

The Blackwell Cultural Economy Reader

Edited by

Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift

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Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
Introduction	x
Part I Production	1
1 A Mixed Economy of Fashion Design <i>Angela McRobbie</i>	3
2 Net-Working for a Living: Irish Software Developers in the Global Workplace <i>Seán Ó'Riain</i>	15
3 Instrumentalizing the Truth of Practice <i>Katie Vann and Geoffrey C. Bowker</i>	40
4 The Economy of Qualities <i>Michel Callon, Cécile Méadel, and Vololona Rabeharisoa</i>	58
Part II Finance and Money	81
5 Inside the Economy of Appearances <i>Anna Tsing</i>	83
6 Physics and Finance: S-Terms and Modern Finance as a Topic for Science Studies <i>Donald MacKenzie</i>	101
7 Traders' Engagement with Markets: A Postsocial Relationship <i>Karin Knorr Cetina and Urs Bruegger</i>	121
Part III Regulation	143
8 Varieties of Protectors <i>Frederico Varese</i>	145

9	The Agony of Mammon <i>Lewis H. Lapham</i>	164
10	Governing by Numbers: Why Calculative Practices Matter <i>Peter Miller</i>	179
Part IV Commodity Chains		191
11	African/Asian/Uptown/Downtown <i>P. Stoller</i>	193
12	Retailers, Knowledges and Changing Commodity Networks: The Case of the Cut Flower Trade <i>A. Hughes</i>	210
13	Culinary Networks and Cultural Connections: A Conventions Perspective <i>Jonathan Murdoch and Mara Miele</i>	231
Part V Consumption		249
14	Making Love in Supermarkets <i>Daniel Miller</i>	251
15	Window Shopping at Home: Classifieds, Catalogues and New Consumer Skills <i>Alison. J. Clarke</i>	266
16	What's in a Price? An Ethnography of Tribal Art at Auction <i>Haidy Geismar</i>	289
17	It's Showtime: On the Workplace Geographies of Display in a Restaurant in Southeast England <i>Philip Crang</i>	307
Part VI Economy of Passions		327
18	Feeling Management: From Private to Commercial Uses <i>Arlie Hochschild</i>	329
19	Negotiating the Bar: Sex, Money and the Uneasy Politics of Third Space <i>Lisa Law</i>	352
20	A Joint's a Joint <i>S. Denton and R. Morris</i>	368
21	Marking Time with Nike: The Illusion of the Durable <i>Celia Lury</i>	384
	Index	404

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Introduction

We live in an unusual historical period in that the business of economic analysis has become associated not just with one discipline, but with one part of one discipline. Economics, and in particular, neoclassical economics, rules the roost. However, there are at least some signs that this hegemony is beginning to break down or at the very least is beginning to fray at the edges. The reasons for this are clear. New accounts of the economy have been produced, accounts that not only challenge the dominance of neoclassical economics, but also question what counts as economy.

This book can be seen as both a contribution to this growing body of heterodox economic knowledge, and also as an extension of it. Until quite recently, heterodox approaches still took on the terms of trade of economics, concentrating their attention around the conceptualization of a separate sphere of social life called “the economy,” a sphere which was lorded over by distinctive and systemic rules and driven by the imperatives of resource production, allocation, and distribution. For example, in institutional and evolutionary economics, the main task has remained that of honing or improving accounts of an unproblematically presented economic realm (e.g., value, profit, distribution, surplus), rather than challenging the ontological status of the economy and the dominance of an economic worldview.

Similarly, in socioeconomics, the ambition has been to reveal the variety of ways in which the economy is socially embedded (e.g., by considering how qualities such as trust and reciprocity operating in networks of interpersonal relations affect economic efficiency), rather than to argue that the social and the economic are woven together as a single and inseparable fabric (thereby questioning what economic efficiency might mean in isolation). In turn, while certain political economy critiques of the neoclassical orthodoxy demonstrate that capital is a social relation (e.g., profit is based on class exploitation or the social division of labor), they usually continue to accept such strong assumptions of systemic rationality and order that they too often oust non-rational, performative impulses (from desire to radical uncertainty) from being given their due consideration (Joseph 2002).

