30th Annual ILASSA Conference on Latin America
February 4th to 6th, 2010

From Fashionable Hats to Cheap White Cotton:
The Consumption of Foreign Commodities and the Formation of National Identities in Nineteenth-Century Colombia

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Abstract:

The paper explores the cultural impact of the consumption of foreign commodities in nineteenth-century Colombia, in particular, its influence on the formation of national identities after independence. It looks at the link between Colombia's material culture and the formation of a "cosmopolitan" national identity and aims to determine to what extent foreign goods were employed as tools for the construction of national discourses. The paper will argue that the consumption of foreign goods was one of the key paths chosen by the country's upper classes to build a nation according to European standards.

Still, because the consumption of foreign goods was not limited to the upper classes, the paper will go further and analyse how the importation of these commodities had a cultural significance on different levels of society, and, in consequence, demonstrate that the category of "foreign good" was employed and reworked to fulfil cultural and social objectives by the different levels of the social strata. The paper contends that the study of the tensions between categories of 'foreign' and 'local' commodities illustrates who participated more actively in the creation of a national identity that was built in the light of European references.

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Introduction

William Duane, a North American journalist, described to his readers the conditions of Bogotá's Central Square just a few years after Colombia gained its final independence from Spain. According to his account, the square which contained the capital's main market had no tables, chairs, stools, counters, or chests, but did hold a surprising variety of commodities. 'Here,' Duane stated 'are seen the manufactured products of all parts of the globe, Japan and China, India, Persia, France, England, Germany, Italy, and Holland; and, though last, not least, the United States'. [1] Yet, while Duane was right in stressing that textiles were the major import during this period, they were not the only foreign commodities sold in the Colombian market after independence. Bales of 10 to 15 pieces of fabrics were shipped to the coast of Cartagena or Santa Marta along with cases of silk and military hats, ribbons, stockings, gloves, earthenware and chinaware, looking glasses, stationary, umbrellas, and parasols, not to mention boots, scissors, *machetes*, combs, and buttons.[2]

The impact of the consumption of these foreign objects, introduced into the country after 1820, has been studied by contemporary historians almost exclusively from an economic point of view. Only on a few occasions have they centered their attention on the cultural implications of consumption on Colombian society and on the country's processes of identity construction. My contribution seeks, therefore, to explore the link between nineteenth-century Colombia's material culture and the formation of a "cosmopolitan" national identity. In this line of analysis, it also attempts to determine

[1] William Duane, *A Visit to Colombia: In the Years 1822 & 1823, by Laguayra and Caracas, Over the Cordillera to Bogota, and Thence by the Magdalena to Cartagena*, (Philadelphia: Published by T. H. Palmer, 1826), p. 477-479
[2] Walker, Alexander. *Colombia: being a geographical, statistical, agricultural, commercial, and political account of that country*. (London: Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy, Vol II. 1822). p. 227 – 230.

to what extent foreign goods were employed as tools of identity construction in a society whose referent of 'progress' was European.

This paper has been divided into four sections. The first gives a very brief overview of the Colombian import trade to provide a general idea of the type of foreign objects imported during the period of study. In the second section, I briefly identify and discuss the external referents employed by the country's elites in the nation building process. I do so with the intention of analysing, in the third section, the flexibility given to the term "foreign commodity" in nineteenth-century Colombia, so as to understand how this category was reworked to consolidate national identities and fulfil a variety of cultural and social objectives in different social strata. I argue that a study of the tensions between categories of 'foreign' and 'local' commodities gives and indication of who participated most actively in the creation of a national identity whose reference was mainly foreign. Finally, the fourth section offers some suggestions for what should be taken into account in future studies of the relationship between material culture and national-identity formation in Latin America.

