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Geography of consumption I

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> Not only is shopping melting into everything, but everything is melting into shopping. Through successive waves of expansion – each more extensive and pervasive than the previous – shopping has methodically encroached on a widening spectrum of territories so that it is now, arguably, the defining activity of public life .... Shopping is the medium by which the market has solidified its grip on our spaces, buildings, cities, activities, and lives. It is the material outcome of the degree to which the market economy has shaped our surroundings, and ultimately ourselves.
>
> (Leong, 2001: 129)

I The cultural turn: cultural economy and commercial culture

To begin with the obvious: the explosion of literature on consumption, which perhaps began with a consumer boom in the 1980s (Miller *et al.*, 1998), has not let up through the 1990s, and if anything is intensifying today. There is a particular history of social interest in consumption, of course, in which consumer booms and century's turns play their part (Sayer, 2003), but it is surely incontrovertible that 'the current level of attention seems to be of an entirely different order'(Clarke, 2003: 9). This is evidenced, for example, by an expanding library of trade books, including several 'best-sellers', on the pervasive effect of brands (Klein, 2000), marketing (Seabrook, 2000), fast food (Schlosser, 2001), fashion (Lee, 2003), credit cards (Manning, 2000), shopping (Schor, 2000; Hine, 2002), commercialism (Cross, 2000), politics (Cohen, 2003), and, ultimately, the 'emptiness' of globalized consumer society (Ritzer, 2004). While there are exceptions (see Chung *et al.*, 2001), it is clear that it is the 'dark side' of consumption that sells in popular culture, and these books play variously on fears of corporate manipulation, environmental degradation and exploitation. Collective unease is perhaps an explanation for the spectacle of the President of the United States and Prime Minister of Great Britain – countries that lead the world in retail space per capita (Chung *et al.*, 2001: 51) – reportedly exhorting people on their patriotic duty to go shopping to bolster that vital but shaky measure of social well-being, 'consumer confidence', in order to counter the effects of the

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terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. There is a politics to all discourses on consumption, but I suspect that this is perhaps the first time that shopping was evoked explicitly as war by other means!

At the same time, even if it is still an exaggeration to claim that 'now it is all consumption' (Gregson, 1995), there has been a remarkable increase in academic production on the subject, both through the intensification of research on the socio-spatial organization of retailing and practices of shopping and by expansion of the field as we have followed consumers into new contexts of consumption. Thus, while geographers continue to work on traditional questions of retail location and the form of the retail built environment (Marston and Modarres, 2002; Lowe, 2000; see also Abaza, 2001, and Salcedo, 2003), they now also work on topics such as fashion (Dwyer and Crang, 2002; Dwyer and Jackson, 2003; Leslie, 2002), food and foodstuffs (Friedberg, 2003; Valentine, 2002; Guthman, 2003; Cook and Harrison, 2003; Domosh, 2003) and home decor (Leslie and Reimer, 2003; see also Miller, 2001b). Geographers have embarked on a self-confessed 'mission', pioneering work in 'alternative retail' or 'second-hand worlds' (Gregson *et al.*, 2000; 2002; 2003; Gregson and Crewe, 2003; Crewe *et al.*, 2003; see also Clarke, 2000); they have explored nightlife in new 'urban playscapes' (Chatterton and Hollands, 2002; Hollands and Chatterton, 2003; Hollands *et al.*, 2003; Evans, 2003; see also Turner, 2002); some have mapped the penetration of consumer culture into post-socialist and postapartheid contexts (Smith, 2002; Dodson, 2000; see also Wessely, 2002, and Shevchenko, 2002); and others have explored new 'worlds of e-commerce' (Leinbach and Brunn, 2001; Currah, 2003; Leyshon *et al.* 2003; see also Oh and Arditi, 2001; Slater, 2000).

