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Prog Hum Geogr 2001; 25; 629

DOI: 10.1191/030913201682688986

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Progress reports

The besieged body: geographies of retailing and consumption

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I Governance, regulation and retailing

My writing of this second report coincides with the publication in the UK of two influential and long-awaited reports which both directly address issues of retailing and consumption, and underscore the close connections between academic debate and public policy. The first of these, the Competition Commission's (2000) report into possible spatial monopoly in the supermarket sector, reveals the power of local market concentration in the retail sector and the implications which this has for consumer food choice¹ (see also Bowlby, 2000; Crewe and Davenport, 1992; Humphrey, 1998; Wrigley, 1999, 2000a, 2000b). Following a 16-month enquiry, the Commission found evidence of both entry and sunk cost exit barriers and also of three pricing practices by the leading UK food retailers that distorted competition and gave rise to complex monopoly situations (Competition Commission, 2000; see also Doherty 1999; Wrigley, 2001). Although the Commission was broadly of the opinion that the retail industry is competitive and that 'overall, excessive prices are not being charged, nor excessive profits earned' (Competition Commission, 2000: vol. 1, 7), it nonetheless found evidence of effective local monopoly situations in some local areas and acknowledged that significant local concentration was a cause for concern and should not be allowed to deteriorate (vol. 1, 154, quoted in Wrigley, 2001). Significantly, too, the Commission argued that competition and consumer choice issues cannot be effectively addressed within the current regulatory regime. The picture becomes even more muddled when recent reports from the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) pointing to the negative effect of out-of-town superstores are taken into account. The result, then, seems to be growing public concern over the power and

practices of large grocery retailers alongside a contradictory planning framework and, more broadly, a benign regulatory environment.

The second public enquiry report I want to consider is the long-awaited Phillips Report into the BSE crisis in the UK² (Phillips, 2000). Again, what is interesting here are the seemingly contradictory findings of the report, which, like the Competition Commission Report on retailing, broadly vindicates the regulatory systems and procedures which were put in place to deal with the crisis while at the same time acknowledging that both the food system and government agencies were structured in such a way as to militate against swift and effective action in preventing the spread of the disease. What unites these two documents is food, and more specifically the regulation of the food system. Together, these seemingly disparate reports touch on two of the key themes that I want to address in the following discussion. The first is the question of retail regulation, consumer choice and the politics of consumption; the second is the issue of food consumption and the body. What these documents highlight,³ above all, is the intimate and unavoidable connection between the food system, retailing and the consuming body. Together, I argue, these themes encapsulate a number of theoretical and policy issues which are currently occupying the minds of retail and consumption geographers.

II The politics of consumption

1 Food safety, food scares and careful consumption

Both the Competition Commission and the Phillips enquiry point, inadvertently, to questions of consumer confidence and (dis)empowerment. They also reveal the potential power of big corporate capital and its tendencies towards overaccumulation, be it the case of large supermarkets or the agro-food system (Arnold and Narang Luthra, 2000; Peterson and McGee, 2000; Wrigley, 2000a; 2000b). What is becoming clear is that we need to more fully theorize the relationships between practices associated with the provision of food and the consumption of that food (Lockie and Kitto, 2000). While Marsden (2000) has argued that 'through the haze of food scares . . . and public anxieties surrounding GMOs . . . there is clear evidence of a growth in concern for the consumption end of food supply', others have suggested that 'the prevalent representation of such experiences as the mark of "consumer choice" belies a diminished understanding of and control over what it is we are eating and the social conditions under which it is produced' (Whatmore, 1995: 36). Using elements of actor-network theory a range of commentators have revealed how consumption has become increasingly more reflexive and more risky. Nature displays, it is argued, 'boomerang qualities' (Beck, 1990); 'it has the habit of bouncing back in the wake of human modification. The most notable example of nature's boomerang quality in the food sector is BSE where a seeming domestication of various natural entities suddenly gave rise to a terrifying new actor (a prion protein), one that causes irreversible damage to the brain. As this case importantly illustrates, nature has many complex ways of evading the outflanking processes of industrial capital, so that ever more complex mixtures of the natural and socio-economic tend to emerge' (Murdoch *et al.*, 2000: 110).