A Brief Appraisal of Colombia's Import Trade

According to the French traveller Gaspard-Théodore Mollien, by the 1820s the European economic intervention in Colombia was almost monopolised by England. Mollien stated in 1823 that 'the power of England in America is without a rival; no fleets but hers are to be seen; her merchandises are bought almost exclusively; her commercial agents, clerks, and brokers, are every where to be met with'[3]. Two years later, James Henderson, British Consul General in Colombia, confirmed Mollien's assertions when he listed the types and amounts of English goods of interest for Colombia's import trade. Readymade clothing and linen, men's and women's shoes, silks and handkerchiefs, umbrellas and looking glasses, cotton stuffs and spirits, woollen, cotton and silk hats, earthenware, crystal, and furniture, were some of products listed by the consul in his report[4].

[3] Mollien, *Travels in the Republic of Colombia in the years 1822 and 1823*. (London: 1824), pp. 405-406.
[4] The National Archives of the U.K. (Hereinafter T.N.A): Public Record Office (Hereinafter P.R.O.), BT 6/40, Colombia Consular Reports (1825-1827). James Henderson, Bogotá, Colombia, to the Board of Trade, London, October 9th, 1824, manuscript.

In fact, recent studies support Mollien's and Henderson's statements as they show that from 1822 to 1823 the value of imported English goods nearly tripled, and that by 1825 imports from Great Britain reached a peak more than six times the level during 1822[5]. The increased volume of imports after Independence was paid in part by the British loans of the 1820s, and in part by the British investments in mining and other enterprises. However, by 1830s Colombia entered in an economic depression that forced the upper class to look for new alternatives to obtain greater resources if they wanted to keep receiving their most desirable foreign goods; and it was in the consolidation of an export economy in which they saw the most effective alternative for obtaining the necessary capital to satisfy such a demand for imports. This demand was, therefore, well established before the consolidation in the 1840s of a rather stable export economy.

Actually, the conformation of new patterns of consumption started to take place before Colombia's export economy was completely consolidated in mid-nineteenth-century. The desire for foreign goods was caused by the constant trade with the British colonies before Independence - particularly with Jamaica – and increased considerably thanks to the contact of Colombians with the English in the 1820s - first by the British Legion that came to fight for Independence, and later, with European entrepreneurs and diplomats that came to the country in the 1830s bringing new standards of dress and furnishing. Furthermore, the desire for new articles was also reinforced by the travels of a few members of the upper class to Europe who returned to the capital determined to set new patterns of consumption.

Owing to the improvement of the inter-oceanic transportation, by the 1860s almost all the importers were dealing directly with Europe and no longer via Jamaica or other European colonies. England supplied from the mid-century until the 1880s approximately 50 percent or more of the imports to the country, whereas France provided close to 25 percent of foreign merchandise, which were mostly luxury items. The amount of imports from the United States – that from 1820s to 1840s were primarily re-exports - rose during the 1850s, but decreased in the following decade as a consequence of its Civil War. Finally in the last decades of the nineteenth century England's participation was

[5] Frank Safford and Marco Palacio, *Colombia: fragmented land, divided society.* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.163.

reduced to 34 percent, mainly because of the improvement of the import trade with the United States and Germany (Table 1).

Table 1. *Imports by country of origin – Seven predominant countries or geographical areas (mean annual values in thousands of gold pesos)*

	1837-1840		1866-1870 (excl. 1867/8)		1885-1889	
Great Britain	644.8	**21.3**%	3359.0	**59.9**%	3925.4	**47.1**%
France	220.3	7.3%	1318.8	23.5%	1844.9	22.2%
Germany			269.9	4.8%	971.9	11.7
Spain	96.2	3.2%	24.6	0.4%	104.6	1.3%
Other countries / Europe	23.6	0.8%	7.4	0.1%	18.9	0.2%
United States	219.1	7.2%	379.2	6.8%	999.7	12.0
Caribbean	1716.2	56.2%	190.5a	3.4%	258.5	3.1
Jamaica	1480.9	**48.8**%	-	-	1.3	-
Curazao	68.8	2.3%	-	-	124.9	1.5%
S. Thomas	135.5	4.5%	-	-	-	-
Cuba & Puerto Rico	28.0	0.9%	-	-	131.4	1.6
Others	3.1	0.1%	-	-	0.9	-

a: For the years 1868-1869 the distribution is as follows: Jamaica $4.4; Curazao $98.4; S. Thomas, $33,0; Cuba and Puerto Rico $38.9; Others, $1.0, for a total of $175.7.