Much of this research follows upon the so-called 'cultural turn' (Cook *et al.*, 2000), as geographers have traced creativity, aesthetic practices and the making of meaning, from consumption into the realm of production, there revealing the mutual 'entanglement of commerce and culture' (Dwyer and Crang, 2002: 410). Two useful studies of the commodification of cultural difference within particular brands of foods, for example, both of which employ postcolonial perspectives, are Domosh's (2003) analysis of the gendered and racialized images of 'purity' exploited by Heinz Corporation, and Cook and Harrison's (2003) exposure of the 'cultural fixing' of Grace and Walkerswood products in the British (super)marketplace. Some recent studies of the movement and transformation of meanings along 'commodity chains' (see also Hughes and Reimer, 2003), include, for example: Mansfield's (2003) account of 'cultural signification' of *surimi* paste, or imitation seafood; Dwyer and Jackson's (2003) examination of the role of cultural intermediaries in the 'fashioning' of meanings of Indian garments as they variously connote exoticism, ethical trade, craft-based individuality, quality and design originality; and Dwyer and Crang's (2002) related study of the 'hybrid commodity cultures' implicated in production and consumption of Indian fashions. Geographers have also produced innovative studies of the cultural embeddedness of economic practices, for example, in fashion, retailing and publishing (Jackson *et al.*, 2000a; see also Du Gay and Pryke, 2002): in some of the more intriguing studies, which also explicitly consider the spaces of consumption practices, or the 'ecology of work', Valentine (2002: 3, her emphasis) shows how 'working bodies are *in-corporated* into organizational life through emerging food practices'; Leslie (2002) shows how employees in fashion retail are also consumers and models of the product that they sell; and Gregson and Crewe (2003) show

how 'retro retailers' use their cultural capital to define their position as cultural intermediaries in 'creative industries'.

The task of 'transcending the simple dualisms often erected [sic] between commerce and culture' (Lowe, 2000: 216) has become something of a mantra for the new geographers of consumption. It is apparently made urgent by material transformations in the retail economy, consistent with conditions of postmodernity, for it seems that many geographers would agree not only that cultural and economic moments in markets cannot be separated, or that what we call 'the economic' is discursively produced (Callon, 1998; Slater, 2002), but that somehow 'culture is *now* organizing the economy in crucial respects' (Slater, 1997, my emphasis). While Jackson *et al.*, (2000b: 1–2) and Jackson (2002: 4–5) are at pains to establish that the realization of the 'cultural economy' (Du Gay and Pryke, 2002) is neither merely rhetorical nor the result of academic fashion, I think the anthropologist Miller (2002: 173) is absolutely right that this is a form of 'post-hoc self-rationalization' since the economy is no more cultural than it ever was, and was certainly 'just as cultural at the time when most academics saw themselves as Marxist'.[1]

In this review, I argue that much of the new geography of consumption is precisely an academic *fashion*, in the sense that it is 'a manner of performance', a 'prevailing mode or style', and an expression of social distinction (see *Hyperdictionary*, 2003), that is simultaneously an object of aesthetic and commodity production. Taking seriously claims about the 'cultural economy', I treat the new geography of consumption as an emerging 'commercial culture', a hybrid form that transcends 'conventional dualisms' that separate production from consumption (Jackson *et al.*, 2000a). There are two principal arguments: first, and following others who have recognized the preference for 'straw person' arguments in recent 'culturalist' approaches to consumption (Gottdiener, 2000: 17; Clarke, 2003: 16), is that its 'newness' is constructed in opposition to an anterior and putatively inferior product which is a 'hollowed-out' version of Marxist commodity fetishism and a caricature of the Frankfurt School (Lodziak, 2002: 91); and, second, that the rhetorical strategies of differentiation, the methods of research and the political positions adopted are evidence of a tendency towards 'a legitimization of commercial culture and apology for liberal capitalist markets' (Warde, 2002: 11). It is paradoxical that as popular culture apparently intensifies its concern about the penetration of capitalist production into everyday life, many academics working in the field of new consumption studies are self-consciousnessly rejecting political economy (with notable exceptions such as Hollands and Chatterton, 2003), as well as semiotics and psychoanalysis, and even enthusiastically endorsing materialism in the vernacular sense (Miller, 2003: 234–35). Explanation for this paradox, I suggest, persisting with my residual sense of materialism in the Marxist sense, lies in the changing conditions of academic production and new forms of consumption of our product.