More far-reaching accounts of the economy and the economic have, of course, always existed, from those of Gabriel Tarde, Max Weber, or Theodor Adorno who,

each in their very different ways, noted the ethical-cum-psychic orders that characterize different economic systems, to those of Georg Simmel, Walter Benjamin, and Georges Bataille who, equally differently, showed how enchantment and obsession propelled accumulation. But it is only recently that a genuine ambition for change has come about in so many different disciplines at once.

There are many reasons for this new ambition. We will identify just six. The first is a profound mistrust across the world of what the business of economy and the accompanying discourse of economics have wrought. The current world economic horizon includes the wreckage of so many hopes and dreams that it was almost inevitable that people would begin to search for alternative understandings of what counts as prosperity and economic well-being.¹ The second reason relates to the first. There is increasing frustration in parts of the policy community that orthodox economics has provided at best partial accounts of the current state of affairs, leading to a search for policy alternatives drawn from outside orthodox economics that is being conducted with some urgency (Leyshon, Lee, and Williams 2003).²

In turn, this ambition has led to a much greater recognition of plural ways of organizing the economy and plural ways of meeting economic need. Thus, third, the sheer diversity of economic organization has become clear in a way that has never been the case before. While it is true that Weber and others were acutely aware of the cultural specificity of Western economic modes of thinking, it has taken much longer to accept that such differences are not anomalies, even though the principles of, for example, Islamic and Buddhist economics now inform the economic practices of large parts of the world.³ And, back in the West, it has become almost normal to refer to varieties of capitalism rooted in different histories of institutional and cultural practice.

A fourth reason for this ambition is the rise of interdisciplinary work, which has led to a heightened exchange of different knowledges of the economic, including the various theorizations of economic knowledge itself. For example, work within economics, which has traditionally explained learning in terms of perfections of rational behavior, has been leavened over the years by work in cognitive psychology that distinguishes between different types of rationality and learning (e.g., substantive rationality and rule-based learning, versus procedural rationality and adaptive learning). More recently, these understandings have been jolted by work in social studies of science, economic anthropology, and business studies, which show that a significant amount of learning is the product of embodied knowledge, the cognitive unconscious, and practical action. A noticeable development has been the attempt to combine these insights into a general interdisciplinary perspective on economic knowledge (Callon 1999; Amin and Cohendet 2004).

Fifth, there has been a growing frustration with the narrow range of methods that are considered legitimate by orthodox economics, and especially the current emphasis on the countable, the modellable, and the predictable. For example, in business studies, such an approach makes it difficult to understand a number of crucial dimensions of the workings of firms, from their uses of knowledge and rhetoric, through the role of “soft skills” like leadership to the bite of various monopoly practices. Similarly, businesses know that there are profits to be made from the insights of market research based on participant observation of consumers, discussions in focus groups, the practical semiotics of advertising and consumer magazines,

and video diaries. Of course, the hold of formalism and calculus remains strong – and no doubt it has its place – but this hold is weakening in the face of regular misdiagnosis and the availability of knowledge from, as it were, the ground up.

Sixth, and most importantly for the concerns of this book, there has been an explosion of interest across academe in matters cultural. It was perhaps inevitable that some of this interest would flow over into the economic sphere, given the sheer numbers of academics involved in the cultural turn, which expressed itself as either a more limited ambition to take up cultural aspects of the “economy” (e.g., consumption as a cultural practice), or a more far-reaching ambition to rework the economy as a cultural artifact. The result is an efflorescence of work that this book is designed to reflect and give a coherent voice to. Though, to begin with, this work might have been described as simply gap finding, adding cultural inflections to various economic topics, that phase has now passed and new and interesting hybrids are appearing (Du Gay and Pryke 1999).

The New Settlement

The production, distribution, and accumulation of resources – loosely the pursuit of prosperity – have always been a cultural performance. However, since the late nineteenth century in particular, with the rise of a separate profession of economics and a set of specifically economic knowledges, such performance has either been neglected or actively denigrated (Hodgson 2001). This Reader seeks to put back that which should never have been taken out.⁴ This is no easy task because prevalent social description has come to take for granted the idea that there are separate spheres of activity called culture and economy. The book challenges this settlement by showing how the pursuit of prosperity is a hybrid process of aggregation and ordering that cannot be reduced to either of these terms and, as such, requires the use of a unitary term such as cultural economy.