This increasing concern over food safety and quality, along with growing consumer

mistrust of scientific knowledge and government agencies' assessments of risk, has led to a consumer culture of suspicion (Sulkunen *et al.*, 1997: 15). This in turn, argues Marsden (1998: 285), is resulting in more 'careful consumption' among certain sets of consumers and to a range of quality-assurance schemes in agro-food production as falling farm incomes, food scares and requirements for due diligence in food production are combining to force the system to look for new ways to meet consumer demands while ensuring competitive livelihoods for the agricultural sector. There has been, for example, a proliferation of retailer-initiated Quality Assurance Schemes and institutional efforts that attempt to differentiate products according to standards of safety, hygiene and traceability (Guthman, 2001; Holloway and Kneafsey, 2000: 285; Morris and Young, 1997; 2000). Marsden (2000) cites such developments as evidence that 'an alternative geography of food is forcing itself onto the social science agenda' (p. 107) and evaluates the most effective ways to interpret such 'alternative and emergent' food supply networks (p. 20). Yet, while public consciousness has been raised by food scares, this shift towards a logic of quality is fuelled by the emergence of a growing food elite who are knowledgeable about tracing the origins of their foodstuffs (Marsden, 2000). The process is, thus, deeply socially divisive.

The emergence of a group of politically, socially and environmentally aware consumers belies the gritty reality that the majority of British consumers have neither the political clout nor the financial means to engage in careful consumption and to mobilize against the dictates of big retail capital. There remain enormous social inequalities in current food/power relationships. This is not to say that such movements will always remain on the margins, but it is to recognize that if they are to become more centre-stage they will need to confront both the spaces of prescription and the spaces of negotiation which are available in current privately regulated food governance systems (Murdoch, in Marsden, 2000, 28). These trends suggest we need better models of food governance which build upon more differentiated understandings of food as a natural, social and political construction. Thus, 'through the analysis food governance we need to explore ways in which the state, NGOs and civil society are evolving and enrolling actors in ways which begin to make a difference, not only to the "alternative" modes of food supply and consumption but also the more conventional "industrial model" of food supply' (Marsden, 2000: 28).

2 Citizen consumer

Following on from this, a range of new work is beginning to be more sensitive to the inequalities and politics of consumption. The act of consumption is being invested with increasingly political overtones and the repercussions of consumption are becoming increasingly evident – in terms of both the socially and environmentally devastating effects of overconsumption and the pernicious nature of labour processes central to the low-cost production of clothing, toys and many consumer electronics commodities (Crewe, 2000; 2001; Johns and Vural, 2000; Klein, 2000; Roberts, 2000; Ross, 1997). One conceptual device for socially and spatially connecting consumption with production is the commodity chain (Crewe, 2001; Hartwick, 1998; 2000; Hughes and Reimer, 2002) which is a 'way of tying together material and signified realities, consumption and production, and activities separated by space and markets, providing a fuller

interpretation of the material and representational worlds from which to theorize the practical politics of change' (Hartwick, 2000: 1190). Hughes and Reimer's (2002) collection suggests possible directions for commodity chain intervention, both through unveiling the regimes of exploitation along particular commodity chains and through tracing the movement of commodities through particular circuits of culture, and offering more culturally nuanced insights into the meanings of goods as they pass through different places and phases of commodity circulation. Their work also begins to speculate about the development of ethical systems of provision, echoing recent work on stakeholder approaches in retailing and consumption (Whysall, 2000).

