

Local consumption cultures in a globalizing world

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Focusing on the resilience of distinctive local consumption cultures, this paper challenges some of the more sweeping claims that have been advanced in the name of 'globalization'. Thinking about a 'globalizing' rather than a fully 'globalized' world encourages us to examine the deeply contested nature of the concept and to explore the geographically uneven nature of recent economic, political and cultural transformations. This paper approaches globalization as a site of struggle rather than as an established fact, emphasizing the need for empirically grounded studies of the impact of 'globalization' on consumer cultures in different geographical contexts. The paper examines the way that producers have 'customized' their products for different markets (drawing on evidence from China and South Africa). It then reviews case study evidence from three contrasting consumption cultures: consumption and 'public culture' in India, 'consumer nationalism' in China, and 'artful consumption' in Russia. The paper concludes by identifying some current debates and outlining some directions for future research, including a re-emphasis on consumption and material culture; an exploration of consumption as social practice; the delineation of commodity-specific consumption cultures; and some reflections on the political, ethical and methodological issues that are being raised in contemporary consumption research.

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Globalization as a site of struggle

'Globalization' is a deeply contested concept that has assumed almost talismanic status in recent years. Like other talismanic terms, great claims have been made in its name. According to Peter Dicken, the word entered the social sciences in the 1960s as part of a wider debate about the social impact of new communication technologies. The term was said to herald:

a world in which nation-states are no longer significant actors or meaningful economic units; in which consumer tastes and cultures are homogenized and satisfied through the provision of standardized global products created by global corporations with no allegiance to place or community. (Dicken 2000, 315)

Often regarded as a key exponent of this view, Manuel Castells argued that information technologies

were producing a frictionless world or 'space of flows', superseding the previous and familiar 'space of places' (Castells 1991 1996). In other accounts, globalization is held responsible for the erosion of local difference, where the constraints of geography on social and cultural arrangements are receding and where people are increasingly aware that they are receding (Waters 1995).

In this paper, I join forces with those who have sought to demonstrate the resilience of 'local' cultures against some of the exaggerated claims that have been made in the name of globalization. Following David Held (2004), I prefer to talk about a 'globalizing' world rather than to think in terms of a world that is already fully 'globalized'.¹ While the pace and intensity of social change is impressive, its geographical impact is far from even. There is, then, an urgent need to 'ground' the study of globalization through empirical investigation of particular

places and to historicize the transformations that have taken place within living memory. So, for example, Hirst and Thompson (1996) remind us that globalization is nothing new and that previous generations have witnessed equally dramatic social transformations following capitalism's earlier expansionary phases. So, too, in Bayly's (2004) magisterial re-working of the history of consumption in light of recent post-colonial critiques, a convincing case is made that the world was far more 'globalized' in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries than is commonly supposed. Such accounts of global inter-connection emphasize the multi-centred origins of modernity and demonstrate that European power, though increasingly dominant, was fiercely contested. From such a perspective, references to 'globalization' in the present era can be understood as a rhetorical device, deployed in support of a specific (neo-liberal) political agenda (cf. Larner 2003). But what of globalization's impact on consumer culture? Here, too, it is possible to puncture some of the more inflated claims that have been advanced in the name of global economic transformation. So, for example, recent work has demonstrated the slow advance and uneven penetration of the commodity form, even within Western economies, and the many forms of resistance to its further spread (Williams 2003; Williams and Windebank 2003).

On close examination, the 'globalization' thesis looks far less impressive, the forces promoting de-territorialization (whether economic, political, technological or cultural) always being subject to the countervailing forces' re-territorialization. While the balance of forces is often far from equal, globalization might be better thought of as a *site of struggle* rather than as a foregone conclusion. For, as Watts has argued, globalization requires a sensitivity to how location, identity and community are refashioned in incompletely globalized sites: 'Globalization does not so much mark the erasure of place but in a curious way contributes to its revitalization' (Watts 1996, 64). From this perspective, globalization emerges as an incomplete, uneven and contested process: an unfinished project whose contours are shaped by locally specific social and cultural practices.

Local consumption cultures

In this section, I want to consider the resilience of local consumption cultures in the face of

'globalization' and to document some of the ways in which these global forces have been 'domesticated' (tamed and localized) in specific contexts of consumption. Consumption is clearly a key site in debates over globalization with the apparently limitless reach of brands like McDonald's and Coca-Cola becoming virtually synonymous with the term,² and yet there is now extensive ethnographic evidence with which to challenge many of the exaggerated claims made in the name of globalization.

It is now widely appreciated that even the most 'global' brands, such as McDonald's or Coca-Cola, have different cultural connotations and are consumed quite differently in different places. Miller's (1998) work on consumption practices in Trinidad and Gillespie's (1995) ethnographic study of young Punjabis in Southall, West London are just two of the many examples of this 'domestication' of meaning.³ The wider argument is well put by Appadurai, who argues that 'as rapidly as forces from various metropolises are brought into new societies, they tend to become indigenized in one way or another' (1996, 32). So too, for the Swedish anthropologist Ulf Hannerz, the contemporary world is characterized by 'an intense, continuous, comprehensive interplay between the indigenous and the imported' (1996, 5). Nor can any single society claim to provide the 'authentic' source of meaning for any particular commodity or cultural form. Rather, as Miller argues, there is the growing equality of genuine relativism:

Central Africans in suits, Indonesian soap operas, and South Asian brands are no longer inauthentic copies by people who have lost their culture after being swamped by things that only North Americans and Europeans 'should' possess. Rather there is the equality of genuine relativism that makes none of us a model of real consumption and all of us creative variants of social processes based around the possession and use of commodities. (Miller 1995, 144)

If, as Escobar claims, culture still 'sits in places', despite the forces of displacement and de-territorialization that have accompanied globalization, it does so as a result of what he describes as 'subaltern strategies of localization' (2001, 159).