We had originally thought to begin this introduction with a series of examples that showed the ways in which economies are becoming more culturally driven or more culturally embedded. Thus, we might have shown how the continuing rise of cultural industries based on the mass commodification of culture had breathed new life into the economy (e.g., through new markets in tourism, leisure, media, arts, music, books), created all manner of new forms of enterprise (from Internet giants such as Amazon, to a market for impresarios), and played a major role in economic regeneration in many parts of the world (e.g., in the urban renewal of some old industrial cities, the impact on the profile of exports from small countries like Sweden of preeminence in global popular music, national programs around the developing world based on cultural tourism). Again, we might have shown how the consumption preferences and status demands of a new global middle class have propelled the rise of a lucrative fashion and design industry that is supported by an extensive and elaborate infrastructure (made up of magazines, advertising, international travel, lucrative offshoots like spectacles, designer architecture, and consumer servicing of one sort or another). One more example might have linked economy to ethics. Thus, the slow food movement that first arose in Italy is now rapidly spreading to other European countries. This movement rejects the culture of fast food, and taps deep into sensibilities of tradition, community, holism, work–life

balance, and taste, as the ground for a new economics of staple needs. Equally, we could have considered the rise of the Fair Trade movement that has attempted to ethically reconfigure modern Western consumer preferences with some interesting results.

Out of this host of examples, and no doubt many others, we have decided to fix on just one to show the way in which economy and culture are inextricably intertwined: the case of the quite extraordinary rise and rise of the Sport Utility Vehicle (SUV). In general, the system of automobility, which has become a threat to the very atmosphere of the planet, is a paramount example of the cultural and the economic moving in lockstep (Sheller and Urry 2000). But the case of the SUV makes the point in a way which is somewhere between tragedy and farce – and parody. Beginning with vehicles like the Jeep Cherokee and the Ford Explorer in the 1980s, these vehicles have gradually become a major segment of the US car market, earning record profits for their makers.⁵ They have grown larger and larger (hence the Jeep Grand Cherokee), culminating in the General Motors Hummer H2, modeled on the military Humvee, and have been taken up by more and more car manufacturers (including foreign car companies like BMW, Mercedes, and Lexus). Yet these cars have been generally condemned by environmentalists for their appalling record on fuel economy (which for some models can be as little as 10 mpg) and for the fact that by being classified as light trucks they avoid federal automobile fuel efficiency regulations. Thanks in large part to the growth of this segment of the market, the average fuel economy of American cars is currently at its lowest for two decades, at about 21 mpg. Given that the United States represents 5 percent of the population but uses 25 percent of its oil, this propensity to consume light trucks and lots of gasoline is a major problem for the world, both in terms of resource depletion and greenhouse effects. Again, these cars have also been castigated by road safety experts for being no safer than other smaller cars and for being particularly susceptible to problems like rollover (Bradsher 2002).

Why such “economic” success? The reason can be found in the way in which the “cultural” buttons of the large number of affluent families⁶ that now constitute the main market for SUVs have been able to be pushed by the car manufacturers. Four of these buttons have proved particularly important. One, paradoxically, is safety. Drivers, and perhaps especially women, feel safe in SUVs. They are up high and surrounded by a cage of steel and, especially for those families with children, they seem to offer a kind of domestic fortress – but on the road. A second related button is fear of crime. In part, SUVs also seem to function psychologically as armored cars: Bradsher (2002) claims that they are often designed to look as menacing as possible so as to allay their occupants’ fear of crime and violence. Then, third, cars in general have become platforms for large amounts of equipment, which it is much easier to fit into bulky SUVs. Fourth, through concerted advertising campaigns, SUVs have become associated with glamor and power. Added to these factors, high income families care little about gasoline prices and so are inured to price rises in what is anyway a low gasoline price environment.

The economic-cum-cultural spell of SUVs is now being fought against by various ethically attuned alliances. For example, the National Religious Partnership for the Environment (NRPE), an alliance of Christian and Jewish groups, has written to 100,000 congregations in the US calling from the pulpit for people to cut fuel

consumption, is training clergy to speak out on green issues, and has started an advertising campaign to ram the message home.⁷ NRPE asks “What would Jesus drive?” and the answer is clearly not an SUV. Whatever the case, the Bush administration is currently considering a proposal to require SUVs and other light trucks to achieve higher rates of fuel efficiency in a response that again is both economic and cultural.

