They give the impression of being more angry than shocked, less psychologically injured although disheartened.

> "I was very sad, in the evening I felt physically very tired as if I had climbed Everest". (Interview no. 19)

> "I felt uneasy, for a month I had a feeling of insecurity, I felt discouraged". (Interview no. 30)

> "Their (the burglars) coming was predictable. My first reaction was one of anger because these robbers had been idiots. They chose the wrong objects (they ignored some more valuable items). I had the very same reaction that I have when a a colleague makes some mistakes in his work. I hate human imbecility". (Interview no. 24)

This last interview, shows more clearly than any abstract discussion, the different kinds of reactions that the two sexes have. No woman would answer in such a way. In similar cases (when not all the valuable objects are stolen) they declare themselves lucky.

They say: "in this misfortune I have been lucky; they could have stolen this object too ...." On the other hand, the angry attack on the burglar because he was not clever enough, the comparison with a work situation, are typically masculine kinds of reaction. They remind us of what we said about male collecting: the fact that men's mentality, their way of facing problems and of dealing with reality are far more influenced by the logic and functional rationality characteristic of the public sphere.

Several women had prolonged reaction to the burglary; some got sick, others had psychological problems, etc.(16) They felt extremely insecure in the house and kept on thinking and talking about the burglary in the following months. Several of them, telling me about this tragic experience, cried again although in some cases more than ten months had passed.

> "Every evening I check all the house, I look under the bed to make sure no one is in the place. I often dream that a burglar comes in and kidnaps my child. ....(Interview no. 10)

Men seem to get over the event in a shorter time although a sense of disillusionment and distrust toward humanity remains:

> "You can no longer trust anybody. ..." (Interview no. 28)
>
> "I lost any faith in people". (Interview no. 26)

The most serious long-term psychological effects are experienced almost exclusively by women. In particular, it seems worth noting that female victims perceive and describe the intrusion of the burglars in their homes as if it were almost a physical assault: they use the same words to express both experiences (burglary and sexual assault). They speak of violation, contamination, pollution, desecration. All

the women I interviewed stated that the intrusion of a stranger in their home was the worst aspect of the burglary. All of them said that after a few days they had overcome the sorrow for the loss of valuable and cherished objects, but the idea that some dirty individual (dirty in the sense that being a burglar he was morally deficient and therefore impure and contaminating) had violated their privacy, had insinuated himself in what they consider a sacred place, had opened their drawers, cupboards, touched the most intimate things, remained most disturbing. Rituals of purification were carried out: they cleaned and purified all the house: "I used alcohol to disinfect all the house". Some of them threw away bottles of spirits because they were afraid the burglars had drunk from them, and still declared they did not feel confident, they did not feel safe, they felt as if they had been victims of a physical violation.

> "What I cannot accept even now (after ten months) is the fact that someone has violated my place. I cannot overcome this fact. It made me feel uneasy, insecure, unsafe. Even now when I lock the front door I have the impression that it is still open. The home was the only place where I felt safe and now I have lost this feeling of safety. I know physical fear and this fact has aroused the fear that someone may assault me". (Interview no. 4)

> "I had the physical feeling of being touched, abused". (Interview no. 6)

> "They touched all my clothes, my underwear was thrown on the floor, they opened all my letters. Even now when I think of it - and I do it very often - I feel a real revulsion, I cleaned and disinfected all the house and still I feel it is not like before, it is, how can I put it, impure". (Interview no. 9)

The home, which was previously perceived as a safe refuge over which the occupants had control, had suddenly revealed itself as accessible, penetrable by unseen strangers. To regain this lost sense of security is very difficult, above all for women who rely to a larger extent than men on the home as a meaningful and safe space

where it is possible to express oneself freely. The victims immediately after the burglary install new locks, anti-theft devices, whereas previously they basically believed that others would respect their privacy.

The analogy between sexual assault and home violation is understandable if one takes into account the enormous importance that the home has in the building and the maintenance of woman's identity. The violation of the home, as well as the more serious violation of the body, is in fact for a woman a violation of the self. Men, although they state that the intrusion of one's privacy is the most disturbing feeling they derived from this experience, do not have such a deep psychological reaction to the intrusion itself. Probably, this is due to the fact that they generally have a less deep emotional attachment to the home, even if it is an important place too for them. But there is not the same intense emotional relationship that ties women to their homes.

Even after several months, the previous conception that the victims (of both sexes) had of the home, and the sense of security they derived from it, are not restored. This reflects the fact that the home is fundamental in the process of construction and maintenance of a stable self; and this is probably more relevant for people who feel particularly insecure. Therefore, one can hypothethize that the less people are self-confident the more they will react to home violation.

Besides, it is necessary to stress a second element related to the importance people attach to the home; the fact that it is perceived as private territory (in ethological terms).[18] Therefore, its violation sets in motion deep, almost instinctive, reactions in order to safeguard its security. This is suggested by the presence, as we said of rituals of purification, by the fact that several women

speak of violation of a sacred territory, by the fact that after a robbery the victims tend to stay all the time in the house, become afraid to abandon it. The invasion of the territory is perceived and considered as far more traumatic than the material loss they suffer.

Reactions to the loss of valuable objects

What is of particular interest for us is that the economic loss people endure is not at all considered one of the most relevant aspects of the theft. Apart from the violation of the home, which is by far the most disturbing aspect of the crime, what the victims regret mostly is that the stolen objects are usually connected with mementoes and souvenirs of past experiences and persons, and therefore they have great symbolic and sentimental meaning and value attached to them. These losses deeply affect people:

> "I do not mind the economic loss (although it has been a considerable one) - but the sentimental loss. They stole all the mementoes I had of my husband (the interviewee is a widow). I have nothing left of the things he gave me. They deprived me of all the most intimate and personal mementoes. My privacy was destroyed, they desecrated my home; I had to change house, I could not stay there any longer". (Interview no. 12)

> "What really disturbed me was that they touched and rummaged everywhere, they even stole my correspondence. This is what annoyed me most. Maybe they read it, it was really personal. I felt injured, as if they had touched me. I do not mind at all the money they stole (it was a conspicuous amount for someone who was not rich), but when I think of the letters I feel sick, I get mad". (Interview no. 14)

> "This watch was very dear to me (grandfather's present). I kept it in a drawer because I was afraid my wife or children could break it. I never used it because I was afraid to damage it. I did not mind the theft of the camera, although it was a very good one, because if you have the money you can buy a new one. But the watch was very dear to me". (Interview no. 26)

This sudden loss of personal belongings induces people to reflect

on the real importance that things have for them; on the values and meanings they project on material goods.

As I have said, the economic and financial side of the question is never considered the worst aspect of the burglary. Furthermore, the objects whose loss was most regretted were those having great sentimental value and not those of great monetary value. Some of the people interviewed said that they never realized before how important these objects were for them and showed anger toward the burglars because "they do not respect our feelings, our memories".

The great majority of the stolen objects were in fact presents received in important and special circumstances, in relevant moments of one's life (wedding, childbirth, etc.).

The stolen objects which do not arouse particular reactions are just those to which there is no emotional and symbolic value attached, although they are generally the most used (stereo sets, television sets, cameras, etc.).

> "Well, I know I can buy a new one (colour T.V.) - although at the moment I have no money - but the ring was my mother's present. This is different".
> (Interview no. 9)

Neither economic value nor functional value can compete with the symbolic meanings and values attached to objects.

Symbolic value and gender differences

From the material I have collected a difference emerges in the symbolic meanings that men and women attach to things, in the kind of objects whose loss the two sexes most regret. While women show their sorrow for the loss of objects that symbolize family ties, kinship relationships, mementoes connected with the history of their family, (grandmother's silver plates, jewels, wedding presents, etc.), men

generally tend to suffer most for the loss of objects that have to do with their personal, individual achievements, with tokens of personal success, self-realization and action (sports trophies, things awarded to them at work, holiday souvenirs, etc.)

> "I must confess that the theft was an unpleasant experience because people you do not know get into your place and you feel disturbed. But I was not as upset as my wife for the loss of our silver. I remember I was far more angry and sorry when my car was stolen. I loved it very much. I enjoyed working on it, repairing it etc., I enjoyed driving. I had many memories associated with it." (Interview no. 38)

> "I am very sorry they stole a medal I received when I climbed the Matterhorn. ....It was a nice souvenir, I had enjoyed that climb very much. ... And then, what makes me very angry is the fact that it had no economic value, it was not made of precious metals". (Interview no. 40)

Many of the objects indicated by men as the most significant, as the ones they miss most, are connected with activities performed outside the home, with professional success, leisure activities, etc.

These data present interesting analaogies with the results of the research carried out by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton on the meaning of things.(19) In their work, similar findings are discussed when they analyze which are the objects considered most important and significant by the two genders: men seem to prefer mementoes of professional or sport achievements, cars, tools that they use in "do-it-yourself" activities, etc.; women, even when they work and have an active public life, are far more tied to all that has to do with family life, relationships, etc.

> ".....Other tools, even when not actually tools of the trade, are often central to man's identity as <u>homo faber</u>. Here is a tool and die maker whose main hobby is to build and fly model airplanes. He feels most at home in the basement where his tools are and where he says he has the 'most control over the environment'. These tools allow him to express what is most uniquely individual about his self." (20)

In the building of personal identity men are more likely to find identificatory material in objects that have to do with action.

Another interesting difference in the ways in which the two sexes relate to objects is the fact that even when they point to the same object as the most significant to them, they give two different explanations of their preference. In one case, for example, a silver frame containing a picture of the husband fishing, with the wife sitting alongside, was stolen. While both husband and wife regretted the loss of the object (not for the silver frame but for the picture that reminded them of past experiences) the wife observed: "I am sorry we lost it because it was a nice souvenir, we were a young happy couple at that time, it was taken just before we got married". The husband's comment was typically different: "I regret the loss of this picture- (I don't have a negative to make another copy) - because that day I had a jolly good time fishing, I was second in the fishing competition". The meanings attached to the same object are very different and the object is perceived in two different ways. The difference reflects the distinction between instrumental male roles and expressive female ones that has been already stressed discussing the phenomenon of collecting.

