

Spatializing commodity chains

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Abstract: There has been a growing interest in connecting production and consumption through the study of commodity chains. We identify three distinct approaches to the chain and review debates concerning the merits of a 'vertical' rather than a 'horizontal' approach. Drawing upon the example of the home furnishings commodity chain, the article highlights the importance of including horizontal factors such as gender and place alongside vertical chains. We consider geographical contingencies which underpin commodity chain dynamics, the role of space in mediating relationships across the chain and the spatialities of different products.

Key words: commodity chains, consumer culture, gender, home furnishings industry, space.

I Introduction

The topic of consumption has begun to receive considerable attention within geography. Rather than suggesting that cultural processes are simply reflective of economic or political factors, recent discussions have begun to emphasize the constitutive nature of culture within society (Crang, 1997; du Gay *et al.*, 1997: 2) and to underscore the centrality of consumer cultures to social life (Lury, 1996; Slater, 1997). This 'turn' to consumption should not be taken to suggest that the phenomenon is purely contemporary. Rather, commodity cultures are central features of modernity itself (Slater, 1997). None the less, it is only recently that geographers and other social scientists have begun to rethink creatively the implications of consumption for economics and politics (Miller, 1995: 1; 1998).

For Miller (1995: 33), consumption has become

the fulcrum of dialectical contradiction. On the one hand, consumption appears as the key contemporary 'problem' responsible for massive suffering and inequality. At the same time it is the locus of any future 'solution' as a progressive movement in the world, by making the alienatory institutions of trade and government finally responsible for the consequences of their actions.

Miller (1995) views consumption rather than production as the new vanguard of history and as a key site through which political options must be articulated. He suggests that

it is the bourgeois female rather than the working-class male who will become the progressive force in the twenty-first century (Miller, 1995). While such arguments are polemical, it has become increasingly important to locate the consequences of our consumer choices and to forge a politics of consumption. Nava (1992) sees the potential for consumer struggles which are neither liberal nor individualistic, but rather are radical and collectivist.

Recent work on consumer culture reveals a broad range of perspectives, from those such as Slater (1997) and Miller (1994) who emphasize the growth of a more extensive material culture alongside the development of modern capitalism, to considerations of consumption as 'the articulation of a sense of identity' (Mackay, 1997: 4). Slater (1997: 2) has recently suggested that 'consumer culture is probably less a field . . . and more a spaghetti junction of intersecting disciplines, methodologies, politics'. The diversity of writings on consumption notwithstanding, one of the most problematic spaces within consumption debates concerns the gap between materialist analyses which often ignore the symbolic meanings of commodities, and culturalist writings which often remain 'sociologically ungrounded' in that they fail to engage with questions of poverty, exploitation and differential opportunities for consumption (McRobbie, 1997: 81; see also Madigan and Munro, 1996).

In recent years there has been an emerging interest in bringing together the analysis of different sites, including production, distribution, retailing, design, advertising, marketing and final consumption. This focus on commodity chains or systems of provision examines consumption from the vantage point of one commodity and traces the reworking of meaning along different sites in the chain. Commodity chain analyses provide a means of thinking more precisely about the specific practices which shape the flow of goods: as Mort and Thompson (1994: 109) have argued, 'a sectorally-specific analysis provides a useful antidote to the problems of overgenerality'. The difficulty with master narratives of change is not that they are wrong, but rather that we need to consider the specificities of different sectors. Further, in viewing the chain as a whole, commodity chain analyses provide a space for political action by reconnecting producers and consumers (McRobbie, 1997).

Our central contention is that space and place shape the nature of systems of provision in significant ways. It is important to consider the spatiality of commodity chains for a number of reasons. First, understanding the ways in which chains vary through time and space is essential both to the articulation of a politics of consumption and to the formation of industrial policy. It can lead to the development of regionally specific policies targeted at particular industrial sectors. Secondly, the recognition that space plays an important role in mediating relationships along the chain can also assist in the formation of more comprehensive policies co-ordinating all sites, not just production. Thirdly, commodity chains culminate in the production of space. Sites such as the home need to be considered in terms of their role in shaping the dynamics of chains. Recognizing the way consumers transform and use commodities can illuminate the power of consumer resistance. Finally, through a focus on place we can appreciate the 'leakiness' of chains and the ways in which goods are linked at retailing, advertising or consumption sites. Thus a spatial approach is helpful in guiding both policy and politics.

Gender is central to the logic of the commodity chain: a politics of consumption

cannot be articulated through class alone. With reference to the fashion industry, Angela McRobbie (1997: 85) argues:

... fashion is a *feminist issue*. It is comprised of six component parts: manufacture and production; design; retail and distribution; education and training; the magazine and fashion media and the practices of consumption. If we consider these one at a time, demonstrating their mutual dependence as well as their apparent distance from each other, it is possible to see a set of tensions and anxieties which in turn provide opportunities for political debate and social change.

Recognizing new forms of consumer activism has benefits in that it appeals to groups (such as women and young people) traditionally marginalized from workplace and/or electoral struggles (Nava, 1992). Given that women still wield 80% of purchasing power (Nava, 1992: 198), gender is of fundamental importance both to the study of commodity chains and to a politics of consumption.

In this article we review recent work on commodity chains, systems of provision and circuits of culture. Moving beyond the theorization of commodity chains as governed purely by competitive dynamics, we demonstrate that chains are not simply structured through class divisions or the functional positions of producer and consumer. Rather than viewing systems of provision exclusively as linear chains, we highlight multiple and shifting connections between sites. There are complex spatialities at work: discourses of gender, for example, are articulated in different ways across the chain. Power relations are differentially established across spaces of the chain.