So, while the retail geographies of the 1990s explored the consumer marketplace as a site of human agency and personal fulfilment (Crewe, 2000), there is evidence of a shift in focus during the early 2000s towards consumption as a site of political action through explorations into the connections between commodity culture, self-identity, citizenship and political participation. By positioning geography at the explorative edge of commodity-chain analysis, Hartwick argues that we are opening up spaces for the emergence of a new kind of radical politics (2000: 1183–84) which can begin to expose commodity fetishism, to counter reversals of meaning and to link signified to material reality (Hartwick, 2000: 1190). Others, too, have begun to debate the ethical dimensions to the global traffic in commodities and have questioned whether new forms and practices of consumption might simply be reproducing existing regimes of political, commercial and cultural dominance (Jackson, 1999; Hughes, 2000). Jackson (1999) in particular is useful here in questioning the morality of the market through the traffic in things, and asks 'why such moral opprobrium attaches to certain kinds of commodification (of sexual services or human genes, for example) rather than to other kinds (such as the sale of food or animals)'. Clearly what this underscores is the role of variable consumption knowledges in underpinning any moves towards the construction of a meaningful political critique of consumption (see also Jackson *et al.*, 2000; Miller, 2000). What is clear, too, is that there remains considerable scope for work which critically interrogates the relations between consumption, individual identity, the power of agency and the potential formation of a collective politics of consumption.

III Consuming bodies

The second theme I want to discuss, which relates directly to the issues surrounding food discussed above, is the question of consumption, embodiment and the fashioned body. What much of the literature on the food system discussed above misses is what Probyn describes as the brute physicality of food (Probyn, 1999: 216). Food is not simply the outcome of the agricultural system, is rarely just body fuel; rather, it is something 'which both viscerally segregates us and radically brings us together. Without doubt food is a hugely powerful system of values, regulations and beliefs . . . one of the difficulties that faces any study of food is its enormity, and the ways in which it spills into every aspect of life' (Probyn, 1999: 216). It is this spillage, this seepage, of food into every sphere of our lives which I have tried to emphasize throughout this discussion. As Appadurai reminds us, 'food seems to possess inherently tropic qualities. Simply put, food moves about all the time. It constantly shifts registers: from the sacred to the everyday, from metaphor to materiality, it is the most common and most elusive of

matters' (Appadurai, 1986, quoted in Probyn, 1999: 217). Some of the most interesting work of late is that which addresses food's relationship to embodiment, and questions how food, the body and fashion are mutually (and at times troublingly) connected through processes of consumption.

1 Body management: fashion, fitness and food

Fashion has always occupied a difficult position in respect to theory. For feminists, fashion, adornment and embodied practice have been seen as irretrievably linked to sexual display, and have been denounced for perpetuating dominant heterosexist paradigms based on a conception of the subject as necessarily taking an active part in her production through the deliberate cultivation of self-image. The body – and particularly here the female body – is always inescapably encoded by cultural norms (Negrin, 1999) and the commodification of the body through the fashion and beauty industries presupposes that acutely self-conscious relation to the body which is attributed to femininity (Doane, 1987: 32; see also Corbett, 2000), and which is so troubling to many feminist fashion theorists (Craik, 1994; Church-Gibson, 2000a; 2000b; Wilson, 1984). The effective operation of the commodity system, it is argued, requires the breakdown of the body into parts – nails, hair, skin, breath – each one of which can constantly be improved through the purchase of a commodity (Doane, 1987: 32). Critical work in this area has documented, for example, the ways in which media images, and particularly fashion photography, have perpetuated mythical stereotypes of the perfect female form as young, beautiful and thin (Gamman, 2000, Grogan, 1999), and have argued that 'a culture of slenderness . . . promotes a form of misogynistic revulsion against the fleshy female body. The irregular female form must be abhorred and contained, if not entirely repressed from representation' (Gamman, 2000: 65; see also Adam, 2000).⁴

