

THE LIMITS TO RETAIL CAPITAL

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'There is no thinking of limits that does not deploy a certain model of space.' (Wood 1990: xvi)

Introduction

There can be little doubt that the pace of theoretical change within human geography has picked up considerably over the last decade. In some ways that change appears to have followed something like an exponential path. From another vantage point, however, the discipline seems not to be following a linear progression at all; rather, it appears that we are either going round in circles or perhaps bifurcating in radically opposed directions. It is within this context that this essay offers an account of three distinctive approaches to the geography - or more accurately geographies - of retailing. Yet at its base lies a more subversive aim: If the body of the present text begins from the premise that a 'geography of retailing' is a coherent idea, ultimately this idea will have been decentered in a call for a far more expansive geography of the consumer society. The narrative to be presented here will have ended far from its starting point.

If the (as yet still faintly voiced) idea of a 'cultural turn' in economic geography is borne out (Crang 1993), it can be anticipated that the final turn of this essay, from a 'restricted' to a 'general' economy, will be placed under this rubric. To this possibility, however, must be added the caveats that this reading may neither represent authorial intention nor exhaust the meanings of the text. The idea of a cultural turn is, in fact, more generally problematic than many allow. A cultural turn in economic geography is likely to have

been but part of a wider deconstructive turn within human geography - a turn that has as its reality-effect a blurring of boundaries within (and perhaps outwith) the discipline. (This statement signals the view of 'culture' at work in these pages, a view most adequately located under the sign of 'poststructuralism'.)

A debt to poststructuralism infuses this text on an epistemological level. Poststructuralism has introduced to human geography the textuality of the world (Barnes and Duncan 1992). The implications of this revelation have not, though, been readily absorbed. Debate remains fixed in accordance with a simulated polarity of difference-as-opposition (positivist and realist science) and difference-as-contradiction (dialectics). The deconstructive difference-as-difference has to be set into play (Doel 1992). In the (twi)light of this polarised disciplinary context rests an immanent critique of opposing positivist and political-economic retail geographies, the latter a relative newcomer to a geographical field long dominated by neo-classical economic thought.

This critique reveals an unfortunate potential in the 'new (political) economic geography of retailing', to which this volume contributes, in that it may embroil us within a simulated debate and thereby refuel a restricted economism. The development of an acceptable radical critique of orthodox retail geography will have performed the purpose of preserving the orthodoxy. To avoid this we need to raise the stakes and look to an unacceptable critique. This requires an adventurous leap; a leap toward an analysis of the spaces of 'capitalism'

grounded in an acceptance of the ideas of 'general economy' (Bataille 1991; Derrida 1978; Baudrillard 1976a). Can we live up to, or continue to live without, such a vertiginous theoretical task? Just a few decades ago, geography made a similar leap, as it began to embrace dialectics (Harvey 1973, 1982; Olsson 1980). There can be no justification for such moves, just as there can be no criticism. But let me ironically furnish this with the authority of Foucault's (1977: 33) prediction that, at some time in the near future, transgression will 'seem as decisive for our culture, as much a part of its soil, as the experience of contradiction was at an earlier time for dialectical thought.'

Contra Olsson's (1992: 91) suggestion that epistemology 'never left the mirror stage', perhaps we are now finally witnessing an epistemological shift to the upper vector of Lacan's (1977: 315) graphe complet, the vector of the drive. A wayward line of thought provides us with the possibility of realising the character of the final stages of the world (Pefanis 1991). There can, therefore, be no argument for expanding the (delimited) sub-discipline of retail geography. We must instead de-limit geography. Approaching the limit we discover that the most stolid of classical geometries have transmuted themselves into the most hyperreal simulations; and the most revolutionary thoughts remain haunted by a rationalist phantom of production. The option to fiddle and tinker with solid theories and iron laws while the fractal world around implodes is, though, no longer open. The time has come to

transgress, to cross limits. By exploring the neo-classical and the Marxian foundations of opposing retail geographies (in an inevitably caricatured, but nonetheless serious, way) this essay seeks to exaggerate weaknesses in these traditions of thought - to the point where they express a lack that pushes over onto new terrain. In structuring the essay in this way I am pegging my hopes on a 'pataphysical move; seeking an imaginary solution.

On orthodox retail geography

'Systems obsessed with their systemacity are fascinating.'
(Baudrillard 1979: 128)

In applying the term 'orthodox' to a subset of retail geography I would hope to signal the inclusion of the largely empiricist - or, more fairly, empirically-directed - work which describes analytically the changing spatial structure of retailing (examples might include: Davies 1976 1984; Dawson 1980 1983; Dawson and Broadbridge 1988; Guy 1980; Jones and Simmons 1990; Brown, 1987) as well as more mathematical positivist retail models (for example, much of the material collected in Wrigley 1988a). These two strands of work find a common ancestry in the spatial science of the 1960s but have subsequently stressed the empirical and theoretical components of this framework differentially. Given that it is the latter strand of work which most strictly adheres to its underlying assumptions, much of this section will lay its focus there. The obvious critique positivist retail geography properly belongs to an earlier period of human geography (cf Gregory 1978). I forewarn the reader of this much, and to a certain extent circumvent any such detailed critique. It is not, though, easy to escape the fact

that such geographies continue to exert an immense fascination.