We begin by evaluating the main approaches to the commodity chain. In a second section, we assess the merits of 'vertical' versus 'horizontal' approaches to consumption and address recent criticisms of a commodity chain analysis. A third section argues that despite the spatial connotations of the concept, there has been little work on systems of provision from a geographical perspective. We cite three main ways in which commodity chains might be conceived in more explicitly spatial terms, drawing upon the case of the home furnishings chain. First, chains and their associated lores are geographically contingent, varying across different national, regional and local contexts. Secondly, there is a need to examine places of final consumption such as the home and to foreground the constitutive role of space at all locations in the home furnishings chain. Finally, 'horizontal' factors such as gender and place should be analysed alongside 'vertical' dimensions.

II Conceptualizing the commodity chain

There has been considerable interest in the buyer-supplier interface within the commodity chain. Both the dynamics and the regulation of buyer-supplier relationships have been examined in detail (Crewe and Davenport, 1992; Wrigley, 1992; Arce and Marsden, 1993; Crewe and Forster, 1993a; 1993b; Crewe, 1994; Marsden and Wrigley, 1995; 1996; Shackleton, 1996; Wrigley and Lowe, 1996; Hughes, 1998; Marsden *et al.*, 1998). This work has contributed greatly to our understanding of the mediating role of retailers within the economy, operating at the intersection of production and consumption (Ducatel and Blomley, 1990; Sayer and Walker, 1992; Crewe and Forster, 1993b). Much recent research has also charted the changing balance of power away from suppliers and towards retailers (Crewe and Davenport, 1992; Wrigley, 1992; Gereffi *et al.*, 1994). As yet however, there has been little exploration of multiple sites in

the chain and relatively few commentators have extended their analysis to final consumption.

The notion of the commodity chain traces the entire trajectory of a product from its conception and design, through production, retailing and final consumption. Commodity chains have been defined as the 'network of labour and production processes whose end result is a finished commodity' (Hopkins and Wallerstein, 1986: 159). Chains constitute sets of interorganizational networks clustered around one commodity or product, linking households, enterprises and states (Gereffi *et al.*, 1994: 2).

Although there is considerable overlap and convergence within the commodity chain literature, three distinct strands of work can be identified. There are important differences between these strands in the way each addresses causality, as well as the direction of inquiry and the number of sites included in the analysis. These differences are not incidental but rather reveal contrasting theoretical perspectives which in turn have important political implications. In particular, we highlight significant lacunae within each set of discussions. The *global commodity chain* (GCC) literature frequently passes over the particularity of individual nodes. Although *systems of provision* accounts recognize the interplay between production and consumption, they can overstress production dynamics at the expense of social relations at other sites in the chain. Finally, considerations of *commodity circuits* may obscure questions of exploitation.

Much writing within the global commodity chain tradition derives from world systems theory (Hopkins and Wallerstein, 1986; Marsden and Little, 1990; Appelbaum and Gereffi, 1994; Gereffi *et al.*, 1994). The analytical debt is clear: in the same way that world systems theory accounts are firmly located at the level of the modern world system, GCC narratives tend to centre upon the *global* dynamics of production/consumption/retailing linkages. Further, although Appelbaum and Gereffi (1994: 43) argue that the analytic distinction between 'core' and 'periphery' might be more appropriately applied to nodes in the global commodity chain rather than a single core country, the highly dualistic language of core and periphery is retained in a GCC approach. Appelbaum and Gereffi (1994: 43) are centrally concerned to determine 'where does the global commodity chain "touch down" geographically, why, and with what implications for the extraction and realisation of an economic surplus?' Thus GCC analyses often remain at a surface level, focusing on systems and flows and only periodically examining individual nodes.

In the context of the food systems literature, Arce and Marsden (1993: 296) contend that an 'application of the systems approach effectively suppresses the significance of contextualized human agency – that is, people coping with the uneven nature of contemporary economic and social change . . .' The notion of 'system' is reductionist in that it subsumes observations about gender transformations, labour-force issues, household restructuring or new regimes of capital accumulation. Further, Arce and Marsden insist that the case of food casts doubt on the perceived systemic quality of the international food system which obscures national variations in production and consumption. Rather, we must 'disentangle the notion of the increasing interconnectivity of firms and people in the new period of globalisation from the deterministic and functional assumptions this may all too easily suggest' (Arce and Marsden, 1993: 309).

The direction of inquiry within the GCC literature is highly revealing. Accounts often treat consumption as a starting point from which to trace relations back to the

underlying exploitative reality of production. Hopkins and Wallerstein (1986: 160), for example, begin with final production and then move sequentially backward to raw material inputs. Points of distribution and consumption are merely noted at the outset before commencing the real task of unveiling production and extraction.¹

A second tradition of commodity chain analysis – and perhaps the most comprehensive elaboration of production–consumption relations – derives from Fine and Leopold's (1993) explication of 'systems of provision'. They reject 'horizontal' analyses of consumption, which start from one particular factor influencing consumption (e.g., retailing) and then generalize it across the economy as a whole. Rather Fine and Leopold (1993) argue for a 'vertical' approach which does not isolate common aspects of consumption but instead pinpoints differences in the ways in which production and consumption are linked in various commodities. Different systems of provision are the consequence of distinct relationships between material and cultural practices spanning the production, distribution and consumption of goods (Fine and Leopold, 1993; Fine, 1993; 1995). They argue that 'in explaining consumption, it is not sufficient to depend upon its proximate determinants – in tastes, prices or habit – nor to swing to the opposite extreme and render the system of production the sole determinant of what is consumed, important though it is' (Fine and Leopold, 1993: 4). Such a perspective allows for a more dynamic consideration of consumer behaviour, whereby demand 'has played a more determining role in some periods of history and in some commodities than in others' (Fine and Leopold, 1993: 23).