The history of international advertising is particularly telling in this regard, littered with examples that demonstrate the cultural limits of globalization.⁴ For all the corporate energy that has gone into creating a single 'global' message and despite the

increasing transnational flow of people, money and artefacts, cultural homogenization is still far from being achieved. Rather than simply rolling out their existing products across a geographically undifferentiated market, producers have had to adapt their 'global' brands to a variety of local conditions. Paradoxically, then, 'globalization' has itself required companies to adopt a variety of localizing strategies in order to succeed commercially. Two brief examples illustrate the point. The first is Wood and Grosvenor's (1997) exploration of the British confectionery company Cadbury's expansion into China. Since the development of its Open Door policy in the late 1970s, China has actively encouraged foreign investment. Working through its Australian subsidiary, Cadbury's soon moved to set up a chocolate plant in China.⁵ But this was no simple process of 'globalization', whereby Western tastes in fast food and confectionery were simply exported to other parts of the world. While Cadbury's were keen to maintain their production standards, the company was obliged to make significant changes to the product and to the production process in order to accommodate *guo qing* (the special situation of China). Like other foreign companies, Cadbury's had to adapt to the Chinese way of doing business, described by Wood and Grosvenor as 'heavily personal and based on *guanxi* (literally, connections) and *xinyong* (one's reputation for being reliable and trustworthy)' (Wood and Grosvenor 1997, 177). Cadbury's eschewed the mass market for sugar-based confectionery and concentrated instead on the development of brand-name products for top-end consumers. Products were given local names, such as *jibaili* ('best of luck and a hundred blessings') and the recipe was changed to reduce the sugar content and increase the volume of cocoa solids. Technical issues such as reliable refrigeration and a ready supply of clean fresh milk had to be overcome, as well as (re)training the workforce to meet the company's own alien standards. Marketing and distribution also posed significant challenges in a country where self-service was comparatively rare and where impulse buying was relatively unknown. While it might represent 'globalization' in one sense, then, the introduction of Cadbury's chocolate to China clearly demonstrates the resilience of local consumption cultures to which transnational corporations must adapt if they wish to succeed.

A second example concerns the political struggle over marketing South African oranges during the

apartheid era. This case demonstrates the way that 'local' geographical circumstances can make a difference to the global ambitions of transnational corporations. Mather and Rowcroft (2004) document the way that the South African Citrus Exchange was forced to suppress all references to local geographical 'lore' in marketing oranges overseas because of the product's problematic associations with apartheid. (This is in contrast with the earlier Empire Marketing Board's strategy of referring directly to place of origin and to South Africa's membership of the British Empire.) Despite the absence of direct reference to country of origin, the Citrus Exchange's promotional campaigns in the 1960s and 1970s were still steeped in South African history. Even the product label 'Outspan' makes reference to the process of unyoking a team of oxen used by the *voortrekkers* as they journeyed into the country's interior. The Citrus Exchange also used a team of all-white South African 'Outspan girls' to market the fruit. As one contemporary commentator remarked:

South Africa owes a debt of gratitude to the Citrus Exchange for sending these young ambassadors on tours abroad. They have sold not only our oranges but also the good qualities of South Africans and the good looks of our girls. (Cartwright 1976, 96)

Significantly, the 'Outspan girls' were instructed not to engage in political discussion and to restrict their conversation to promoting the healthy image of the fruit. Opposition groups took precisely the opposite tack, with the Dutch-based organization Boycott Outspan Aktie (BOA) providing consumers with information about the political situation in South Africa and making the boycott of South African fruit a key part of the anti-apartheid struggle. In one publication (*Outspan: bouwstenen voor apartheid* or 'building bricks for apartheid'), BOA drew directly on the words of former President B.J. Vorster, who once claimed that 'Every time a South African product is bought, it is another brick in the wall of our continued existence'. Translated into English as *Outspan: fruits of shame*, the document linked citrus production to South Africa's colonial history and to the rampant inequalities of the apartheid system (BOA 1972). BOA organized a series of consumer boycotts in the 1970s and provided their own alternative to the 'Outspan girls', hiring a group of 'multi-racial Inspan girls' who engaged consumers in discussion about South African politics and

sought to make a direct connection between Outspan and apartheid. The struggle over Outspan oranges clearly demonstrates the continued salience of the 'local' in global marketing terms, even where there is a concerted attempt to suppress the 'geographical lore' that adheres to particular commodities (cf. Cook and Crang 1996).

To pursue this argument further, the following sections provide more detailed evidence from three contrasting places where 'globalization' has had very different implications in terms of 'local' cultures of consumption.

Consumption and 'public culture' in India

The first example draws on my own recent work (with Phil Crang, Claire Dwyer and Nicola Thomas) on the geography of transnational consumer culture in Mumbai.⁶ Our work was inspired by the long tradition of research on 'public culture' in India, a term that was adapted from Habermas's (1989) influential work on the transformation of the public sphere. As employed by Appadurai and Breckenridge, public culture refers to

the space between domestic life and the projects of the nation-state – where differentiated social groups (classes, ethnic groups, genders) constitute their identities by their experience of mass-mediated cultural forms in relation to the practices of everyday life. (1995, 4–5)

Appadurai and Breckenridge's 'public culture' project represents an intervention in debates about globalization in general and about India's 'modernization' in particular. In terms of the former, they sought to challenge those who believe that 'Americanization or commodification or McDonald's (or some variation of all these) is seducing the world into sameness and creating a world of little Americas' (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1995, 1). Regarding the latter, they sought to emphasize the local meanings of modernity in terms of specific forms of subjectivity, agency, pleasure and embodied experience. Their work demonstrates the active role that consumers play in shaping this experience, with public culture emerging as a key site of cultural contestation. The 'public culture' tradition is still very much alive, as can be seen from the journal that bears the initiative's name, and in new studies of public theatre, story-telling, cinema and magazine culture in India (Dwyer and Pinney 2001).

