

*The Progress in Human Geography lecture*

# Commercial cultures: transcending the cultural and the economic<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** In recent years there have been repeated calls for a convergence between ‘the cultural’ and ‘the economic’. This paper provides a specific take on these issues through an exploration of the contested geographies of contemporary commercial culture. Traditionally, ‘culture’ has been associated with meaning and creativity, with works of the imagination and aesthetic practices that are far removed from the pursuit of economic profit. By contrast, ‘commerce’ has conventionally been regarded with disdain by critically minded social scientists, signalling a vulgar and materialistic world, devoid of morality, where human agency is subordinated to the logic of capital. This paper aims to challenge such dualistic thinking by exploring the commodification of cultural difference and by demonstrating that the rational calculus of the market is inescapably embedded in a range of cultural practices. The argument moves from an analysis of linear commodity chains to an exploration of more complex circuits and networks, illustrated with examples from contemporary commodity culture, looking specifically at the food and fashion sectors. Rather than demonstrating complexity for its own sake, the objective is to identify new forms of understanding and new possibilities for intervention in what can sometimes seem like an all-encompassing ‘consumer culture’ where every act of resistance is immediately recuperated in successive rounds of commodification.

**Key words:** commodities, culture, commerce, (cultural) difference, food, fashion.

## I Introduction

Over the last few years, ‘progress’ in human geography has been marked by repeated calls for a convergence between ‘the economic’ and ‘the cultural’. Examples range from Nicky Gregson’s (1995) warning about the evacuation of ‘the social’ from social and cultural geography – where an emphasis on meaning, identity, representation and ideology was in danger of replacing studies that are more firmly grounded in significant differences of gender, class, race, sexuality and (dis)ability – to Andrew Sayer’s (1994) insistence on the continued salience of the economy, addressed to those (among whom I would include myself) whose research had been shaped by geography’s recent ‘cultural turn’. Sayer (1997) has, of course, contributed further to

these debates, arguing for the dialectical interplay of the cultural and the economic, echoing Lash and Urry's bold assertion that 'the economy is increasingly culturally inflected [while] . . . culture is more and more economically inflected' (1994: 64).

Nor are these moves purely rhetorical (although I think it could fairly be said that calls to transcend the 'great divide' between the cultural and the economic have significantly outnumbered empirically grounded studies that demonstrate the difference that such a move would make in practice). There is, however, a growing number of examples of the kind of work I have in mind. A promising start was made in the early 1980s with Sharon Zukin's (1982) study of the intersection of culture and capital in the creation of New York City's real-estate market for luxury 'loft living', an approach she has subsequently elaborated in relation to the wider 'cultures of cities', including the key mediating role of the 'critical infrastructure' in the city's public culture of museums and restaurants. Similar lines of enquiry have been pursued in Paul Du Gay's (1996) study of the collaborative manufacture of 'enterprise culture' among retail workers and consumers in 1980s Britain, and in Linda McDowell's (1997) work on the gendered performance of culturally approved workplace identities in the City of London – to name just a few of my recent favourites.

What, then, can an exploration of commercial culture add to these promising debates? At first sight, it might seem that the juxtaposition of 'culture' and 'commerce' in my title is a doomed attempt to bring together two irreconcilable ways of seeing the world.<sup>2</sup> After all, 'culture' is traditionally associated with meaning and creativity, with works of the imagination and aesthetic practices that are far removed from the pursuit of economic profit. 'Commerce', on the other hand, has traditionally been regarded by social scientists with disdain, signalling a vulgar and materialistic world devoid of morality, where human agency is subordinated to the logic of capital. To quote from Raymond Williams' *Keywords*: while 'commerce' has retained a fairly neutral inflection, negative associations began to attach to the idea of 'commercialism' from around the mid-nineteenth century as 'a system which puts financial profit before any other consideration' (1976: 70). The perceived decline of the 'industrial spirit' in England dates from around the same time as observers began to associate industry and commerce with vulgarity (Weiner, 1981).

The themes that are addressed in this paper concerning the economies, practices and spaces of contemporary commercial culture clearly have a wider resonance in terms of what Linda McDowell (2000) has recently described as the 'awkward relationship' between the cultural and the economic. Following McDowell, my argument seeks to challenge the kind of dualistic thinking that separates production from consumption, the local from the global, or culture from economy – by emphasizing the mutual constitution of these very terms and investigating their fundamental inseparability. So, for example, the marketing of something as mundane as a jar of coffee draws on a language of seduction and sensuality, culturally encoded through references to the exotic and the erotic. In the advertisements to which I am referring here, for Cap Colombie and Alta Rica coffee, the makers Nestlé invite us to breathe an 'aroma that softly, subtly catches the attention, then charms into wilful submission': 'Voluptuous, dark and full-bodied', with an 'aroma of passion . . . Alta Rica, we bask in your glory'. The commodity form is imbued with the sexual aura of the 'Latin' women whose bodies adorn these billboard and magazine advertisements. We are even asked to imagine that a multinational company like Nestlé has a soul: 'From the Heart of Latin America. And the soul of

Nescafé'. We have become so used to this kind of commercial blandishment that we are almost immune to its absurd hyperbole ('basking in the glory' of a cup of instant coffee).