I take it that, in principle, it would not be especially difficult to formulate three related areas of critique with respect to this kind of work: first, much orthodox retail geography is founded on a predictive and instrumentalist epistemology; second, most of its ontological presumptions are linked to the neo-classical economic view of the world (and thereby rest on an impoverished conception of space); and third, its capacity to elucidate other social structures is (therefore) undermined. Note that none of these criticisms are necessarily particularly damning according to orthodox retail geography's own internal criteria. The various components of orthodox retail geography, in some people's hands, can and do work fairly well. But arguments can certainly be made that invite an examination of the 'ideological' character of this work. I will briefly tackle these here but it must again be stressed that I am deliberately shying away from any precise or definitive account.

The first area of critique suggests that orthodox retail geography produces knowledge that is unequally powerful with respect to existing divisions in society. The methodologies of everything from spatial interaction modelling to questionnaire surveys of consumers' or shop workers' attitudes aim but to verify a certain instrumental view of the world and to generate knowledge on the basis of that view. Such knowledge generally proves most useful to those already powerful groups in society. Much predictive work is produced precisely for the direct benefit

of retailers (an example is provided by Geographical Modelling and Planning [GMAP], a commercial consultancy company based at the University of Leeds) or to inform the policy and planning decisions of the state. In principle, such methodologies could be used to benefit consumers or workers rather than retailers and the state. Some may argue that certain of these benefits are harmonious. But it is not beyond the imagination that the interests of these different groups diverge and one suspects that those already endowed with power gain most from such knowledge. This is to present a rather functionalist caricature of the production of knowledge but it would not prove to difficult to develop a more convincing account that reached the same conclusion.

A second mechanism by which power has become increasingly concentrated within particular components of the retail system is a more concrete one. It concerns changes in retail planning as recently experienced in the British case (Davies 1986). The shift from 1979 onwards toward less 'restrictive' retail planning effectively meant that the central state withdrew from urban planners the right to regard their paternalistic judgments of equitable retail provision as superior to the outcome of the market. This change has certainly not stemmed the battles between the retailers, planners, residential and other interest groups but there can be little doubt that retail planners today have the merest vestiges of their former powers (or, indeed, their ideals). The expertise retailers bring into play over planning applications, in the form of well rehearsed strategies (Shaw 1987), dubious impact predictions (Whystall 1981) and

allegedly shady deals, make it impossible to view the knowledge capable of being generated from a positivist retail geography as neutral and objective (though see Norris (1990) for a more sober judgment of impact assessment). Retailers have long since learned to play the system - and planners, often of local economic necessity, have for quite a while now given way to job-creating or infrastructure-improving retail developments (Davies and Howard 1988). Positivism, with its imperative to record how things are rather than how things should be, seems at worst supportive of, and at best a weak tool to counter, the existing imbalance of power/knowledge.

To move to my second area of critique, it is evident that the account of retailing presented in those positivist geographies generating such knowledge is underpinned by a staunchly neo-classical economic framework. This is never far from the surface. For example, much retail geography still adheres, to a greater or lesser extent, to central place theory (Thorpe 1991). As 'the most elegant approach developed to explain the relationship between the economy and the urban form' (Urry 1985: 34), the $k=3$ or 'marketing' hierarchy has exercised considerable sway on the imagination of retail geographers. That central place theory owes much to neo-classical economic theory is uncontroversial (cf Berry 1967; Berry and Parr 1988). A point that is less well taken, though, is that despite major changes in the urban retailing system (Wilson and Oulton 1983), firm theoretical sense can still be made of the world by recourse to geographical theory based on neo-classical economics. This is

important in the light of hopeful statements that the neo-classical economic framework has simply become outmoded by 'real-world' change. Neil Smith, for example, has suggested such a 'moving on', noting that 'instead of trying to identify the optimum site for a new supermarket, many geographers turned to identify the broader processes in which whole landscapes were made and remade' (Smith 1989: 142).

This 'real world' change does not necessarily imply the methodological sea change Smith supposes. Structural change in the urban retailing system is demonstrably compatible with geographical theory based on neo-classical economics. This compatibility concerns the (not unproblematic) relations between central place theory and the shopping model (cf Wilson 1978). Although these models may be mathematically incompatible (Wilson 1991), the $k=3$ central place hierarchy can be thought of as a limiting case of the production-constrained spatial interaction model. There is no need to conceive of the market areas of shopping centres as constituting rigid, discrete, contiguous zones. Consumers favour near rather than distant shopping centres but the propensity of visiting the nearest centre is probabilistic not deterministic. Market areas, consequently, have fuzzy boundaries - a situation characteristically represented in the shopping model. The validity of this conception renders the switch Smith (1989) implies essentially superficial in methodological terms.

This is in evidence in the dynamic modelling of changes in the retail landscape (Wilson and Clarke 1979; Clarke and Wilson 1985). Catastrophic change in the urban retail system,

emanating from: the supply side of the retail system (primarily the influence of growing economies of scale - a 'retail revolution' initiating scale and operational changes akin to the production changes initiated by the industrial revolution); the reduction of the friction of distance over time (Poston and Wilson 1977); and quantitative and qualitative changes in demand (largely in middle class consumer behaviour pertaining to car and home-freezer ownership) have altered the structure of the urban retail system beyond belief. But these changes have not altered the ability of models based on neo-classical economic foundations to describe and predict that system. The successful dynamic modelling of structural changes in the retail system suggest that the neo-classical approach is alive and well (Wilson 1988: 174-7).