The meaning of the house

In modern industrial society the house is strictly bound to the individual's self, it reflects his personality, social status and values.(21) The house becomes central for the person: a considerable amount of time is spent in it, it is one of the most valuable (if not the most valuable) possession one may have, and it embodies deep affective meanings. The individual personalises it through furniture and objects and in this way expresses his self.

Furthermore, through it messages are communicated about one's

taste, status, conception of family life, etc., and therefore it gives information on identity. At the same time the house plays an important role giving a sense of security to the individual: in the domestic setting we experience a sense of control and mastery over the environment and this is fundamental to give us a sense of stability. This sense of security derived from the control over the environment is not necessarily and exclusively a prerogative of the house. It can be found also in other contexts. The house, from this point of view, plays an essential role for those individuals who do not find self-assurance and realization in other spheres, such as the professional or those connected with social achievements.

Besides, in contemporary society, the house has become one of the central channels to communicate status. Through it we express and affirm our standing in the eyes of strangers. The house becomes less privatized (in societies based on extended family, lineage or tribal systems, the dwelling is almost exclusively a monopoly of women, while men have at their disposal public meeting places),(22) since men are far more present in it and a great part of social life and interaction with friends and acquaintances, which used to take place in specific public spaces, now go on within the house which, consequently, tends to become an arena of display.

> "Status seeking is manifested through a dependence upon objects to affirm identity, and it is this very dependence upon objects, especially the house, to affirm identity which modifies the privatisation of the house, for it opens the private world to outsiders. (...) Here can be seen the necessary link between the private (individualised) self and the more open, public house among individualistic groups". (23)

The house therefore provides the individual with multiple meanings: it is a means for communication status and, contemporarily, it constitutes an important sphere of self-expression and a sort of emotional

refuge from the external world; an environment over which one feels in control. This last aspect is particularly relevant among women who seem less inclined to perceive the house in terms of status but rely more than men on it as an emotional refuge, as a private territory in which they feel confident.(24) Home, in fact, seems to provide them with an extremely important identificatory domain. In our social mythology women are, on the other hand, firmly lodged at the center of the home: the belief that woman's place is in the house is, after all, still deeply rooted in popular thinking.

Besides, this major involvement in and attachment of women to the house, has to do also with the fact that women spend far more time, energy, and work in it. For all these reasons they probably perceive and experience it, more than men, as their private territory. Men are more likely to have at their disposal other territories, apart from the house, where they can enjoy a relative freedom of behaviour and a sense of intimacy with and control over the environment. In some cases public territories can become "private" ones in the sense that they are meeting places of particular groups of people who know each other very well. (For example, some pubs or clubs where people regularly meet, always sit in the same chairs, at the same table; where the waiter knows what to serve, without asking, etc.). Women, for social and cultural reasons are far more bound to the house and, consequently, it is quite reasonable that they find in it a main source of identification.

The importance of the house as a source of identification and expression of territorial needs is clearly pointed out by Ardrey when he suggests that home is experienced as a private territory which provides satisfaction to three different territorial needs: that of control over space, of personalisation of space as an assertion of

identity, and that of stimulation which is achieved by defending one's territory.(25)

From the analysis of the interviews with robbery victims, what emerges quite clearly is the importance of the house as an environment in which one feels safe, and the consequent strong resentment caused by the intrusion of strangers in it. From this perspective it is interesting to note that the victims had a strong emotional reaction even when the burglars - being disturbed - did not manage to steal anything, or even when the police recovered the stolen property after a few days.

The identification, in the case of women, of home violation with body violation, expresses quite clearly the emotional attachment, the symbolic meaning, the sacred character, projected on to the house. As a territory, the body is the most private one belonging to the individual. The rights to view and touch it are subjected to great restrictions and are of a sacred nature. Simmel pointed out brilliantly the importance for the individual of having at his disposal a personal space, a sort of invisible circle surrounding him and assuring a necessary physical and psychological space.

> "... The individual who fails to keep his distance from a great person does not esteem him highly, much less too highly (as might superficially appear to be the case); but, on the contrary, his importune behaviour reveals lack of proper respect. ... The same sort of circle which surrounds a man - although it is value-accentuated in a very different sense - is filled out by his affairs and by his characteristics. To penetrate this circle by taking notice, constitutes a violation of personality. Just as material property is, so to speak, an extension of the ego, there is also an intellectual private property, whose violation effects a lesion of the ego in its very center".(26)

The house, for women, is a sacred place 'whose violation effects a lesion of the ego in its very center'. This fact, emerges even

more clearly if their reactions to the burglary are compared with those to the damage or even the destruction of the house caused by natural disaster.

Since the loss of property, the damage or the destruction of the house in the case of natural disasters does not imply a direct, malicious and aggressive human intervention, the victims do not react as they do in the case of burglary. They do not perceive any kind of violation of their territory and tend to accept the destruction of the house and the consequent deprivation as fruits of a supernatural will. Therefore, they tend to interpret it as punishment.(27)

This obviously does not mean that people do not regret the loss they have suffered, of the house and of cherished objects, but, since in many cases there is loss of human lives, too, they feel guilty about the sorrow they feel for the loss of material possessions.

Immediately after disaster, the individuals usually consider themselves so lucky to be alive that they do not give great importance to the loss of personal belongings. When the first shock is overcome, the sorrow and regret for the loss surfaces and one constantly fights and reacts against these feelings, realising that to be alive is already a great fortune, that others are worse off than them. People who were in the house when the disaster took place who, therefore, fully realize what a terrible experience it has been, and how lucky they have been to survive, tend to react more moderately than people who were absent at the time of the disaster, to the damage or destruction of the house and the loss of belongings. The first impact on those absent at the time of the disaster is through the ruins of the house and damaged or destroyed personal belongings; only at a later stage do they rationalize and reflect on their luck at not being there at the time of the disaster. Therefore, from this point of

view, their reactions to the material loss are stronger and immediate.

Even in disaster situations women tend to react differently. They, together with the old of both sexes, regret more than young or middle aged men, the loss of symbolic assets, particularly of their homes. Women and the old rely so much on the house as an identificatory domain that their stronger emotional reaction is quite understandable. As M. Wolfenstein points out very clearly "the more belongings are included in the definition of the self, the more vulnerable one is to losing part of oneself".(28)

This brief discussion of a few elements of the reactions of individuals to loss and the destruction of belongings caused by natural disasters, highlights two important differences between the latter and the experience of being burgled.

First, natural disasters cause loss (of human life and material objects) to a collectivity, unlike the burglary which causes loss to a single person or family. The collective aspect of such a phenomenon induces people to react differently. The victims of natural disasters constantly tend to make comparisons between their condition and that of the other victims, thus making loss and deprivation appear relative. The collective character of the tragedy greatly influences their reaction to the loss.

Secondly, when the person does not feel threatened with the violation of personal territory by another individual, the loss of cherished objects and even of the house does not trigger off the reactions we already described analysing the victims of burglaries. The victims of disasters do not perceive "nature" as a violator of personal territory. The destruction and loss of belongings are therefore accepted with a sort of resignation, of awareness that it was unavoidable and that one is still luckier than others who lost even more.

These feelings are completely different from anger, distrust in humanity, etc., which characterize the reactions to burglary. These different reactions should contribute to emphasize the importance - too often neglected - of territoriality in the study of human behaviour, and, more specifically, of man's relation with the environment.

Although there are these differences it seems important to emphasize a common attitude between the victims of these two different phenomena: in both cases women present an attitude toward the world of objects different from that of men; they attribute different meanings to, and project different feelings on the material world that surrounds them.

Some conclusions

I think that, at this point, some remarks and generalization can be made on gender differences in the way in which we relate to things. These distinctions are indeed deeply rooted in the individuals' identities since they are present in the most intimate symbolic environment people can create to give meaning to their lives.

Men act in accordance with masculine stereotypes even in those circumstances where they are not constrained by external social obligations or contexts to do so, when they are supposed to choose and act freely for themselves. Women, on the other hand, even when they have an active public life (they are employed, they are engaged in public activities, etc.,) are far more tied to the household and family as sources of identification, as spheres of self realization. Therefore, it can be said that the selves of men and women represent different sets of intentions or habits of consciousness.(29) Their attention is turned to different things in the same environment and when they appreciate and value the same things they do it for different reasons,

they attach to them different meanings.

Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton in their book distinguish between objects of action (such as tools, cars, etc.,) and objects of contemplation (such as furniture, pictures, etc.,) and argue that men usually are more attracted by and have a deeper tie with the first type of objects while women have with the second.

> "For men, action usually means exertion toward a goal of physical and mental supremacy. The active pursuits of women are often motivated by intentions that are broader than the self defined by its physical limits, whereas those of men tend toward the expression of individual intentionality. For men, objects often point outside the home, but the connection is rarely that of a part to a whole, as with women and elderly. Instead, the object connects different aspects of the person's self: the family man with the professional man and the man of leisure".(30)

These remarks confirm the observations I made in the course of my field work. In all the three groups I interviewed, (collectors, robbery victims, and as we shall see, nuns and monks), I constantly found a different attitude towards objects by the two sexes. The women of all three groups show more attraction toward 'contemplation objects' and rely on them far more than men for the construction and stability of their identity, while men tend to assign more value and meaning to objects that have to do with the outside world, with action. This fact shows how strong gender differences are rooted in our culture and how they are solidly transmitted through the process of socialization.(31)

They deeply permeate even the most private and secret areas of our personalities. Men seem to reproduce, even in the most personal behaviour, the same attitude asked of them in the working sphere and in every other public area. Women, even those who have a job, a high level of education, and live in large cities, seem to have

introjected very deeply values and meanings related to family, domesticity, kinship, etc. On the whole, women tend to have a more passive attitude toward the external world. They tend to identify themselves with a world of domesticity, memories, intimacy, family relationships. This attitude has already emerged when we discussed collecting. Above all, the fact that in the case of men it is a dynamic activity (searching, bartering, meeting, corresponding), while in the case of women it is more an accumulation, a hoarding, almost without any personal effort in searching, with no exchanging etc.