While examples like these demonstrate that cultural meanings are regularly appropriated for commercial ends, I also want to argue, conversely, that the apparently rational calculus of the market is inescapably embedded in a range of cultural processes. I am not seeking to 'reduce' the cultural to the economic (or vice versa), or to show that either side of the equation is more significant than the other. Rather, by subjecting a range of commercial cultures to theoretical reflection and empirical scrutiny, I want to try to demonstrate the value of an approach that transcends conventional dualisms between 'the cultural' and 'the economic', drawing out the links between production and consumption and making connections between a variety of scales from the local to the global while simultaneously blurring the boundaries between academic disciplines. This is an agenda of such heroic (some would say foolhardy) proportions that it can only be achieved (if at all) through specific examples and, for further illustrations, I shall be drawing on my own current research (with Claire Dwyer and Phil Crang) on contemporary transnational commodity cultures.<sup>3</sup>

The intellectual agenda I am pursuing here follows recent changes in the commercial world itself, which was transformed during and after the Thatcher years. Thus it has become commonplace to speak of a 'retail revolution' in Britain as three or four supermarket chains have come to account for an ever greater proportion of the nation's shopping expenditure (Wrigley and Lowe, 1996). As corner shops have gone out of business, new stores have sprung up in locations that were once regarded as off limits to retail capital, like airports and railway stations. Changes to Britain's commercial landscape are, of course, much more widespread than the changing retail geography of the high street. Banks and other financial institutions now regularly sponsor opera performances and TV series, while football shirts are emblazoned with the team's sponsors (famously subverted by Robbie Fowler's parody of Calvin Klein in his support for the striking Liverpool DocKers). As these examples (which could easily be multiplied) suggest, the mutual implication of culture and commerce is clearly grounded in changes in the material world as well as in scholarly fashion.

To pursue my argument, I want to consider a number of different models for bringing the cultural and the economic into closer dialogue, seeking to privilege neither term but to 'deepen' our understanding of their mutual entanglement through some specific examples. My argument involves a move from linear commodity chains to more complex circuits and networks as a way of subverting dualistic thinking and unsettling the kind of linear logic that sees consumption at one end of a chain that begins with an equally abstracted notion of production. This emphasis on networks and circuits is not designed to demonstrate complexity for its own sake but to suggest new modes of understanding and new possibilities for intervention in what can sometimes seem an all-encompassing 'consumer culture' where every act of resistance is immediately recuperated by the market in successive rounds of commodification.

## II A 'simple' commodity chain analysis

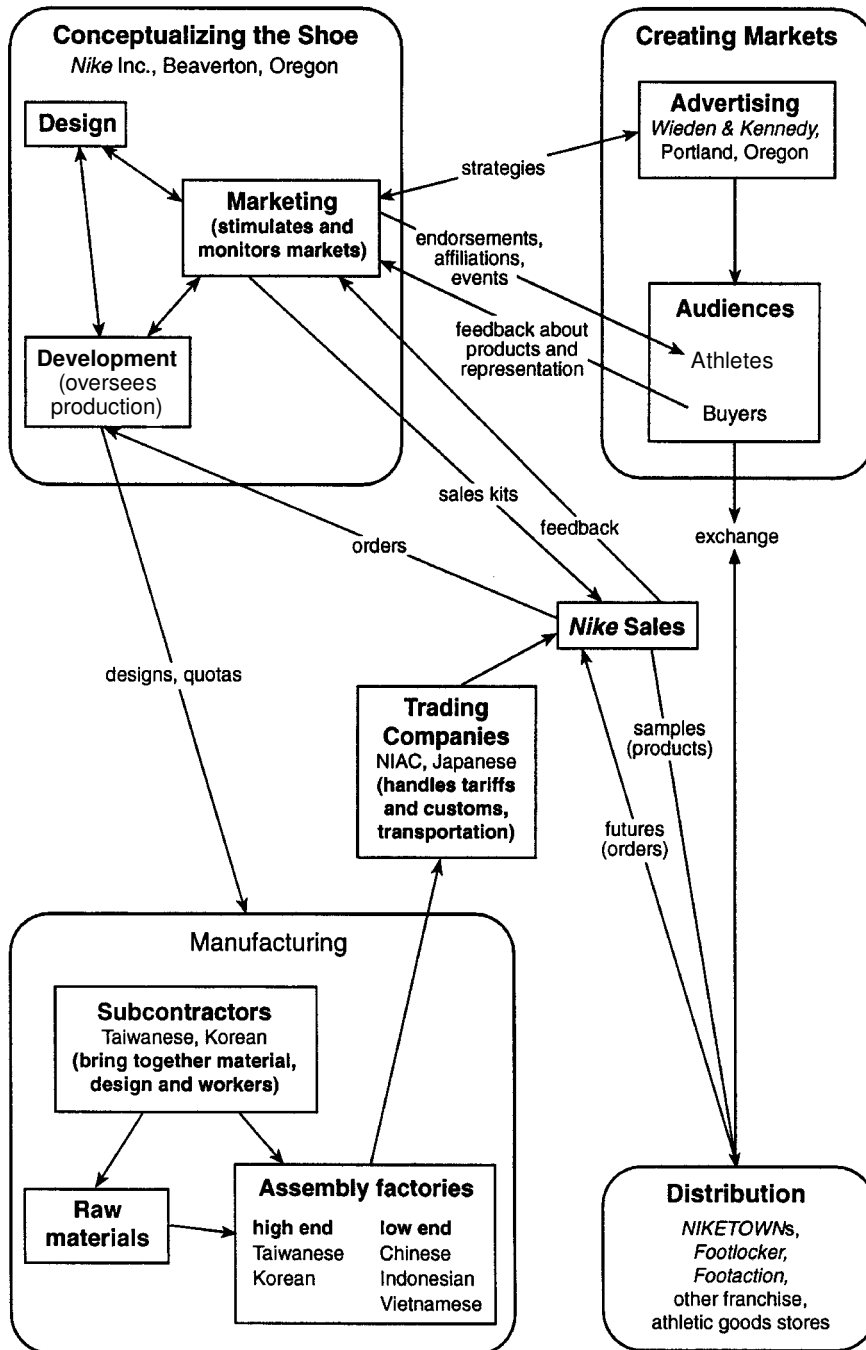
Let us begin, then, with a simple commodity chain analysis, taken from Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson's recent study of *Nike culture: the sign of the swoosh*