By considering the intersecting dynamics of production and consumption, a systems of provision approach moves beyond the relatively long-standing polarization in debates surrounding economic transformation within advanced capitalist economies. On the one hand, accounts of flexible specialization have long pointed to the role of consumer demand in shaping the nature of production. It is argued that production is now in fact 'consumer-driven' (Piore and Sabel, 1984; Sabel, 1989). Alternatively, regulationist analyses have tended to emphasize either technological change or the role of regulatory institutions (Harvey, 1989; Walker, 1992). A central difficulty with both sets of literatures is the inadequate way in which consumption has been conceptualized. A systems of provision approach therefore allows for a more balanced treatment of the relationship between production and consumption (see also Gibbs, 1992; Leslie, 1997).

Fine and Leopold (1993: 28) also acknowledge the sign value of commodities and recognize a constantly changing relationship between the symbolic meanings of goods and their physical content: 'the commodity as a use value bound for consumption and as an exchange value deriving from capitalist production necessarily, across each of these facets, exhibits a potential diversity of development. How these two aspects are bound together and mutually change or support each other is the key to understanding consumption.' Different commodities are ideologically constructed according to varying logics. Thus it is important to trace not only commodities, but also discourses, knowledges and representations through systems of provision. One of Fine and Leopold's main interests is in documenting changes over time in the practices and knowledges through which flows of goods are shaped: that is, in specifying the historical contingency of chains. We argue that it is equally important to establish the geographical contingency of systems of provision.

A central shortcoming of much of the commodity chain literature is that the process of 'unveiling' sites is underpinned by a focus on production as the locus of 'reality'

(Clarke and Purvis, 1994; Cook and Crang, 1996a). The aim is to delve below the surface of signs and symbols associated with the product, in order to trace the signified commodity back to the material realities of production. Fine and Leopold's work goes the furthest in avoiding this productionist pitfall. Nevertheless, at times their attempts to understand particular systems such as clothing appear to criticize demand-side explanations while asserting the primary importance of production factors.

A third approach to the investigation of the commodity chain involves tracing commodity 'circuits'. Much of this work combines political economy and poststructuralism and draws upon Johnson's (1996) depiction of a nonlinear circuit. Johnson stresses the transformations of both meaning and form that take place at different 'moments' inhabited by different social practices and draws attention to the system of social divisions in which each moment is located. This notion of a 'circuit of culture' has been utilized to conceptualize the dynamic relationship between producers and consumers of advertising (Jackson and Taylor, 1996); to consider the ways in which geographical knowledges of commodity systems are shaped and reshaped (Cook and Crang, 1996a; Crang, 1996; Cook *et al.*, 1997); and to examine how particular cultural artifacts move through the circuit (du Gay *et al.*, 1997).

Cook and Crang's (1996a) consideration of 'circuits of culinary culture' incorporates a healthy scepticism towards the origins of commodities: they recognize that origins are always constructed. Unlike the notion of a chain, circuits have no beginning or end. Cook and Crang allow for a dense web of interactions between all sites and assume that commodities inter-relate with other goods as they travel. Du Gay *et al.* (1997) situate their study of the Sony Walkman against the backdrop of a number of separate processes whose articulation produces variable and contingent outcomes. Linkages are 'not necessary, determined or absolute and essential for all time' but instead their 'conditions of existence or emergence need to be located in the contingencies of the circumstance' (du Gay *et al.*, 1997: 3). Thus rather than privileging one site – such as production – in interpreting the meaning of an artifact, explanation lies in the combination of different processes.

While a consideration of the commodity chain implies tracing relationships of causality and constructing explanatory sequences, the notion of the circuit is less interested in these connections (Hinchliffe, 1997). The objective of previous commodity chain approaches was to 'thicken' the connections between producers and consumers, yet Crang (1996) worries that although such knowledges aim to inform consumers of the conditions under which products are made, these knowledges are also susceptible to co-optation in strategies of social distinction. An alternative aim involves 'an ethical refusal to find or construct meaning at all, a radical (and hard-fought) passivity that opens up spaces in which consumed objects, subjects, and arenas can just be' (Crang, 1996: 57). Crang (1996) rejects this option and instead advocates an aesthetic reflexivity foregrounding the fabrications made available at different sites. Thus an appropriate politics of consumption involves juxtaposing various snapshots of a product (Bell and Valentine, 1997: 200) and acknowledging the fragmentary and contradictory nature of the knowledges through which commodity systems are imagined (Cook and Crang, 1996a). Rather than assuming that consumers have little knowledge of commodities, their quality and geographical origins, commodity circuits both construct and are reconstructed by consumer knowledge (see also Gregson and Crewe, 1997; Clarke, 1998; Crewe and Gregson, 1998).