Our own research sought to extend this work through an exploration of transnational food and

fashion cultures in London and Mumbai (cf. Dwyer and Jackson 2003). The project used focus group evidence in order to produce a more 'grounded' reading of globalization and to challenge the simple mapping of 'tradition' and 'modernity' onto 'East' and 'West' (Jackson *et al.* 2004). While some of our focus group respondents felt that 'Fast foods, like McDonald's, have taken over Mumbai', the range of foods that were locally available were more usually regarded as a source of pride: 'In Bombay we can get anything'; 'Actually Bombay is the place where you can get everything and you get a blend of all the cultures'; 'We eat everything' (including Thai, Chinese and Mexican food); 'Indians are basically adapted to any kind of food'.⁷ Moreover, our respondents celebrated the city's capacity to absorb and adapt a range of foreign influences: 'Bombay absorbs everything'.⁸

Several of our focus groups referred to the 'Indianization' of pizza (often itself regarded as an Italian-American hybrid), including one group who talked about 'Punjabi pizza', with the addition of Indian toppings and ready-made *masalas*. Others referred to the addition of garlic and chilli sauces to McDonald's burgers, while Chinese food was commonly regarded as Indian or Indian-Chinese with one person insisting that 'Indian people do Chinese food much better than Chinese people'. Other culinary traditions, such as eating outside the home (cf. Conlan 1995), have survived the introduction of a range of 'global' cuisines. The weekend family outing to a restaurant – most often on a Sunday night – was commonplace amongst all generations. One retired man spoke about going to restaurants at least once a week and at the weekend and about the popularity of outdoor eating such as family picnics.

Our work on transnational fashion also challenges simplistic notions about the Westernization of 'Asian' dress. We demonstrate, instead, that the pace of change is socially and spatially uneven in both London and Mumbai, with evidence of 'multiple modernities' rather than a single East–West gradient. So, for example, many of our Indian respondents were keen to emphasize the modernity of Mumbai, whether in terms of the fast pace of life, the city's ability to absorb a wide range of international influences, or the increased freedom of contemporary consumer choice. The commonly assumed contrast between 'Western' modernity and 'Eastern' tradition was not only resisted by many of our focus group participants but was, in

some cases, reversed. A group of University students in Mumbai insisted that their cousins living overseas were more traditional in terms of dress than they were because, nowadays, 'you can get everything in Mumbai'. Young women in the fashion industry were also adamant that their relatives in the UK were very much behind the trends in Indian clothing. Members of one of our London-based groups recalled how 'they're more clued up' in India and Pakistan than in Britain:

We never know what the fashions are going [to be] in Pakistan or India, and suddenly we're five years behind them, we're wearing something they wore five years ago and you go over there and you feel, 'Oh my God, I'm out of fashion'.

Walton-Roberts and Pratt (2004) report similar findings from their work with Non-Resident Indians in Canada and Britain, where India was said to be more modern in terms of fashion and style than Britain, challenging the arrogant assumption that modernity resides exclusively in the West. A group of British-Asian students in London described how they sought to 'keep up with what's happening in Bollywood films, what the stars are wearing and stuff', acknowledging how this meant that they were 'always behind what the style is like': 'I'm always out of fashion compared to my cousins'.⁹

'Consumer nationalism' in China

While the penetration of foreign consumer goods in China could be read, at one level, as a simple case of globalization, with companies like Coca-Cola and Pepsi buying up the leading local soft drinks firms and 'extinguishing' their brand names, here too recent work by Beverley Hooper (2000) finds evidence of hybridization, indigenization and resistance to these trends. Some forms of consumer resistance are quite explicit, as when students in Nanjing shouted *dado Maidanglao* ('down with McDonald's') as they marched past a local restaurant, or when a protestor in Guangzhou held up a placard that read: 'I'd rather die of thirst than drink Coca-Cola. I'd rather starve to death than eat McDonald's' (Hooper 2000, 452).

But there are also more subtle forms of protest, including those that are expressed in the language of 'consumer nationalism'. The majority of foreign goods in China are Japanese or American, with consumer preferences explained in terms of quality and reliability as well as status. Although US and Japanese goods are generally equated with modernity

and sophistication, their consumption is tempered by China's long history of foreign domination, described by Hooper as a humiliating experience that left an indelible mark. As well as political demonstrations, strikes and boycotts against foreign goods dating back over a century, Hooper also notes how the media have likened the arrival of foreign consumer products to an 'invasion', while government officials and manufacturers have sought to promote local products through the language of 'consumer nationalism' (*xiaofei minzu-zhuyi*). So, for example, local producers of beauty products and fast food have sought to capitalize on their greater cultural knowledge of Chinese consumers, inventing or reviving cultural tradition for their own commercial purposes. In competing with Kentucky Fried Chicken, for example, the Shanghai-based Ronghua Fried Chicken Company has argued that its product is 'more suitable' for local tastes (using a marinade of twenty-one traditional Chinese herbs that are claimed to have medicinal value, along with other 'special ingredients' that are said to restore consumers' *yingyang* balance (Hooper 2000, 457)). Similarly, local manufacturers of hair and beauty products claim to understand the distinctiveness of the 'Oriental woman' (*dangfang nüxing*) or 'Asian woman' (*Yazhou nüxing*). Foreign firms have hit back, with the French company L'Oréal recruiting Chinese film star and celebrity Gong Li as the local 'face of L'Oréal': 'the very embodiment of Chinese elegance and beauty' (Hooper 2000, 460). The use of these Orientalist constructions clearly demonstrates the adoption of countervailing strategies, if not outright resistance, to the influx of global products into China (cf. Davis 2000).