(1998).<sup>4</sup> The book argues that Nike have succeeded commercially through the commodification of sport, turning a 'parity product' (where there is actually very little difference between Nike sports shoes and those of their competitors) into a hugely successful brand, commanding over 40% of the market share and grossing over \$9 billion a year. Their commercial success is, of course, based on the exploitation of foreign labour – with Pakistani children reputedly paid as little as 6 cents an hour to sew footballs, and labour costs accounting for less than \$3 of the retail price of a pair of \$80 trainers.

Selling a global brand through marketing that appeals to local tastes (in the words of Nike Vice-Chairman Richard Donahue) involves a range of corporate strategies including the breaking up of production, subcontracting and outsourcing, with virtually no production done in-house and with an extremely high proportion of the company's budget devoted to advertising and marketing. This 'buyer-driven commodity chain' (Donaghu and Barff, 1990) involves some 18,000 retail accounts throughout the USA plus a mix of independent distributors, licensees and subsidiaries in approximately 110 countries around the world. The production process itself is now more likely to be located in Indonesia, China and Vietnam than in Japan or South Korea as Nike, like their competitors, are constantly searching out lower wage regions. Critics of multinational firms like Nike have often expressed their role as to unmask or unveil the exploitative labour conditions and social relations involved along the commodity chain. Yet, when one tries to represent the company's supply networks, subcontractors, marketing and distribution systems diagrammatically, the notion of a simple single-stranded 'commodity chain' scarcely does justice to the complexity of the processes involved.

### III 'Unveiling' the commodity fetish

It could, of course, be argued that Nike's strategy of spatially dispersed flexible production has helped shield them from external criticism. In 1997, for example, the company employed former US Ambassador Andrew Young to tour its Asian manufacturing facilities, championing Nike's Code of Conduct and their severing of links with a number of factories that were paying below the minimum wage or operating excessive working hours. Responding to public criticism of exploitative wages, unacceptable working conditions and the harassment of women workers, the company claimed that their jobs were prized locally in comparison with other available work, using a form of cultural relativism to justify their economic practices. These contested relations of production are, of course, nowhere to be seen in the company's advertising campaigns or in their lavish Niketown retail stores. Here, the emphasis is on the individual athlete, personified through 'stars' like Michael Jordan and André Agassi, with the admonition to all of their customers to fulfil their true potential (Just Do It). As such, the company's ideology could clearly be represented as a classic case of commodity fetishism, where identical shoes without the Nike logo would be much less desirable. Yet there is something hollow about the call to 'unveil' the commodity fetish as though the provision of such knowledge would automatically lead to widespread shifts in consumer behaviour or to significant changes in working conditions at the point of production. There is little evidence to suggest that commercial culture works in



**Figure 1** The Nike commodity chain  
 Source: Goldman and Papson (1998). Reprinted by permission of Sage Publications Ltd from R. Goldman and S. Papson, *Nike Culture*, © Sage Ltd, 1998

this way, notwithstanding the success of specific consumer boycotts for products such as Coors beer or Nestlé dairy products.

David Harvey has, of course, written passionately about the need to reveal the 'hidden geographies' of production that lie masked on the supermarket shelves: the fingerprints of exploitation that are rendered invisible by the commodity form. Our job, according to Harvey, is to 'lift the veil on this geographical and social ignorance', 'tracing back' and 'revealing' what lies 'embedded' within the social relations of contemporary consumption (1990: 422–23). Robert Sack employs a similar metaphor to talk about the history of extraction, manufacture and distribution being 'virtually obliterated' when the finished product is presented to the customer (1992: 118), while Martyn Lee asks why commodities show 'no manifest trace' of the labour that was invested in them during production, calling on academics to 'reveal' the 'concealed' exploitation of labour that lies behind the 'mask' of the commodity form (1993: 25). As I argued recently in another paper (Jackson, 1999), however, there is something unsatisfactory about this call for unveiling and unmasking the commodity fetish, not least its subtle privileging of academic knowledge over the popular wisdom of everyday life. It shows little respect for the political judgement 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 (Morley, 1992).<sup>5</sup> For these reasons and others, recent work from a variety of theoretical perspectives has begun to move from an analysis of commodity chains to the less linear logic of circuits and networks.

