Reading Retail: A Geographical Perspective on Retailing and Consumption Spaces

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Reading retail is an introduction to the geographies of retailing and consumption. It is aimed primarily at undergraduates and draws on the organizational framework and style of the authors' courses at the University of Southampton. The book has two purposes: firstly it introduces the reader to a wide range of literature and debates in retail studies and in economic geography as a whole. Secondly it encourages students to develop an awareness of the polysemous nature of academic discourses and to critically engage with the literature. As such, it is as much about reading as it is about retail.

The book is organized into four parts. The first outlines the theoretical background to the work, setting it in the context of the new economic geographies of retailing that developed in the mid-1990s and of the corporate and cultural transformation in retailing that they reflected. The second deals with the business of retailing, including corporate structure and strategy, the restructuring of supply chains, changing labour practices, and issues of corporate governance. While part two draws extensively on a range of literature and market intelligence familiar to management scientists, part three is more geographical in its focus. It addresses the relationship between space and corporate retail activity. A range of scales are considered, from the local contestation of space in the mall to the globalization of retail capital and its transformation of emerging markets. The final part considers the places and spaces in which consumption takes place. Four such places are considered: the street, the store, the mall, and the home. The gendered nature of these places and the way in which the organization of space facilitates consumption are discussed in detail.

The text integrates 68 short, edited readings into an accessible, fast-moving style of commentary and analysis. On numerous occasions, the work of authors with contrasting perspectives is presented together, and the reader encouraged to develop a sense of the debate through their comparison. While making extensive use of excerpts from important literature in the field, this book is by no means a course 'reader'. Rather, it introduces a wide range of literature and offers guidance on seeking out other more specialized work where required. An index of authors and a comprehensive bibliography are helpful in this respect. Wrigley and Lowe take a broad view of retailing, covering ground from the corporate financial aspects of the sector that draw heavily on themes of corporate governance and financial analysis through to cultural readings of retail and of consumption. The focus is interdisciplinary and a range of non-geographical literature, particularly relating to the activities of firms in the retail sector, is introduced. A wide range of other data, including market intelligence sources and business analysis reports, broaden the scope of the book beyond the purely theoretical.

Reading Retail uses the 'story' of the new retail geographies to develop a perspective on the wider debates in economic geography. For example, four sectoral case studies: US Drug Store retailing, the demise of the 'great American department store', UK food retailing, and US food retailing, are used to introduce issues of power and control in the firm. When introducing readings and debates, special reference is made to the authors' backgrounds and to the forums in which they publish. This approach helps the reader to develop a sense of the debates and a feel for the key individuals and publications that shaped the development of new retail geographies, and of economic geography as a whole. To develop the above example further in this respect:

In a well known paper published in Environment and Planning A in 1994, subsequently expanded in her book The Cultural Crisis of the Firm (1997), Erica Schoenberger, a US geographer at Johns Hopkins University, introduced into the mainstream of debate in economic geography issues relating to power, identity and knowledge in the firm (Wrigley and Lowe, 2002, p. 41).

A distinctively United States–United Kingdom perspective on retailing is adopted throughout the book. The short section on the internationalization of retail firms makes reference to the activities of firms such as Carrefour (of France); however the main example employed is of US firm Wal-Mart's entry into Europe. This approach enables a
coherent and focused argument to be developed, however it limits its perspective to a particular type of retailing, involving Anglo-American styles of management and marketing. A number of high-profile firms are referred to, including Gap, Nike, Coca-Cola, and Starbucks. While they are (perhaps overly) familiar and form the mainstream of popular academic accounts of corporate and consumer culture, a number of other less well-known case studies are also included. These complement the more familiar examples and offer the reader a slightly less conventional set of insights.

In reviewing *Reading Retail*, it is important to consider its relevance both to a specialized and to a more general undergraduate audience. It is certainly written as a course text for students of retail geographies. However, its interdisciplinary coverage and accessible style ensure that it is of more general relevance too. The four parts of the book can each be read individually. As such, sections can be used as an introduction to the nature of academic texts, as a guide to reading them, and as a contextualized introduction to literature in economic geography and beyond relating to the firm and to the nature of markets.

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**Happiness and Economics: How the Economy and Institutions Affect Well-being**

Bruno Frey and Alois Stutzer
Price: $24.95/£17.95 (paperback)

Whether economics is a dismal science depends on several things. One is its ability to explain economic behavior. Even if victorious on this front, one may still wonder ‘who cares?’. And the cynic has a point if human well-being is only marginally affected by economic variables and policies. The extent to which economics does matter to people is an empirical question. Much research on the measurement and determinants of mental well-being has been done by psychologists, psychiatrists, and neurologists, to a large extent proceeding independently from economics. Until now.

Bruno Frey and Alois Stutzer’s book, *Happiness and Economics*, connects the study of mental well-being to the subject of economics. It is an important book. Their main focus is on a simple question that asks respondents a question like: ‘Taken all together, how happy would you say you are: very happy, quite happy, not very happy or not at all happy?’. This is one of several types of measure that the authors discuss which can be used as a proxy for a person’s subjective well-being.

What makes this book special is its focus on the facts. This is not a book about opinions. It is easy to read for someone unfamiliar with the area and not working in empirical research. But for a person with a statistical background there is also detailed regression evidence using large data sets with both cross-section and time series dimensions to show exactly how the empirical regularities described in the text have been estimated. The emphasis is on reporting the best available results that quantify by how much economics and institutions matter to happiness.

The book’s starting point concerns the skepticism in economics in the early 1900s that utility could even be measured. Most students are still taught that preferences can only be indirectly revealed by people’s choices. Frey and Stutzer concisely summarize why a reconsideration of this position is now appropriate. One reason is the significant progress coming from psychology of the concept and measurement of mental well-being.

The book next outlines how personal and socio-demographic factors affect happiness, such as marriage, age, and gender. Frey and Stutzer note striking empirical regularities that exist linking, for example, marriage to greater happiness and divorce to less. This may seem intuitively obvious, but the point is that these results lend more support to the view that their data are reflecting true mental states and should be taken seriously.

Although the above factors have not traditionally been the domain of economics, the authors quickly get down to business to outline how money, employment and unemployment, inflation, and ultimately politics and institutions affect happiness. The first in this list – money – is probably the most controversial and most difficult to pin down. Frey and Stutzer summarize the research findings that seem to be telling us that money does have