Louisa Schein (1999) provides further evidence of the complexity of consumer desire in post-Mao China, much of which cannot be captured purely in terms of 'globalization'. She notes that for many Chinese consumers, especially those in rural areas with limited financial resources, consumption takes the form of spectatorship rather than acquisition, with the media and advertising being the object of consumption rather than the goods themselves. Social practices of imagining, longing, yearning and desire are all central to this form of consumption, eroticizing commodities according to complex regimes of sexuality and gender. Such desire is clearly 'de-territorialized' in the sense that consumers can enter this virtual commodity space without the goods being physically accessible to

them. But it is also an intensely 'local' form of consumption in the sense that the meanings of particular goods are shaped by specific cultural forces, as demonstrated by Schein's own work among the Miao minority in Guizhou province in South-west China. In this context, luxury goods are accessed via popular magazines and satellite television. Schein describes the 'reservoirs of envy' that such consumer goods can generate, referring to the 'wild craving' and 'commodity enslavement' that can result (Schein 1999, 347). As an anthropologist, she compares the situation of contemporary China with the cargo cults that were common in early twentieth-century New Guinea, where the desire for consumer goods was 'magically' resolved in a context of wide economic disparities and where foreign goods were associated with prestige (cf. Burridge 1960; Worsley 1968). Schein quotes Georg Simmel's argument that 'We desire objects only if they are not immediately given to us for our use and enjoyment . . . only to be attained by the conquest of distance, obstacles and difficulties', suggesting that in this case 'distance' has a strongly transnational and inter-racial character (Schein 1999, 358). Consumer desire, Schein suggests, is a way of overcoming spatial constraint, acquiring 'worldliness' or 'imagined cosmopolitanism' through (often indirect) engagement with the world of goods.

There is a clear parallel here with Hooper's argument (above) where consumer desire is not for some undifferentiated 'global' Other. Rather, Schein argues, Chinese consumers of transnational media in mainland China are imagining themselves as part of a larger community of Chinese 'co-ethnics', exploring a range of alternative Chinese modalities besides those that are promoted in state-defined forms of Chinese-ness. These alternatives include a longing to be re-united with Chinese Others outside the borders of the Chinese state, where consumption may signal a new or recuperated form of collective identity (cf. Yang 1997).¹⁰ Schein maintains that China's distinctive history can also be discerned in the way that consumer desire is eroticized in the media with images of the 'sexy young thing', virtually absent from public culture during the Maoist period, rapidly joining long-established images of the 'good wife' and 'wise mother' (1999, 364). Schein concludes that Chinese consumerism bears the deep imprint of the globally hegemonic mode in which commodities are sexualized, gendered feminine, rendered spectacular and associated with the space of leisure and affluent consumption. But

also that it is rooted in the specificities of Chinese history that have led to the relationship between consumption and the erotic being expressed in a distinctive idiom (1999, 366).

'Artful consumption' in Russia

My third example is taken from Katerina Gerasimova's (2003) examination of the consumption practices of 'ordinary consumers' in the post-war Soviet economy, based on life-history research in Leningrad and St Petersburg and covering the period from 1945 to 1991. She identifies a culture of 'artful consumption', a term that applies not just to the acquisition phase of consumer goods, but also to what she describes as the post-commodity phase of use and re-use (cf. Gregson and Crewe 2003). Gerasimova documents the way that the meaning of goods is transformed through use, including the personalization of things through practices of mending and repair, handing things on to successive generations or finding new uses for goods that no longer serve their original purpose. Gerasimova argues that during the Soviet period many goods were produced in such a way as to encourage subsequent repair, with disposal regarded as a last resort. Notions of 'luxury' and 'fashion' (such as the seasonal renewal of clothing) were frowned upon, with a disdain for material things indicating a person's commitment to a higher spiritual plane.

Gerasimova also argues that subject-object relations were very different in the Soviet period. A faulty boiler would be repaired not just because it was costly to replace but because such objects were regarded as subjects in their own right. The imperative to 'mend and make do' was premised on an understanding of the subjectivity of material objects, treated like 'comrades' whose lives should be extended wherever possible. Having the knowledge about how things work (or the knack of getting them going again) was a collectively valued asset. Soviet consumers were adept in the arts of storage, exchange, barter and hoarding ('just in case'), with many goods being diverted from their intended use (such as instant baby milk used to bake cakes, or flour used to make wallpaper paste). Disused furniture would be taken to the *dacha* (country house) or gifted to a relative rather than being discarded. While their apartments might be full of stuff, this should not be taken as evidence of 'conspicuous consumption'. Rather, Gerasimova suggests, repair and re-use were practical strategies in a context of chronic shortage, but were also

indicative of a domestic economy that gave consumers some independence from the state.

Caroline Humphrey takes up the story, examining the flow of imported goods that accompanied the coming of a market economy in the former Soviet Union during the 1980s. Rather than being unambiguously welcomed, her research suggests that contemporary Russian attitudes to consumption are 'complex, sometimes negative, and subject to rapid historical change' (Humphrey 1995, 43). Consumer attitudes and practices, Humphrey argues, demonstrate a strong degree of persistence from the late Soviet period, with the rapidity of recent social change leading to a population that is polarized by generation, separating those who came of age in the Soviet period from those whose adult experience postdates the Gorbachev reforms. In the Soviet era, virtually all consumer goods were manufactured by state enterprises and distributed according to centralized plans. Though they may have been manufactured at some distance from where they were consumed, most goods were unequivocally regarded as *nashi* ('ours'), unlike the recent flood of imported goods that are decidedly *ne nashi* ('not ours'). While the vast majority of Russians continue to subsist on very low incomes, their attitudes to consumption are now shaped by a greater knowledge of the wider world.