#### IV Circuits and networks

What, then, are the alternatives to commodity chain analysis? I should like to review two possibilities here, before turning to my own empirical work. In the first example, Sarah Whatmore and Lorraine Thorne have proposed an alternative geography of food that examines the 'nourishing networks' of situated people, artifacts, codes and living things which are not reducible to any single logic or determinant interest lying somewhere outside or above the social fray (1997: 288). Drawing on the work of Bruno Latour and John Law, they trace the points of connection and lines of flow involved in the elaboration of fair trade coffee networks. Their mobilization of Actor Network Theory focuses in particular on how these networks are made durable through the combined efforts of a range of institutional actors in North America, Peru and the United Kingdom. Significantly, they also include another non-human actant in this network: the coffee itself, the variabilities of which reverberate through the network. Whatmore and Thorne demonstrate that fair trade and commercial coffee networks exhibit distinctive 'modes of ordering' with very significant effects for those involved at different points in the commodity's journey from the plantation to the breakfast table; they are conceived here, though, not as a single chain but as a more complex network or circuit. The contrast they draw between network lengthening and network strengthening is particularly suggestive of the alternative modes of political intervention with which I shall conclude this paper.

The second example comes from Ian Cook and Phil Crang's *Eating Places* project, based on ethnographic work in North London, where they introduce a range of different metaphors to denote the 'entanglement', 'juxtaposition' and 'displacement' of contemporary commodity cultures (Crang, 1995; Cook and Crang, 1996). Their work traces these networks laterally rather than vertically, drawing on anthropological authorities like Nick Thomas (1991) and Arjun Appadurai (1986), whose invitation to trace the 'social life of things' has a particularly geographical resonance. Cook and Crang acknowledge that 'depth' models frequently imply a futile search for cultural origins with their associated notions of culinary 'authenticity'. More lateral or horizontal models abandon the search for authenticity and its implication of a single originary point, untouched by the adulterations of commodification, with its chimerical world of stable, unchanging, unitary cultures.

Cook and Crang's work also reveals some wonderful ironies as 'category managers' attempt to introduce order into the lives of their unruly consumers who insist on combining 'inappropriate' ingredients rather than living the uncomplicated, well-regulated lives that would make supermarket managers' jobs so much more straightforward. Categorizations that make perfect sense 'on the shelf', with Italian breads grouped together with dry or fresh pasta and with jars of wet sauce, can be 'consumed' quite differently in other contexts as part of a meal that is only tangentially (if at all) defined as 'Italian'.

To abandon the search for 'authenticity' does not imply a lack of interest in exploring the process of 'authentication': where rival food companies, for example, make competing claims to the culinary authenticity of their (often relatively indistinguishable) products. The complexities of such authenticity claims can be illustrated from two recent advertising campaigns for Patak's and Sharwood's curry sauces. At first viewing, the recent television ads for these two brands look remarkably similar. Both use the same word ('passion') with respect to their own product. Yet, on closer examination, some significant differences emerge which relate to the companies' distinctive histories and associated geographical imaginaries.

A firm like Patak's can make relatively unproblematic references to culinary authenticity, rooted as the company is in the biographical history of Kirit and Meena Pathak, who migrated to Britain from Kenya in 1956. From modest beginnings, selling sweets, spices and savoury snacks from a shop on Drummond Street in London, Patak's has expanded to be one of the richest 'Asian' companies in Britain with pre-tax profits of £5.5m in 1999, exporting to 44 countries worldwide and supplying a substantial proportion of Britain's 'Indian' restaurant trade. According to Kirit Pathak, the family's biography is inexorably tied up with all stages of product development, the authenticity of the production process itself guaranteed by his own and his wife's embodied identities and the links they draw between their domestic and commercial worlds (from an interview in *Tandoori* magazine 1997: 41):

Although we have highly mechanized production lines, I still regard my tongue, nose and eyes as my real work tools . . . My wife Meena is responsible for creating the majority of recipes in our product range. Once she has perfected a recipe at home, it's brought into the Product Development kitchen at the factory and completely dissected and then rebuilt.

Their current advertising campaign places a similar stress on culinary authenticity, emphasizing specific regional cuisines and cooking styles, underpinned by the

product's close association with the Pathak family name, culminating in the invitation to 'Share Patak's Passion for India'.

By contrast, a company like Sharwood's, established in the City of London in 1889, with products now literally spanning the globe ('It's half the world, it's Sharwood's'), would find notions of culinary authenticity much more difficult to sustain. Sharwood's invitation to 'Stir up some passion' locates the source of this emotion in their customers rather than in the product itself. Sharwood's Senior Brand Manager (interviewed recently by Phil Crang) reflects on the contrast with Patak's in the following words:

Let's face it, you've got competitors out there, like Patak's, who by their very name, I mean they are Indian. Consumers accept that they are going to be more authentic than Sharwood's. The image people have of Sharwood's is very much a kind of 'man from Del Monte' image, going out there, finding the best products and bringing them back to the UK, and adapting them and delivering them in a way that is most appealing to the UK consumer . . . They know it's not going to be too off-putting, or too ethnic if you like . . .

