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Geographies of retailing and consumption: markets in motion

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I Market ecologies

While I began my first of three reports on retailing and consumption (see Crewe, 2000; 2001) bemoaning the early neglect of these topics across a number of academic disciplines, I start my final report with an altogether different lament, namely that there has been a recent surfeit of writings on markets, material culture and consumption. While this is no bad thing in itself, I use the word lament purposefully in order to signal my concern about the insightfulness of some of this work (see also Miller, 2001, on the discrepancy between the quantity and quality of recent consumption research). In the discussion that follows, I do not propose to launch into a critique of all that is bad in consumption studies, nor to write in the style of an annotated bibliography of consumer studies. I am also purposefully side-stepping the now locked-in and tired refrain of 'let's join economy and culture', through either 'unveiling' commodity chains (Hartwick, 1998; Goldman and Papson, 1998) or via circuits and networks (Jackson, 2002: 8). Rather, in what follows I attempt to construct a series of arguments about the concept of the market as one way of framing and organizing what are currently disparate lines of inquiry. It seems to me that what unites much of the better literature in the field at present is a concern for the ways in which particular forms of exchange are accomplished, represented, spatialized and institutionalized (Carrier, 1997; Dillely, 1992; Philo and Miller, 2001; Slater and Tonkiss, 2001: 199). A number of different models of markets and exchange seem to be emerging which, in different ways, might help to develop our theorization of the connections between commodities, consumers and their spatial and temporal worlds.

II Markets in meltdown

Some of the earliest interpretations of consumer market dynamics were those resting on the logic of marketization, mediatization and monetization (Baudrillard, 1970; Ritzer, 1993; Lash and Urry, 1996; Wernick, 1991). The increased commodification of all spheres of social life under a postmodern aesthetic of hyper-reality and illusion leads, it is argued, to the 'attenuation of actuality' (Lukacs, 1963: 25), to a process of dematerialization where value is increasingly dependent not on the material properties of the commodity, nor on need or economic value, but on position in relation to codes of meaning (Jansson, 2002). Consumption and entertainment become increasingly indistinguishable and increasingly large-scale under such theorizations, and commodification is assumed to be a remorseless process, 'a process that must end in cultural *meltdown*. So shopping malls have become the battleships of capitalism, bludgeoning consumers into unconsciousness' (Amin and Thrift, 2002: 40). The power of shopping-centre capitalism to transform our urban spaces into mediatized, privatized, serially reproduced brand zones is bringing about 'an eruption of the extraordinary into the everyday' (Classen, 1996: 52, cited in Slater and Tonkiss, 2001: 191), where the extraordinary mutates into the ordinary, feeding the anxieties of choice. So, the argument goes, 'not only is shopping *melting* into everything, but everything is *melting* into shopping . . . (shopping) is the material outcome of the degree to which the market economy has shaped our surroundings, and ultimately ourselves' (Leong, 2001: 129). Consumer culture, under this theorization, may represent a bitter irony, a contradiction in terms, since no real culture is possible under conditions of near-totalizing marketization, commodification and cultural manipulation. Consumer culture here represents the cultural manipulation of the consumer through the market (Ritzer, 1993; Slater, 1997: 63). So 'we are led, in a classic manifestation of market-derived false consciousness, to identify our political and personal interests . . . with the mystifying games of consumption' (Slater and Tonkiss, 2001: 184).

While it is undeniable that conglomerate-controlled consumption and entertainment environments increasingly characterize the built form of our urban spaces (Goss, 1993; Gottdiener, 1997: 7), there are a number of conceptual difficulties with this totalizing imaginary of a surreal globalized consumer culture. These difficulties relate to questions of temporality, spatiality, morality and agency. First, then, is the question of temporality. In a wonderfully constructed series of timelines, Chung *et al.* (2001) reveal the long and rich spatial history of the retail form, beginning with the foundation of the city of Catalhoyuk for the trade in commodities in 7000 BC, and ending with Wal-Mart, the largest retailer in the world in 2000. They explore, too, via a mapping matrix, the ways in which key developments shaped the evolution of retail formats, tracing a number of dimensions through time (money, glass, movement, lighting, communications, nature). In the case of glass, for example, they trace the geographical and historical spread of mirrors (first century), crown glass (Middle Ages), cast glass (Holland, 1600s), skylights, display cases, float glass, LCD and flat-glass display screen. In a potent series of images, Chung *et al.* juxtapose pictures of trading spaces in Rome (110), Isfahan (1585), Paris (1815), London (1851), Milan (1865), Moscow (1893), Houston (1971), Xian (1994) and Las Vegas (2000). What is startling about this montage is the striking degree of architectural, structural and spatial conformity across the disparate sites and through time. There is nothing, then, particularly new or extraordi-