In making this argument, I do not mean to implicate equally all those conducting valuable empirical work on the 'cultural economy' of consumption, as there is an obvious danger of constructing another straw person, such as the awful journalistic stereotype of Cultural Studies constructed by Lodziak (2002) in his jeremiad against the 'myth of consumerism'. I stress that I see it as a tendency only, which I will expose in a purposive selection of polemical statements made by leading 'brand' names in the field.

II The empirical turn

The cultural turn has been accompanied by what Crewe (2003: 359) calls an 'empirical turn', towards 'fine-grained studies of commodities and consumption in specific temporal and spatial settings'. Mort (2000: 7), in a textbook example of a straw person argument, identifies a 'revisionist strand' in recent consumption studies which he says is concerned more with specificity than the traditional 'over-generalized accounts [that] produced an undifferentiated understanding of the relationship between commerce and projections of selfhood, as if consumers' experience of who they are is simply triggered by market mechanisms'. Miller (2001a: 227) also advocates 'a proper encounter with actual studies of consumption and consumers... sufficiently nuanced to be appropriately targeted at the complex and contradictory processes of consumption'. If the use of the dominant metaphor of marketing is accidental, the rhetoric of propriety and authenticity is typical of the means by which authors of new consumption studies distinguish the superiority of their new product. Evidence of the penetration of promotional discourse into academia (Warde, 2002: 11) is further provided by claims to pursue 'rounded and grounded' understanding of 'what it *actually* means to consume' (Miles *et al.*, 2002: 5, their emphasis), a 'desire to study *actual* consumption and consumers' and '*commitment* to ethnographic or equivalent experience' (Miller, 2001a: 232, my emphasis), a willingness to take on '*detailed* empirical work' and '*painstaking* fieldwork' (Jackson, *et al.*, 2000b: 3, my emphasis), and the avowed seriousness with researchers now take shopping practices and talk (Gregson and Crewe, 2003: 12).

In fact, complexity and/or nuance might be considered the second mantra of new consumption studies: Gregson and Crewe (2003: 13), for example, consciously 'err toward a more provisional, partial and fragile reading of the consumer', and Jackson *et al.* (2000b: 2) claim to 'avoid the tendency of some recent work in cultural studies towards excessive abstraction and over-generalization' in favor of 'detailed empirical work, drawing on ethnographic methods, on in-depth interviews and focus groups, on archival work and painstaking fieldwork'.[2] Various authors seek 'to disrupt the linearity of many conventional accounts of consumption' (Crewe, 2003: 357), preferring more complex 'circuits of culture' to commodity chains and 'ecoding/decoding' (Jackson, 2000: 146), 'notions of circuitry and interconnection' and lateral models to 'linear constructs of modernization or globalization' (Jackson, 2002: 12), metaphors of networks and transnational circuitry derived from the French *filière* approach (see Raikes *et al.*, 2002), or actor-network theory, to 'single-stranded linear chain with clear beginning and end points' (Dwyer and Jackson, 2003: 270; see also Dwyer and Crang, 2002: 417; Valentine, 2002) and more complex and 'culturally sensitive economic geographies' to teleological narratives of Americanization (Lowe, 2000: 216).

Perhaps conscious of the criticism that epistemological sophistication and methodological multiplicity are sometimes assumed to invest the new consumption studies with an inherent political advantage (Du Gay and Pryke, 2002: 5), Jackson (2002: 5) reassures us that the goal is not to demonstrate complexity for its own sake, but to subvert dualistic thinking and linear logic, and to suggest new possibilities for intervention in 'what can sometimes seem an all-encompassing "consumer culture"'. I'm not sure, however, that greater complexity in analysis of consumption will help consumers themselves to understand the processes of consumption, much less to

intervene in them, but this is not what Jackson has in mind. In his *Progress in Human Geography* lecture, which I take as a manifesto for a new geography of consumption, Jackson explicitly attacks the 'hollowness' of Marxist attempts to 'unveil' the fetishism of commodities, 'as though the provision of such knowledge would *automatically* lead to widespread shifts in consumer behavior' (Jackson, 2002: 6, my emphasis). I doubt any Marxist would so deny the necessity of education and organized struggle in this regard, but he further argues (2002: 8) that it effects:

> a subtle privileging of academic knowledge over the popular wisdom of everyday life. It shows little respect for the political judgment or moral integrity of ordinary consumers to represent them as so easily duped by the manipulative forces of contemporary capitalism. It also runs counter to all the empirical evidence from media and cultural studies that emphasizes the agency of audiences to read media messages in an increasingly knowledgeable way.