We've gone for the passion and adventure side of ethnic cuisine . . . we try to talk about the passion for food, ethnic food, as opposed to passion for a [particular] cuisine, and in that way we overcome the cuisine-specific boundaries [of Chinese, Indian or Malaysian food]. If you look at our advertising, we've got a very broad ethnic mix in there, we've got a Rasta guy, a West Indian guy, we've got a sort of Oriental-looking girl, an Indian guy, we try to be very broad and talk a sort of emotional language . . .

It's how it makes them feel, definitely. Ethnic food, it's special. It's not fish and chips or bangers and mash, you know. It makes people feel excited and exciting, it inspires them, it makes people feel kind of empowered . . . it's a bit out of the ordinary . . . they're looking for a bit of an adventure . . . that's how they feel when they cook ethnic food.

The contrast between Patak's and Sharwood's is emblematic of the commercial significance of contrasting business histories, different kinds and degrees of transnationality (relating to the product, the firm, the biography of specific entrepreneurs, the supply of materials etc), and different cultural or symbolic geographies.

My next set of examples comes from a different sector of British-Asian enterprise – the fashion industry – with its uneasy juxtaposition of catwalk style and sophistication with the demeaning conditions and exploitation of sweatshop labour. Again, though, I want to suggest that this kind of dualistic thinking is not the most helpful way forward in investigating the transnational geographies of contemporary commercial culture.

## V Refashioning cultural identities?

There has, to date, been relatively little work on British-Asian fashion, with the important exceptions of Nasreen Khan, Parminder Bhachu and Emma Tarlo whose work I will now briefly consider. Nasreen Khan (1992) provides a useful introduction to the recent cultural history of Asian women's dress, from *burqah* to Bloggs, beginning with the hostile reception of Zandra Rhodes' collection of ripped saris, commissioned by the Indian government and shown in New Delhi in 1982. The collection caused widespread offence in defiling a garment that had become the hallmark of Indian women. Khan goes on to illustrate the widespread politicization of dress in South Asia, including Benazir Bhutto's adoption of the (Islamic-inspired) *dupatta* (headscarf or shawl), the growing popularity of *bindi* forehead decorations in the West and the general revival of 'ethnic' fashion among middle-class urban-educated consumers in India and throughout the diaspora. Khan argues that this 'ethnic revival' was the result of a multitude of small ventures by women, from 'suitcase collections' and similar



modest beginnings in people's attics and garages, to the development of more commercial boutiques and designer labels.

Khan charts the initial ambivalence of many British-Asian women to 'traditional' styles of dressing and the tendency to adopt different clothes for different settings: 'British on the streets, Asian at home.' During the early years of immigration, she argues, 'Asian' clothes occupied a private or secret place for many young people. By the early 1980s, however, businesses like Variety Silk House in Wembley had begun to cater for the local British-Asian community and visitors to the subcontinent were returning to Britain with evidence of the creative fashion explosion in India and Pakistan, no longer regarded as the bastion of tradition in contrast to a stereotypically 'modern' west. Designers like Geeta Sarin and firms like Libas and Egg sold their clothes through catalogues and via upmarket stores in Belgravia and Kensington, tapping a more affluent east-west market rather than the localized 'Asian' market in places like Ealing, Southall and Wembley. Meanwhile, as Claire Dwyer's (1999) research has shown, such 'traditional' items of clothing as the veil have been substantially reworked in the construction of new identities among young British Muslim women.

Parminder Bhachu's account of the new landscapes of British-Asian fashion also emphasizes the agency of women in forging new identities within an increasingly global market place (1998: 189):

[diaspora Asian women] have used global commodities and consumer products to create new local interpretations of cultural identity . . . patterns [which] emerge from their sophisticated command of the symbolic and political economies in which they are located.

Her work focuses, in particular, on the commodification of the *salwaar-kameez* (or Punjabi suit) and its entanglement within the commercialization of the wedding economy. She shows, for example, how the dowry system has escalated among Sikh women in Britain so it is not uncommon now for dowries to include over 50 items of clothing as well as household goods, luxury consumer items and gold ornaments (1993: 106–107). Bhachu interprets the rise of the ready-to-wear *salwaar-kameez* as a highly charged piece of clothing: an inscription of ethnic pride (1998: 194) through which Sikh women, in particular, were able to express their opposition to the 'Hindu' sari following the Indian army's action at the Amritsar temple. While the media have focused on 'western' appropriations of 'Asian' dress – such as Jemima Goldsmith's wedding outfits in 1995 or the clothes that the late Princess Diana wore on her visit to Pakistan in 1996 – Bhachu insists that cultural creativity also flows in the other direction.<sup>6</sup> So, for example (1998: 196–97):

. . . during 1994 and 1995, many metropolitan Asian women wore the top half of the *salwaar-kameez* with a full body stocking and with Doc Marten or thick platform shoes . . . Mohicanized and punkized *salwaar kameez* outfits have also been worn by Asian women in the last decade. The whole gamut of current styles in vogue – from punky to funky to grunge to baggy hip-hop – can be seen in the interpretation of *salwaar-kameez* by diaspora women.