Source: José Antonio Ocampo, *Colombia y la economía mundial, 1830-1910,* Bogotá, 1984. Table 3.13. pp.162-63.

Though a detailed study of the composition of Colombian imports goes beyond the purview of this presentation, a brief enunciation of the products imported into the country is necessary in order to understand the implications of the consumption of foreign commodities after its independence. During the period of study the major imports were, undoubtly, textiles, followed by food and drink and metal goods – which included machinery and railways, as well as all kinds of consumer goods made of metal, such as pots and cutlery. Among the secondary items imported to Colombia were soap and medications, leather manufactures (especially shoes and boots), glass, furniture, paper, weapons, and ammunition. According to the Colombian historian José Antonio Ocampo, in the nineteenth century 95% of Colombian imports were consumer goods; this proportion declined slowly to 85% in 1910. These figures show that the impact of imports should not be overlooked, particularly if the vast majority of the commodities imported were consumer goods. Still, before analyzing such an impact it is necessary to pause and study the references for national construction adopted by nineteenth-

century Colombians in order to comprehend the connection between this new material realm and the process of national identity formation.

The European reference

Needless to say, once the wars of Independence were over, the path to national construction in Latin America was carried out under the influence of a cosmopolitan political imaginary. The Creoles, aware of the magnitude of the task set before them, had no other alternative but to resort to foreign models to fill the gap left by Spain, in order to create states and nations. The Colombian elites' decision to make use of cosmopolitanism to accomplish this task can be explained, first, by their effort to continue participating in a European cultural universe; second, by their desire to preserve the link to their white European origin, and third, because of their conviction that civilization emanated from Europe and needed to be imposed on the new republican citizens, either via legislation or educational reforms, to name a few. Nineteenth-century national identity construction, then, is a process characterized by the dialectic of for Europe and against Europe

Yet, the elites did not just see in Europe a model of civilization. They were not naïve in their use of it as a reference for national construction and state building. They saw, in the adoption of foreign models, a mechanism to establish their legitimacy as cultural mediators between the 'civilized' European word and the rest of Colombian population. Besides, it is worth stressing that their control over this "cultural mediation" was even more significant for Colombian upper classes than for other Latin American elites. In the nineteenth century Colombia was a poor country, at the margins of great transatlantic exchanges, whether human or economic. It had very few European residents and foreign immigration, and its climatic and topographic constraints, its lack of stable sources of income, and its relentless civil wars, became deterrents to both capital or population inflows.

The contact with Europe and therefore, with progress, was now more than ever in the elites' hands. Yet, the relative material isolation of the country, perpetuated by the immense difficulty of transportation, did not meant that ideas, objects, books, political models, cultural influences, and imaginaries have not traveled to the new republic. On the contrary, the ideals attached to these objects and to this new material culture, would have political implications in the processes of

Colombia's national identity formation, not only of the elites but also of the rest of the country's population.

The flexibility of "foreign commodities"

Now that we have a basic idea of the type of goods imported into Colombia during the nineteenth century and the adoption of foreign references for national construction, it is worth examining in detail the meaning of the "foreign object" for Colombian society. The historian Karl Gerth has recently stated that the study of the development of a social anxiety over foreign commodities, at a time when countries become independent nations, constitutes an alternative way to understand the formation of modern national identities; an statement which – although its direct reference is China - I consider a great contribution to the history of national construction in the Latin American context.