One concern raised by the notion of circuitry, however, is whether renouncing the language of the commodity 'chain' means abandoning a language around which we can mobilise. The conceptualization of a '*virtually endless* "circuit of consumption"' (Jackson and Thrift, 1995; 205; emphasis added) may involve the loss of an important political stance: the foregrounding of exploitation. It is for this reason that we are hesitant to abandon the concept of the chain altogether. Aesthetic reflexivity can be an important first step to action but does not always lead to resistance. Furthermore, if 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.

Although there are parallels between the three approaches to the commodity chain, we have identified important differences in the ways in which authors address causality, the particular direction of inquiry they pursue and the number of sites studied on the chain. While we are drawn to the notion of a nonlinear circuit, there remain important reasons for tracing changing lines of power, precisely because it never remains fixed in one site. Commodities may differ in terms of which location in the chain holds the balance of power, with potentially important implications for resistance. However, we would agree with Cook, Crang and others that commodity chain analyses should not privilege one site as the locus of reality. Rather, the aim should be to highlight contradictory organizations and lores available at different sites.

III Horizontal or vertical analyses?

The study of commodities through the lens of chains, circuits or systems of provision has prompted considerable debate. In stressing linkages between production, retailing and consumption, the commodity chain approach foregrounds 'vertical' connections. In contrast, horizontal approaches emphasize how relationships between commodities are forged in distinct places on the chain such as retailing. Debate thus revolves around whether consumption should be studied in terms of particular products (a vertical approach) or whether it should be analysed from the vantage point of themes such as gender or individual sites such as advertising (a horizontal approach). A number of issues are at stake. Is there a vertical uniqueness to individual commodity chains? Does a vertical approach neglect the interconnections between different systems of provision? Is it essential to consider horizontal factors such as gender or place alongside vertical chains?

Miller (1997) argues that in fact, there may be no vertical logic to chains. Given the complexity of sites and factors involved in a single commodity, it is difficult to isolate one particular location as determinant (Miller, 1997: 150). If there is no necessary link between various sites on the chain, there is no reason to study consumption vertically. Drawing upon Attfield's (1992) work on furniture retailing in Britain, Miller argues that although retail is the link between manufacturers and consumers, retailers treat the commercial logic of supply as quite separate from the symbolic representation of goods to the public. For example, furniture that is mass produced may be advertised for its craftsmanship, while hand-made furniture may be advertised as modern and functional. In some cases there may be no relation between an advertising campaign and consumer tastes, yet in others there may be a strong connection between the two. Therefore, 'to ask which is responsible for the innovation becomes a pedantic "chicken

and egg"-style enquiry' (Miller, 1997: 312). Specific processes visible at one stage may have only trivial consequences for another site in the chain.

Thus although Fine emphasizes the need to uncover causal mechanisms through the vertical chain, Miller queries the whole notion of causality as a basis for understanding consumption. While Miller's critique merits consideration, taking his arguments to their extreme can also lead to a theoretical dead-end. To suggest that retailers may treat supply and advertising separately does not mean that one does not have important implications for the other. Du Gay *et al.* (1997: 59), for example, suggest that 'consumer activities were crucial to the introduction, modification and subsequent redevelopment and marketing of [the Walkman]'. That is, consumption dynamics fed back into advertising, retailing and production.

Although there may be affinities between chains, differences are often significant and frequently relate to the logic of the chain as a whole. Gereffi (1994) argues that some chains such as automobiles are producer-driven, while others such as clothing or food are retail-driven. Recent arguments within geography citing the growth of retailer power (Wrigley, 1992) have been based almost exclusively upon the food chain. It remains important to identify differential power relations between sites on individual chains.

The organic or biological nature of food has implications across the entire food system in terms of quality and value (Fine, 1994). Boyd and Watts (1997) suggest that the nature of just-in-time practices in the USA broiler industry derives from both the organic qualities of the product and the distinctive historical and geographical embeddedness of this particular chain in the American South. In particular, the organic nature of the product is tied to high levels of vertical integration in the industry. Food chains are distinct in that they involve complex hybridities: 'food is a liminal substance . . . bridging . . . nature and culture, the human and the natural, the outside and the inside' (Atkinson, 1983: 11). The pollution of ecosystems, growth of genetic engineering of food products and the absorption of chemicals into the bodies of producers and consumers of food mean that there are ethical connectivities between actors at one location in the chain and those at other sites (Whatmore, 1997: 49).

Similarly, McRobbie (1997: 87) has argued that '[fashion] retail workers might recognise themselves to have more in common with other workers in the fashion industry than those employed in selling food or furniture'. While fashion retail workers share low pay, part-time hours and low rates of unionization with other retail employees, aspects of performance and presentation involved in the work are specific to fashion retail and relate to a 'fashion' chain logic. Like female consumers of fashion, retail workers' 'self-image as working in the glamorous fashion industry must surely be undercut by the reality of knowing that in a few years time, possibly with children to support, it is unlikely that they would hold onto the job of decorating the shopfloor at Donna Karan' (McRobbie, 1997: 87). Reintegration of political practices across different sites might allow the transformation of the fashion chain as a whole, 'rather than allowing it to remain a space of exploited production and guilty consumption' (McRobbie, 1997: 87).

In addition to the question of uniqueness, other critics have suggested that vertical approaches neglect interconnections between different systems of provision. Glennie and Thrift (1993: 604) suggest that the symbolic meanings of commodities stem not only from the chain itself, but also from their relation to other commodities: 'interactions

themselves produce new effects which cannot be traced back to any single system.' Similarly, Mort (1997) argues that it is insufficient to study consumption as an aggregation of different commodity chains; rather, research needs to incorporate both horizontal and vertical lines of development. Advertisers and marketers, for example, are involved in selling a wide variety of goods between which they frequently make comparisons. There are frequent overlaps of knowledge on the part of both commercial experts and consumers themselves, who do not view commodities in isolation (Mort, 1997: 17).