The activities of these cultural intermediaries, Bhachu argues, have opened up new spaces, generating new landscapes and ethnicities, new consumer styles and material economies, representing 'the subversive outcomes of the shared cultural geographies of British women in the 1990s' (1998: 197). Bhachu emphasizes the symbolic importance of the *salwaar-kameez* as 'reflective of the stitching and suturing of many terrains and textures in which Asian women are situated' (1998: 198) and of the active negotiation of

new cultural forms by British-Asian entrepreneurs who continuously reformulate their 'ethnic' traditions through the filters of their British class and local cultures (1993: 101).

It is no coincidence that Parminder Bhachu adopts a highly spatialized vocabulary to describe these processes of cultural creativity and commercial innovation. Her own biography is highly transnational, describing herself as a European woman of East African descent who lived for many years in Britain before taking up permanent residence in the USA. From her own experience of multiple migrations, she speaks authoritatively of the local specificity of consumption styles, the creation of new spaces and notions of citizenship and the new landscapes of transnational Asian fashion, arguing that conditions of social and economic marginality have produced some extremely powerful arenas of cultural creativity (1996: 300).

The contemporary resonances of Parminder Bhachu's work can be put in longer historical perspective by reference to the work of Emma Tarlo (1996). Tarlo argues that dress has always played an active process in the forging of social identities in India, from the Nationalist Movement's support for *swadeshi* (Indian-made) clothing, through long-felt concern about the decline of the Indian handloom industry (first noted in 1880), to the recent revival of traditional Indian craftwork, design and embroidery, promoted by the Indian Handicrafts Board.

Tarlo brings this historical perspective to bear on her anthropological study of the recent development of an urban 'fashion village' for upper-middle-class Indian consumers in South Delhi. Hauz Khas, the case-study village, provides one particular instance of a more widespread 'ethnic revival' during the late 1980s, when urban women from the educated élite were 'returning' to the kind of clothing that rural women were themselves in the process of rejecting. During Tarlo's fieldwork in 1989, the village was dominated by a style that Tarlo describes as 'ethnic chic', actively promoted by the local Creative Arts Village Association. This commercial revival of so-called 'ethnic' style was spearheaded by designers such as Bina Ramani who was born in India but had lived abroad for 25 years in London, San Francisco and New York, working for Christian Dior, Givenchy and other top designers, later supplying Liberty and Harvey Nichols with her own 'classic' designs. In setting up her store in the urban village of Hauz Khas, Ramani claimed to have seen India 'with foreign eyes' – as demonstrated by her cringe-inducing admiration for 'those rural women in their fabulous and colourful garments'. The fragile foundations of this 'ethnic revival' soon became apparent, however, as local people moved to get a share of the village's commercial success. Indeed, the villagers whose innocence Bina Ramani celebrated soon demonstrated their own shrewd business judgement, undermining the village's aesthetic appeal in the process and driving its exclusive image inexorably downmarket.

Since Tarlo completed her fieldwork, Hauz Khas has been transformed into a state-of-the-art shopping complex. 'Ethnic chic' has been replaced by 'global' fashions (skinny black lycra and platform shoes) reflecting the influence of cable television and investment from Non-Resident Indians living abroad. Understanding the evolution of Hauz Khas requires a longer historical timeframe that includes the upper-middle-class appeal of 'European' dress, the Nationalist 'return' to *khadi* (hand-woven cloth produced from hand-spun yarn), the process of post-Independence modernization and the revival of so-called 'ethnic chic'.

Here again, then, I would suggest that notions of circuitry and interconnection have more to offer than linear constructs of modernization or globalization that posit some

kind of simple transition from a traditional to a more highly commodified system of exchange.

One final twist in this tale was the invention during the late 1990s of another version of 'ethnic' or 'Asian chic', this time promoted within the British media, who detected a moment when it was suddenly 'cool to be Asian'. This latest version of 'Asian chic' appears to have been born out of the coincidence of several interrelated phenomena including the commercial success of bands like Cornershop (whose album 'Brimful of Asha' reached number one in the British charts in 1998). Meanwhile, Madonna's album 'Ray of Light' was re-mixed by Talvin Singh as Madonna herself took up yoga and began painting her hands with *mehndi* (henna dye). Fashion designers like Dries van Noten, Rifat Ozbek, Vivienne Tam and Dolce and Gabana all included Indian fabrics and embroidery in their collections, while supermodels and film stars like Naomi Campbell and Kate Winslet all appeared in saris and with *bindis* painted on their foreheads. 'The Asian invasion', as Sheryll Garrett described it in *The Sunday Times* (under the inevitable headline 'Who's sari now?', 23 August 1998), 'is heading this way: in the charts, on the catwalk, even on the best-dressed cushions'. Nothing was immune to the trend it seemed as *Wallpaper*, the coolest of style magazines, Garratt reported, had gone 'urban-turban', signalling 'the commercialization of anything Asian'.