Objects for the individual (whatever the sex) are emotionally very important, but the kinds of meanings attached to them are different and reflect two different attitudes toward the world: the instrumental and the expressive. By instrumentalism we mean the embodiment of the principles on which modern consciousness is based: rationalistic, emotionally controlled, self-interested, individualistic. Instrumentalism stresses the work orientation of human activity. It includes the rational ethos of technocratic society, the self-interestedness of the archetypal male. It is a kind of answer to the fragmentation of the self that tends to the containment, if not to the elimination, of the expressive emotional side of the individual's personality. By expressivism, on the other hand, we mean almost a mirror image of instrumentalism. Where the instrumentalist is rational, emotionally controlled and calculating, the expressivist is passional, instinctive, spontaneous. Subjectivity and emotional involvement are central elements of this kind of personality.

The kinds of meaning embodied in the objects not only reflect these two different attitudes toward the world, they reflect also the different positions of the two sexes within the world: the

subordinate one of the women and the dominant one of men. As Goffman pointed out, women in our culture are typified as being subordinate, their role is clearly secondary to that of men.(32) In advertisements, women are pictured deferring to men in every situation, and even when they are pictured performing a more commanding role vis-a-vis a man, they are portrayed with an "I am only joking" smile, indicating that if things get tough they will defer to man. And this subordination is deeply rooted in feminine subjectivity. It is assimilated and accepted at a very unconscious level. In spite of the not too recent opening of the working sphere to them, women seem to be still deeply and emotionally attached to an ideal of domesticity.

NOTES:

1. D.W. Winnicott, Collected Papers: Through Paediatrics to Psychoanalysis, London: Tavistock Publications, 1958; ibidem, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena, A Study of The First Not Me Possession', The International Journal of Psychoanalysis, vol. 34, 1953, pp.89-97

2. The literature on Fetishism is very rich. Among these studies I would like to cite S. Freud, Fetischsmus,"Almanach" 1928, pp.17-24; English Translation, Fetishism,International Journal of Psychoanalysis, Vol. 9 n.2, 1982, pp.161-166; Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse, Objets du Fetichisme,n. 2, Automne 1970; Jean Pouillon, Fetiches sans Fetichisme, Paris: Maspero, 1975.

3. See, for example, K. Abraham, Selected Papers, London: Hogart Press, 1927.

4. On this subject see, for example, J. Baudrillard, La Societe des Consommation, Paris: Denoel, 1970; C. Lasch, The Culture of Narcissism, New York: Norton Books, 1978.

5. cf. W. Leiss, The Limits to Satisfaction, London: Marion Boyars, 1978.

6. Obviously I do not refer here to shoplifting by people in need but by well-off middle class people.See T.C.N. Gibbens and J. Prince, Shoplifting,London: The Institute for the Study and Treatment of Delinquency, 1962; J. Melville, "When is a Thief not a Thief?, New Society, 18, March 1982, pp.430-432; D.P. Walsh, Shoplifting, Controlling a Major Crime,London: Macmillan Press, 1978.

7. cf. for example, S. Hall and T. Jefferson (eds.) Resistance Through Rituals, London: Hutchinson, 1976.

8. J. Melville, When is a Thief not a Thief? op. cit., p.430

9. cf. above all the Adlerian School. cf. E. Glover, "The Neurotic Character", British Journal of Medical Psychology, 4, 1925.

10. T.C.N. Gibbens and J. Prince, op. cit., p.86.

11. cf. F. Alexander, "The Castration Complex and the formation of Character", International Journal of Psychoanalysis, Vol. 3, 1922.

12. T.C.N. Gibbens and J. Prince, op. cit. p.87.

13. Ibidem, pp.88-89.

14. Ibidem, p.89.

15. The following reflections on people who have been robbed, are based on a research I have carried out on this subject. Interviews nos. 1 - 20 were conducted with women, nos. 21 - 40 with men. For more details cf. the methodological appendix.

16. These remarks correspond to those present in the studies that analyze victims' reactions to crimes. cf. For example, M. Maguire, Burglar and Dwelling: the Offender and the Victim, London: Heinemann, 1982.

17. This subject will be developed in succeeding paragraphs.

18. On the concept of territoriality cf. K. Lorenz, On Aggression, Methuen & Co., London: 1967; S.M. Lyman and M.B. Scott, "Territoriality: A Neglected Sociological Dimension", Social Problems, Vol.15,n.51,1967-68, pp.236-249; E. Goffman, Relations in Public, New York: Basic Books, 1971, especially chapter 2 "The Territories of the Self".

19. M. Csikszentmihalyi & E. Rochberg-Halton, The Meaning of Thing, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

20. Ibidem, op. cit. p.109.

21. The role played by the house in forming the individual's identity is far less important in societies based on different custom and values. cf. A. Rapoport, House Form and Culture, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1969.

22. On this subject see the paper by W. Janz, "The extension of the self in house fronts", Paper in Anthropology, n. 645, (Dwelling and Cultures), University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, 1978; M. Harrington, "Resettlement and self image", Human Relations, vol. 18, n.2, 1965, pp.115-137

23. cf. J.S. Duncan, "From Container of Women to Status Symbol: the Impact of Social Structure on the Meaning of the House", in ibidem, (ed), Housing and Identity, London: Croom Helm, 1981, p.51.

24. cf. J.R. Seeley, R.A. Sim, E.W. Loosley, Crestwood Heights: A Study of Suburban Life, New York: Wiley, 1963.

25. cf. R. Ardrey, The Territorial Imperative, A Personal Inquiry Into the Animal Origin of Property and Nations, New York: Dell, 1966.

26. G. Simmel, "Secrecy and Group Communication", in T. Parsons, (ed.), Theories of Society, New York: The Free Press, 1961, p.320. On this topic see also E. Goffman, Behavior in Public Places, New York: The Free Press, 1963.

27. The following remarks on victims' reactions to disaster are based on an analysis of secondary literature. cf., among others, G.W. Baker, J. Chapman, W. Dwight, (eds.) Man and Society in Disaster, New York: Basic Books, 1962; M. Wolfenstein, Disaster, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957.

28. M. Wolfenstein, Disaster, op. cit. p.179.

29. M. Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, The Meaning of Things, op. cit. p.106.

30. Ibidem, pp.107-108.

31. cf. T. Parsons, The Social System, Glencoe Ill., :The Free Press, 1951, L. Glennon, Women and Dualism, New York: Longman, 1979.

32. E. Goffman, Gender in Advertisements, London: Macmillan Press, 1979.

CHAPTER VI

## THE VOW OF POVERTY : ASCETISM AND IDENTITY

The goal of this chapter is that of exploring what happens to the self and identity when the individual is deprived for most of his life of significant objects. I think that this is an interesting question since it provides us with a better understanding of the relationship existing between personality and objects, of the role things play in shaping and maintaining a stable self.

In order to answer these questions I decided to study a sample of members of religious orders since these deliberately give up secular life and values, renounce material goods and gratifications, and live according to strict and rigid rules governing the use of time, space, money, information, etc.(1) In principle, monks and nuns, by taking a vow of poverty and thus experiencing a voluntary privation of material objects, experience most distinctly the roles and functions objects play in making up and shaping the personality; they show how the relevance of renunciation of the use and ownership of things bears on the process of subjugation of the personality and of annihilation of the self that the fulfilment of the requirements of religious life demands.(2) It seemed, therefore, interesting to understand how the destruction of one's previous identity and the laborious construction of a new one take place (among other things) through the privation of and the separation from material objects which are significant to the person. The questions I was interested in had to do also with the process of formation of a new

self and a new identity in a context characterized by the absence of personal objects, by the anonymity and uniformity of the environment in which the individual undergoes this change, the passage from a lay to a religious status.(3)

The hypotheses I had in mind were:

I). The more the individual experiences a situation of material privation the more he feels uncertain and insecure and the more he seeks in the few objects at his disposal a source of stability, a confirmation of self.

II). In a context - like the monastery or convent - characterized by lack of personal spaces and of private spheres of identification, it is to be expected that the individual tends to conform to the norms and values of the group and to emphasize all those aspects of behaviour which manifest membership of and affiliation to the organization. Therefore, above all at the beginning of their religious experience, when they find themselves in a transitional stage, it is to be expected that monks and nuns attach great importance to those membership tokens (like the uniform) which make their new religious status and identity visible to themselves, to the religious group, and to the external world.

III). The behaviour of monks and nuns towards objects should reproduce the differences we noticed between the two genders while discussing the cases of collectors and of the victims of robberies. Therefore, it should be expected that monks and nuns, when they enter the Order, bring with them different possessions and when deprived of them they react differently, and that when leaving their homes and, later on moving from convent to convent, they should have different reactions.

Visiting the religious Orders and interviewing monks and nuns, I immediately realized that life is very different within male and female monastic establishments, and these differences (mainly organizational) had to be considered and taken into account in the analysis. Life in male Orders has changed considerably since the Second Vatican Council, whereas in the female Orders, it seems to fit my initial assumptions and hypotheses. More specifically, the changes which are more relevant for us have to do with the way in which the vow of poverty is experienced and understood by the monks. The ascetic character of the monks' life has faded away and is considered an old-fashioned way of understanding the experience of poverty. The emphasis has shifted from a life based on austerity and ascetism (still very much corresponding to that led within female orders and by the old monks) to a life in which personal possessions and individual use of objects are admitted as long as the person perceives a "social utility" in what he does with these things and as long as he is willing to share them with others.(4)

The young monks have at their disposal and use several objects; they do not experience either that dramatic change in life style, or those feelings of uncertainty and insecurity which the aspirant nuns encounter when they enter the convents and find themselves in depersonalized and anonymous environments. Thus, in the monks' case, it is possible to hypothetize that experiencing a less radical and strict process of socialization in the religious role, a condition of greater freedom in the use of time, objects, money, etc., they should keep a multiplicity of selves, they should not pass through a process of destruction of the previous identity but play a number of different roles, of which the religious is just one. Those membership tokens which I hypothetized to be very important in order to create a

feeling of membership and identity, should, in the monks' case, be less fundamental as a source of identity.