Clearly Jackson has discovered a different Cultural Studies here from that guilty of 'excessive abstraction and overgeneralization' he and his co-authors noted earlier. I agree, however, that it is important strategically not to alienate consumers with disdainful rhetoric, nor to ignore their considerable agency. Nevertheless, if academic knowledge is not in some way privileged, even if only by the institutional resources invested in its production and its increasing 'complexity', surely we might as well all give up and go shopping? As E.P. Thompson (1957: 35), cautioned, when Cultural Studies was but a twinkle in the eye of the New Left: 'The intellectual must work within a narrow ridge between academic hubris on the one hand; and on the other hand false humility, the abasement of the intellect before working-class experience, which compromises our own intellectual integrity, but also our ideas'. Moreover, fetishism in the Marxist sense does not refer merely to the intentional 'masking' or 'veiling' of the production of particular commodities, and the findings of audience research are quite consistent with the phenomenon that Marx intuited a century ago: that commodities are possessed of a 'mystical character', which is the objectifying effect of the *system* of exchange, and that under capitalism individual and social identity is fashioned through consumption (Gottdiener, 2000: 4).

Daniel Miller (2003: 360–63; my emphasis) seems to acknowledge other dimensions of fetishism when he identifies '*one* of the most problematic effects of fetishism [as] the unwillingness of consumers to take into account the interests of those who produce their goods'. Like Jackson, he defends the inherent moral and political integrity of the consumer, in that fetishism derives from imperatives of thrift and frugality that he argues dominate 'ordinary shopping': hence, 'private virtue produces public vice' (2003: 362). Unlike Jackson, however, he is enthusiastic about the work by human geographers on commodity chains, and believes that education might induce consumers to 'gain knowledge, care about, and ultimately pay more money to producers' (2003: 367). Regretfully, he reports the failure of his attempt to gain funding for his project that would use the internet as a means of 'disintermediation'. While I sympathize with his goals, I find the project to 'defetishize the commodity' rather naive in its faith in electronic forms of mediation, and, again, I am critical of the conception of fetishism only in sense of the 'veiling' of the real relations of production and distribution, as if it is merely a matter of 'seeing through' to what the surfaces of the commodity obscures.

There seems to be a signal unwillingness in the new consumption literature to engage with the 'complexity' of Marx's concept of fetishism as a reified relationship

with things – that is with the '*calculus* of objects' and the chains of signifiers that construct the world of commodities (Baudrillard, 1998: 27) – or the anthropological and psychological dimensions of the concept. According to Clarke (2003: 16–17) this is symptomatic of a misunderstanding of, and hostility towards, theory *per se* – consistent, of course, with the 'empirical turn' – but is also a suspicion of structural models of society and consciousness: of the idea of 'consumer society' in which subjects are compelled to consume beyond any reasonable conception of basic needs, and in which consumers are able to deny or repress their knowledge of the system, to suspend disbelief and enjoy 'having it both ways'. Certainly there are grounds for suspicion of psychoanalysis, Freud's neurotic subject, and the representation of desire as the expression of an unconscious lack (see Belk *et al.*, 2000: 104), but given the call to embrace the complexity and circuitry of actor-network theory it is surprising that more have not further followed the 'materialist turn' in social and cultural theory. To do so would be to acknowledge that social relations cannot cohere without the attribution of intentionality and agency to things, or that 'material reification or fetishism is precisely what holds the social order in place and allows it to move at the same time' (Pels *et al.*, 2002: 6–8). It seems that the new consumption studies have yet to move beyond the 'pervasive humanism' that Miller and Jackson (Miller *et al.*, 1998: 1–5) themselves originally identified a few years ago as they evaluated 'the fruits of the first generation of empirical studies of consumption'.