An exploration of the categories that defined commodities as either foreign or Colombian opens a new framework of analysis for the study of the process of modern nation-building for the Latin American case. I consider this approach appealing since it allows observing how the process of national identity formation worked in different levels of society, and furthermore, how it went noticed or unnoticed by some of its sections. To advance my argument, I will use two examples from nineteenth-century primary sources. The first aims to demonstrate how the use of foreign clothing in a specific historical event marked the division between two sectors of society that were constructing their identities, both social and national, using different reference points. The second intends to show how the decisions of merchants to re-brand local goods as foreign (or to be more precise, European) serve to confirm that the classification of good as foreign or local had cultural weight in nineteenth-century Colombia.

On the 19 of May 1853 Bogotá's artisans rebelled against the radical liberal faction – also known as *Gólgotas* - to protest against the lowering of the import tariff and the rise of food prices. Despite their divergent political ideologies, the social identities of the two poles of conflict were made evident rather by their dress. On the one side, the artisans came to be referred to as *los de ruana* because of the traditional poncho-like garment they wore, while the upper-class youth of the liberal faction came to be known as *los de casaca* (literary 'those with jackets'). *Los de casaca*, also called *cachacos,* were the primary consumers of English clothing. Isaac Holton, an American botanist who visited

Bogotá in mid-nineteenth-century, described them as 'young men that wear coats, and might include English words from buck and dandy to gentleman'[6]. The *cachaco* that Holton was referring to was in a certain way a high-status 'type' that took pride in its intellectual pursuits, as well as in its elegance. Years earlier, John Steuart had also described this 'other class' of *cachacos* or dandies who had cast aside the national *ruana* and adopted European manners.

By the late 1850s young lawyers, wearing English black woollen cloth trousers, vests, and frockcoats were given such appellatives not only by the members of their own social group, but also by the popular classes that started to identify them by their polite manners and foreign dresses. However, the adoption of this type of attire by this generation was not exclusively a response to foreign fashion. Wearing English wool cloth trousers was part of a broader process of identification - consciously sought by the elite of this generation - with nineteenth-century European parameters. The generation of the late 1840s and early 1850s was formed by an upper sector of liberal lawyers, who believed that their duty was to banish all vestiges of the colonial era and consequently, were determined to complete the work of Independence by clearing away what still remained of outdated Spanish institutions. This not only meant a rupture with their colonial past, but also a decisive commitment to the proclamation of the English liberal individualism of the time and above all, the free trade economic ideologies emanating from England. The *cachacos* counterpart, on the contrary, constituted a sector of society that protested, for obvious reasons, against free trade measures and foreign commerce. This faction consisted mostly of artisans, generally recognized by their locally made clothes, such as the *ruana,* the *sombrero de jipijapa* (broad-brimmed hat) and *alpargatas* (cloth sandals).

Therefore, the idea of a national entity, as well as of a new republic, was different for both sectors of society. Radical liberals favoured the individual over the group and laissez-fair over monopolistic economic programs. In social policy, this meant fewer restrictions on speech, the press, assembly, and other areas of individual expression. In the economic sector, the elimination of monopolies, the reduction of levels of taxation, private ownership of land, and free movement of products across national boundaries keeping faith on the comparative advantages of the international exchange of

[6] Isaac Holton, *New Granada: Twenty Months in the Andes* (New York: 1857), p. 73.

goods. In short, liberals believed that "progress" and "civilization" would follow the release of individual enterprise. On the other side of the discussion were the artisans. They reacted to these liberal reforms, above all, because of their economic implications. Artisans rallied against tariff reduction on ready-made clothing, shoes and other manufactures, since they considered that such measure will damage the country's industry and disemploy thousands. For instance, in 1850 the *Sociedad Democratica de Bogotá* presented a petition to the legislative body asking for the increase of tariff protection for all the areas supposedly more affected by imports. The petition made clear that artisans were suspicious of foreign ideas and foreign products. In short, the differing ways of conceiving the nation between these two sectors of society was clear. While the elite wanted a radical adaptation of European liberalism, the artisan class was fighting for the application of more real and less theoretical economic policies. This division was manifested, clearly, in the relationship of each of these sectors with the commodities imported from Europe.