It is clear from an example like this that stripping out the so-called cultural so as to leave the so-called economic pure and ready to be analyzed makes no sense, since it inevitably leaves out of the explanation some of the most important motive forces. But, more than this, trying to break the two apart produces epistemic monsters which try to repress their own mixed origins in a way which is already all too familiar in other fields.

It should already be clear, then, that this book is not in the business of simply adding a cultural filigree to what in the end is still held to be an economic core. Neither is it in the business of arguing that there are immanent economic laws that play themselves out in a medium called culture (i.e., that the economy is culturally embedded). Nor is it interested in showing that matters cultural are mobilized for economic gain (e.g., the mobilization of culture for profit). Rather, the argument of this book is that the pursuit of prosperity must be seen as the pursuit of many goals at once, from meeting material needs and accumulating riches to seeking symbolic satisfaction and satisfying fleeting pleasures. For most of the time these goals are pursued through hybrid and temporary coalitions, but set against the background of various kinds of ordering frame, from the swathe of regulations that order the conduct of competition to the mundane ordering of everyday economic life through various crucial infrastructures such as roads, pipes, and cables.

This book is intended to concentrate on a new phase in the history of cultural economy approaches. In the beginning, writers in the field tended to employ what we might call an additive model, in which all that was attempted was to add a cultural element to an economic explanation. Indeed, this position is still held by those who believe that without a strict demarcation of the cultural and the economic, often parsed as the interpretive and the instrumental, analytical power is lost (cf. Ray and Sayer 1997). Some possible shortcomings of this approach led to the deployment, instead, of what we might call a synthetic model, in which culture and economy became partners. This is the dominant position currently, with much work paying attention to illustrating, as we have already seen above, the way in which “culture” impinges on the “economic.” However, more recently a certain amount of dissatisfaction with this approach (and not least its tendency to transfer inappropriate models from one domain to another) has also surfaced, leading to what might be called a hybrid model in which the two terms, culture and economy, are dispensed with, and instead, following actor–network theory and similar approaches, attention focuses on different kinds of orderings (cf. Callon 1999, Latour 1999, Hassard and Law 1999).

This new position is still struggling to find an exact vocabulary for its analysis of the steps through which economic quantities and qualities are formed. What is certain is that this is more than simply analyzing each moment in a production or consumption process, and then seeing how it is culturally inflected and how the cultural inflection affects economic “outcomes.” Rather, it is an attempt to identify

the varied impulses and articulations through which value is formed, added, and circulated; summing to what can only be described as a cultural economic ensemble with no clear hierarchy of significance. These impulses and articulations are not only plural and mixed, but also performative, since they involve not only following the rules of the game but also constantly establishing new rules.

Such an approach emphasizes the sheer variety of actors – human and non-human – involved in modern economic transactions and organizational arrangements, and the ways in which expertise is constantly being redistributed among them. Seller prices in a given commodity market, for example, might be seen as the combined product, and shifting power of influence, of long-term supply and demand trends, the decisions of major sellers (Tool 1991), the parameters of trading standards and regulations, the work of forecasts and forecasting tools, imaginaries of desire and desirability, the symbolic power of the product, and the machinations of trading arrangements and trader strategies. This approach has been particularly fruitful in analyzing the formation and maintenance of markets of all kinds, and especially the way in which the economic knowledge that transpires becomes a horizon of expectation that is itself constitutive. Most obviously, we see these insights worked out in a series of close-hatched ethnographies of the global financial markets, where fluctuations in the markets and the standards of worth that are applied to the highly profitable gleanings from those fluctuations are the result of complex compromises arising out of the circulation of information and knowledge among many actors, from speculators and traders to databases and small proto-artificial intelligences (e.g., Knorr-Cetina 2000, Miyazaki 2003, Riles 2003). However, the approach works just as well in analyzing smaller scale markets, and especially those that have been built up using formal economic knowledge (e.g., famously, market expectations in the French strawberry market are based on a particular model of markets, such that the economic and cultural horizons fuse) (Callon 1999).