III Academic forms of resistance

Several studies have recently discovered a lack of resistance to consumption, even in contexts where it might be expected. For example, in what have become known (ironically) as 'alternative contexts of consumption' (Clarke, 2000: 97), such as second-hand markets (Clarke, 2000), charity shops (Gregson *et al.*, 2000) and car-boot sales (Gregson and Crewe, 1998), consumption is found to be structured primarily by dominant discourses of thrift and value, or taste and distinction, rather than moral or political purpose (Gregson and Crewe, 2003: 11). Similarly, the consumption of organic foodstuffs, which originally marked the taste and satisfied the environmental sensibilities of yuppies (although it was always based on the exploitation of immigrant labor), has expanded dramatically and led to consolidation through mergers, component contracting, unsustainable monoculture and other characteristics of mass production (Guthman, 2003). We should not be surprised, perhaps, for work in Cultural Studies has long shown that resistance to bourgeois culture does not necessarily entail resistance to capitalist commodification (see Latham, 2002: 34). I am not sure, however, whether playful appropriations of diverse ingredients cutting across supermarket categories of ethnic cuisines really constitutes resistance (Jackson, 2002: 9). Nor can I quite conceive of consumption as itself inherently a form of resistance to capitalism – even the 'negation' of capitalism – as if it is the means by which labor seeks to overcome its alienation, and bring back its products into the creation of humanity (Miller, 2002: 182). As Lodziak (2002: 45) correctly points out, there is a difference between making social meaning through consumption, and politically meaningful action, which Jackson and Miller among others seemed to have confused.

While Sayer (2003: 341–43) has noted 'an extraordinary insensivity' of social theory and the social sciences to the moral dimensions of economic life, even when they are implicit in lay practice, Miller's (2001a) 'poverty of morality' refers to the opposite failing, namely that academics in sociology, cultural studies, economics, and consumer studies – history and anthropology are partially excepted, and geography is not mentioned – are motivated by their own peculiar moral anxiety over consumption. Miller (2001a: 226–27) acknowledges that an antimaterialist moralism 'may span millennia' and that 'the fear of materialism is shared by most people around the world' (2001a: 240), but he is particularly exercised by the hypocritical asceticism of 'fairly well-off academics, mainly in the USA' (2001a: 226) who seem to want to make a virtue of poverty.[3] Thus, apparently, despite the unassailable fact that what 'most of humanity desperately needs is more consumption' (2001a: 227), members of the 'ascetic left' nevertheless 'constantly assume that goods are bad for people' (2001a: 241). He does not name names because he is 'trying not to lose any friends' (2001a: 226), and the critique is certainly severe enough as he avers that 'apparently well-meaning, morally upright papers [on Americanization of consumption] might at another level be largely self-serving, condescending, or even racist forms of academic production that primarily project the interests of middle-class American academics' (2001a: 237). Jackson (2002: 8) is more measured, but he does name two geographers in the USA – David Harvey and Robert Sack – as well as communications scholar Martyn Lee, whose work to expose the 'hidden' geographies of production he contrasts with authors '[who] reject the *simple* repudiation of capitalism for more *complex* forms of engagement' (2002: 14, my emphasis). Among other things, this means participant observation and self-reflexivity, and work in this vein has expanded and deepened our understanding of select consumption practices and contexts, and made it possible for academics to admit the pleasures of one's own consumption (especially in Gregson and Crewe, 2003), which is refreshing. However, when this is itself represented as a form of resistance, and in this case only to 'left Puritanism', it comes dangerously close to paralleling what Naomi Klein (2000: 33) calls 'ironic consumption', in which consumers confidently self-identify as 'hip and daring' upon their own authority, knowingly rejecting old-fashioned notions of authenticity and need as they consume conspicuously.

Since Miller has evoked the specter of Transatlantic comparison, we might further speculate that there is something peculiarly British about the posturing of new consumption studies, even though the market has thoroughly penetrated academia in both national contexts. Studies of consumption in Britain have been particularly influenced by the populist strand of cultural studies, which showed that subcultures creatively appropriate consumer goods in 'rituals of resistance', and by models developed in European social theory of self-reflexive actors constructing social identity in the form of consumer lifestyles (see Gronow and Warde, 2001). Lodziak (2002: 29) in his (overly) sustained attack on the 'culturalist theory of consumption', also lays blame squarely on the Research Assessment Exercise, which, he argues, leads to an 'ethos of self-promotion' and Sayer (2003: 343) similarly worries about the increasing egotism and vanity that are consequent upon the commodification of research that 'is beginning to happen under our noses in universities'. Even Miller, (2002: 183) notes the effects of a pervasive audit culture on education in Britain, which is part of capitalism's mimicry of the political authority of the consumer, so that academic labor turns to legitimation of action rather than action itself.