The politics of the positivist neo-classical framework is, however, an interesting one. The faith placed on modelling the market processes involved in retailing tends formally to marginalise questions which involve (political) judgments. It is simply taken as given that the modelling of retail structure and its spatial dynamics as a market process is unproblematic. And it is true that such an approach has seen significant technical and instrumental progress. Whether the supply-side is conceived of as bearing the traits of perfect or imperfect competition (Wilson 1985), neo-classical economic assumptions about the nature of the firm are reproduced. Whether the demand-side of the system is conceived of as being characterised by optimisation or sub-optimisation, consumers are theorised in atomistic

behavioural terms. (Alternative consumer behaviour modelling techniques, such as those drawing on random utility theory, are compatible with the meso-scale formulations of consumer behaviour in spatial interaction models (Wilson 1981) - though the entropy functions of the latter are not to be confused or conflated (Wilson 1991)). These modifications all aim at predictive or instrumental power. Where they suggest public sector planning solutions, they provide expertise to confirm the paternalistic control of the planner as social engineer. Alternatively they aid directly in private sector planning, with respect to retailers' commercial decisions (Penny and Broom 1988; Birkin and Foulger 1992).

It is possible to make one limited form of value judgment with respect to different states of such a market system; viz in assessing formally the welfare implications of different stable equilibria of the retail system. This theoretical possibility is, though, a political chimera. Although there are explicit formulations of consumer surplus in shopping models (Coelho and Wilson 1976; Coelho et al 1978) and although a retailers' producer (sic.) surplus can be derived (cf Wilson 1976) to evaluate the aggregate desirabilities of different urban retail structures (Williams et al 1990) this kind of exercise has a forced political status. To begin with, conceptual problems are still in evidence - such as the ambiguous conception of consumer surplus in the literature (resulting from a failure to distinguish between the Marshallian and compensated demand curve). Although this kind of problem is solvable, it is ultimately impossible to make valid judgments on the basis of

the most refined of concepts. As Little (1950) long ago showed, formal tests on the Pareto or potential Pareto efficiency of different system-states never does remove the necessity of baldly political decisions of equity. Such an exercise is irredeemably condemned to be a purely technical nicety.

The liberal-utilitarian political philosophy behind such a theoretical chimera, however, does serve to debar certain political questions from the agenda. One can note here, for example, the failure of orthodox retail geography to acknowledge the historical specificity of consumer sovereignty (Mohun 1977) and the sexism of economic man (Barnes 1988: Linda McDowell (1989), in her overview of feminist developments in geography, offers some further comments on women and shopping models in her tellingly entitled sub-section 'Add Women and Stir'). As Barnes (1988) has indicated, these problems are not unrelated and centre around a particular notion of rationality in economic geography (see also Barnes 1989, 1992a, 1992b). This is something of a crucial issue in that it signals the cultural specificity of notions of 'rationality', a point necessarily incorporating the gendered nature of rationality. The underlying epistemology of neo-classical economic theory is in clear debt to Cartesian rational ideals. 'Economic man' represents a particular incarnation of the Cartesian knowing subject. The critique of this mode of rationality has been most potently formulated from within the discourses of psychoanalysis and of feminism (see Williams 1993 for an analysis of the subject from the conjunction of these two

discourses).

Rather than continue along these lines of critique, however, I would like to make one or two comments on more recent developments in the nature positivist retail geography. The 'GIS (Geographical Information System) revolution' has at last enabled spatial interaction models to sit on the desks of retail managers in suitably 'user-friendly' forms. When the mathematical explanation offered by shopping models is safely shielded behind maps of easily-interpretable performance indicators (see Clarke and Wilson 1986) the need for explanation is finally overtaken by the consideration of the accuracy of prediction (though this is presently limited by computer power). The demonstrated existence of weird-looking but predictively superior spatial interaction models (Openshaw 1988), which can be generated computationally, takes the former need for explanation to its logical vanishing point. As Baudrillard (1983b) has suggested, the tendency toward simulation has re-ordered reality into hyperreality, causality is replaced by genetic code and the requirement for meaning is simultaneously eroded. As data are mercantalized (Lyotard 1984) spatial science enters a postmodern condition.

On retail capital

'To understand capitalism, we maintain, we need to theorize retailing.' (Ducatel and Blomley 1990: 207)

Smith's (1989: 142) remark about 'real world' retail change and academic trends has already been read as too easily implying a necessary relation between the two. On another reading, however,

it proves to be entirely accurate. The growing concentration of capital in the retail sector (Wrigley 1987) has begun to reveal the fundamental inadequacy of much existing geographical work, whether empirically descriptive or mathematically formulated. Orthodox retail geography has maintained its hegemony within the subdiscipline most clearly in its understanding of retail location. Retailers face intense locational pressures and, as argued above, the knowledge orthodox that retail geography generates is practically useful. Where this work is at its most stultifying, though, is in its inability to link this locational imperative to the underlying capitalist dynamic which acts as its driving force. There is a clear possibility of rewriting the historical geography of retailing in terms informed by such a broader framework.

The political economic retheorisation of retail geography that is now underway implies a shift within both retail geography and political economic geography (Ducatel and Blomley 1990: 207). Attempts to elucidate the geographical implications of the changed 'real world' situation have begun to generate work that takes on an entirely different flavour to the retail geography considered thus far. Moreover, the kinds of circumstance outlined in this literature precisely explain the conditions for the increasingly widespread uptake of locational modelling techniques and GIS in retailing. Much of this work has been couched in terms of 'retail restructuring' (Wrigley 1988b; see more generally Lovering 1989).