nary about contemporary retail developments, save the technological and scale parameters within which developers are working.

Second, the totalizing spatial metaphors that implicitly inform theorizations about a postmodern retail economy of signs and simulacra do not, I would argue, take sufficient account of a range of other consumption practices and spaces. Occurring sometimes at the margins (of the city, the clock, the calendar), but increasingly occupying more central spaces and times, are a range of consumption activities that simply do not fit the globalizing metaphors of cultural meltdown. Recently brought into view by a number of writers is a range of altogether more individualized, personalized, unpredictable and variable consumption activities, including, for example, shopping for second-hand commodities, consuming at auctions or over the internet, collecting memorabilia and seeking out 'relic' forms such as vinyl and discontinued computers (Attfield, 2000; Clarke, 1988; 2000; Geismar, 2001; Gregson and Crewe, 2002; Smith, 1989). What is significant about this work is that it reveals the complexities of value determination in exchange and reveals how, through a range of discursive, visual and taste-based practices, commodity markets can be constructed, reconstructed or subverted (Geismar, 2001).

Third, and here I am drawing on Miller (2001), there is an identifiable sense within much writing coming out of the cultural meltdown school of thought that consumption is intrinsically evil. Morally corrupting, socially divisive, relentlessly materialistic and environmentally detrimental, consumption is here seen as capitalism's servant. Adopting the moral high ground, such writers begin from the premise that goods are to the detriment of their owners, and that object attachment comes at the expense of attachment to people. What this obviates 'is a quite different morality, an ethics based on a passionate desire to eliminate poverty . . . What most of humanity desperately needs is more consumption (not less)' (Miller, 2001: 227). Saying rather more about the subjectivities of academic knowledge producers than it does about consumption *per se*, this is a literature that 'allows the anxieties of the rich to obscure the suffering of the poor and seems constantly to assume that goods are intrinsically bad for people. (This) is simply not my idea of a moral approach to the topic of consumption. It is rather a sign of an academic discipline that has lost touch with what it purports to study' (Miller, 2001: 241).

Fourth, and finally here, the markets in cultural meltdown thesis fails, I would argue, to adequately theorize questions of agency. Working with an ultimately manipulationist, undersocialized view of consumers, such models overlook the 'authority of interpretive subjects as well as the significance of the contexts in which interpretations are made . . . their theories are somewhat media deterministic, sharing one of the core problems of Marxist media imperialism thesis' (Jansson, 2002: 23). People rarely consume in a blind, passive and gullible fashion but, rather, they 'actively perform their presence in specific motile milieus. The parameters of agency have been changed' (Amin and Thrift, 2002: 124, and De Nora, 2000). Actions are intertwined with people's everyday practices and the structure of cultural communities in complex ways. Passivity, predictability and rationality are increasingly less appropriate descriptors of contemporary consumption practices.

III Sentient markets

In part as a critique of the overgeneralizations inherent in the massified market model above, but more broadly as part of an emergent emotional geography agenda, a range of new work has begun to consider consumers in context, looking at questions of sociality, tactility and space (Baker, 2000; Green, 2001; Maffesoli, 1992; Miller, 1998). Focusing on the walking, touching, scenting, hearing and feeling dimensions of consumption (fun, fear, embarrassment) such work is making inroads into the world of a corporeal logic of consumption (Billig, 2001; Warnier, 2001). Consumption spaces, under this version of the market, are performative, theatrical, places of display and subversion. They are increasingly 'omnisensory . . . they reach across the senses, using not just vision but also touch, smell, taste, hearing and kinaesthetic (movement) senses in order to produce strong bodily reactions' (Amin and Thrift, 2002: 125). In a fascinating exploration of the ways in which connections are made between human passions, hopes and anxieties, and the very specific natures of goods, Nadesan (2002) reflects on how discourses of brain science are conjoined with debates about the commodification of childhood in order to encourage parental selection of 'appropriate' toys that will ensure the engineering of the entrepreneurial infant.