Humphrey's work on contemporary consumption in Moscow (based on fieldwork in the mid-1990s) suggests that many long-established practices have continued. These include the layout of stores, the display of goods and the culture of queuing. Drawing on Bukovskii's *Letters of a Russian traveller* (1981), she suggests that long-established images of 'deception' (*obman*) associated with the former Soviet government have been extended to contemporary attitudes towards Western consumer goods through a culture of habitual cynicism that refuses to take things at face value (Humphrey 1995, 45). Many employers (both state and private) continue to pay their employees in coupons or vouchers (which are exempt from tax), perpetuating older forms of centrally determined distribution. Other companies were unable to pay wages and closed down for months at a time. As a result, Humphrey reports, Russians commonly divide their money into cash in hand (*nalichniye*) and notional money owed to one (*beznalichniye*). With a general shortage of *nalichniye*, the shops may be full of glittering consumer goods but most consumers are forced to search for cheap basic goods,

reinforcing the perception that the market-economy is based on a deception. Humphrey recounts the feelings of a Soviet visitor to the West:

all these things must be for show (*napokaz*) like in a Soviet shop window, and of course no-one will buy them. That is why there are no queues and such huge quantities of goods lie around unsold. Real goods must be procured with difficulty (*dobyvat*), unearthed (*otkopit*), obtained on the side (*nalevo*), from under the counter, or from such crafty places as are known only to the dedicated. (Humphrey 1995, 57)

In the post-Soviet period, Western goods in Russia are also looked on with suspicion, confirming consumers' expectations that they will again be deceived. While consumer goods might once have signalled defiance of the official regime, however, they are now associated with the government's economic reforms and with the rise of an entrepreneurial class of New Russians whose shady dealings have come to epitomize that process. Buying distinctively 'Russian' goods – such as land on which to build a *dacha* – is regarded as a sound investment whose desirability is demonstrated by the privations that consumers are prepared to endure in order to afford it. A culture of saving and self-denial has become pervasive, where many ordinary Russians would rather rely on family and social networks than on the vagaries of the market. Far from producing a homogenization of consumer culture, following the impact of 'globalization', Humphrey concludes that the bewildering pace of recent change in the former Soviet Union has produced a heterogeneity of cultures, where consumption (and the refusal to consume) remains deeply embedded within long-standing social attitudes and moral ideas about the political-economy.¹¹

Current debates and future research directions

Reviewing the foregoing case study evidence from India, China and Russia has, I hope, demonstrated the persistence of 'local' cultures of consumption and countered some of the homogenizing claims that have been made in the name of 'globalization'. If local consumption cultures clearly persist, in what areas should future research be focused? In this section, I consider some unresolved issues in current consumption research and highlight some potentially fruitful areas for future work.

Consumption and material culture

Since the early 1990s there has been much talk of the 'rematerialization' of social and cultural geography.¹² While this move has generally been welcomed, the meaning that attaches to the 'material' has been the subject of considerable debate. For some commentators (such as Gregson 1995), the emphasis is on reuniting the study of consumption cultures with the material inequalities that are associated with social relations of gender, class, race, sexuality and (dis)ability. For others, it is about how we engage with the material world, requiring 'a deep redescription' of what constitutes a social explanation (Latour 2000). Asking why things matter (Miller 1998) raises ontological issues about the nature of matter itself. In Miller's original thesis, mass consumption was heralded as the dominant context through which people relate to the world of goods (Miller 1987). Miller's argument focused on the concept of 'objectification' which he described in terms of a process of externalization (or self-alienation) and sublation (or re-absorption). Material objects, in Miller's view, are always embedded in specific cultural contexts. Artefacts are cultural forms not just in the sense that they 'mirror' or 'reflect' the social relations within which they are embedded. Rather, according to Miller, material culture has a constitutive character, 'objectifying' social relations.

This 'return to the physical' has been welcomed by many, but regarded as problematic by others. In particular, Kearnes (2003) has challenged the implicit dichotomizing of an objective material world and a subjective textual or discursive world. For Kearnes and others, a critical (re)engagement with the material would need to pay greater attention to the 'wayward expressiveness' of matter, including its capacities to act outside its relation with human subjects. Such an approach is consistent with the recent emphasis in actor-network theory on the agency of non-human actants and on a relational understanding of objects and subjects (Thrift 1996; Whatmore 2002). This is a radically different notion from a simple 'return' to a lost materialism and unsettles conventional notions of physicality. Kearnes' critique raises important philosophical questions regarding our understanding of the material world, challenging any easy assumption of a distinction between words and experience, premised on a belief in any pre-discursive reality.

Consumption as social practice

A second area of current debate concerns the practical nature of consumption versus the rhetorical invocation of consumer subjectivities. References to 'consumers' and particularly to 'consumer choice' are now widely regarded as problematic. In contemporary political discourse, consumers are constructed in particular ways to suit the prevailing ideological agenda. So, for example, within constructions of 'enterprise culture', DuGay argues that

consumers are constituted as autonomous, self-regulating and self-actualizing individual actors, seeking to maximize their 'quality of life' by assembling a lifestyle, or lifestyles, through personalized acts of choice in the market place. (1996, 77)

New Labour's recent emphasis on consumer choice is no less ideological in its own way, claiming to put consumers centre-stage while simultaneously replacing 'real' consumers with a range of agencies that claim to represent their interests.¹³ Because of the problematic nature of these terms, there have been recent calls to focus instead on consumption as practice.