Others have considered body management practices in relation to fashion, looking at the corporeality of embodied difference. Kaiser *et al.* (2000) analysed the 'identity talk' of academic women, looking at the ways in which they construct their intellectual identities through clothes in the context of dominant power relations in the academy. (Re)creating looks of intellectual authority in the academic world requires constant mediation between attractiveness and professionalism and the academic women discussed here articulate complex relationships with their personal standpoints, their disciplinary lenses and their everyday practices (Kaiser *et al.*, 2000: 134). In a similar way, recent work by Green (2000) reflects on the feelings of vulnerable exposure which women professors feel when selecting what to wear in the dominantly masculine environment of the academy. Other work looks at the embodied fashion practices of pregnant women (Longhurst, 2000a; 2000b) and at the apparent invisibility of older women in the fashion retail environment (Church-Gibson, 2000a). The body of the consumer subject is constituted as literally 'prepared for consumption' (Malson and Swann, 1999: 403); consumption, under such circumstances, requires sustained emotional capital. It is hard labour.⁵

For political economists also, fashion has operated in a theoretical vacuum. Fashion's fundamental dilemma is that it is inevitably predicated on change and obsolescence, which has led to the assumption that it is therefore superficial, narcissistic, trivial and wasteful (Bruzzi and Church-Gibson, 2000). Yet in recent years there have been signs of

more detailed and critical engagements with fashion through a drawing together of work on fashion imagery and discourse, theories of consumption and the body, questions of gendered identity and studies of selling spaces. Fashion – and its connection to food, the body and gendered subjectivity – is finally being taken seriously (Bruzzi and Church-Gibson, 2000; Entwistle, 2000a; 2000b; 2000c; Guy *et al.*, 2000; Sweetman, 1999; 2001; White and Griffiths, 2000). For those interested in the commercial spaces of consumption, new work has focused on the designer, the retailer, the city and the spaces of fashion culture (Arnold, 1999; Clarke, 2000; Crewe and Goodrum, 2000; de la Haye, 2001; Evans, 2000; Gilbert, 2000; McRobbie, 2000; Mantle, 2000; Maramotti, 2000; Taylor, 2000). Others have looked at the labour process within the fashion and cultural industries, and at how work practices and spaces are being recast in the new economy (Crewe *et al.*, 2001; Harris, 2000; Neff *et al.* 2000; Pratt, 2000). There is also a continuing thread within work on shopping spaces looking at the imaginative fetishism of the mall through magic, memory and mystique (Backes, 1997; Goss, 1999; Woodward *et al.*, 2000). Finally, a range of new work is looking at the ways in which gendered subjectivities are played out historically and spatially. Showalter (2001), for example, discusses the ways in which retro has become the approved sartorial style of feminism. Retro or vintage, she argues, ‘was the ideal feminist choice, an ironic style that inserts a wearer into a complex network of cultural and historical references’ (Showalter, 2001: 3; see also Crewe *et al.*, 2001; Gregson *et al.* (2001) on the reappropriation of 1970s fashion in 1990s Britain). Cole’s work shows how clothing has been a primary method of identification for gay men, while O’Neill’s (2000) essay on John Stephen, the ‘King of Carnaby Street’, shows how Stephen successfully adapted a gay style to the mass heterosexual menswear market in the 1960s.⁶

Work looking specifically at the relationship between food, the body and media images has begun to move away from investigating the potentially damaging effects of media images on women and of a diet-promoting culture (but see Grogan, 1999; Dittmar and Dury, 2000) and is looking more towards a theorizing and researching of ‘eating disorders’ such as bulimia and anorexia nervosa ‘not as individual pathologies but as culturally, politically and discursively located forms of embodiment and body management’. Other work has looked at the culture of fitness and at how, for example, bodies must be tight, contained, under control, with firm margins (Adam, 2000: 40). It is, argues Adam, possible to be large, with a substantial weight, as long as it is managed. This echoes Murray’s (2000) work on body management practices and working out, which argues that it is quite possible to be fat and fit. McCormack (1999) also opens up some ‘critical trajectories for a wider examination of the metaphorical and material geographies that are produced through the working out of particular figurations of embodied fitness’ (p. 156), while Cahill and Riley (2000), Harding (1999) and Sweetman (1999) consider questions of body transformation and body art through tattooing and piercing. When food is approached, increasingly it is not simply in terms of its relevance to eating disorders, excessive thinness or obesity, but the fashion and food connection is also considered in terms of fetishism, seduction, the spectacularity of the catwalk show and contemporary concepts of the grotesque (Buckley and Gundle, 2000; Bruzzi, 2000; Gamman, 2000; Khan, 2000; McLaughlin, 2000).