Ideas of retail restructuring and the concentration of capital in the retail sector have effectively appealed to the twin

empirical observations that the size of units of capital involved in retailing has increased, together with their market shares - expressed, for example, in the oligopolistic market structure of British grocery retailing (Wrigley 1987; Hallsworth 1990; Davies et al 1985). The consequences stemming from this changed situation have been characterised in terms of an entirely different competitive situation than that conventionally understood in the retail geographical literature; Wrigley (1991: 1540) likens this new situation to a 'predatory game' (interestingly, this analogy is also made by Wilson (1981: 150) with reference to the Lotka-Volterra equations).

This new understanding has much to say about space but affords attention not to direct influences on store location but to influences on the strategic behaviour of large retail companies and the spatial consequences of this behaviour. The most important emphasis is that large corporate retailers are increasingly driven by a capital logic. Thus, retailers have been increasingly concerned to deploy capital more efficiently (e.g. in terms of return on capital employed). This has meant a more intense use of capital in relation to labour, with increases in labour productivity largely attained by the implementation of information technology throughout the distribution channel (Guy 1988). Retailing practices are also increasingly tied into the financial capital markets (and, to a lesser extent, speculative property markets). As a result of these factors, the geographical manner in which retailers operate has increased in complexity.

An important dimension of this work is to be found in its ability to relate a number of empirical trends to the heightened capital imperative facing corporate retailers. Certain points raised by the 'new' literature undoubtedly have their antecedents in orthodox work, such as the issue of the retail power in the marketing channel (Dawson 1979; see, more recently, Dawson and Shaw 1990). In the new literature this has been related to an increasingly efficient use of capital by retailers who, as monopsonistic buyers, are able to attain net positive cash flows (Wrigley 1987). This situation has implications in terms of the consumer; for example, Wrigley (1991), developing an idea in Moir (1990), provides prima facie evidence of the existence of monopoly profits in British grocery retailing. Despite such insights, however, there is a potential danger here in maintaining a focus primarily on the retailer rather than on the commodity channel as a whole. This may continue to provide a restricted view, concentrating on the geography of stores and neglecting the geography of such important trends as the centralisation of retail distribution operations (MacKinnon 1985; Sparks 1986), the development of the contract market in physical distribution (Ferne 1989) and increasing levels of trade marketing by manufacturers to retailers (Davies 1990).

The most important element of this new work, however, lies in its more adequate understanding of space as a product of social activity rather than merely a given context. It is only silhouetted against this literature that the impoverished view of space in orthodox retail geography becomes fully apparent. Geographical work deriving from neo-classical economics conceives

of space as a neutral container, at most effecting transportation costs that influence the equilibrium state(s) of the retail system. Political economic work, by contrast, has a more sophisticated understanding of the reciprocal nature of the relations between space and corporate retail activity. Wrigley (1989: 288), for example, has characterised retail change over space in terms of a number of phases of 'capital switching' operating at, and thereby helping to define, different spatial scales. The term 'capital switching' has an ambiguous status here; it is not, I think, intended to be read as synonymous with the use of the term in the Cambridge capital controversies (see Harcourt 1972), though this reading may have some mileage. Rather it refers more readily to an identifiable series of intrinsically geographical changes in the operation of retailing activities, occurring at particular spatial scales.

Post-war out-of-town retail movements, for instance, have been characterised as a first phase of capital switching, effectively operative at the urban scale. Hallsworth (1991) has suggested that the dynamics of retailing's built environment may be linked to changes in the wider condition of the capitalist economy (cf Harvey, 1978). The idea of three post-war 'waves' of retail locational decentralisation (Schiller 1986) and recent inner city revitalisation carries clear resonances with Harvey's (1989a) idea of the landscape of capitalism being formed in capitalism's own image, with bouts of 'creative destruction' forming a necessary part of that mode of production. Beyond the observation that capital may be 'grounded' in retail property

assets, however, this notion has remained underdeveloped.

A second phase of 'capital switching' has, according to Wrigley (1989), occurred within the regional arena, as corporate retailers have expanded geographically in order to meet increasingly unrealistic stock market expectations. In the British case, the overriding necessity of new store openings has resulted in the largest British retailers continuing to raise financial capital during the current recession (Wrigley 1991). A third phase of 'capital switching' is also held to be in evidence, at the international scale (cf Treadgold and Davies 1988). This is most notable in terms of transatlantic flows of capital towards the USA (Wrigley 1989; Hallsworth 1990) but pan-European retailing represents a further aspect to this scale of activity, following a capital logic similar to that explaining regional expansion.

Despite this understanding of the relations between space and retailing, it may be argued that this work represents 'medium level' theory, lacking an adequate abstract understanding of these relations. In an important paper, Ducatel and Blomley (1990) have attempted, from an orthodox Marxist perspective, to redefine the tenets in accordance with which the whole substantive topic of retail geography is to be understood. Their intervention is explicitly presented as a 'first attempt', deliberately side-stepping any real consideration of space (Ducatel and Blomley 1990: 207). (Their paper does, though, range from international comparisons to the microgeographical scale of store design (Ducatel and Blomley 1990: 223-4).) Rejecting out of hand the whole tradition of orthodox retail geography,

Ducatel and Blomley (1990) provide an axiomatic formulation of 'retail capital' as the foundation for a new orthodox Marxist retail geography. Unfortunately, this theoretical strategy ultimately fails to deliver. As Fine (1991) has concluded, many of Ducatel and Blomley's empirical observations are not reliant on the category 'retail capital' and the theorisation of the category itself seems to raise more problems than it solves: 'retail capital is not an appropriate abstract category to develop within Marxist theory' (Fine 1991: 1).