The *Independent on Sunday* ran a similar feature a few months earlier ('British, Asian and hip', 1 March 1998) about the 'mainstreaming' of so-called second-generation Asian culture (compared to the economic and social marginalization of their immigrant parents). The same range of cultural phenomena were noted, including Cornershop ('breaking the ethnic mould of British pop'), the radio and television comedy show *Goodness Gracious Me*, London's Anokha nightclub and the (now-defunct) *Second Generation* style magazine. The optimism of this piece with its emphasis on 'leapfrogging the cultural divide' and not needing to compromise artistic integrity in order to reach a white British audience, contrasts strongly with the much greater reserve expressed in another article on 'Asian cool' published in the same newspaper just nine months later (6 December 1998). The article started with the now-predictable range of examples including Madonna's penchant for saris, David Beckham's sarongs, the popularity of *mehndi* tattoos, Talvin Singh, Cornershop and the Asian Dub Foundation. A different message emerged, however, in the latter part of the article, signalled by the subheading: 'Hands off our culture: If it's been in this year, it's probably been Asian. But has the appropriation of all things Eastern gone too far?'. According to the journalist, Hettie Judah:

The message is clear: when white people adopt Asian fashions, deck their houses out in Asian fabrics and furniture and mix samples of Asian instruments into their music, they embody mainstream fashion. When Asians make music, theatre or film, their work is classified as underground or fringe.

The article included a quote from the musician and composer Nitin Sawhney lamenting the 'colonial arrogance' of contemporary western attitudes to Asia, redolent of a much longer history of Orientalist fascination for all things eastern, sold as off-the-peg profundity, a panacea for the a-spirituality of western capitalism. Sawhney complained about the trivialization and fetishization of Asian culture, about the superficial level of understanding (illustrated by Madonna's unknowing appropriation of a priest's insignia at the MTV awards or more recently by the controversy over David Beckham's

tattoo) and the perception that Asian culture needs to be represented by white people before it is 'accessible' to the rest of the world.

Contemporary commercial cultures are full of such ambiguities, where models of ethnic authenticity and essentialist constructions of identity are no longer tenable as guides to the complexities of cultural borrowing. Rather than casting these issues in terms of a stark opposition between the negative associations of cultural appropriation and an equally uncritical celebration of the positive potential of cultural hybridity, I want to conclude by exploring the politically contested middle ground, where cultural cannibalism and economic exploitation rub shoulders with the emergence of more critical forms of multiculturalism.

As our own research suggests, the agents of cultural innovation – be they 'ethnic entrepreneurs', cultural intermediaries or 'ordinary consumers' – exhibit a higher degree of reflexivity than they are often credited with in studies of cultural appropriation. While the agency of small-scale designers is undoubtedly circumscribed, neither are they merely dupes of an economic system that is entirely beyond their knowledge or control. For some clothing firms, like One BC in Nottingham's Lace Market, for example, 'Asian' designs are just one aspect of their cultural repertoire which also includes playful allusions to traditional 'British' dress (bowler hats) or ironic references to 'Cowboys and Asians': 'Clint Eastwood meets Ghandi, a label and an attitude . . . Fugitives from the law of averages'. Indian companies, like The Bombay Store in Mumbai, are equally capable of playing these subversive cultural games, with garment labels that read 'You're fed up with Nike, Reebok and Tommy Hilfiger . . . you're looking for an intelligent gift . . . you're an 'alternative' person . . . you'd like to improve the Indian economy . . . you'd like to make us richer than we already are . . .'. As so often, of course, the use of irony is double-edged and the hint of subversiveness in these examples is (however knowingly) subordinated to the imperatives of the market. What looks like 'resistance' at one moment is rapidly recuperated by the market at the next moment as 'consumer culture' engages in another round of commodification.

But I do not want to end on such a pessimistic note. In conclusion, let me start to unpack some of the political dilemmas and ambivalences that are contained within contemporary commercial culture.

## VI The politics of commercial culture

As the previous examples suggest, the politics of commercial culture are complex, particularly where authors reject the simple repudiation of capitalism for more complex forms of engagement with the commercial world. So, for example, Cook and Crang's enthusiastic endorsement of Michael Taussig's invitation to 'Get in touch with the fetish' (1996: 147) should not be read as an abrogation of political responsibility but as an opportunity to develop more subtle understandings of the commodification process and its cultural implications. Expressing a similar kind of ambivalence, Katharyne Mitchell (1997) has warned against the simple assumption that cultural hybridity is politically progressive, advocating more grounded empirical work as an effective means of challenging the 'hype of hybridity'.

There is, however, a legitimate concern in recent work about commercial culture that more complex models of circuits and networks simply confuse the issue, dulling the

critical edge that thinking about commodity chains was designed to introduce. Deborah Leslie and Suzy Reimer make such an inference when they suggest that the conceptualization of a *virtually endless* 'circuit of consumption' may involve the abandonment of a clear political stance: '[I]f the aim of commodity chain analysis is no longer to determine what forces are driving the chain, we are left with a question as to why chains should be reconstructed at all' (1999: 407). Demonstrating complexity is scarcely a worthwhile end in itself and I want to align myself with those who are concerned about the political consequences of separating production from consumption and, worse, mapping that separation onto a distinction between 'economic' and 'cultural' approaches.

So, for example, Angela McRobbie (1997) has criticized the political complacency of recent consumption studies where questions of social exclusion (poverty and hardship) are, at best, marginalized in an overwhelming emphasis on pleasure and desire. Such an emphasis may have been justifiable, she argues, in order to reclaim the agency of 'ordinary consumers' whose skills and investments (both economic and emotional) had been derided by an over-emphasis on the power of (apparently ungendered and disembodied) 'market forces'.