Theories of practice challenge the conventional social science emphasis on discourse and representation, focusing instead on the flow of events. They emphasize how the social is always in a process of becoming, sustained through more-or-less durable networks of connection and through various socio-technical apparatuses. So, for example, in Shove's (2003) work on the social organization of normality, the emphasis is on the myriad daily rituals that reproduce our daily lives. Taking a shower, washing clothes or turning on the central heating are now an unreflective part of many people's everyday lives. But the constructions of comfort, cleanliness and convenience that these practices enable clearly involve a diverse range of technological procedures and practical know-how. Approaching these changes to our domestic environment through notions of social practice rather than as discursive formations leads to radically new conceptualizations and, potentially, to new forms of political action.

Applied to the study of consumption, theories of practice offer a radical alternative to the conventional emphasis on individual decisionmaking. Practices can be understood as routinized and socially embedded forms of behaviour that require skill and competence to enact (Williams *et al.* 2001).

According to the sociologist Alan Warde (2003), studying consumption as practice requires an understanding of the history and development of the practice itself, the internal differentiation of roles and positions within those practices, and the consequences for how different people are positioned when participating. From this perspective, Warde argues that 'the consumer' – a figure that has bewitched political and social scientists as well as economists for generations – evaporates (Warde 2003, 6). Instead, Warde argues, the focus should be on how practices are organized and on how moments of consumption are enjoined. Empirical research would then focus on what types of practice are prevalent in different situations, what range of available practices particular individuals engage in, and what typical combinations of practices occur in particular times and places.

The turn to practice has also been accompanied by a shift to more 'ordinary' (less conspicuous) forms of consumption, as in Gronow and Warde's (2001) work on the consumption of utilities, such as water, gas and electricity, where there is limited scope for consumers to make 'identity' choices through switching suppliers. Instead, their work focuses on the socio-technical infrastructure that is required to facilitate particular consumption choices – an approach that might fruitfully be applied to other kinds of consumption practices.¹⁴ Rather than seeing consumption as primarily a leisure pursuit involving a choice of consumer 'lifestyles' (cf. Shields 1992), focusing on consumption as practice also leads to a re-emphasis on consumption as work, accomplished by skilled social actors with finite resources. As our current work on grocery shopping in Portsmouth (referred to in the previous footnote) demonstrates, most consumption 'choices' are orientated around routine provisioning activities within often tightly constrained household budgets. An emphasis on practices of doing, use and appropriation is beginning to emerge in recent consumption work (cf. Gregson *et al.* 2003), leading to a re-examination of the way that consumption practices are embedded within the complex rhythms and everyday domestic routines of contemporary households.¹⁵

Commodity-specific consumption cultures

Geographical work on consumption has tended to focus on a relatively narrow range of goods, principally food and fashion and, to a lesser extent, music and other communications media (including

the Internet). These are sensible places on which to focus in the sense that they involve a series of material and symbolic geographies that stretch across a variety of scales, from the body and the home, to the neighbourhood and the nation and beyond. But the choice of commodities may also restrict the range of spatialities that we consider. A wider range of commodities has been investigated in anthropology, including recent work on homes and gardens, office paper, political banners, cars, soft drinks and radio (cf. Miller 1998 2001a 2001b). Geographers have recently begun to address a wider range of consumer goods and services including mobile phones (Laurier 2001), complementary medicine (Doel and Segrott 2003) and interior design (Leslie and Reimer 2003). But little attention has yet been paid to the comparative issue of whether it might be possible to identify commodity-specific consumption cultures.

My own recent work on the geographies of transnational food and fashion (with Philip Crang and Claire Dwyer) attempted to address this issue, mainly in relation to questions of consumer identity. In some accounts, food is considered to be a stronger marker of identity than fashion because it is literally incorporated within the body (cf. Valentine 2003). While some observers have tended to dismiss the cultural significance of clothing because of the ephemerality of fashion, others have pointed to the close connection between clothing and the body (Entwistle and Wilson 2001). This is partly a matter of different research traditions, where cultural studies have tended to adopt a semi-otic approach to clothing-as-sign – as displayed on the hanger or the catwalk – while feminist social science has been keen to explore clothing-as-worn, going 'through the wardrobe' (Guy *et al.* 2001) to investigate the social significance of clothing in terms of the wearer's embodied identity. Nonetheless, the material properties of food – including its organic qualities – give it a heightened significance for consumers, particularly in terms of the health issues that have beleaguered the British food industry in recent years. In our research on transnational food and fashion, we found British consumers to have been much more ready to appropriate 'Indian' cuisine than they have been to wear 'Asian' clothing such as *salwaar-kameez* or *saris*. While it could be argued that British high-street fashion has been influenced in more subtle ways by a variety of 'Asian' styles (cf. Bhachu 2004), clothing is clearly a highly charged

commodity whose cultural significance should not be disparaged.¹⁶

Our current work on food commodity chains underlines the extent to which different commodities – in this case, chicken and sugar – are invested with quite different degrees of emotional intensity.¹⁷ For example, some people might regard chicken as just another commodity, including the manager of a West Country chicken hatchery who we interviewed who argued that ‘It’s all to do with money with chicken really, you shuffle chicken like you shuffle money really’. Yet, later in the same interview this respondent talked about how ‘You’ve got to look after them [chickens] just like I look after my wife, they need tender loving care and that’s all that matters to them really’. In deploring contemporary consumers’ lack of knowledge about where food comes from, he was also quick to remind us that ‘Some people might just think milk comes from a bottle [and] eggs come from a cardboard box, but there’s a chicken at the end ... a live thing at the end’. Chicken production is, at once, a highly intensive, industrialized process and simultaneously a constant battle with unruly nature. While chicken production has become highly politicized as a result of a series of ‘food scares’ including, most recently, the outbreak of avian flu, sugar is generally regarded as a much more mundane product, despite its historical associations with slavery and the current furore over the possible ending of EU subsidies.¹⁸