This argument is significant because, as Fine readily admits, it does not deny the importance of retailing (no more than the lack of an abstract category of 'steelmaking capital' denies the importance of steelmaking). Rather, it questions the level of abstraction upon which Ducatel and Blomley (1990) pin their hopes and thereby partially supports the kind of theoretically informed empirical work characterising much of the new retail geography discussed above. More importantly, however, Fine provides a clarification of Ducatel and Blomley's analysis, raising a number of important theoretical points.

As Fine (1991: 19-20) notes, Ducatel and Blomley (1990) jump between two equally inadequate definitions of retail capital as an abstract category: the first is based upon sale for final consumption; the second on sale for final consumption to workers. The former is problematic because the relevant abstract division is between commodities being sold as constant capital on the one hand, and as wage goods on the other - a division which is not empirically evident in retailing. (Both builders and

DIY-enthusiasts shop at DIY superstores, for example.) The second definition is equally a contingent matter. The distinction between what workers and capitalists purchase and how they make those purchases cannot be seen to define an abstract category. Capitalists' 'luxury' consumption (out of surplus value) may take on particular qualities but this does not define an abstract category, logically excluding wages being used for such purchases. The overlaps between such categories of consumption are, therefore, potentially manifold. Thus, '[t]he boundaries of retail capital are not determined by the circulation of capital but by the circulation of revenue which... is at a lower level of abstraction since it depends upon distributional struggle (and the potential divergence of the value of wages from the value of labour power, etc.)' (Fine 1991: 26-7).

As the positive aspect of his critique, Fine (1991) ventures the view that Marx provided a comprehensive theory of capital in exchange which, unlike 'retail capital', can be justified analytically with reference to the circulation of capital (Fine 1991: 16). To detail Fine's classification of capital in exchange: merchant capital represents a specialised subset of capital involved in the circulation of commodities; interest bearing capital is also involved in the circulation of commodities, referring to that money capital lent to merchant capital where it is used to appropriate a portion of surplus value. These categories provide a hermetically sealed account of that portion of capital involved in exchange. Whilst the detail of this more adequately defined Marxian model need not

detain us here, its importance extends beyond the point that it has no room for 'retail capital'. As Fine (1991: 17) demonstrates, it also provides an important theorem suggesting a tendency toward the equalisation of the rate of profit of merchant capital in relation to productive capital. Whilst space limits a consideration of the full implications of this point, it may be noted that this not only creates difficulties for neo-Ricardian political economists dedicated 'to treating [commerce] as equivalent to productive activity' but also present problems for those wishing to argue that retail power emanating from capital concentration in the retail sector permits a greater appropriation of surplus value by retailers.

The debate between Ducatel and Blomley (1990) and Fine (1991) forms part of a wider disagreement between Marxists concerning the 'fractionation' of capital (see Jessop 1982) and the degree to which 'it is possible to equate the expressions of the forms which social capital takes (i.e. its functional forms) with the concrete nature of capitalist institutions at a lower level of abstraction' (Tickell 1992: 111). This debate can be read as outlining a need for a more rigorous political economic geography of commerce. My intention here, however, is to read this debate against the grain - and hence to break out of a set of arguments that could clearly found a new political economic geography of retailing to oppose the existing orthodoxy, in a polarised but glacial manner. The move I am making here is intended to take us out of this orbit and off on an entirely different tangent. It is not, however, a random move; it picks up on a particular

aporia in Ducatel and Blomley's (1990) text. The most telling mark of this possibility is the problematic status of consumption which repeatedly makes itself felt. I am not alone in this reading. Although Fine (1991: 27) makes relatively little of the point, he does suggest that Ducatel and Blomley (1990) have 'structured the role of demand' to support their conceptualisation of retail capital. Ducatel and Blomley allegedly characterise demand 'as something lying outside and confronting (retail) capital' (contra Marx's (1973) characterisation of consumption in the Grundrisse as one of a number of 'distinctions within a unity' that equates to the circulation of capital). This, it is suggested, is evident in Ducatel and Blomley's (1990: 216) 'reference to the struggle of consumers to impose their use value logic as opposed to an exchange value logic' (Fine 1991: 27), where use values are 'culturally constructed... signifying class status for Bourdieu [1984]' (Fine 1991: 28) and hence extrinsic to the economy.

What is revealed in Ducatel and Blomley's (1990) text, therefore, is an undercurrent that unwittingly escapes the capital-logic totality. It is perhaps no accident that the problematic character of the demands of final consumers begins to suggest an approach that parts company with the orthodox Marxian view at the very time when retailing itself is being to be transformed - at the point where it finds itself embracing a competitively driven need to become increasingly 'attentive' to consumers. The growth in retail marketing (treating the retailer itself as a brand rather than merely a stockist of manufacturer's branded goods) and in retail marketing management

(Walters and White 1987; McGoldrick 1990), in retail positioning (Davies and Brooks 1989) and in expenditure on store design, retail advertising and retail 'image' generally, signals a shift into a world of 'retail culture'. In some ways there is nothing new in this (Bird and Witherwick (1986) provide an interesting case study). In other ways, though, there is something of a marked sea change in its importance. Again, a postmodern shift that has more than a little to do with capitalism but suggests a certain level of stress in that structure.