2 Dysfunctional consumption, de-shopping and the regulation of desire

Fashion and food shopping and consumption are not all about desire, design and playful performativity. In her recent edited collection entitled *Serious shopping*, Adrienne Baker (2000) begins to dispel some of the (largely media-fuelled) myths around addictive shopping and the stereotypes of those who 'indulge' in it – usually women, bored, maybe slightly depressed. Baker presents an altogether starker reality of dysfunctional and excessive consumption, and tells of those for whom the magic does not work – the brave attempt to heal through shopping fails. While consumption has long been seen as a means of regulating emotions, particularly women's emotions, and a source of emotional fulfilment, giving a buzz, a thrill or a lift, Baker's (2000) collection reveals an altogether more pernicious side to excessive consumption. From those who engage in 'de-shopping' – the purchase of goods whose return to the shop is deliberately premeditated at the point of purchase – to those whose lives become defined by excessive and addictive consumption and associated debt, imprisonment and sometimes suicide, Baker and her colleagues paint an altogether more sinister picture of shopping as far more than just looking (Baker, 2000; Elliot, 2000; Minsky, 2000; Murray, 2000). As Bowlby (2000) tellingly entitled her book *Carried away*, for some consumers the magic of the mall is elusive. There is a connection between the commodities bought and the person themselves, the things they buy carry the poignancy, the tragedy, the longing, the despair, the emotional intensity of human relationships . . . most of all they convey the relationship with a very fragile self (Baker, 2000: 4).

Notes

1. Such debates have also been rehearsed in the USA in recent years, and have resulted in a recent shift to regulatory tightening by the Federal Trade Commission in the USA in the face of recent consolidation in the US food retail sector.

2. Although the report I refer to here deals specifically with the UK case, international concerns over the movement of potentially contaminated meat in recent months reveal the internationalized nature of food commodity chains and how different national regulatory regimes have the potential to disrupt particular localities at particular times through sidestepping domestic import regulations. The most noteworthy examples include the recent import into the UK, via a legal loophole, of potentially infected beef from France and Germany in spite of EU recommendations that all countries may face random checks for BSE in cattle in March 2000. Japan is also considering introducing a ban on all beef products from the EU, while the EU threatened to ban meat from America because of allegedly lax controls over food safety (Helm, 2000). Similar media hysteria surrounded the allegations in 1999 that Belgium was exporting carcinogenic foodstuffs which were contaminated with dioxin (King, 1999). This latest food scare, labelled 'chickengate', along with international panics such as the Hong Kong bird flu epidemic of 1997, again underscores both the leakiness of international borders and the relative powerlessness of nation states to regulate food traffic. Similar arguments can be made in relation to the international traffic in GM foods, with organizations such as Greenpeace lobbying against the unregulated 'invasion' of GM crops from the USA and Australia (Harrison, 2000).

3. See also recent food scares in the UK surrounding salmonella, e-coli, campylobacter and the entry into the human food chain of contaminated chicken intended for pet food.

4. It is interesting to note that men are increasingly showing up in bulimia figures, perhaps as a result of men's bodies also becoming increasingly commodified.

5. Brewis and Linstead's (2000) article 'The worst thing is the screwing' is a particularly incisive account of embodied consumption work in the sex industry. They discuss the ways in which prostitutes manage both their own and their client's bodies in an industry where the commodity being consumed is the body. This is a clear example of the commodification of the body as an object for consumption.

6. See also Mort (1996) on consumer cultures, masculinity and space; the special edition of *Fashion Theory* 4 (4) on masculinity; Breward (2000) on embodying practices and fashion for men; and Crewe and Goodrum (2000) on Paul Smith and the fashioning of new forms of men's consumption.

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