Campbell's *Romantic ethic* (1998) is often credited with pursuing the intellectual origins and mental basis of modern consumption (Boden and Williams, 2002: 495). Campbell posited two models of consumption: one is deeply sensory, direct and tactile and characterizes experiences such as eating, drinking, singing, dancing and sex. The other, more characteristic of consumption-as-shopping, is based on imagined pleasure or anticipated emotions whereby consumers have gained the capacity to autonomously control and decontrol imagined emotions (Boden and Williams, 2002: 495). This predominantly mentalistic approach to consumption produces an artist of the imagination, one for whom the market represents the source of anticipated pleasures. Such expectation in turn fuels ever greater desire as real consumption never, ultimately, lives up to the imagined alternative (Bianchi, 2002). The magic does not work. The consumption circle can never be closed. The problem with Campbell's position, however, is that it is based on a rather disembodied subject position grounded on the unhelpful dualistic struggle between mind and body, reason and emotion (Boden, 2001). Consumption is rarely, if ever, founded on either hedonistic, bodily, sensory fulfillment *or* imagined pleasure, but rather is the product of both, corporeal and cerebral at the same time. 'The relationship between reason and emotion in consumption, as elsewhere, is not simply oppositional, or even that tensionful, but one which is both constituted and consummated in more or less continuous ways' (Boden and Williams, 2002: 499). Hedonism and the ascetism of self-control can be mutually constitutive, a romantic seeking of pleasure can coexist with the reflexive and rational monitoring of oneself (Rantala and Lehtonen, 2001).

Perhaps more insightful, then, would be a more emotionally grounded understanding of consumption, one that acknowledges consumption as an emotionally charged process, a sensory experience, in which certain types of products, places and shops are imbued with desire or disgust, love or loathing (Gregson *et al.*, 2002b; Williams and Hubbard, 2001: 204) and where the thermal, acoustic, luminary and olfactory qualities of the space are fully recognized. This may be one means of reanimating the

geographer's consumptional imagination, of breathing new emotional life into the classically rational bones of retail geographers.¹

IV Shop space

Closely aligned with the idea of sensual consumption is a renewed interest in retail spaces, and in shop space more specifically. Challenging the abstract conception of the shop as a functional, smooth, opaque economic surface (Goh, 2002: 6) and of a consumer as a 'precisely mapped individual within psychosocial matrices' (Pearmain, 2000: 133), such work is focusing on shopping-as-practised and its relation to space (Gregson *et al.*, 2002a; 2002b; Goh, 2002). Significant here is the attempt to understand how shopping spaces are constituted and made sense of by consumers themselves through their shopping practices and discourses. Frequently, these practices are relationally constituted in a number of ways. First, they depend on the co-existence of distinctive spaces associated with contrasting shopping practices – contrast discount shops and design-led stores; food superstores and fashion emporia (Crewe and Gregson, 2003). Shop space is more appropriately conceptualized as a tapestry of different spaces, woven together to comprise personal, accumulated shopping geographies that are routinely reproduced, and extended, through practice. Second, they rely for their constitution on a temporal imaginary of how things once were, or might be again. The role of memory, of the consumer's historical imagination, is significant here, as one consumer interview from the Baker (2000) collection reveals: 'where is the pleasure in electronic scanning and relentless credit-card swiping? What has happened to proper tills, brown-paper bags and a bit of amiable banter over the weighing scales?' (Pearmain, 2000: 140). The notion of looking at how memory is invested, invented, recollected and animated through a range of material forms represents an important means of understanding the consumer's world (Attfield, 2000; Kwint *et al.*, 1999). Finally, consumers' constitution of in-store geographies connect to the shop's own narrative productions and stories which are themselves in a constant process of flux, of becoming. The shop here 'assumes the role of author and storyteller in relation to the customer-as-reader' (Goh, 2002: 8), although not in any narrow cause-and-effect sense but, rather, reading and writing the shop sit in mutual and relational constitution. Consumption spaces are produced and consumed discursively, materially, relationally, interactively. Until we understand how consumers' knowledges and readings of shop space intersect with the multiple and intertextual modes of writing the shop, our understandings of consumption as practised in space will be partial, static. What this in turn implies is that we must see consumers in context, as entangled within the domain of the shop, not separated from it. 'Each of us has a highly charged, lived relationship with shopping which is changing and developing daily throughout our lifespans. It is part of our ecology' (Pearmain, 2000: 136). Consumer culture cannot be reduced just to commodities, or to shops, or to consumers, but must be understood in terms of relationality; as a recursive loop; dancing on the tightrope (Rantala and Lehtonen, 2001).