Whether these changes necessarily have anything to do with 'flexibility' (Harvey 1989b; Gibbs 1992) is a contentious point. It has been suggested, for instance, that the retail sector is at the leading edge in such logistical innovations as just-in-time systems, the implementation of information technologies and so on (Murray 1988). The retail sector also provides clear examples of segmented labour markets with entry characteristics inviting a highly 'flexible', gender-specific secondary labour force. These points are of considerable empirical importance but this should not be taken too readily as implying a shift in the economic dynamic of capitalism toward the retail sector. Theoretical regard should be paid to the idea that 'far from retailers dominating productive capital, they are incorporating it in all but formal ownership' (Fine 1991: 24).

One concern about the new economic geography of retailing, therefore, must be that it may inherit from orthodox retail geography a continued emphasis on retailers and their store location activities - albeit in a manner far more appreciative of

the economic context of the corporate retailer. This focus may misrepresent both the wider structure of the commodity channel and the status of consumption in shaping retail change. In fact these two aspects are increasingly related - for example, physical distribution management is linked to store layout and design via such techniques as direct product profitability (McKinnon 1989). The problematic status of the consumption-retail nexus in particular, however, has increasingly provided a cultural dynamic to retail activity - though this is fuelled by, not separate from, the oligopolistic market structure of retailing.

One of the most important aspects of retailing relates to the fact that it creates a space where everyday life meets the machinations of capitalism. Such a conception begins to reveal something about consumption in relation to capitalism, whilst at the same time demonstrating the dependency of retailing and other forms of capital on a forceful and energised cultural logic.

From Retail Capital to General Economy: A Geography of Exchange Without Reserve

'Baudrillardian's never make it past the shopping mall.' (Masumi 1992: 179)

In the previous section, some suggestion has been made as to the limits to 'retail capital' in relation to the growth of 'retail culture'. A parallel critique might have reversed this emphasis, placing the stress on the limits to retail capital. In other words, to understand the current historical geography of capitalism we may need not 'to theorize retailing', as Ducatel

and Blomley (1990: 207) assert, but to theorise those aspects of capitalism which most directly attach to culture. The most obvious contender for such a critique would be advertising (though advertising is but the most high profile of a vast bank of marketing practices, and sometimes too easily becomes a scapegoat for more fundamental aspects of capitalism). Activities such as advertising have increased in importance, in part as a consequence of changes in the form taken by retailing. In the move from counter-service to self-service shopping, for instance, the 'sales push' of the shop assistant has largely given way to a 'sales pull', exemplified most clearly by the 'information' supplied to consumers by advertising (Porter, 1976). It would not prove too difficult to argue, without denying the increased importance of retailing, that forms of marketing such as advertising are also of a heightened importance.

The most significant feature of advertising - though many theorisations commit the violence of abstracting from this - is its peculiar cultural nature. 'If we stripped modern advertising of direct reference to the three themes of money, sex and power there would be very little left' writes Harvey (1989b: 287). And indeed many commentators have suggested that a key characteristic of consumer capitalism is its unprecedented reliance on an undercurrent of sex. Whilst not wishing to imply that everything may thus be reduced to sex, this is a telling example. Although geography, like economics, has always eschewed the psychoanalytic notion of the unconscious, there can

be little doubt that unconscious drives are at work in defining the contours of the economy. Thus, however much economists might theorise the fundamental rationality of the economy, 'something else' always seems to remain at work, beyond the sphere of rationality. This 'something', always to be explained away as a different category of concern, invariably falls under the sign of 'culture'. The idea that capitalism, in its present 'consumerist' guise, is driven by some manner of cultural logic is, therefore, of fundamental importance. An adequate account of this phase of capitalism would refuse those formulations which operate a restricted economy, which hold the suspended category 'culture' in reserve.

The most important line of argument to be taken up from cultural theory within geography concerns the constitution of the human subject. Work on the constitution of the consuming subject and the role of retail spaces in defining, as well as being defined by, the subject of consumption is certainly of relatively recent vintage as far as geography is concerned (Shields 1992). It should be acknowledged, though, that cultural studies has afforded attention to shopping in this manner for a far longer period of time (Morris 1988). This work provides an explicit recognition of the implication of the subject in spaces designed to valorize capital. Whilst this work has, perhaps, concentrated unduly on large shopping malls, it nevertheless indicates some important directions for geographical research - notably in recognising (explicitly or implicitly) that the spaces produced by consumer capitalism represent hyperspaces for the subject (Shields 1989; Featherstone

1991). This argument is, as yet, not well developed - or at least not well understood. It is not an easy argument. In my view it can best be conceived in terms which recognise three putative historical changes in the dialectical constitution of space and subjectivity. The space defined in Renaissance linear perspective constituted the subject at an externally positioned, all seeing point of visual mastery (Cosgrove 1985). However, tendencies evident in Modernist art (Lefebvre 1991), the 'narrative space' of the cinema (Heath 1981) and so on, modulated this subjectivity to a point where multiple vanishing points ultimately undermined the very notion of the vanishing point, thus paving the way for a postmodern 'hyperspace' (a new, virtual space) and new forms of subjectivity (Clarke forthcoming).