Thus, the following remarks upon the repercussions that the privation of significant objects have on the individual's personality are therefore based essentially on the material collected interviewing nuns, while that obtained interviewing monks is used to contrast nuns' ascetic experience with a different reality. I think that such a contrast is reasonable and legitimate and not biased by gender differences since the nuns' life appears to be very close to that of the old monks (that is to a religious socialization characterized by austerity and ascetism) and, on the other hand, the picture which emerges from my analysis of Italian male orders is very similar to that discussed in those studies of female religious orders made in different countries (mainly the U.S.).(5)

Privation of objects and identity changes.

The aspirant nuns, upon entering the convent, need to be resocialized in order to be able to fulfil the requirements of the new life they choose to lead. This is accomplished through a well institutionalized and precise programme (there are codified rituals, prescribed behaviour, precise schedules, particular tests, controls over the person, etc.), which have to be complied with. This process of socialization takes place over a long period of time and over three stages: postulancy, novitiate and professed religious life. This long and demanding apprenticeship is a very clear indicator of the complexity and difficulty that such a transition implies and of the graduality of the process.

The aspirant nun who decides to abandon secular for religious life chooses deliberately to enter a total institution characterized by a

well-defined code of behaviour, precise rules and goals; the process of adaptation to and identification with the new values and meanings is gradual and progressive and involves an absolute and complete modification of her previous way of life, the laborious construction of a new identity, a new perception of the world. Both formal and informal mechanisms of control are forged in order to govern the behaviour beliefs and thoughts of the aspirant nuns. Their life, above all during the first years spent in the convents before taking the final vows, is highly prescribed and routinized. Enforced isolation from the world and a strict resocialization within the religious community are often carried out in order to produce the radical change in identity, commitments and behaviour required by the new status of member of a religious order. Very often high geographical mobility is used too in order to prevent the development of strict personal bonds among the religious persons and feelings of attachment to particular buildings, rooms, environments.

Entering the convents the female aspirants tend to bring with them, above all, tokens and souvenirs of their family and friends (photographs, small presents such as pens, religious pictures, etc.). Male aspirants, on the other hand, tend to bring with them radios, stereo sets, tape recorders, cameras, musical instruments, typewriters and, above all, a considerable number of books, not only on theological or religious subjects. Women, furthermore, unlike men, report that they felt very strongly the separation from their homes, not only from parents and relatives, but also from the house itself, showing the relevance it has as an identificatory domain.

> "I missed that feeling of safeness and security that we have when we feel at home" (interview no. 8)

> "At the beginning I missed my house almost in a physical way. ... After a certain period I found here other things which, to a certain extent, replaced my home, now I am used to this environment; I have a sort of attachment and affection toward it and I feel well here too". (Interview No. 9)

These different attitudes and reactions which characterize the behaviour of the aspirant monks and nuns correspond to those pointed out discussing the cases of collectors and of the victims of robberies. This correspondence strengthens further what has been argued on differences in the way the two genders relate to the material world and on the contribution things make to the construction and maintenance of our self-perception and identity. The objects the two genders bring with them denote also a different attitude toward the external world and different expectations for what concerns their future religious life. Women bring with them above all objects which remind them of significant persons and affective bonds, men, objects which allow them to keep in touch with the world outside the convent (radios, books, etc.), to pursue personal hobbies and interests (music, photography, etc.) which do not necessarily have any relation with their religious life. They claim that books and typewriters are essential tools to achieve the necessary preparation for their future profession, and other objects such as a guitar, a camera, etc., will help them to interact and socialize with the lay people they will meet in their external activities.

The future nuns, even those who will engage in external and public activities such as nursing, teaching, etc., do not seem concerned about the world outside the convent and tend to emphasize their own retreat and withdrawal from the world. On the other hand, even during postulancy and novitiate periods characterized by tighter control over the persons and limited interaction with the external world - the aspirant monks experience far more numerous external

contacts and relationships than their female counterparts.

In the female orders, both contemplative, cloistered and missionary, there is a very tight control over the sisters' lives from every point of view: control over the use of time, of objects, of money, of space. The rule of dependence - that is the fact that the aspirant has to depend totally on the Superior's will, has to ask permission for everything she needs (even soap or tooth paste) - is far more rigid and literally respected than in the male orders. Sisters must ask permission for every action they intend to undertake. The control over the objects they keep in their rooms is very rigid (there are frequent inspections), every object they receive from parents and relatives must be presented to the Mother Superior who decides what do with it and to whom it must be given. Sisters are periodically allowed to write home and their correspondence is checked by the Superior. They are not allowed to keep any money and if they have to go out (i.e. to the Theology School) they are given the bus tickets or the money they need. They cannot therefore buy anything unless authorized, they cannot bring into the convent any paper or magazine (the daily paper of the Vatican is usually available for reading in the common room), they cannot watch television unless the Mother Superior decides there is something worth watching. Only a few old nuns were allowed to keep a radio in their rooms. But this was clearly defined as an exception. The books the sisters read are chosen by the Superior because of their potential contribution to the religious and theological knowledge of the nun and are kept by the single sister only for a limited period, after which the books are kept in the convent library.

The deprivation of any significant object, the prevention of any individual initiative, the strict dependence on the Superior, the

depersonalization of the environment, bring as a consequence the annihilation of the individual's identity and the patterning of the sister's self after the religious ideal imposed by the Order: gradually but systematically, every object which had some connection with the previous life of the aspirant nun is eliminated. The only personal items that usually the sisters keep with them are a few pictures of their relatives, a watch and an alarm clock - essential tools to guarantee punctuality and routine, basic qualities of religious life. Nowadays sisters have at their disposal personal garments too, while until a few years ago they had common ones. They also have personal prayer books.

> "When I arrived I had a fountain pen which I was given by my friends when I left home to come here. I liked it very much and I was very happy to own it because I never had one before. When I unpacked my luggage the Mother who supervised this activity took the pen. She said I wouldn't need it. I felt very sorry; I hadn't even tried it, and then I did not understand why she behaved in such a way. Now ( after one year) I do. (Interview no. 10)

Monks: from conformity to individuality. The role played by possessions.

The aspirant monks enjoy far more freedom for what concerns both the objects they are allowed to keep, the books and papers they are allowed to read, and the possibility to have external relationships, to use money, time, etc., according to personal criteria. Unlike sisters, they can smoke, help themselves freely with drinks and food, read novels or whatever they wish. When they receive a present from home or from friends they personally decide whether to keep it for themselves or to share it with the rest of the community. Usually they are more engaged than sisters in activities external to the monastery (both studying and working) and this makes almost impossible a form of control over the brothers' life which is as tight as

that over sisters' behaviour. This life external to the monastery, gives to the monks a higher level of personal autonomy. Moreover, after the Second Vatican Council, male Orders in Italy have been more receptive than female ones to innovations which, to a certain extent, encouraged personal inclinations and gave a certain amount of freedom to express individual attidues. Conformity and uniformity, which were essential and predominant characteristics and principles of life in the religious Orders before the Vatican Council(6), gave way to a progressively more personally oriented vision of religious life within the Orders. As I said, this change in Italy has taken place and developed to a larger extent in male Orders, while in the female ones innovations have been far less radical and slower.(7) This is acknowledged by the religious Orders themselves, above all by the monks who are in touch with female Orders and can, therefore, make comparisons between their own and the sisters' conditions.

> "We (monks) constantly live with the temptation to become attached to some objects. I would say that this is probably nowadays the greatest risk we religious people have in the western world. The contacts with the external world push us towards new needs and it is very difficult to put up resistance. ..... I think that in the female Orders (he is the confessor in a nuns' convent) the control over the persons and therefore over what they possess is greater. There is no doubt that they generally experience a far more rigorous poverty than ours, because they have fewer opportunities to interact with the external world. .... In our cells we can do whatever we like, we can keep books, records, radio, etc.; we can hang posters on the walls, pictures, etc. The nuns' cells are completely depersonalized, they are cold; I feel they are terribly anonymous. (Interview No. 23)

This new ideal of religious life, which has been developing since Vatican Council II, is reflected, for instance, in the dramatic differences in the ways of living and of conceiving the monk's experience between young and old monks.(8) Compatible differences which are not found among young and old nuns.

> "Nowadays the communal use of goods is stressed far more than the ascetic character. As long as we do not perceive our relationship with objects as problematical - in the sense that we do not feel too dependent on them - we are allowed to possess whatever we want; really there is no problem. ... The old monks have remained faithful to their ascetic way of living. They are very different from us. Although we live in the same monastery we are worlds apart. (Interview no. 44)

Brothers are allowed to personalize their rooms both with posters and objects of their taste. Their rooms have little to do with the ascetic austerity of the older monks' cells. Several of them have radios or record players, the great majority possesses a personal theological library, although they have at their disposal excellent common libraries in the monasteries. Some have collections of art books or of records of classical music etc. The personal ownership of these things is explained and justified by the fact that

> "The Order must develop the personality of the persons, allowing the single individual to exploit and expand his own attitudes and skills through the pursuing of personal interests and hobbies". (Interview no. 37)

The great majority of monks, even before taking the final vows, hold paid jobs outside the monastery. They personally receive their salary and, according to the rule, they must give it to the bursar Father, whom they must ask for the money necessary to buy what they think they need. This passage of money from the monk to the bursar Father and from him back to the monk, is done in order to stress and emphasize the dependence of the single monk from the Order. Even if, according to those interviewed, the bursar Father usually does not oppose the requests of the monks, the simple fact that they are compelled to ask for every item they wish to purchase, constitutes a sort of filter, of self-limitation, and self-control over their requests.