While McRobbie's critique is directed specifically at the divisions she perceives within contemporary feminism (between cultural or literary approaches on the one hand and political-economic approaches on the other), it can, I think, be more widely applied. For it concerns an academic division of labour between a 'materialist' focus on the exploitative labour relations of sweatshops and homeworking and so-called 'cultural' approaches that focus on the (admittedly unequal) pleasures that were opened up by the birth of consumer society. McRobbie makes some practical suggestions for 'bridging the gap', including more sociologically grounded studies of how women actually shop; studies of the position of black and Asian women as consumers; studies of the long-term careers of women in fashion retailing; and greater sensitivity to the language of consumption, including, for example, the way that black and Asian women in McRobbie's own work expressed their relationship to fashion in terms of pleasure and enjoyment but always articulated through the language of work and labour (1997: 82; see also McRobbie, 1998). More generally, though, McRobbie hints at a politics of consumption that involves thinking across the gaps that exist (in material and symbolic terms) between textile production, manufacture and design, sewing and sketching, serving and being served, working and wearing. It may then be possible, she suggests, to identify a set of tensions and anxieties which provide opportunities for political debate and social change (McRobbie, 1997: 85). It is an agenda that calls for an 'unsettling' of conventional accounts rather than an 'unveiling' of the commodity fetish. In terms of the circuit and network models I have advocated above, it involves looking at all the points of connection within a network or throughout a circuit rather than at successive points down a linear commodity chain.

## VII Conclusion: commodifying difference

Just over 10 years ago, Jonathan Rutherford argued that capital had fallen in love with difference. Advertising, he claimed, thrived on selling things that enhance our sense of uniqueness and individuality: 'From World Music to exotic holidays in Third-World

locations, ethnic tv dinners to Peruvian knitted hats, cultural difference *sells*' (1990: 11, his emphasis). From such arguments, a kind of cultural pessimism developed with critics such as bell hooks detecting a cannibalistic tendency within contemporary commodity culture. In a now-familiar passage, hooks argued that 'ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture' (1992: 21), suggesting that the relationship between the 'ethnic' and the 'mainstream' was purely parasitic. According to hooks, communities of resistance had been replaced by communities of consumption, with commodification stripping the signs of difference of their political integrity and cultural meaning. Sharon Zukin (1995: 11) warns similarly of the aestheticization of difference, while Deborah Root (1996: x-xi) has characterized the wider tendency within western society towards a kind of 'cannibal culture' where the aestheticization of difference leads to a romanticization of violence. These arguments are rhetorically powerful, but tend to gloss over the wide range of meanings that can be attached to the commodification of difference. While 'eating the Other' may be an expression of power and privilege (in some circumstances), it may (in other circumstances) provide an entrée to more critical forms of multiculturalism. To move in that direction requires us to identify the many ways in which power is distributed along the chains and through the networks that we describe and analyse. It requires us to examine more closely the complexities of the production process, the politics of representation and the practices of consumption, rather than simply inferring these in some abstract, a priori way.

Each of the metaphors employed in this paper has its own political implications: 'chains' have their weak links, 'circuits' can be broken and 'networks' suggest a more diffused model of how power is distributed. This can, as I have argued, leave our analysis open to the process of recuperation where, as each time difference is recognized and acknowledged, it is immediately subject to new rounds of commodification and exploitation. There is a danger, then, that in replacing linear models with more complex understandings of cultural change we may simply be playing into the hands of the market. We might also, though, be opening up new lines of fracture, new possibilities for more equal social relations to be forged. These are issues to be struggled over, to (re)theorize and work through empirically. For me, at least, that is what is at stake in attempting to transcend the cultural and the economic, as I have attempted to illustrate here through an exploration of contemporary commercial culture.

## Notes

1. This paper was originally delivered as the *Progress in Human Geography Lecture* at the RGS-IBG Annual Conference in Plymouth (January 2001). Thanks to the editorial board for their invitation and to the publishers for their support of this lecture.

2. I have taken my title from a recent ESRC-sponsored seminar series with which I was involved, and from which a selection of papers has recently been published (Jackson *et al.*, 2000). I am happy to acknowledge the ESRC's support of the 'Commercial Cultures' series (award no. R45126458096), and to thank my co-organizers Michelle Lowe, Daniel Miller and Frank Mort, as well as all of the participants who contributed to our discussions in London, Sheffield and Southampton.

3. The project is funded by ESRC as part of their Transnational Communities programme (award no. L214252031).

4. Nike is a particularly well-worn example within human geography, as is evident from the recent work of Peter Dicken (1998), Erica Schoenberger (1998) and Donaghue and Barff (1990). Other examples could have included Brad Weiss's (1996) study of Tanzanian and American coffee culture, or Elaine Hartwick's (1998) study of the international trade in diamonds.

5. Morley's (1992: 31) discussion of the difference between consumer *agency* and consumer *power* is particularly useful in the present context.

6. More recent examples include Cherie Blair and Ffion Hague's appropriation of the sari for high-profile events in the British-Asian community, but not, to date, for any more 'mainstream' events.

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