Fine *et al.* (1996: 63) have reiterated the benefits of vertical analysis, arguing that an exclusive focus on horizontal explanation leads to a predominantly 'descriptive account of consumption, even if [it] is organised within some analytical framework prioritising one or more horizontal factors'. There is an acceptance that horizontal factors may have a particular role: Fine *et al.* (1996: 63) do not wish the systems of provision approach to 'preclude the analytical legitimacy of abstract categories such as capital, labour and class'. However, they are doubtful of any attempt explicitly to consider horizontal and vertical structuralisms together: in their view, such efforts result in 'analytical degeneration' (Fine *et al.*, 1996: 65). Fine and Leopold (1993: 304) argue that 'systems of provision may well lack the neatness and certainty offered by other, less inclusive, theoretical frameworks. But it will substitute a more revealing dynamism that stretches the capacity to confront issues of great complexity, a power increasingly necessary to generate innovative work in the field of consumption'. Thus while Fine and Leopold seem content to tolerate the 'messiness' of a vertical approach, and even include a comparison of two commodities in their work (food and clothing), they impose a particular ordering framework upon their inquiry. We argue that although it is necessary to narrow the analysis to several key factors or dimensions in order to avoid analytical confusion, horizontal and vertical factors each have salience and can be analysed in isolation or in various combinations. Both Miller's (1997) ethnography of consumption in Trinidad and Mort's (1996) analysis of the construction of masculinity (a horizontal factor) across retailing, advertising and style magazines provide good examples of the inclusion of both vertical and horizontal approaches.

In making a case for horizontal analysis, Glennie and Thrift (1993) highlight the need to consider not only the biographies of commodities, but also consumers. Factors such as gender, ethnicity and place have tremendous importance for the ways in which consumers use and construct commodities. While much work has emphasized class inequalities within the global economy, relatively little attention has been devoted to the gender relations involved in circuits of production, distribution and consumption. Complementary and conflicting discourses of gender are inevitably located at various nodes. Thus there remains a need to utilize both horizontal and vertical approaches within the analysis of consumption.

IV Geographies of commodity chains

An explicit consideration of the role of space in mediating relationships across the chain provides a means of combining horizontal and vertical analyses without losing the analytical rigour of systems of provision approaches. Although relations between sites are clearly forged through space and place, commodity chains have received relatively

little attention within geography until recently (Jackson and Thrift, 1995; Cook and Crang, 1996a).

Geography plays a central role in tracing connections between sites along the chain and in revealing the complex implications of consumer actions. Harvey (1990: 422), for example, argues that we can consume a meal without any knowledge of the complex geography of production and the social relations that produced it: 'the grapes that sit upon the supermarket shelves are mute; we cannot see the fingerprints of exploitation upon them or tell immediately what part of the world they are from.' In a different vein, Sack (1992: 103–104) argues that 'the very act of consuming mass produced products then makes us agents of production by perpetuating places and processes of production, distribution, pollution, depletion and destruction'. Both accounts seek to encourage a politics of consumption through the 'thickening' of producer–consumer connections.

Alternatively, Crang (1996) uses the metaphor of displacement to consider how the meanings of commodities are reworked across the chain. First, he stresses the need to consider how local places of consumption such as the home are not only produced, but also created by consumers. Secondly, he argues that we need to understand how sites such as the home are connected to global systems of provision. Thirdly, Crang emphasizes the need to consider the geographical meanings associated with commodities flowing through systems of provision. Pred (1996) also includes the importance of examining the continual shifting of meanings and contexts of commodities over time with the displacement of one commodity by another. To these geographies, we add the need to trace how chains emanating from diverse geographical contexts are not only different but also intertwined. Further emphasis needs to be placed on the dialectical relationships between chains and their national, regional and local contexts. As Glennie and Thrift (1993: 605) have argued, 'satisfactory analyses of consumption practices will also need to recognise that features of place, context, and setting are central to many types of consumption and shape consumers' practices' (see also Miller *et al.*, 1998). The nation is not merely a place where processes of consumption happen, but rather is itself constructed out of these same processes (Miller, 1997: 5). Miller (1997: 12) explicitly calls for *multisited* ethnographies of the articulation between production, distribution and purchase.

It is crucial to recognize varying spatialities of consumption. Coffee, for example, is linked to sociality and selfhood in very different ways in coffee-producing regions such as Tanzania than in coffee-consuming nations such as Europe or North America. For Weiss (1996: 103) this demonstrates that 'it can no longer be presumed that global forces like commoditization lead inevitably to the eradication of specific local meanings, no matter how ostensibly powerful and seductive commodity forms might appear' (see also James, 1996). Most versions of commodity chain analysis view the chain in a unidirectional fashion, focusing on the agency of metropolitan consumers who construct meanings from inert raw materials from the third world. However, producers can also be consumers: 'the differing trajectories of coffee as valued object demonstrate the difficulties of neatly distinguishing between producers and consumers and suggest that the connection between production and consumption is less a clear-cut sequence in economic practice than a multi-stranded and reflexive cultural process' (Weiss, 1996: 104). Coffee offered to a guest in Tanzania is not the same commodity as that sipped in a food court in North America, but there is a complex dialectic

between the two sites on the chain. It is thus essential to highlight the geographies of commodity flows.