A Brief History of Cultural Economy

In this section we want to trace out some of the possible approaches to cultural economy that are currently circulating. In undertaking that task, we need to be aware that these approaches all have a history, which could be recounted as the lineage of cultural economy. But we want to make it clear that this is a fragmented history, full of stops and starts, rather than a definite and definitive narrative.

The first approach stresses the centrality of *passions*. Pre-nineteenth century European economic thought was often concerned with economic principles as a means of overcoming what was seen as a surfeit of passions in the conduct of daily life. Economic rationality would damp down passion and produce a more “civilized” mode of conduct; so, for example, engagement in productive work would head off the kinds of violent encounters – from war to duels – which were an all too prevalent feature of eighteenth-century life. Later on, in the course of the nineteenth century, a romantic reaction to this civilizing conception of the economy sets in. The economy itself comes to be seen as a negative passion for accumulation of the kinds revealed in the practices of hoarding by misers and in the theoretical writings of Marx. Many analyses argued that hedonistic behavior and other forms of passion needed reintroduction in a world whose only passion had become accumulation.

What we see then is a shift in register, but in both cases, the economy is seen to be intimately associated with the expression of passion.

The second approach is loosely related to the first, in that it focuses on so-called *moral sentiments*. It is often forgotten that Adam Smith not only wrote *Wealth of Nations*, but also *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. For Smith, as for so many writers of his time, the practice of economy was also the practice of moral judgment and worth. Economic value could never be divorced from moral value. Smith saw that the entanglement in modern society of a moral order of sympathy – participation in the feelings of others – with economic individualism as the driving force of wealth creation, cushioning the worst effects of pure self-interest.⁸ Such injunctions have a very long history, casting in some cases a long shadow into the present. For examples, the principles of hard work, honest commercial relations, and trust that guide the trading practices of faith-sensitive Muslim entrepreneurs draw deep into Qur'anic injunctions on giving false oaths, correct weight, and goodwill in transactions (Stoller 2002). Moral judgment also abounds in the choice over different types of economic system or subject. For example, in a long line of socialist economic thought running from Marx and Ruskin to Lenin and Chayanov, a clear distinction is drawn between the moral worthiness of labor for social utility and social need and the degenerative effects of labor based solely on production for profit. Similarly, in nineteenth-century French writing on poverty, the economic condition of the poor is judged as a condition of moral descent, with remedial actions such as alms and charitable support justified less in terms of labor market or other economic imperatives than as a weapon against moral turpitude and social degeneracy (Procacci 1978).

The third approach identifies *knowledge* as a key motive force in the practice of economy. Going back even to the work of Smith and Marx on the division of labor, we can see a meditation on how different forms of knowledge – mental and manual – can be deployed in order to produce optimal accumulation. While Marx and Smith were chiefly concerned with the link between knowledge and capitalist efficiency (Sohn-Rethel 1978), another equally long parallel tradition has been concerned with showing how knowledge inculcated in the habits of work, tacit practices, machinery and tools, institutionalized norms, and cultural understandings acts as the motor of economic prosperity. The assertion here is that the economics of prosperity hinge around the qualities of knowledge distributed across a variety of mediums, which, taken together, count as a cultural resource with profound economic weight. This is most evident in the work of Veblen at the turn of the last century, who argued that because of the strong interdependence between “habits of thought” and “habits of life,” there can be “no neatly isolable range of cultural phenomena that can be rigorously set apart under the head of economic institutions.” Interestingly for our purposes, he thus concludes that “an evolutionary economics must be the theory of a process of cultural growth as determined by the economic interest” (Veblen 1990: 77).

The fourth approach, also in no small measure traceable to Veblen, stresses that learning and economic change in general can be likened to *evolution*. The evolutionary metaphor, drawing on the work of Darwin, Lamarck, and Spencer, has a long history of use and abuse in economic thinking since the mid-nineteenth century. Learning (and learning how to learn) is seen as a means of transmission of culture in

non-linear, path-dependent, and institutionally specific ways. This process of evolutionary transmission is conceptualized in terms of “habits of thought” and “habits of life” that act as a culturally inscribed “genetic” template guiding economic behavior across societies and through time. Evolutionary thinking was one of the key ways in which a historicist current was injected back into a predominantly equilibrium-based economics, thereby reasserting the centrality of the kind of dynamics that allowed a space for cultural explanations.