Despite this highly important recognition of a fundamental change in space, however, there are some significant problems with existing cultural geographical work on consumption. In providing something like the antithesis to the kind of work discussed in the previous section - work which still owes a significant debt to structuralist Marxism, and therefore still insists on economic determination in the last instance - a focus on the subject of consumption will almost inevitably face the danger of being read as the other side of a structure-agency dualism. Although such a reading is fundamentally at odds with the tenor of the poststructuralism that influences much of this work, one cannot help but imagine that such a misrepresentation is actively at work in some such writing. (Evident, for

example, in work which presents culture as an economy (of meaning) which operates simply in parallel to the 'material' economy (cf Fiske 1989).) The solution to this problem is dependent as much upon a dismantling of the economistic view of structure as the agency-laden view of subjectivity. It is my contention here that this solution requires a deconstruction of the meaning of 'economic'. Such a task carries with it, however, profound implications for our understanding of capitalism. It cannot, therefore, avoid an engagement with Marxism.

A theoretical crisis has been facing Marxism for a long time now. Witness the optimistic conceptualisation, a few decades ago, which labelled our era 'late capitalism' (Mandel 1978). The term's dual implication of the 'last stages of' and the 'already dead' is now steeped in irony. This has seen a dramatic and parodic reversal. Newer theorisations of 'early' or 'infantile' capitalism (Frisby 1985; Jameson 1984 respectively) - of a polymorphous perverse capitalism - cast a strange light over the traditions that constitute the theoretical edifice of late Marxism. Despite belated attempts to imbue untinged areas of geography - such as retail geography - with a dose of political economy, it is evident that this crisis has been working its way through geography. Harvey's (1989) attempt to domesticate the flux and specificity of cultural change within the safety of an inadequate base-superstructure model is symptomatic of the threat culture is perceived to bear. It is precisely this point that makes the retheorisation of retail geography - an insignificant enough sounding task to most outside

the subdiscipline - an especially important one. For, as demonstrated above, it is in such areas that the cultural dynamic of contemporary capitalism can best be located.

The issues raised so far - especially the problems expressed in the (related) binary oppositions economic/cultural and structure/agency - finally point to the possibility of the economy manifesting not an unbounded (or even a bounded) rationality (as in mainstream economics and political economy) but an unbounded irrationality. (Here irrationality must be conceived of as eccentric to, not the binary opposite of, rationality.) This type of notion is most developed in Bataille's (1991) 'general economy'. The remainder of this section provides an explication of this line of thought, in a final move away from existing retail geographies and towards a far more expansive and potentially incisive geography of the consumer society.

The discussion of Bataille leads into an account of Baudrillard's conception of the consumer culture of the West. This, it is argued, offers a more politically charged indication of the theoretical strategies facing those with an interest in activities such as retailing and, of course, the spaces these activities define. Whilst space limits any detailed explication of these ideas, a brief exposition of Baudrillard's position is provided together with a cursory critique in a brief commentary on the potential value of other approaches, including the works of Deleuze and Guattari and of Walter Benjamin. The general intention, though, is to now look forward to a new geography

that no longer operates according to a restricted economy. This carries with it a political project that may be termed postmodern; it is, inevitably, incredulous towards metanarratives and looks to analyse the cultural condition of the West without a renewed vision of progress. What will finally have proved important here is a new formulation of the 'economic' that recognises the Hegelian essence of virtually all existing political-economy (Clarke and Purvis forthcoming). Our future view of 'economy' will have been found to have required a deconstructive move.

Bataille's (1991) notion of 'general economy' rests on a reading of Mauss' (1966) Gift as an anti-economic principle - a reading diametrically opposed to Levi-Strauss' development of the concept (Pefanis 1991). Bataille sought to bring to prominence the irrationalist notion of the parte maudite, the 'accursed share'. The concept refers to a surplus, an excess - a radical expenditure that Western culture has carefully repressed in order to preserve the myth of reason as the essence of (economic) progress. The concept carries with it a nihilistic danger, perhaps a nihilistic telos. It is a virulent destructive energy linked to all situations characterised by pure expenditure, loss or wastage: sacrifice, death, the loss the self in the extremes of sexual ecstasy, all manner of discharges.

Derrida (1978) has spelled out the difference between the Hegelian 'restricted economy' and the 'general economy' of Bataille. Whilst removing some of the surrealistic threat from Bataille's concept he does push the concept to its logical conclusion - literally, in relation to reason. The Hegelian

dialectic took resort in an accumulation: Hegel went beyond the metaphysical binary opposition of identity/exclusion. But he reserved within the dialectic a progression - the third synthetic term accumulating a final greater value than that of the original thesis and antithesis. The general economy, by contrast, is without reserve. There is no third term gathering up the investment of the other two: there is only a spillage; a flooding caused by the breaching of binary oppositions; a sacrifice of two clear rational terms for a loss that is neither a total absence nor a renewed presence; a transgression of two binding limits.