While most commodities span numerous scales from the body to the home, community, city, region, nation and globe, individual commodities relate differently to these scales. Some goods articulate closely with the body (i.e., clothes, food), while others relate to the space of the home (i.e., furniture). It is important to reflect upon both the unique spatialities of products and also the geographies of chains, which are by no means linear, and involve complex webs of relationships between spaces. A consideration of the spatiality of commodity chains has important consequences for both policy and politics.

We focus upon the home furnishings commodity chain and suggest that by its very nature this particular chain evinces a need to consider the causalities which shape chains as a whole: it is arguably tied more specifically to the creation of space than food or clothing chains. Furniture ends in the creation of both domestic and public space, which has consequences for the design and conception of the product, as well as its presentation in retail space (see Löfgren, 1990; Atfield, 1990; 1992). Like fashion, furniture has a strongly gendered component. However, in the case of the furniture chain, the construction of gendered identities throughout the chain has a strong spatiality and ends in the 'placing' of female consumers in the home.

V The home furnishings industry

This section expands upon some of the specific relationships that unite production and consumption and the role that space plays in structuring relationships within the home furnishings chain. The case study also foregrounds the need to consider horizontal factors such as gender and place in conjunction with vertical chains. We argue that the spatiality of the commodity chain is central to an understanding of chain dynamics and that the spatiality of the product itself has implications for power relations across the chain. These arguments are developed through three vignettes. This is by no means an exhaustive review of the ways in which the spatiality of chains might be considered, but rather we seek to illuminate several interesting aspects of the geographies of 'home consumption'. First, we argue that the geography of the chain is manifested in lores running through the circuit. Secondly, we argue that a consideration of the significance of different sites provides insight into the role of space in mediating relationships across the chain, and suggest that the home is a constitutive site on the chain. Finally, through a consideration of the unique vertical features of the home furnishings chain and in particular its role in the creation of shared familial space, we argue that this chain has particular implications for gender, sexual and family identities.

1 Geographical contingencies and national lores

Our first window on to the geographical contingencies of commodity chains considers the situatedness of the chain within different national spaces. We draw upon ongoing comparative research investigating home furnishings chains in the UK and Canada in order to illustrate how representations of commodities differ as a result of the varying

geographies of chains in different countries. There are a number of salient similarities between the British and Canadian furniture chains: both are characterized by high import penetration, low quality levels and a lack of design intensity. However there are also important differences between the two contexts, including different histories of furniture production, contrasting geographical lores and varying levels of consumer awareness of the commodity chain. In addition, a greater share of the market is dominated by large retailers in the UK than in Canada (Industry Canada, 1996: 55; Kidd, 1996: 9).

Although multiple symbolic meanings are available to consumers in both Canada and the UK, some meanings are nationally specific. In taking this first step towards highlighting geographical contingencies, we respond to Crang and Malbon's (1996: 710) call for a more explicitly spatial consideration of consumption. They suggest that ironically, '... the really boring and obvious question of how consumption differs between places is actually far from boring and seemingly, not obvious enough for us geographers to have got very far in answering it'. Spatial structures of systems of provision play a role in the geographical meanings associated with commodities flowing through these systems. While we construct an account of national lores, there are important regional dimensions to be pursued too. Molotch (1996), for example, provides a fascinating discussion of the association of furniture styles with place in his consideration of the emergence of Mission-style furniture in southern California (see also Scott, 1996a; 1996b).

There has been much recent discussion of the ways in which consumers use imperialist/'exotic'/'ethnic' imagery in the construction of individual identities 'at home' (Crang, 1996; May, 1996; Smith, 1996; Usherwood, 1997). Historically, the UK home furnishings commodity chain stretched across colonial space. London furniture manufacturers imported raw materials from the colonies and exported furniture to Australia, South Africa, Argentina and North America (Kirkham *et al.*, 1987). Since the nineteenth century, the retailer Liberty's stock of Indian, Persian and Arabic merchandise has provided consumers with 'a major source of popular knowledge about empire' via 'exoticised yet commercial representations of "oriental imagery" and narratives' (Nava, 1996: 49). Traces of these geographies are reinvoked in contemporary advertisements such as that for the retailer, Pukka Palace, which ran in *Elle Decoration* in 1997 and which promoted 'the remains of the Empire ... genuine colonial furniture'. The lores contained within this type of advertisement are directed at consumer anxieties about the end of empire. However, these distant images are targeted at very particular market niches – to consumers who are aware of the origins of these products.

While similar geographical lores are available in Canada, codes do frequently differ. Canada remains an important source of wood and metal, but Britain's supply of both raw materials is substantially diminished. UK retailers suggest that consumers rarely ask about either the environmental origins or domestic sourcing of products. In contrast, Canadian retailers indicate strong consumer awareness of the furniture commodity chain. Canada continues to be a resource hinterland, and many contemporary designers use domestic materials such as steel, maple and birch to create an aesthetic compatible with the Canadian landscape. A suggestion of northern wilderness emerges strongly even in the name of the Toronto retailer, UpCountry. Their furniture is upscale but also rustic, and advertisements stress that items are made in Canada. These lores speak to consumers' anxieties about the place of Canada's manufacturing

industry in the global economy and assume a sophisticated knowledge of the economic geography of commodity chains. There has been a growing concern in Canada about the sustainability of forest resources and the lack of value-added production. Many small design-orientated retailers source domestically, draw upon local design talent and stress these relations in the selling of their furniture. The geographical lores accompanying UpCountry's furniture are complex: although many of its designs reflect a modernist aesthetic, the retailer draws upon Canadian discourses of the 'North' and 'nature' in promoting its products. The store markets national heritage and tradition, but in a way that ultimately challenges a straightforward opposition between traditional and modern styles. Although parallel lores are constructed across both Canada and the UK, particular lores are unique to the two contexts and evolve from the spatiality of chains in these contexts. This has implications for both industrial policy and consumer activism in the two countries.