This observation calls for the study of political and cultural weight of the classification of good as foreign or local and furthermore, of an analysis of merchants' decisions to misrepresent certain goods as European. As it has been stated, 'European goods' were consumed by members of the upper-class as well as by the common peasants of the interior of the New Granada. While the former bought expensive English watches, table settings, hats and spectacles, the lower classes and the rural inhabitants – which constituted about 90 percent of the country's population by the 1870s - bought cheap English cotton and linen manufactures. Yet, despite the fact that a great portion of the country's population consumed European imports, the category of "foreign commodity" was not applied or emphasised when making reference to all of them. The label 'foreign' served to signal either one of two things: that the item was a 'luxury good' or that it was a 'modern commodity'. Indeed, those who were part of the upper classes had an interest in demonstrating the origin of the good as it served – at least in their view – to exhibit their proximity to European-ness/ European sophistication and in some cases, origin. In other words, if they were meant to construct a modern nation, the adoption of a European lifestyle was a must. How were they going to convince France and England that they were worthy of their attention and of their treatment as nations in equal conditions of sovereignty? From their viewpoint, probably not by wearing *ruanas*.

This can sound simplistic at first. However, there are various factors to take into consideration when evaluating the implications of European fashion in Colombia in the nineteenth century. Colombia was a poor country by Latin American standards. This meant that the purchasing power of the majority of the population was very low and even the liquidity of the more privileged classes was limited, since most of their wealth consisted in their big estates and haciendas. Therefore, everyday life accessories and small items - easier to import and less expensive to transport – became the means to demonstrate proximity to Europe customs, as opposed to the big palaces in Argentina or Chile, or the conspicuous consumption of French commodities in Mexico City. The restricted access to foreign commodities in Colombia promoted the flexibility of this category and reinforced their symbolic value as markers of modernity and civilization, in a material realm that was still a plagued of colonial vestiges.

For that reason, what really mattered was that the good looked European. For instance, English three-cornered hats and trousers were being brought from Jamaica to Bogotá in the 1820s and from the United States in the 1830s and 1840s and being adopted and consumed as if they were originally English. No discussions over their quality – despite the fact that Jamaica has been identified as a dump ground for inferior manufactures – or even over the possible old-fashioned features of the goods, seem to be stated. Additionally, if the goods came directly from England, discussion over quality obviously did not take place. But neither did it seem to emerge when such commodities were made in Colombia with English cloth. In other words, if a good was made in the country with English material for Colombians it was still European. Newspaper advertisements show how 'wide cloth of excellent quality', 'superior cloth for trousers', 'an elegant selection of (…) cloth to make jackets and dress coats' were sold in the cities allowing the wealthy and the middle classes to ask their tailors to dress them after the European fashion. Therefore, the nationality of the commodity was constructed, or to use better words, socially negotiated in nineteenth-century Colombia by all members of society to fulfil cultural and political purposes.

Furthermore, it did not seem to matter a great deal the way that the goods were being accessed. Of course, if goods had been acquired by a member of the upper class in his travels to London or Manchester, the way that the good had been obtained and not only the possession of such a commodity had a considerable significance in Colombian society. But when Colombians could not

purchase the goods directly, they went so far as to buy English used goods from the diplomats or entrepreneurs that were leaving the country, or died during their stay in the capital. For instance in 1825 a notice in *El Constitucional* announced the public sale of 'the house of Sr. H. G. Mayne (that is soon leaving Bogotá)' and indicated that 'the furniture of the house, of the latest fashion, consist of canapés of very rich Damascus, (…) and a piano-forte made by Clement of London, very elegant'. In the same year, the newspaper published and advertisement selling among other goods of the 'deceased Sr. Macamara: (…) four pairs of military trousers, embroiled in gold and silver, made in London.'