Although monks' dependence on the Superiors is far less strong than that of nuns, since it is essentially connected with the giving and asking of money only, while they are quite free in their use of time, of food, etc., it is often scarcely tolerated by the young brothers who state it is a sort of common practice to keep some private and personal funds so that they do not feel obliged to approach the bursar every time they want something. Moreover, the fact that, as we said, they are allowed to keep the presents they receive without asking the Superiors, gives them the possibility to possess and use several objects. For this reason status differences among monks are visible and apparently they sometimes engender invidious attitudes which emerge in connection with the availability of goods, as well as success at school or university.

In the case of nuns, the strict and rigid control over their whole life and more specifically over what they are allowed to keep in their rooms, makes almost impossible any feeling of envy among them for what concerns the use and ownership of objects. And even if, of course, there are intellectual, educational and cultural differences among them, the stress on conformity and dependence tends to make those differences less visible and therefore less a source of conflict than (they are) among monks.

The fact that monks use, possess, and personalize their environments through objects, makes their relationship with things almost inevitably problematic. They are well aware of this fact and for this reason the great majority of those interviewed were induced to praise the practice of frequent moves from monastery to monastery which compels them to get rid of all that is not strictly necessary. Nuns, on the contrary, discussing the moving from one house to another, tend to stress the fact that they have to abandon associates

and environments which had become familiar, dear.

The conflicting situation in which monks find themselves is reflected in the following quotation:

> "The greatest effort I have faced in my religious life is that of getting rid of things, of possessing nothing. Some time ago my parents gave me a guitar as a present. I asked for it because I thought it was useful to get in touch more easily with young people. Then I had no time to study it but I became strongly attached to the instrument and this created a great conflict in me. Eventually, having to move to another monastery, I decided to give it away. I felt really relieved. It was a sort of liberation. I noticed similar behaviour in other brothers. To move from monastry to monastery is very useful because we leave all that is not useful, and in this way free ourselves from so many ties". (Interview no. 38)

The complexity of monks' relationship to things induces them to sophisticated rationalizations of the fact that they personally possess and use several objects. So, for instance, one answered the question whether he did not find any contradiction in possessing a private library as follows:

> "All that is mine is in fact of the whole community, because I lend what I am asked; and even if I am the only one to use an object, it is the community that uses it through me". (Interview no. 40)

Or, as another one observed:

> "The point is not that of possessing nothing but that of perceiving things as not yours and therefore of being able to lend them to everybody". (Interview no. 33)

> "To have a personal library is now a common practice. I am very fond of history and art books. Books are the objects I love most and I often receive them as presents from my lay friends. When I travel (during the summer holidays) the knowledge I acquire reading these books is very useful. (....) I am aware that it is definitely a private pleasure but, at the same time, it is a capital which I transmit to others. (He usually travels with a group of lay friends and he acts as a tourist guide). .... These books are stored in my room

> but I do not perceive them as mine. Perhaps it would be better to store them in the monastery library, but in all large monasteries (like this one) the things which are common are neglected and then for us it is normal to keep our things in our rooms". (Interview no. 23)

It will be seen from these passages that monks tend to consider possessing acceptable, on condition that the individual perceives a certain degree of social utility in the use he makes of these objects (it is not by chance, in fact, that the most commonly possessed objects are books since one can almost immediately justify their social utility by the fact that through them one acquires useful information which can be given to others), and that he is willing to lend the things he owns.

But to be willing to give one's beloved objects to others (usually other monks) is difficult even for monks. These exchanges often originate quarrels among them, they may spoil friendships and relationships within the religious community:

> "I do not like to lend my stuff, above all the things I am attached to I am a musician and I have several scores. When someone asks me for a score I feel sick at the idea of giving it because I think it can be spoiled or lost and I need it. It is a continuous struggle". (Interview no. 34)

This can be explained by the fact that some of these objects are very significant for the single monk who projects personal feelings on to them and who, therefore, when giving them away loses part of his self. This is relevant to our argument since it shows that the monk relies on spheres different from the religious one for the maintenance and the integrity of his self. Material objects which do not have any relation with his religious status, become nevertheless essential elements of his life and identity. At the same time the personal use and ownership of goods stimulates various conflicting feelings and reactions in the monks.

The problem of coming to terms with the ideal and the vow of poverty - essential features of the monks' life - and, at the same time, the tendency to accumulate goods, are aspects of the religious experience which often become difficult to solve. Several monks asserted that this is one of the most difficult and demanding problems they face in the religious life. Moreover, the increasing personalization of the religious experience, the recognition and the encouragement, by the Orders, of differences in attitudes, sensibility, skills, etc., the greater autonomy which monks enjoy today, have brought as a consequence a new emphasis on the monk as <u>individual</u>, with his tastes and personal aspirations, more than as member of a community which he has to respect and on which he depends. It becomes more and more difficult to respect the principles of dependence and obedience which are rooted in the idea of negation of the individual's personality and in the uncritical acceptance of God's will mediated by the Superior's plans.

But discarding the ascetic ideal, which is no longer considered adequate to the active role monks want to play in modern society,(9) makes it very difficult to reach an equilibrium between a "legitimate", self-limited and self-controlled, use of goods and the desire to possess. Besides, the greater personalization of the religious experience has brought about a certain identification of the monks with the external activities they carry on, the objects they collect, the hobbies they practice. Some of them, for instance, during the interview, defined themselves as teachers, musicians, photographers, etc. To lend their working tools - books, scores, cameras - becomes a difficult matter since they invest so much emotionally in them. Moreover the fact that the ownership of some of these objects has been the result of a long and tiring accumulation of "secret" money or of

complicated bargaining with the bursar Father, that monks had to plan these purchases long before they were able to make them, engenders in the monks a greater attachment to their possessions which are perceived as the product of personal effort and achievement. The great majority of the monks, in fact, describing the efforts they went through in order to obtain something, clearly appeared proud of their enterprise:

> "This is the first camera I bought. It took me more than one year to accumulate enough money to buy it. But then I was very happy to have it. Now I do not use it any longer (he has a better one) but I am still very fond of it. It is the first object I bought. I get deeply attached to my things. I need them even physically. If I do not take photos for a while, I nevertheless feel the need to use it even without a film". (Interview no. 31)

By discarding the ascetic ideal, by personalizing the environment, by making use of the freedom to express one's personality, to diversify oneself from the others, to wear common clothes, to work outside without being detected as a member of a religious Order, the monk has obtained the possibility of maintaining a lay identity, of acting and behaving as a layman and therefore of experiencing a double perception of his self both as a lay and as a religious person. This means that monks do not pass through a process of destruction and annihilation of their lay identity; on the contrary they have several selves at their disposal. This brings as a consequence a greater psychological autonomy from the religious role.

Uniform and identity.

The different conditions which characterize the nuns' lives, as has been argued above, compel them to a more radical change in life style, to a clearer cut with their previous lay status, to a necessarily deeper transformation and change of values and attitudes. All these features engender a more complete and radical process of eradication of the previous identity, and a greater sense of insecurity

and uncertainty until a new self is completely shaped and accepted by the person. In this period of transition and change the aspirant nuns (aspirant because they have not yet taken the final vows) find themselves in an in-between condition: they are not yet nuns but, at the same time, they no longer feel lay persons. Being in such an unstable, precarious, poorly defined, status, not having the possibility to rely upon personal objects and familiar environments to support their identity and their self perception, they strenuously seek to conform as much as possible to this new life style, to integrate themselves into the religious community.(10) During the interviews the postulantsand novices told me how important it was for them to learn how to walk properly, how to speak, how to make gestures in order to communicate silently with the other sisters. Moreover, an interesting indicator of the anxious desire to perceive themselves and be perceived as full members of the religious community, can be found in the strong aspiration to wear the religious habit. Such a desire is unanimously expressed by the aspirant nuns. All of them, in fact, claimed to have felt disappointed and frustrated by the fact that in the first year, and often also in the second, they had to wear ordinary clothes which they brought in from home. They longed for a visible sign of their changed condition, they would have liked to be identified as different from the "normal" people they mixed with when they went out, and would have liked to feel part of the religious world they had entered.

> "When I entered I wanted so much to wear the habit. ....
> Then when I had to go out (to the theology school)
> and nobody recognized me as a postulant, I did not
> like it. This year (she is a novice now) I have a
> uniform - although it is not the proper habit -
> and I am far happier because now people understand
> I am different, that I have made a religious choice".
> (Interview No. 13)

Several aspirants during the first year create for themselves a sort of uniform (usually a black overall), they lengthen the dresses they use when they go out (dresses which have been selected according to the criteria of modesty and inconspicuousness). They are clearly disturbed by the idea of being perceived as young women instead of persons with a precise religious status. The insecurity and precariousness linked to their transitional status make the interactions with the external world difficult and a source of anxiety. They tend to avoid contacts with the secular world: those who are allowed to go home for holidays (one week during summer) say they do not like it, that they feel uneasy within their family; they claim that they do not know how to behave. They do not yet feel secure about their choice and their new status and going back home may often stimulate conflicts and open wounds which have just healed or have not yet healed. They claim it is enough for them to know their parents and relatives are well and that they do not like to spend more than a couple of days at home:

> "When I go back home I long to come back here in the convent. This is the place in which I feel at home now, here I feel I am in the proper place. I no longer feel at home when I am with my family.
> (Interview No. 11. She entered the convent two years before).

In some Orders I visited, a uniform is given to the young aspirant nuns when they become novices (usually one year after their entering the convent). This symbolizes the first important step towards full affiliation to the order and it is highly appreciated by the novices. They now feel visibly different from the lay persons and accepted by the religious community. This strengthens their perception of themselves as persons with a religious status.

> "At least now it is evident that I am a member of a religious Order. Many people ask me what this uniform represents because it is not very common. I am happy to wear it, now I feel more confident when I have to go out because my choice is visible. I like to wear it in the convent too because it shows that I am a novice, that I am a member of this community". (Interview No. 17).