2 Creating space through 'home consumption'

Having argued for the geographical contingency of commodity chains at a national level, we turn to focus upon the creation of space through home consumption. Our argument emphasizes both the *creation* of space by consumers and the creation of (the) *space* of the home. The commodity chain literature often ignores what happens when consumers place commodities in the context of their everyday lives. In part, this reflects a tendency to emphasize the power retailers and advertisers exert over consumers (Jackson, 1993). Morley (1995) has described this as a 'hypodermic' approach whereby consumers are depicted as passive, injected with meanings derived from cultural texts. Such arguments have a distinctly gendered inflection, in that 'the "consumer as dupe"', the consumer split off from the Enlightenment ideal, is generally seen as "feminine" and 'other' to rational Enlightenment man (Slater, 1997: 57).

In highlighting the constitutive nature of home consumption, we argue that consumers do not straightforwardly draw upon meanings prescribed by retailers and advertisers, but rather that commodity meanings are often contested and reworked by consumers. For example, the provision of room set displays which began in shops such as Habitat substitutes consumer participation for dealer expertise. Consumers are positively encouraged to imagine the spaces of the home while shopping, and to construct identity through the creation of space. Individuals or groups of consumers may also radically reframe the symbolic meanings proffered by retailers, as Ritson *et al.* (1996) argue in their consideration of the lesbian group, Dikea. In this case, lesbians connect the Ikea logo to the image of a 'dyke', resignifying the commodity signs produced by the company. While Ikea's advertising traditionally was targeted at straight consumers, Dikea subverts hegemonic images. Consumer actions are important in shaping systems of provision. We would argue that sites are not joined in a unidirectional chain, but rather that connections are forged in a more web-like fashion.

Understanding consumers' tactics of resistance (de Certeau, 1984) is essential to conceptualizing the role of demand in the reorganization of the home design industry. Writing about twentieth-century 'home-making', Löfgren (1990: 32) asserts that 'home making has become very closely related to identity formation. The home is a place

where you actively try out different sides of the self, it is an important arena of cultural production rather than a site of anxious cocooning'. The home has become an important arena of playfulness and creativity. Further, Löfgren (1990) argues that the project of 'home' is never complete and through constant visits to furniture stores such as Ikea, notions of 'family' and 'gender' are continuously renovated.

However, one can proceed too far in celebrating consumer autonomy, reflexivity and resistance. As Forty (1995: 94) has indicated, 'designs tell people what they ought to think about the home and how they ought to behave there'. Producers and marketers exploit consumer interests in playing with identity in order to speed up fashion cycles in furniture and reduce its durability. Furniture retailers increasingly promote seasonal colour changes. There has been an increased use of mass-produced chipboards and artificial veneers, even in furniture sold by 'high-end' retailers (Fine and Leopold, 1993: 163). A consideration of the neglected space of the home reveals the complex process which transpires when goods move from the store to the home and are situated within the home. Home furnishings consumers clearly engage with geographical lores and in doing so create their own spaces. These forms of engagement have important implications for the way retailers package furniture and present it in space. Further, the ways in which meanings are worked and reworked within one space has consequences for other sites and spaces.²

In focusing upon the creation of the particular space of the home, we support suggestions that geographers' accounts of the spatiality of consumption have tended to focus on a narrow range of sites, particularly the department store, shopping mall and theme park (Jackson and Thrift, 1995). Other spaces of conviviality such as streets, restaurants and bars are often neglected (Crang and Malbon, 1996). The consumption literature has also tended to ignore places of final consumption. The act of purchase is only a single moment in the process of consumption, and thus it is essential to expand the terrain of inquiry to other moments (Pred, 1996). The home is not just a place where consumption happens, but rather an integral and constitutive site on the chain. Further investigation of the relationship between home consumption practices and identities is needed (Attfield, 1990; Miller, 1990; Putnam, 1993). Recognizing the role of consumption means escaping the legacy of approaches from the Frankfurt school on, and opening the left to the potential of consumer politics (Nava, 1992).

3 Gender and space: fashioning identities at home

Pursuing further the ways in which identity is reconstructed through home consumption, we focus in this final section upon gender and the fashioning of identity. We use the example of the (strengthening) linkages between furniture and fashion chains as a means both of illustrating the 'leakiness' of systems of provision (Glennie and Thrift, 1993) and of reiterating the need to examine horizontal factors such as gender and place alongside vertical chains.

Connections between home furnishings consumption and identity formation are increasingly apparent in advertisements and home magazine layouts which blur the boundaries between the furnishings and fashion sectors. In the same way that fashion designers and retailers encourage the continual restyling of one's clothes, furniture

advertisements and home design magazines now increasingly emphasize the pleasure of redecorating with shifts in identity.