Therefore, while on the one hand the category of foreign commodities became restricted to denote luxury goods and modern commodities, on the other, the connotation of 'foreignness' became highly flexible with respect to the commodities that were allowed to fit such standards. To conclude that the latter was only a matter of the economic circumstances that Colombia experienced throughout the nineteenth century and the limited alternatives of Colombians to access such goods, is to reduce the issue significantly. The category of 'foreignness' was consolidated in a cultural terrain I which the European quality of the good made explicit allusion to a national identity project.

To sum up, the low purchasing power of Colombians, along with the difficulties of internal transportation, had created the need for flexibility in the concept of "foreign" in order for such category to serve local and political purposes. This favoured the upper classes as they sought through the consumption of European goods to strengthen an additional channel of interchange with Europe, essential to consolidate their cosmopolitan project of nation-building. Yet, such flexibility ended up favouring other levels of society, as it helped the middle classes to access goods strongly connected with the 'civilizing project' of those above, thus broadening their accessibility to the channels of power.

Conclusion:

On material culture and National Identity Formation

When goods cross cultural boundaries, the historian is generally faced with a set of rather unusual questions. Did a black top hat have a similar meaning for a British Colonel in the 1820s, as it did for a Colombian vice-president in the same time period? To answer such question is at the same time to

examine the cultural implications of consumption in any given society. It is also to explore the interdependence of goods and culture, and the transformations that commodities endure once they cross their own cultural boundaries. And it is precisely this type of questioning that is needed to complete the study of the consumption of foreign commodities in nineteenth-century Colombia.

This leads us to question the relation between culture and goods and above all, if the meanings encoded in commodities are limited to a particular cultural milieu. Following Mary Douglas' maxim that 'consumption is the cultural arena in which culture is fought over and linked into shape', historians as well as anthropologists, have recognized that culture is constructed through consumption. Under such a framework, goods are understood as markers or codes in which the categories of culture are made visible to others and their assemblage, a means to utter particular social meanings. Consequently, because these codes are created by and in a specific culture they can only be read by those who know the code and are able to scan such information. However, this approach eaves open the question of what happens to goods when the culture they corroborate – as markers of cultural categories - is no longer the culture in which they originally circulate.

To explain this situation scholars have turned to concepts such as cultural translation, hybridization, or creolization. The last model, that was principally used in linguistics to explain what happens when a language is created by the merging of two or more languages, has been employed by historians to understand how foreign goods are recontextualized or 'reemployed' – following Michael Certeau's concept - by the receiving culture. The creolization paradigm accepts that once goods reach a different cultural arena the meanings attached to them are transformed according to the values of the receiving culture. Hence this approximation gives considerable significance to the creativity of the new consumer in the shaping of the meanings of foreign commodities according to local settings; and rejects any discussion of 'authenticity' in the adoption of foreign goods by the alien culture.

In the case of nineteenth-century Colombia such creativity clearly did take place. Upper-class Colombians gave additional and even in some cases, alternative meanings to European clothing, furniture and household goods, as signs of both modernity and civility. This procedure was precisely part of the elite's creative process to transform the meanings of foreign goods in order to serve their

cultural necessities of national identity after the country's independence. Moreover, their creativity was reinforced by the fact that in nineteenth-century Colombia the consumption of foreign commodities was highly dependent on cultural mediators between Europe and Colombia, as it has been previously stated. Thus the re-contextualization of European commodities ended being an ideal mechanism for supporting the self-fashioning of the elite, through consumption, and consequently, a means by which to construct their identity looking towards Europe – as its authority outside the self – and against the poorer layers of society.