It is immediately obvious that they seek a confirmation of their role from the external world - by being perceived as members of a religious Order and not as young women - as well as from the convent's world - by feeling accepted by and integrated into the community. Their need to show, through the uniform, their different status probably reflects the psychological need to reject their femininity and to be recognized as sexually non-accessible persons. But, first of all, they must accept themselves as persons who devote their lives to God, therefore, they need to deny all those aspects of their personality which go against this perception of their selves: if they are not given a uniform, they lengthen their dresses, their hair is kept tidy without any refinement. They make an effort to de-emphasize all those external aspects which could make them sexually attractive and feminine. It is quite evident that if their religious status is not apparent they often feel uneasy and embarrassed when they go out, since they may become the object of sexual attentions and this puts them in a conflicting situation.

Gradually this need to rely so much on appearances to support their identity and self-perception seems to diminish: the nuns whom I interviewed, who occasionally wore lay clothes to go out (i.e. to accompany their students to the theatre, etc.), declared they did not feel embarrassed or uneasy. This suggests that when the new status has been completely accepted and the transitional period of discarding the previous self has been overcome, the new self takes shape and there is

less need to use objects as identity pegs. The individual is sufficiently confident of his identity to appear in public without any distinctive mark which makes known his status.

It is possible to generalize and say that the more the individual is insecure and lacking confidence the more he will depend on those tokens of membership to a particular group or institution which play the role of supporting and strengthening his sense of affiliation, his perception of the self as member of a group.

As has been suggested, the life monks carry out within the monastery gives them room enough to express their individuality. It does not compel them to a strict dependence on the superiors, to rigid timetables, etc., and therefore it does not require such a complete and extreme reshaping of their identity. The aspirant monks therefore do not manifest the same need of conformity to the rules of the Order and of being considered and perceived as full members of the religious community. Their use of the habit, for example, gives us a clear indicator of the different condition they experience.

Although all the aspirant monks are given a habit shortly after they enter the monastery, they apparently use it very rarely. When they were interviewed, all but one wore lay clothes personally bought according to their taste (mainly T-shirts or jumpers and jeans) and declared they wear the habit only very rarely, apart from the situations in which they are compelled to do so, (celebration of the mass, common prayers, etc.), that is situations typical of the monastic life. In their activities outside the monastery, which occupy a large part of their time, the monks are free to choose how to appear, how to dress. This liberty makes them quite soon well aware of the symbolic value of the habit, and they soon become able to establish when to use it or not, according to the messages they want to convey.

So, when they go out, they freely choose whether to present themselves as monks or as ordinary individuals. Unlike the aspirant nuns, they do not feel at all embarrassed to be considered "normal" people; actually, above all at the beginning, they are often embarrassed at the idea of going out wearing the habit, that is of being identified as religious. They assert the habit is less comfortable than trousers and makes them appear clumsy, awkward, ridiculous. Some of them, for instance, say they do not like to go home wearing it: "I always go home wearing lay clothes; wearing the habit I would feel ridiculous, out of place". (Interview no. 37). Others claim that in certain contexts the habit constitutes an obstacle to their activities (i.e. working with drug addicts), because it emphasizes and creates difference and distance between them and the others. "The habit can be a barrier between us and the lay persons we work with". (Interview No. 24).

From the data I collected a different attitude emerges towards the religious garb between aspirant monks and nuns. While, as has been said, the young women seem to look for a uniform which distinguishes them from the others and makes their choice clear to the world, the young men seem to show a certain difficulty at being identified as persons with a religious status. They prefer to present themselves as lay persons, to work and go out without being detected as members of a religious community. This difference between nuns and monks can probably be explained by the fact that the aspirant nuns entering the convent face a faster and more dramatic change than their male counterparts, and react to the situation with an attempt to adapt themselves as fast as possible to this new context. The aspirant monks, on the other hand, experiencing a far more gradual change in life style, remain more attached to their previous secular identity and only

slowly and gradually accept their own identification with the community they chose to join.

> "At the beginning (four years before) I hated to wear the habit. Since I had this strong dislike to use it, my spiritual father suggested I made an effort to use it all the time. I remember it was terrible, above all when I went home. I really felt horribly ashamed. I couldn't face my parents, at night I couldn't sleep. I liked the life in the monastery, but I couldn't stand to be identified as a monk. Now I have overcome this problem and I tend to use the habit quite often". (Interview No. 23).

Gradually, those who decide to remain in the monastery, learn to accept themselves as religious persons and progressively they overcome the difficulties they had about the use of the habit, (although they do not wear it very often anyway) and feel confident enough to face the world as monks.

Nevertheless, the fact that they are not compelled to use the habit all the time, and, above all, that they can go out to work or attend conferences, etc., using lay clothes, makes it possible for them to be perceived by and to interact with others as "normal" individuals. They are therefore allowed to maintain a multiplicity of selves, to play a wide set of roles of which the religious one of monk is just one among others. This twofold persona which they have at their disposal for use in interactions, allows them to present different selves according to what they think more suitable.

> "It depends entirely on me to wear the habit or not. It depends on what I plan to do, where I go. I frequently go to the theatre and I often associate with actors. Sometimes I go to these places wearing the habit (when I want my religious choice to be clear and evident), sometimes I wear lay clothes because I do not like to embarrass these persons, since the habit influences my interactions with them, their relationships towards me and among themselves in my presence. The habit is a symbol and just for this fact it can be despised or worshipped. There is no doubt that it cannot be ignored and therefore the interaction is necessarily

> modified. Over this period I tend to use it more often than before because I consider it as a way of manifesting my faith. It is a sort of silent sermon I give to those I meet. (Interview no. 38)

It is undeniable that to interact with a person wearing a habit has certain consequences for the other individual who may perceive the uniform wearer as either a peer or an outsider, and will have particular expectations as to how the monk should behave, and will manifest these expectations in the interaction. But the uniform wearer himself is influenced by the uniform he wears: since no other statuses, or any touch of individuality are acknowledged in the person wearing the uniform by others, he is induced to act as an occupant of his "uniformed" status. In this sense the habit, as any other uniform, plays the role of binding the wearer to his peers and differentiates and separates him from outsiders.(11)

The fact that monks are allowed to wear lay clothes gives them a greater freedom, since they cannot be immediately detected as religious and therefore can enjoy the privileges of anonymity when they go around wearing normal clothes. But it may also bring as a consequence the weakening of the ties with their peers and the strengthening of those with outsiders. This may happen because as the distinctions and the differential markers which made the monks always visible and recognizable are weakened, the boundaries which separate the group from the external world are weakened too, and the individual's qualities and peculiarities are stressed and emphasized instead of those of the group.

From what has been said up to now, the symbolic relevance of objects such as uniforms (which are emblems of groups and organizations) emerges both in making apparent certain values which the public associates with the organization, and in keeping those wearing

them from projecting many personal characteristics. The interaction between "ordinary" people and those wearing uniforms is special since the uniform wearer tends to be perceived as a member of a group more than as an individual. The uniform, in fact, tends to monopolize all the meanings and messages we usually derive from someone's appearance, it tends to eliminate the perception of personal and individual characteristics and to stress the uniformity and conformity of the uniform wearer to the characteristics of the group of which he is a member. Since social intercourse involves mutual adjustment, the uniform wearer, being used to interact with persons who act towards him on the basis of his role, becomes conditioned to respond to their actions in the way in which they expect him to answer. From this it follows that:

> "The greater the number of situations in which an individual wears uniform relative to the number of situations he experiences in which uniform is not worn, the more his conception of Self will be influenced by the nature of the role signified by his uniform, and the more his actions in all situations will correspond to a broad definition of the actions appropriate to the uniformed role". (12)

This means that the possibility of choosing whether to present oneself wearing the uniform or not has deep and significant repercussions on the individual's conception of his self and of his identity. Some studies (13) suggest how the abolition or even the modification of the habit have made an impact on the likelihood of monks and nuns giving up their religious life.

> "The respondents (nuns) mentioned the pleasure of being able to move unnoticed in everyday circles - shopping, browsing, attending meetings, going to classes - and being treated 'like everyone else'. In this way, nuns had greater opportunity to pick up the small routines and skills of secular living and to practice and refine them in unobtrusive ways.

> These ramifications of changes in the habit also had an impact on the imagery with which the respondents identified themselves. New 'selves' were opening up. Being a nun became just one of a number of existential possibilities. As the nuns became more aware of what else they could be, what selves were latently subsumed under their role as nuns, their close identification with the religious role diminished". (14)

The changes and modifications described in the above quotation are not at all surprising because by discarding the uniform one rejects those things which have the function of abolishing individual idiosyncracies in behaviour and appearance as well as in self-image. As the word uniform suggests, to wear it means to make a person similar to others, to conform to the rules of the group, to suppress individuality. It also means to exert a strong form of control over the people wearing it: deviations are much more apparent - a policeman drinking alcohol while on duty, a nun embracing a young man, are immediately noticed by the public which expects different behaviour from them. The person wearing a uniform is not just an individual but a representative of a group which is responsible for the individual's actions.

Some conclusions.

What has been analyzed and discussed so far shows the great relevance objects have in shaping and supporting our identity, in structuring and influencing our perception of ourselves as well as of others. In a situation of transition from one role to another, from one status to another, objects constitute the essential tools the individual relies upon in order to successfully overcome the passage. Their use, in fact, may help the person to separate and differentiate from the previously played roles, and to make evident and signal the change which has taken place.

Objects become membership tokens, they make differences visible and therefore make the external world intelligible and understandable. Through the use and manipulation of objects individuals create distinctions, convey messages, play roles, present a multiplicity of selves according to their appearance. Objects are means of expression: they can express membership of a group or an organization and therefore influence interaction among individuals.