Bataille's (1991) use of 'general economy' took on a concrete appearance. Whole societies could be analysed from afar by mobilising this concept, by tracking the surpluses of energy that inform a new kind of political economy. Bataille's direct task Baudrillard (1976a) inherited in Symbolic Exchange and Death. Contrasting the multiciplous primitive 'symbol' (the life-giving and life-destroying Aztec sun) with the simplistic univalent Western 'sign' (the tourist sun of the Modern sun-worshipper), the foreboding richness of the primitive with the facile clarity of Western communication, Baudrillard seeks to analyse symbolic exchange: exchange that breaks the rules of equivalence; that accepts the anti-economic principle of Mauss' Gift; that mobilises the parte maudite. The symbolic value of the Gift presents within itself the possible murder of the rationalist values of capitalist exchange. (Whilst Baudrillard's primitivism may seem nostalgic, it is not a naive appeal to

Nature. The symbolic is a different, not a prior order of signification.) This principle informs Baudrillard's perspective on consumer capitalism.

Baudrillard (1983b) has linked to this perspective an analysis of the dominance of the electronic mass media in Western culture. His line, akin to McLuhan's, is that the media do anything but mediate: they block all response. (Again the suggestion is that the contemporary West holds superficiality in place of profundity.) The 'masses', the 'silent majority' - Baudrillard (1983a) parodies the utopianism of Marxism - reveal a transpolitical strategy in the face of such a situation. A society composed of empty signs is countered by the masses, who adopt the strategy of a black hole, manifesting a strength of inertia that absorbs everything and radiates back nothing. The strategy Baudrillard (1990) observes and exposes is the acceleration of this extreme passivity, especially in relation to consumption:

'a system is abolished only by pushing it into hyperlogic, by forcing it into an excessive practice which is equivalent to a brutal amortization. 'You want us to consume - O.K., let's consume always more, and anything whatsoever; for any useless and absurd purpose.'

Consumer capitalism thrives on signs functioning as the alibis for use-values. Baudrillard suggests a mode of cultural analysis capable of pushing this system beyond its limits. It is a nihilism, a death drive. It is a thankful way to the abyss, to the end of consumption. Baudrillard's (1988) America provides one possible model geography of the consumer society (see Clarke and Doel 1992): revel in hyperspace and embrace the

end of the world. Baudrillard's (1990) most recent fatal theory of the consumer society suggests the impossibility of anything other than joining the logic of the object.

This is not, of course, the only course. For Massumi (1992: 179) Baudrillard's strategy is simply inadequate. One of Massumi's points seems to refer to the Lyotardian mercantalization of data: 'in an 'information economy' signs cost money' asserts Massumi (1992: 178). Thus Massumi interprets the Baudrillardian surrender to the seduction of signs as a form of sophisticated cynicism - mobilised along class lines. This does not accurately attack the fundamentals of Baudrillard's position. It does, though, suggest one of several undeveloped areas of Baudrillard's theory of consumerism.

A more important point Massumi (1992: 179) raises is that 'Baudrillard's 'hyperspace' is eccentric but not exorbital. He fails to go off on a tangent.' 'Stealing away from the shopping mall on an exorbital path tangent to identity and undifferentiation is called schizophrenia... a breakaway into the unstable equilibrium of continuing self-invention'. Massumi thus suggests the importance Deleuze and Guattari (1983, 1988) might hold for understanding the identifications associated with consumerism (see also Lieberman forthcoming.)

From a quite different tradition, the work of Walter Benjamin might offer a further alternative. Benjamin's 'Arcades project' presents a geography of consumer capitalism (see Buck-Morss 1989). I do not feel competent to comment on this but Benjamin is certainly deserving of attention from geographers interested

in conceiving of the spaces defined by the culture of consumer capitalism.

There is, therefore, no existing adequate exploration of the (postmodern) geography of hyperspace. In my view, this is the key theoretical task towards which we should move. The lack of recognition of the overthrow of perspectival space - a failure to recognise that hyperreality functions according to a video phase (Baudrillard 1976b) - ironically gives rise to a string of pointless concepts. Philosophers are now according an importance to the spaces of postmodernity. Geographers must recognise that this is also their fortune.

These words have given a flavour of what lies ahead - a vertiginous task, to be sure: its epistemology has left the mirror stage; its ontology embraces irrationality; its poetics instil a sense of the textuality of the world. As consumer research itself begins to view consumption as text (Hirschman and Holbrook 1992), as the application of neurocomputing in market research begins to generate new consumption classes and, indeed, create virtual consumers (Horizon 1993), there can be little doubt that the exploration of hyperspace is in imminent need of a new improved brand of geographical imagination.

Conclusion

As a theoretical intervention, this essay has assumed the importance of a diversion of our concerns. Jackson (1991: 194) warns of the danger in the 'common reduction of consumption to advertising and retailing' in geography. Geography has,

until quite recently, had little to say about advertising, much about retailing. It is certainly true that, in the case of retailing, consumption has received a grossly reductionist treatment.

There is an inherent problem, though, in identifying consumption either culturally or economically. This is especially true when this takes the (Hegelian) form of assuming an economy of meaning - a 'circuit of culture' - operating in parallel to the capitalist economy. It is vital that we look beyond any such restricted economies that assume an easy latch on the world.

If we are prepared to accept the Baudrillardian view of Western culture as a loss of the symbolic, we face a daunting task. Maybe it is a task of theoretical terrorism; we ought to create a fatal theory capable of accelerating consumer culture to the abyss - the ironic ring of the 'NEW ECONOMIC GEOGRAPHY OF RETAILING', as it takes on the air of an advertising slogan, forms part of a fragmenting fin-de-millennium human geography.

If we reject Baudrillard's nihilism, we should certainly not neglect the examination of the consumerism of everyday life. We need to be capable of saying something of the hyperspaces of the consumer society that takes us a long way from any actually existing 'retail geography'.

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