V Markets of meaning: the ecology of personal possessions

The fifth means by which we might conceptualize the market is via the metaphor of the journey, as one moment in a much longer series of person:object encounters. A range of new work is aiming to disrupt the linearity of many conventional accounts of consumption which see either the act of purchase or the point of production as the key, defining moment in a commodity's biography (Attfield, 2000; Dant, 2000; Gregson and Crewe, 2002; Lucas, 2002; Shove and Warde, 2002). As I have already dealt in an earlier report with rituals of possession and ownership – with how we make things our own (Crewe, 2000) – I will focus my attention here on other moments in the commodity:person encounter, namely disposal and gifting.

Although retailing and consumption studies have historically focused on questions of acquisition and purchase, consumption is in fact as much about disposal, about acts of casting-out that may or may not connect to replacement or substitution (Gregson and Crewe, 2002; Hawkins, 2000; Hetherington, 2002; Lucas, 2002; Shove and Warde, 2002; Thompson, 1979). While it is important to understand how and why things are collected, hoarded and stashed, to form the disordered everyday clutter of the mundane (Attfield, 2000; Leslie, 1996), equally important is the need to understand practices of disposal – or indeed regimes where disposal is rarely an option (Chelcea, 2002; Wessely, 2002). Shove and Warde (2002) draw attention to the need to examine the churn rate of products, i.e., the rate at which things are demolished, discarded, replaced and thrown away. Sometimes these acts of disposal are about the leftovers of consumption: the packaging of pre-prepared foods for example, the scraps from uneaten meals, empty wine bottles – practices that have been examined recently in the recycling literature (Lucas, 2002; Rathje and Murphy, 2001). But disposal also encompasses processes of replacement, substitution and casting out the no longer wanted or needed. Clearly, then, disposal has much to tell us about how consumers negotiate the product cycle and the twin imperatives of fashion and technological change that underpin this. Equally, disposal can reveal a great deal about devaluation, about how things that once mattered come not to matter any more. This is important theoretically because much of the emphasis to date on consumption has been on value and valuation. Yet devaluation arguably has as much to say about the social relations of consumption, about identities (Marcoux, 2001a; 2001b) and about consumption-production linkages as do studies of value.

My second illustration of the significance of the market in shaping the geographies of commodities is the question of the gift. Specifically here it is important to go beyond traditional arguments about the sacredness of the gift, its inalienability (Mauss, 1954), and to explore the ways in which gift giving comprises both altruism and egoism, and how it is simultaneously a form of exchange, of social communication and of socialization (Bourdieu, 1997; Cheal, 1988; Gregory, 1982; Strathern, 1988; Weiner, 1992). What is particularly significant, and connected to the arguments above about disposal, is the ways in which gifts are locked into a time-space freeze, where objects are locked out of the commodity sphere through relations that make their return frequently problematic and that work to hold their time-space trajectories in suspended animation (Gregson and Crewe, 2002: 178). Gifts are 'tie-ins': signs of social bonds (Komter, 2001), 'gifts are precisely not objects at all, but transactions and social relations' (Frow, 1997: 124).