Different attitudes towards objects among nuns and monks have been described. They are caused both by gender and by organizational differences between male and female Orders. The gender differences which have been pointed out confirm what has been already said concerning the collectors and burglary victims: that women, far more than men, tend to rely upon "contemplation objects" (objects which remind them of bonds and ties with the family or the religious Order) for the construction and stability of their identities, while men tend to rely upon, and to give more importance to, objects connected with action and with the external world (radios, cameras, books, papers, etc.). Secondly, but not secondary, the aspirant nuns experience a real privation of significant objects and this has a considerable influence on the process of annihilation of their lay identity and on their acceptance of the religious one as the only identity. Monks, on the contrary, living in a personalized environment, not experiencing the privation of significant possessions, do not pass through such a destruction and reshaping of their identity. They have at their disposal several identificatory roles of which the religious is just one among others - even if it may be the most important. These differences explain why the aspirant monks do not experience the same sense of insecurity and uncertainty the aspirant nuns do, and why, therefore, they do not feel with the same urgency the need to conform to the rules

of the Order, to perceive themselves as full members of the religious community, but actually find it hard to identify themselves totally and completely in the role of monk.

The results of this argument quite clearly show how the depersonalization of the environment, the abolition and the exclusion of every personal object which may remind the persons of past experiences or ties, (which may therefore embody their projections), and the tight boundaries imposed on external contacts and relationships, engender and stimulate a complete transformation of the individual's identity, and the urgent need to find other identificatory domains which give a new sense of identity and a new meaning to life.

In this context objects become very important since they provide the individual with tokens of membership in the new world of which they are a part. Above all in the period of transition from one role to another, they play a relevant role contributing to the structuring and supporting of the individual's new self and identity.

NOTES:

1. The following considerations are based on a series of interviews I conducted with individuals who decided to enter different Catholic Religious Orders. Interviews nos. 1-20 were conducted with females; 21 - 40 with males. For more details cf. the methodological appendix.

2. On this conception of religious life reference may be made to G.G. Coulton, Five Centuries of Religion, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1923, vol. (i).; E. Beaglehole, Property, A Study in Social Psychology, London: Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1931.

3. For this reason most interviews were conducted with people who had very recently entered religious Orders and found themselves in the middle of the transition from a lay to a religious identity. On the problem of role passage, cf. the classic and famous work by A. Van Gennep, The Rites of Passage, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960.

4. On the contemporary vision of the role of monks see Confederazione dei Padri Provinciali dei Frati Minori d'Italia, La vocazione dell' ordine oggi, Capitolo Generale dei Frati Minori: Madrid, 1/6 - 8/7 1973.

5. This is what emerges from my data. Studies carried out in other countries show an image of nuns' life similar to what I found in monasteries. On this subject cf., for example, L. San Giovanni, Ex Nuns: a Study of Emergent Role Passage, Norwood (New Jersey): Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1978; H.R. Fuchus Ebaugh, Out of the Cloister, A Study of Organizational Dilemmas, Austin & London: University of Texas Press, 1977.

6. On this subject see R. Carli, F. Crespi, G. Pavan, Analisi dell'Ordine dei Frati Minori Cappuccini, Milano: Etas Kompass, 1974.

7. In the U.S. for example, these changes took place also in female orders; cf. L. San Giovanni, op. cit., H.R. Fuchus Ebaugh, op. cit.

8. On age related differences in the conception of religious life cf. R. Carli, F. Crespi, G. Pavan, op. cit.

9. On this subject cf. Confederazione dei Padri Provinciali e dei Frati Minori Cappuccini, op. cit., e G. Carli, F. Crespi, G. Pavan, op.cit.

10. Interesting data emerge from the BBC programme Decision. Poverty, Chastity, Obedience, Post Production Script, London: 1980, broadcast on 15th January 1980.

11. cf. S.M. Wood, "Uniform. Its Significance As a Factor in Role-Relationships", in Sociological Review, vol. 14, n.1, 1966, pp.139-151; J. Nathan and N. Alex, "The Uniform: A Sociological Perspective", in American Journal of Sociology, vol. 77, n.4, 1971/72, pp. 719-30; G. Simmel, Fashion in D.N. Levine, George Simmel. On Individuality and Social Forms, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971, pp.294-323; G. Stone, Appearance and the Self, in A.H. Rose, Human Behaviour and Social Processes, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962.

12. S.M. Wood, "Uniform", op. cit.

13. cf. L. San Giovanni, op. cit. and H.R. Fuchus Ebaugh, op. cit.

14. cf. L. San Giovanni, op. cit. p.43.

## CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this work has been that of shedding light on some specific and limited aspects of the everyday life of contemporary individuals which can help us to understand the peculiarities of modern social experience. More specifically, this contribution refers to a tradition of social thinking which is mainly concerned to clarify some features of modern contemporary society and to stress some of the problems modernity raises for the establishment and maintenance of personal identity.

Within this tradition of sociological and socio-philosophical thought, the main objective of the dissertation has been that of exploring and understanding the functions performed and the roles played by objects in providing the individual with useful material for shaping his self, interacting with others, and building safe identificatory domains where his quest for identity can find an answer (although usually a partial and transitory one).

This topic has been chosen since it has been almost completely ignored by sociology. Analyses of the relationship which binds people and objects are very few and unsatisfactory. The prevalent sociological approach to the above question has in fact generally considered objects as consumption goods able to satisfy human needs and wishes and to communicate status differences among individuals. According to these contributions, people would surround themselves with objects both to satisfy personal or socially-induced needs and to keep up with the competition for social standing.

The objective of the dissertation has been that of pointing out how restrictive such an interpretation is since the meanings and the projections attached to objects are multiple and complex. Things

perform several other functions apart from those stressed by the sociological analyses of consumer behaviour and consumption society. Indeed, I believe that those are only some, and not the most important, reasons which drive us to buy and surround ourselves with inanimate objects. It is therefore necessary not to over-rate these functions but to regard them as some among several others.

An interdisciplinary approach to this subject seems better suited to understand the various roles played by objects and some particular features characteristic of the contemporary relationship between individuals and material things. Disciplines such as anthropology, history and psychology provide valuable evidence and relevant information on the individual's relationship to things in different social and cultural contexts. From a comparison of different ways of relating to objects it is possible to highlight some of the general and basic functions they perform which are present in every social context and cultural system. In the thesis I discussed especially the role things play as cultural markers, as the visible part of the cultural system.

In every culture meanings are attached to things. Through their production, use, exchange, accumulation, destruction and consumption, society defines and redefines its symbolic system; meanings, values, social definitions of reality are created, confirmed, or undermined.

An analysis of the symbolic meanings attached to things provides general information on the structure and the characteristics of the social system as a whole. For example, the way in which we dress indicates our definition of time, of age, of gender differences, of private and public situations, of formal and informal occasions, of social stratification within society.

It is the cultural system which provides the definitions of utility, value, scarcity, etc., on which our vision and perception of the world are based. Changes in society are brought about through a struggle between old and new meanings, old and new definitions of reality: in this respect, objects are just the battle-ground where the contest takes place. In other words, where culture is shaped.

The only recently acknowledged cultural and artistic significance of some objects which were produced at the beginning of the century, is an example of how values, meanings and tastes change in society and of how the material world is the tangible and visible expression of these modifications.(1)

This aspect is totally neglected by those sociological analyses which regard the utility of things as a fixed and clearly defined quality, while it changes considerably not only from culture to culture but also within the same symbolic system in a very short space of time.

Besides, in a social system as complex and differentiated as to-day's, different cultural patterns co-exist and, with them different meanings are attached to things. Objects are often used to communicate diversity from the dominant values and culture: through an often provocative use of objects, groups and minorities signal and make visible their existence and their resistance towards the system. In this context the study of different sub-cultures supplies not only information about social standing, but also several examples of the multiple meanings attached to things, and the use we make of them to communicate values, beliefs, membership, consent or refusal.

To study the relationship between people and things means to throw light on crucial aspects of social life, on the role things play in contributing to satisfy different and multiple needs of the

social actor. In particular, in the thesis I have pointed out the role objects play in shaping and supporting the individual's identity in a social context characterized by the objectification of social relations, by impersonal interactions among individuals. In such a situation objects become the main channel through which it is possible to exchange information on people's definitions of themselves and of the world.

The ways in which we present ourselves, and organize the environment we select for public and social activities - the front region -[2] have become extremely important features of modern life, where other reference points or distinctive criteria, apart from appearance, are missing. Appearance has become a basic aspect of our lives, the yardstick to judge ourselves and others: what one appears to be, and not what he is, has become relevant to us. Objects have therefore taken on a fundamental importance since appearance is grounded in the manipulation and use of things, which have the task of communicating and making easily understandable the messages we want to convey.

Things take on the function of 'identity pegs' on which we rely to present ourselves, to sustain our performance in the interaction with others. But appearance is important not only to communicate feelings and information to others but also to shape our self and identity. As has been argued when discussing the attitude of nuns toward the habit, the meaning of the uniform for the aspirant nuns was not only that of communicating their membership and social position to the world, but also that of an identificatory token which helped them to accept their new status, their new self.

Whilst people behave differently on meeting someone wearing uniform, whether they despise or appreciate what the person represents, at the same time, the behaviour of a person wearing uniform is

influenced by how he feels he appears to others. The way in which we appear has a great relevance in providing us with self-confidence and psychological stability; it deeply influences both our behaviour and self-perception and the behaviour of others toward us.

Not only are objects important as a communicative channel through which we exchange information on our cultural system, values, beliefs, social standing, etc., they also support our selves both in social contexts and public situations, and in our private life.

Indeed, it can be said that we feel and act about certain objects which are ours very much as we feel and act about ourselves, since the objects are part of ourselves, they are extensions of the self, and we identify totally in them. This explains why, in certain circumstances, the person deprived of some significant objects experiences not only a material deprivation - that incidentally, when discussing robbery victims, was seen to have very little impact on the individual - but a real loss in psychological terms. The reactions of the victims of robberies show quite clearly how strong can be the emotional tie binding people and things. Since there are many layers of meaning, several different projections embodied in them, it is just this embodiment of emotional feelings into objects which explains why we get so upset when we are deprived of some significant things, when our private world, which is so crucial for the stability of the self and identity, is invaded by strangers.

The reactions to the territorial invasion of one's own house by burglars are a very clear indicator of the great significance we attach to it as a safe identificatory domain where anxieties and anguishes connected with our public life can be, at least partially, discharged, where, in fact, we feel "at home". For these reasons we resent so much the intrusion of strangers in our house since they

threaten our safest and most precious refuge.