Yet, despite the benefits that these models offer for the understanding of cross cultural consumption, the analysis of Colombia's consumption of foreign objects provides a useful case to test the limitations of such paradigms and simultaneously, to uncover the common –and not always accurate - assumptions about the consumption of Western commodities by 'developing' countries. First of all, the models are built upon the supposition that 'creolization is a strategy for cultural survival'; caused by the imposition of European systems and ideas. It also assumes that the use of creolization is an 'effective strategy to maintain cultural integrity'. Both considerations seem to fit perfectly with a colonial model in which there was literally a receiving culture that was forced to accept the dominant culture. However, Bogotá's upper-class consumption seems to contest such statements. Clearly the re-employment of European commodities was neither the result of a relationship of domination/subordination between the two cultures – at least not formally and even possibly not informally - nor the intent of the upper class to guard Colombia's cultural integrity. On the contrary, the appropriation of European commodities was the result of a conscious search for such cultural contact and furthermore, a mechanism to transform identity rather than protect it. It is precisely these two features that may explain why the common assumptions about the consumption of Western commodities are sometimes misleading and how they can loose sight of relevant cultural phenomena.

Consumption of European commodities is often disparaged for the apparent failure from the locals to 'get things right', even though such 'mistakes' can generally be understood as a form of reworking foreign values into local practices. However, when the role of the receiving culture is rather more active – like the demand of foreign commodities by Colombia's elite - than passive – as the imposition of European's commodities upon African slaves – the 'mistake' is considerably reduced, at least as the

usage of goods is concerned. It becomes, in other words, rather unusual to picture a member of the receiving culture using English hats as basins or umbrellas as urban machetes. This assumption is supported, for instance, by the testimonies of foreigners that despite their commentaries about the lack of taste and comfort of the upper class, seldom mention a completely alternative usage of European commodities. Clearly, there is nothing radically 'exotic' in the consumption, despite the fact that it was taking place in an 'exotic' country, at least under their European standards.

Therefore it could be argued that the active role of the receiving culture in contacting the foreign culture – not only by consumption but also by other means, such as ideology - and the lack of resistance in the adoption of these commodities, guarantees to a certain extent that the usages of goods stay more or less unaltered, despite of the reworking of their meanings to fulfil local upper-class necessities. It was in fact, the elite's interest, as part of it's scheme to emulate Europe, to hold their hats as Europeans, to drink their beer as Englishmen, and to play their piano as upper-class Londoners; and simultaneously, to avoid being identified by the culture form which the goods originated as 'exotic' or even 'barbarous' human beings. Clearly this particular approach underlines the need of the historian to distinguish - once attempting to apply the creolization model to a particular society - between the consumption of elite and the consumption of the lower classes, as a means to establish the degree of 'proximity' of these social groups to the foreign culture, as well as the amount of resistance that existed towards it.

Consequently, it can be stated that the active role of the receiving culture has to be restudied in the studies of cross cultural consumption, particularly in the case of postcolonial Colombia. By taking into consideration the dynamic role of the upper class, the historian would open new spaces of discussion about the intentional construction of new identities through consumption of foreign goods. It would also open ground to understand that the reworking of the meanings and usages of foreign commodities by a specific culture it is not necessarily a mechanism that it employs to defend its cultural identity but rather to create a new one. Moreover, this active perspective will also allow one to take into consideration that, by not being completely alienated from the production, distribution and consumption process of foreign commodities, the receiving culture is able to guarantee, at least to a certain extent, that the uses of the goods are similar to those of their original culture.

Still it is worth noting that as far as meanings are considered, the adoption of foreign commodities by an active receiving culture do tend to suffer the opposite process. They are reworked to fit the cultural needs of a particular social group and changed significantly in comparison to the meanings fixed by the culture of origin in specific commodities. The meaning of goods suffers such dramatic changes, precisely because the values that are being attached to them are the result of the observation from outside the original culture or of an evaluation of what that culture represents for the new consumers – a perspective that the original culture is unable to generate. In the case of nineteenth-century Colombia, modernity and civility were for Colombians meanings that were encoded in these foreign goods. However, even if the practical usage of the commodities was not completely unsuccessful, the meanings encoded in foreign goods did not seem to completely fulfil the elite's purposes. In nineteenth-century Colombia, to own and use European goods did became an effective means for creating social differentiation, but failed to be serve as a means of recognition as a modern elite by their European 'equals'. In short, if for the Colombian vice-president wearing a top hat was being modern and European, for the British Colonel this was definitely not enough.

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