Political, ethical and methodological issues

Researching consumption and commodity culture also raises important political, ethical and methodological issues. I refer specifically to Castree’s (2004) recent critique which calls for greater precision in the use of terms such as commodities, commodification and commoditization. Castree’s concerns go much deeper than the call for semantic clarity. He also advocates a deeper engagement with normative issues and a clarification of our role as ‘critical’ academics. Castree provides some helpful indications of how such research might progress, distinguishing between two properties that are inherent to the commodity form: monetary exchange and alienability, citing Radin’s (1996) work where commodities are defined as things that can be legally and physically alienated from those who own or produce them. This allows her to adopt and defend a moral position that some things, such as children, should not be commodified (by way of

surrogacy or slavery, for example), even though there may be some people who are prepared to buy and sell them (to enter into monetary exchange). Castree is surely right to try and disinter the normative questions that lay buried in recent consumption research and to pursue these questions empirically, as in his own work on bio-prospecting (Castree 2003).

My final point concerns the challenges that recent theoretical developments raise for the ‘doing’ of contemporary consumption research. The recent emphasis on commodity chains and circuits, networks and assemblages (reviewed in Jackson 2002) has important methodological implications. Not only are researchers being called upon to conduct what anthropologists have called multi-site ethnography (Marcus 1995), tracing the flow of commodities from source to sales-point (and beyond into cycles of use and re-use). We are also now being required to demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of the inter-penetration of social and natural systems. In calling for research into ‘the visceral, mortal and, above all, interconnected rhythms of living people, animals, plants and places’, Whatmore (1999, 259) outlines a compelling agenda for future research on the ‘lively spaces’ that fall in-between existing divisions of intellectual labour. But we should not underestimate the demands that such work will make on researchers, many of whom have been trained in a radically different tradition.

What might such research look like? Cook and Harrison’s (2003) recent work on ‘cross-over food’ strikes me as exemplary of the challenges and potential of future research in this field. Their work seeks to reinstate the significance of material inequalities that has been elided in much recent work in postcolonial theory, with its characteristic emphasis on texts and discourses. It does so through closely observed empirical work at the local level, making connections that extend literally around the globe. The specific focus of their work is the apparent failure of Caribbean food to cross-over into the British ‘mainstream’. Cook and Harrison use a mixture of documentary and field-based research to explore the way that two Jamaican companies (Grace, Kennedy & Co. and Walkerswood Caribbean Foods) have negotiated this transition. While the local manufacturing and marketing of hot pepper sauces and seasonings may not, at first sight, appear to be of ‘global’ significance, as the story unfolds it speaks directly to current debates

about hybridity, resistance, ambivalence, scale-jumping, boundary-crossing and a more material form of cultural politics. Cook and Harrison's empirically rich and theoretically grounded case study effectively de-centres European colonial discourses (of 'modernization' and 'progress'), opposes the rigid compartmentalization of histories, geographies and identities, and provides a viable alternative reading of these histories and geographies that is not rooted in Europe. What looks like a 'failure' to cross-over, from the perspective of 'mainstream' (British and North American) food marketing, looks quite different when these dichotomous relations (between 'mainstream' and 'margin') are challenged and when less bounded definitions of 'culture' and 'economy' are applied. Their methodological injunction – to trace a multitude of inter-connections across space and time – can be applied to countless other examples.¹⁹

Conclusion

In this paper I have sought to review recent work in geography and related social sciences that demonstrates the resilience of local consumption cultures, challenging some of the more inflated claims that have been made in the name of 'globalization'. Marshalling evidence from around the globe demonstrates the way that producers have had to 'customize' their products for different markets and how different places have evolved distinctive cultures of consumption. Future research agendas are likely to include a re-emphasis on material culture, an exploration of consumption as social practice (and of the human and non-human networks within which those practices are enacted), the delineation of commodity-specific consumption cultures, and a deeper engagement with the normative (moral, political and ethical) questions that are raised in 'doing' consumption research.

Little more than ten years ago it was possible to write about the relative paucity of geographical research on consumption (Jackson 1993). The present situation is very different, with new research on consumption appearing almost daily. Consumption studies, informed by social theory and addressing feminist and postcolonial agendas, have become a dominant paradigm, particularly within certain (mainly British) strands of cultural studies and human geography. Work in the US has lagged behind somewhat, though American social scientists like Harvey Molotch and Sharon Zukin have

begun to populate (and popularize) the field.²⁰ The dangers of any academic field becoming hegemonic are that work within it begins to lose the radical, cutting edge qualities that first made it attractive to researchers. We might guard against this by retaining our commitment to specific political and ethical agendas, by adopting new methodologies and empirical foci, and by always seeking out new connections between fields, among disciplines and across scales. Now might be a good time for consolidating and deepening our existing knowledge. But the recent history of our discipline suggests that new research directions are more likely to be theoretically driven, with our intellectual terrain itself becoming a site of struggle. While 'globalization' has been a dominant feature of our collective geographical imaginations in recent years, this paper has sought to demonstrate that local geography still matters, particularly when mapping the contours of specific consumption cultures.