This, among other things, should emphasize the significance of the territorial dimension in our social life and therefore the necessity for further and detailed studies of this neglected but crucial aspect of human social behaviour. Additional studies and researches on human territorial behaviour could in fact provide us with a better understanding of the meaning of possessing, of the reactions we have when our territory is threatened not only physically but also when we are victims of psychological territorial violation as, for example, when we are robbed of ideas, of intellectual products, of affections, etc. When our privacy is in some way violated. All these are common experiences to all of us which have not drawn the attention they deserve from scholars interested in the study of everyday life.

Our ties with objects and the environment we build and personalize around us, have to do with our emotional life since things embody memories, past relationships and achievements, since they reflect parts of our personal history and respond to our psychological needs. The symbolic ties, the embodied projections, the meanings attached to things are numerous and different. In this sense it is not an overstatement to say that they constitute a crucial element of the person's identity. As I argued when discussing the nuns' experience of deprivation of significant objects or from Goffman's description of the inmate's condition,(3) to be deprived of one's most personal things compels the individual to renounce his identity and to build a new image of himself, a new self which is not in contradiction with the expectations of his new surroundings.

On this point, I have referred to the dramatic needs nuns have to adjust themselves to their new life style, to be identified with

their new status, to feel part of the new world they have entered, as well as to the great significance that in such a context, the objects, which symbolize and communicate membership, take on, signifying passages of role and changes of status.

To deprive a person of his personal belongings, to move him out of his place, means to deprive him of a culturally defined frame for structuring the experiential living space. This frame is crucial for establishing a sense of personal continuity and meaning in an otherwise impersonal environment. This is even more evident and clear if one takes into consideration people like the elderly, who do not have an active life, who spend the majority of their time in a single environment: the house. In such circumstances the deprivation of objects structuring the person's environment can cause the destruction of the self. There is indeed some evidence that objects which represent memories, relationships, family, etc., i.e., possessions which embody belonging to a human community, have a fundamental significance for us and that this significance is felt more strongly the more we retire from active life, from public and external activities, as in the case of the elderly.(4) Indeed, differences in age and living conditions seem to alter the way in which we relate to things, in which they become significant to us. These questions need to be further developed and analyzed. New contributions could throw further light on these problems and could provide interesting insights and information on, for example, the consequences that can sometimes be caused by moving old people from their houses to more functional settings.(5) The relationship of children to objects could give us some information on the formation of gender stereotypes, on the connections between the formation of a personal identity and the need to possess and have at one's disposal certain objects. Some of these

aspects have been already analyzed and pointed out by psychological and psychoanalytic studies; what is missing and overdue is a sociological approach.

I have also argued that there are relevant gender differences in the way in which we relate to objects, and in the kind of meanings and projections we attach to them. This, I think, is a very interesting aspect. It shows that the ways in which men and women perceive and experience the world are different: women, even when they are very active in the public world, seem to be very deeply and emotionally attached to ideals of domesticity, of family relationships, of affective ties. Men, on the other hand, are attached to ideals of action, of personal achievement and success, of self realization through individual effort both in work and in leisure activities. Women, then, if we take the results of our enquiry on collectors, or the literature on shoplifting, seem to have a less rational and more passionate relationship with the objects they hoard.

These differences, (as has been suggested), find their origin in the different socialization of the two genders within society, in the different values and goals which are instilled into us throughout our upbringing. The two genders tend to attach to and project on to objects different meanings and feelings, and they tend to use different spheres and areas to give vent to their anxieties and dissatisfactions. I have discussed, for example, how the house is a fundamental and crucial identificatory domain above all for women, how some compulsive and obsessional attitudes which in their case may be manifest in the care and effort they devote to tidying and cleaning it, are, in the case of men, expressed in different ways, (i.e. the love for order and classification which characterizes male collectors). What emerge from this comparison of the relationship to objects by the two genders

are , to a certain extent two different visions of reality, two different ways of relating to the external world.

As has been suggested the Parsonsian categories of instrumentalism and expressivism seem to be still very useful to understand these differences. Nevertheless, my thesis clearly demonstrates the need for further and detailed analyses of these problems.

The study of collectors has stressed another function performed by objects: that of becoming a substitute for human interaction. In the case of the collector, there is in fact a complete and exclusive identification with objects an unbelievable emotional attachment to things. Objects become a substitute for human interactions, and a far more tranquillizing one, since they reflect what we project on to them, since we define the rules of the game, the boundaries of our private world. In this way subjectivity can express itself in a rather unproblematical way. Objects, unlike persons, acquire a special quality: they do not judge, they do not challenge or compete , they are owned by a particular person who recognizes himself in them as an absolutely particular human being.

A study of the relationship which is created between persons and objects like, for example, home computers, should give us further information on how, and to what extent, things may replace human sociability and interactions with others. A study of our relationships with pets and plants i.e., with 'animate beings', would provide further evidence of how much and how often we rely on substitutes for social contacts in a situation characterized by anonymity and impersonal interactions such as that which marks our social experience.

Moreover, objects can sometimes offer an answer, although often a partial one, to the individual's needs and aspirations which do not find a way of expressing themselves in other ways. The discussion of

the collectors constitutes, from this point of view, an example of private attempts to find an answer to problems whose solution is difficult if not impossible in the public sphere. Collecting must be understood as a private and personal attempt to excape anxieties, dis-satisfaction and routine typical of our everyday experience.

Other hobbies and leisure activities, which have not been taken into consideration in the dissertation, can be interpreted as different ways to solve these problems. So, for example, do-it-yourself activities or other forms of bricolage can be practised because of the feeling of self-realization involved in actually doing something, manufacturing a particular object in the face of the extreme fragmentation of the work process which has made it almost impossible for the individual to be involved in every stage of production. Collecting, like do-it-yourself activities, implies planning, actual pursuing and final outcome.

In such a context objects are the tools to build private enclaves and small artificial worldswhere - although often only partially and transitorily - we feel at home, free to express our personality and inner needs, which do not find a way to manifest themselves in public life.

It is often in these private contexts that the contemporary individual succeeds in freeing himself from the constraints of social life and in recovering a relationship with himself and the outer world which is not objectified but emotionally and symbolically satisfying. In this sense, we can say that the symbolic value, as opposed to the sign value, (to use Baudrillard's typology) is still present - although probably only in marginal and rare situations - in our relationship to things.

What I am suggesting here is the necessity to investigate further

these areas which, it seems to me, have become progressively more relevant and crucial for the individuals who only in these spheres, are able to express those needs and feelings which cannot find adequate manifestation in the over-institutionalized public world.

Obviously, more than providing a comprehensive explanation or a definitive answer to such questions, the dissertation emphasizes the necessity of further studies and analyses, in order to reach a deeper understanding of phenomena and problems which have been neglected and undervalued by the sociological reflection and which are of fundamental importance to explain the strategies pursued by individuals to give a sense to their lives and to cope with the difficulties brought about by modern society.

NOTES:

1. cf. M. Thompson, Rubbish Theory, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.

2. On this subject see Goffman's analysis of front and back regions in Ibidem, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969.

3. E. Goffman, Asylums, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968

4. cf. M. Csikszentmihalyi and E. Rochbergh Halton, The Meanings of Things, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

5. E. Sherman and E.S. Newman, "The meaning of cherished personal possessions for the elderly", Journal of Ageing and Human Development, Vol. 8, n. 2., pp. 181 - 192.

## METHODOLOGICAL APPENDIX

The empirical part of this work is based on one hundred and twenty interviews I carried out in Northern Italy during the years 1981/82. For each group analyzed in the research (collectors, victims of burglaries and members of religious orders) I interviewed forty persons (twenty males and twenty females). Although - quite clearly - not statistically significant, the sample is diversified according to the age, the level of education, the occupation and the social status of the interviewees.

The interviews, which were taped, generally took place in the homes of the interviewees and were in the form of conversation. They usually lasted for more than one hour each. They were not structured so as to leave the person a very high degree of freedom for the expression of personal feelings and opinions. Nevertheless some basic questions on age, occupation, family background, etc., were asked of all interviewees. In addition to this common background information each of the three groups was asked specific sets of questions.

As to the first group, the persons to be interviewed were selected both from a list of collectors printed in Italy in 1977 and from a series of advertisements which appeared in an Italian specialized magazine published in 1981.

The specific areas and topics covered by the interview were the following:

- when the individual started collecting;
- what he/she collects and why;
- the perception his/her family had of this "hobby";
- collecting and sociability;

- envy, competition and collecting:
- the pleasures of discovering and classifying;

For the victims of burglaries, I had to rely on an insurance company to give me a list of names of claimants, since the Police refused to give me any addresses of the victims of burglaries. Through the people I interviewed from that list I obtained the names of others who had been recently burgled. All those interviewed had been robbed quite recently (from two weeks to ten months previously).

The interviews covered the following topics:

- victim's reactions to the discovery of the robbery;
- description of the environment;
- description of the stolen objects;
- behaviour and reactions in the period immediately following the burglary;
- lasting changes in behaviour and attitudes toward the house and the possibility of a repetition of the experience (feelings of insecurity, loss of confidence in people, etc.).

As to the members of religious Orders, I directly approached the Superiors of eight Orders which I thought interesting since they differed in the organization of religious life and in the possibility of contacts with the external world. I interviewed members of both contemplative Orders and of Orders engaged in external activities. Thirty out of forty interviews were conducted with persons who had entered the Orders only recently, since I was interested in understanding how they experienced the passage from a lay to a religious status. To this purpose the questions I asked them dealt with the following subjects:

- background information on their lives;
- the decision to enter a religious institution;
- family's reactions to the entrance into the convent/monastery;

- emotional effects of the separation from home and from objects of personal significance;

- role passage and adjustment to religious life;

- use of money, objects, etc;

- identity changes and contacts with the external world;

- manifestation of their religious status (especially the use of Habits);

- depersonalization of the environment and changes in self-perception and identity.

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