It is not difficult to see that the promotion of labor-intensive studies, particularly the multidisciplinary, multi-institutional, multimethodological and multisited projects on consumption recently conducted by British geographers in particular (Miller *et al.*, 1998; Jackson *et al.*, 2000a; Gregson and Crewe, 2003; Leyshon *et al.*, 2003), which win large grants from the Economic and Social Research Council and produce quantities of publications, are entirely consistent with the progressive domination of exchange value over the use values of knowledge. It is ironic, but understandable given the psychological structure of fetishism, that, as academia is increasingly subject to the disciplines of the market, the new consumption studies celebrate the relative autonomy of consumption from production. It seems that anxieties about the position of the researcher within the academic mode of production are sublimated onto the figure of the creative consumer. I would thus suggest that Daniel Miller (2001a: 235), for example, heed his own words when he suggests that middle-class American academics 'may misunderstand the implications of their own academic production'.

IV Conclusion

The ambitious multidisciplinary research projects, and the many more modest case studies of particular contexts of consumption that I have documented in this review, have undisputedly advanced academic knowledge of consumer practices and identities, even without the rhetoric of self-promotion, British exceptionalism, and assumption of superior morality. I hope that adding nuance to our understanding does not necessarily entail abandoning the 'ancient suspicion' (Miller, 2001a) of commodity consumption that still resonates so powerfully in popular culture. A 'proper' concern of consumption studies includes not only the detailed study of individual motivations and the choices that consumers make in their everyday practices of ordinary consumption but also the generalized compulsion to consume that I for one feel personally and many people of my acquaintance readily articulate. This compulsion is neither simply the product of the pleas for patriotism by political leaders nor exhortations by the representatives of the consciousness industries, but has its origins in the general alienation of labor and the complex phenomenon of the fetishism of commodities under contemporary capitalism. It seems to me that the new consumption studies risk throwing out the babies with the bathwater: rejecting a caricature of commodity fetishism they lose a concept that provides insight into the relationship between the material and symbolic; and rejecting a caricature of the 'production of consumption' perspective associated with the Frankfurt School they lose an insight into tendencies toward the total organization of everyday life under capitalism (Lodziak, 2002: 91). For example, just about every empirical study of consumption affirms that consumers take pleasure in objects, and are motivated by value and status, but also reveals that choices are increasingly subject to concern over convenience or time (Lockie, 2002: 286). Although they do not cite him, many of the recent studies of both cultural intermediaries and consumers in diverse contexts are revealing of what Adorno (1991: 162–70) called the 'work of consumption', consequent upon the articulation of leisure, nominally its opposite, to the conditions of labor.

The phenomenon of ethical consumption, and the potential of social movements that confront unsustainable consumption of natural resources, is something that I

will consider in a subsequent review (along with gender and the built environment, among others), but it is significant that the most important motivation of 'consumptive resistance' among participants in the simple living movement is found to be, not personal unease with unsustainable lifestyles or status competition, but job dissatisfaction (Maniates, 2002: 212), so affirming the dialectical relationship between production and consumption. I wonder if there is not a clue here, too, as to why the self-promoting British consumption studies, flush with funds at highly ranked research universities, are apparently so much more at ease with consumption than their counterparts in American academia.

Notes

1. Ironically, Miller is listed as third author on the first essay cited here. While I do not wish to speculate on the academic division of labor in the writing of these two articles, loss of consistency is a problem of some recent multi-authored, multidisciplinary collections.
2. Ironically, consumption geographers have embraced ethnography precisely as anthropology as a discipline has acknowledged the 'crisis of representation' and with it the inevitable 'textuality' of ethnographic production, and the unequal powers of access to the means of representation.
3. Ironically, Miller might be argued to do the same when he persistently celebrates the 'heroism' of the 'ordinary' consumer, whose thrifty practices enable consumption, presumably at higher levels than would otherwise be possible, and so sustain familial and social bonds, as they resist capitalist alienation.

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