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Notes

- 1 Held (2004) suggests that we should distinguish between four 'dimensions' of globalization: the *stretching* of social relations, the *intensification* of global flows, the *interpenetration* of economic and social practices at all scales, and the development of institutional *infrastructure* for governing the global system.
- 2 See, for example, George Ritzer's various accounts of 'McDonaldization' (1993 1998) and Barry Smart's (1999) collection of essays on *Resisting McDonaldization*.
- 3 See also Watson's (1998) account of the expansion of McDonald's in East Asia.
- 4 John Sinclair (1987) provides a catalogue of failed attempts to globalize different brands. His examples include General Motors' attempt to sell the Nova car in Spain, where the brand name translates literally as 'doesn't go', and the 'Come alive with Pepsi' campaign which translates into Mandarin Chinese as 'bring your ancestors back from the dead with Pepsi'.
- 5 Cadbury's were not alone, of course, and by 1995 Coca-Cola had 16 plants in China, Kentucky Fried Chicken was well represented in most major Chinese cities and the McDonald's restaurant near Tian'anmen Square was said to be the largest in the world (Wood and Grosvenor 1997, 175).

- 6 The project was entitled 'Commodity culture and South Asian transnationality' and was funded under ESRC's 'Transnational Communities' programme (Award No. L214252031).
- 7 We follow our respondents in their usage of 'Mumbai' / 'Bombay'.
- 8 This quotation is reminiscent of Narayan's work on the British appropriation of 'Indian' food which argues that 'when the British incorporated curry into British cuisine ... they were incorporating the Other into the self, but on the self's terms' (1995, 65). Significantly, in terms of our argument about the local impact of 'globalization', Narayan goes on to argue that the influence of the colonies on colonizing powers is as complicated a matter as the impact of the colonizers on their colonies (1995, 68).
- 9 A similar argument could be made about Indian music (thinking of *bhangra*, for example) where the complex process of cultural borrowing is closely related to constructions of social difference. For an ethnographically grounded study of musical appropriations, see Born and Hesmondhalgh (2000).
- 10 Dutton goes so far as to argue that 'Many consumers in China do not operate with the notion of individuality that underpins even the most mass-produced of fashion products in the West. For these Chinese', he argues, 'fashion is not constructed to mark out one's individuality, but to mark out one's success'. 'Success', in this context, 'means choosing a coat that everyone else is wearing for, to see others in the same coat, dress, trousers or shirt is not a sign of social disgrace, but a mark of wisdom and affluence' (Dutton 1998, 274).
- 11 These ideas about morality and the market are taken up in Mandel and Humphrey (2002) and in Humphrey's own recent work on everyday economies after socialism (Humphrey 2002).
- 12 See my editorial on this theme (Jackson 2000), taken up in different contexts by Lees (2002) and in the new book series on *Re-materialising cultural geography* to be edited by Mark Boyle and Don Mitchell (<http://www.ashgate.com>).
- 13 Compare the Department of Trade and Industry's (1999) White Paper *Modern markets, confident consumers* (Cm 4410) with Marsden *et al.*'s (2000) analysis of the way consumer interests have been subsumed within a retail-led form of food governance. For a wider argument along these lines, see Carrier and Miller's (1998) critique of the new political economy of 'virtualism'.
- 14 We attempt such an approach in our current work on 'Retail competition and consumer choice', a project involving collaboration with Ian Clarke, Alan Hallsworth, Ronan de Kervenoael and Rossana Perez del Aguila, funded by ESRC (Award No. R000239531).
- 15 Gregson *et al.*'s (2002) earlier work on charity shopping demonstrates that an emphasis on practice is as much about relations of looking as it is about consumers' relations with material goods. Their work also makes the important point that consumption practices do not simply involve a choice between pre-given consumption spaces. Rather, such spaces are relational constructions in which consumers themselves help create the places they consume.
- 16 See, for example, Banerjee and Miller's (2003) recent work on the sari, which demonstrates how this most simply constructed yet highly iconic garment reveals the intricacies of life in modern India. The book is also richly illustrated and grounded in first-person narratives, giving it an immediacy and visual appeal that is all too rare in recent consumption studies.
- 17 The project involves collaboration with Rob Perks, Neil Ward and Polly Russell and is funded by the AHRB-ESRC 'Cultures of Consumption' programme (Award No. RES-143-25-0026).
- 18 On the history and politics of sugar production, see Mintz (1985) and on its 'democratization' (from a precious luxury good to a ubiquitous necessity), see Woloson (2002). The main exceptions to British consumers' apolitical view of sugar are those who are campaigning against the impact of EU subsidies on the ACP (African, Caribbean and Pacific) countries and those who associate sugar with obesity and related health problems, particularly among children. In general, though, as in the US (Hollander 2003), British producers have been very successful in 're-naturalizing' sugar.
- 19 The specific connections outlined by Cook and Harrison include those between formerly colonizing and formerly colonized people and places; between culture, economy, politics, religion, music, tourism and (culinary) history; between events in the 1940s, the 1970s, the present day and centuries before; between Jamaica, the UK, North America, Costa Rica, the Philippines, Thailand, India and many other places; between growing, manufacturing, importing, distributing, marketing, retailing and consuming specific products; between escallion, scotch bonnet peppers, salt, black pepper, allspice, nutmeg, citric acid, sugar, thyme and jerk pork or chicken; between imaginative geographies, meal preparation times, product promotions, bench-mark culinary experiences, the weather, supermarket expectations, consistent product quality, regularity of supply and competing prices; and between globalization, diaspora and two types of hybridity: cultural and material-semiotic (2003, 311).
- 20 Molotch's (2003) work on 'where stuff comes from' strives to show how ordinary goods (like paperclips, toasters and VCRs) combine art and utility, frivolity and seriousness, form and function, as part of a common universe of aesthetic, economic and social concerns. Zukin's (2003) work focuses on shopping as a window on contemporary American culture, simultaneously demonstrating its connectedness with distant people and places.

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