Commodities become blurred in spaces such as the home, and in addition are increasingly being packaged together by marketers and advertisers. *Elle Decoration* editorials assert that 'the line between fashion and furniture is getting fuzzier by the day' (July–August 1996). The lifestyle magazine *Wallpaper* is explicitly organized around marketing global designer brands which transcend the furniture–fashion divide, such as Ralph Lauren and Gucci. Toronto fashion designer Robin Kay argues that 'now more than ever a home is an extension of a woman's wardrobe' (in Loxley, 1996: 52).

As we have indicated, gender relations are a central factor in shaping commodity chain dynamics. In the case of the furniture industry, femininity is central to the realm of consumption, as crucially important as notions of masculinity in furniture manufacturing (Parr, 1990; Kirkham, 1994). In part, a neglect of gender in systems of provision is symptomatic of the wider omission in the literature of places of final consumption. Clearly, the furnishing of identity has a strongly gendered dimension. Making visible the gendering of home consumption is important because changing family structures, and notions of masculinity and femininity, play a role in the reorganization of the furniture industry. Current ideas about interior decoration both reinforce traditional notions of family and femininity and reconstitute them. A growing anxiety about changing gender roles is visible in the pages of home design magazines, many of which stress the need for more open and flexible spaces and furniture. There has been a decline in selling and purchasing sets of matched furniture (such as the three-piece suite) towards selling individual items of furniture and one-off pieces (Leitch, 1997: B3). Furniture designs themselves are often more flexible in the current period and can be moved from room to room.

Retailers and home design magazines have not simply followed changing demands for particular styles of home furnishings, but also have sought to rework style/fashion trends themselves. There has been a growing attempt by advertisers to appeal to changing notions of family and sexuality. For example, Ikea advertisements screened in North America feature divorced women and gay male couples shopping for furniture. Shops such as UpCountry, Habitat and Ikea and home fashion magazines such as *Elle Decoration* and *Wallpaper* now increasingly imply that home-making is not necessarily a gender-specific activity (Usherwood, 1997).

Interpreting the ways in which retailers and advertisers are shaped by, and themselves seek to shape, changing femininities and masculinities is far from straightforward (see Nixon, 1996; Jackson, 1997). Our point here, however, is that horizontal factors such as gender and place cannot be ignored in the study of commodity chains. It is in the context of places such as the home that the leakiness of chains becomes particularly apparent. Although there has been a blurring of the home furnishings and fashion commodity chains which becomes most apparent in spaces such as retailing, advertising and the home, there are also important differences between the chains. While furniture and fashion intermingle, the spatialities of the two commodities are quite different. Fashion revolves around the individual body, while furniture involves the creation of domestic spaces that may be shared, negotiated and contested. As a result, these two commodities have distinct qualities and different relations to identity formation. This highlights the need to consider both horizontal factors such as gender,

but also the vertical uniqueness of particular commodities. As yet, very little research has highlighted the relationship between gender and specific goods.

VI Conclusions

Although geography would seem to play an important role in tracing connections across the commodity chain, there has been little explicitly geographical work on systems of provision. Having reviewed several key strands of the commodity chain literature, we have identified a number of important aspects of commodity chain geographies worthy of further study. We have argued first, that commodity chains and their associated lores are geographically contingent, varying across different national contexts. Space, place and nation play an important role in mediating relationships within the chain. These geographical relationships are manifest in the symbolic meanings attached to commodities in different places. Secondly, we have indicated that there has been little attention to the spaces of final consumption, and of the ways in which commodity chains culminate in the production of space. As the case of the home furnishings sector illustrates, the home itself is an important constitutive site on the chain. Finally, while much of the commodity chain literature has emphasized class inequalities within systems of provision across space, little attention has been paid to discourses of gender that may be articulated at different sites in the chain. Through the construction of interior space, notions of home design play an important role in negotiating changes in sexual and gender identity. It is important to consider the spatiality of different goods and the implications of this spatiality for identity. Reflecting upon the spatialities of commodity chains is not only essential to the formulation of industry policy, but also to the creation of a politics of consumption. It is through a focus on place that we might recognize that consumer activism potentially can be more effective and easier than labour strikes at the point of production (Nava, 1992: 198).

In seeking to work with and through the notion of the commodity chain, we have argued that systems of provision can most helpfully be conceptualized as circulations: interconnected flows not only of materials, but also of knowledges and discourses. Earlier, we indicated some commentators' dissatisfaction with the 'thickening of connections' (Cook and Crang, 1996a: 146) that a systems of provision approach may entail. Hinchliffe (1997: 210), too, is ultimately sceptical of 'privileging network topologies . . . in such a way that fixes the sequence and shape of the . . . chain'. Alternatively, the development of explicit linkages between sites of production and consumption can illuminate the possibilities for social change (McRobbie, 1997). We suggest that a systems of provision approach need not rest on a reification and fixing of connections into a unidirectional chain. Rather, commodity chain analyses can (and should) be employed to consider the complex and shifting power dynamics between sites: to open up tensions and anxieties in the multiple sets of relationships between producers and consumers.

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Notes

1. Gereffi *et al.* (1994: 12), however, do acknowledge that consumption and households are insufficiently covered in their edited volume.

2. Such a conceptualization makes it possible to move beyond the polarization which has characterized discussions of the changing geography of consumption. While some geographers stress the ways in which mass consumption has contributed to a homogenization of space and place (Peet, 1989; Sack, 1992), others note the creative uses and recontextualizations of commodities made by consumers and the tendency towards heterogeneity and local uniqueness (Crewe and Lowe, 1995).

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