VI Virtualism and abstract theory

My final means of understanding marketplace dynamics relies on conceptualizing how the market is part of a language through which the social world is understood and represented. Here the market is envisaged as a force, a powerful discourse, an idea which secures belief and currency and which has the means of making itself true (Bourdieu, 1998; Slater and Tonkiss, 2001). Economics, it is argued, 'shapes and formats the economy, rather than observing how it functions' (Callon, 1998: 2; Callon *et al.*, 2002; Strathern, 2002). This framing of market knowledge as constituted and reproduced through extreme abstraction has resulted in 'the creation of the virtual consumer in economic theory, a chimera, the constituent parts of which are utterly daft' (Miller, 1998: 200). Yet the power of abstract models of economic behaviour continues to shape the ways in which we both understand the economy and, significantly, in the ways in which the economy itself functions. Described as virtualism, economic models of the market are no longer 'measured against the world they seek to describe, but instead the world is measured against them, found wanting and made to conform' (Carrier and Miller, 1998: 225; Thrift, 1998).

The means through which I reflect here on the power of virtualism is via the case of e-commerce. A large academic literature on the economic impact of the internet has emerged, focusing particularly on the capacity of this new technological assemblage to disintermediate or reintermediate existing value chains within particular industries (Evans and Wurster, 1999; Greig 2001; Hagel and Singer, 1999; Leyshon, 2001; Malone and Yates, 1987). Significantly for the purposes of this argument, such literatures are not simply reflecting a given economic reality but can be formative to a very considerable degree in the way in which they define important problems, key questions and, in general, what is significant. E-commerce is reasonably open-ended in the form, scope and scale of its effects and, in an uncertain and open field such as this, the power of theoretical definition can be considerable. This literature has been produced by a newly emergent knowledge community that has sought to give theoretical, practical and rhetorical shape to e-commerce (see, for example, Boston Consulting Group, 1999; Christensen and Tedlow, 2000; Gulati and Garino, 2000; Hagel and Armstrong, 1997; Mahadevan 2000; Maruca, 1999; Merrill Lynch, 1999). The production and circulation of such e-commerce narratives initially portrayed a future in which the entire basis for competition in retailing was up for grabs through the dissemination of disruptive technologies. The spectacular stock-market valuations generated by new dot-com firms between 1999 and 2000 in part reflected the confidence of capital markets, drawing in part on revolutionary business models, to 're-write the rules of organization, providing significant first-mover advantages to those firms in the vanguard of its development' (Leyshon, 2001: 56). Such models in turn enable new forms of consumption and new forms of interaction between retailers and consumers (B2C) and, significantly, between different groups of consumers (C2C), including, for example, virtual communities, web-based events, discussion groups and so on (Holloway, 2002; Green, 2001). Now quite how robust such models turned out to be is not my concern here.² Certainly, more recent narratives have emphasized the exaggerated nature of the early hysteria surrounding e-commerce, and the emergent difficulties, or killer costs, facing pure-play e-tailers, namely order fulfillment, logistics, regulation, technology and sociality (Knights *et al.*, 2003; Medhurst, 2000). Suffice it to say that e-commerce provides a fairly

spectacular exemplar of the perils of miscalculation and the practical, and very real fallout that occurs when models fail.

VII The empirical turn

I end this, my final progress report, with some brief reflections on theory and method in consumer studies. If the new retail geography was charged with clearing 'the path for new strategies of empirical engagement' (Slater, 2002), then conceptions of the relation between theory and practice must surely be a key concern for future work. As I hope to have shown in the above discussion, no society is ordered by a single mode of exchange. What is required is that we disaggregate apparently singular principles – about consumption, identity, value, exchange and space – into fine-grained analyses of how, why and where consumers act and interact in structured webs of significance, within material parameters (Philo and Miller, 2001; Woodward, 2001), with commodities and in specific temporal and spatial settings.

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Notes

1. This phrase is adapted from Boden and Williams (2002: 500).
2. See Wrigley *et al.* (2002).

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