The fifth approach considers the kinds of *disciplines* necessary to produce competent economic actors. It is an approach that has very practical antecedents in the work of writers such as F. W. Taylor, who were mainly concerned with minute analyses of bodily movement as ciphers for increased productivity. Later in the twentieth century this kind of approach was supplemented by other forms of bodily accountancy that paid more attention to non-quantifiable factors such as worker satisfaction, which, it was argued, were themselves important aspects of productivity. Literature in this tradition itself depended heavily on the presence of a framework of countability that, with the rise of accountancy and similar technologies, acted as a fundamental frame within which economies could be thought. These very acts of measurement made it possible to establish a culture of governance that acted as a precondition for the establishment of notions of economic rationality now so beloved of neoclassical economics. They also formed a powerful narrative of corporate control, by providing a discourse of “objective” number through which economic decisions could be made disinterestedly and through which aberrant behavior could be identified and judged.

The sixth and final approach focuses on *symptoms*. Interpretations of Euro-American economies as symptoms of general economic modes or models have been a constant of cultural life since at least the time of Adam Smith. These economic readings have had powerful cultural effects. One only has to think of the work of Marx and Engels to see the way in which such readings are able to reinscribe how cultures see themselves as a single functioning economic system, which, in turn, is returned to these cultures as an established economic and cultural fact. This is exactly how Marx and Engels were able to project nineteenth-century English capitalism – despite all its peculiarities – as a world economic standard and its class culture as the only culture. Exactly the same can be said of the pioneer experiments by F. W. Taylor and Henry Ford in the US early in the twentieth century with principles of mass production and mass consumption, which not only served as a model of accumulation for the rest of the world to copy or measure up to, but also as a way of life pivoted around the individual (as specialized worker and as fulfilled consumer).

All these lineages have continued to exist, but as a disorganized field; one that has been marginalized by the weight of marginal economics and computational knowledge, by political economy and the rationality of structure, and by the general neglect of economic processes within cultural studies. Though certain organized subdisciplines have emerged as a partial counterweight – and most notably economic sociology, economic anthropology, economic geography, and economic psychology – they have exerted very little influence on mainstream economic thought. However, there is an opening here that might be widened, since mainstream marginalist economic thought has itself continued to evolve, even as it has become

hegemonic. So, for example, mainstream economics has developed an interest in so-called behavioral finance, which takes note of, and works with, findings from psychology, which are often far removed from the rational assumptions of marginalism. Similarly, recent methodological work on complex systems, simulation modeling (including agent-based modeling), certain forms of game theory, and intersubjective economics has produced a gradual drift from rational and calculative assumptions.

The Current Map of Cultural Economy

Contemporary work in cultural economy may be understood as being concerned with the processes of social and cultural relations that go to make up what we conventionally term the economic. No particular subdiscipline can claim dominance in this emerging field. Rather, it is a hybrid field consisting of impulses arising from a number of different disciplines, including economic sociology, cultural studies, social studies of finance, business and management studies, economic anthropology, and cultural geography, and a whole series of different methodological strategies as diverse as semiotics, ethnography, social studies of science, and theories of practice.

The early days of the approach – some ten years or so ago – were marked by an emphasis on distinctively economic topics with a strong social but weak cultural tinge, such as trust, the sociology of networks, and transaction-rich environments, including markets. This approach continues to flourish, as is evident from the surfeit of books published on the “soft” inputs that drive knowledge capitalism and the cultural industries (Burton-Jones 1999), on the powers of social capital and reflexivity in all areas of economic life (Cohen and Prusak 2001, Storper 1997), and on how trust and associational ties help to lubricate efficiency and economic creativity (Nooteboom 2002).

However, another strand of work in cultural economy has grown in profile, broadening substantially beyond these topics and representing a very different style and approach. This work is more process oriented, more culturally inflected, and more directed towards actual practices. In turn, the intellectual bounty from this work has been a much better appreciation of the economy as cultural practice and of culture as economic practice, for example through understandings of the narrative elements of many modern economies, which are inherent to notions of learning and knowledge acquisition in firms, and the emotional investments made by consumers in mundane but crucial practices such as shopping or investing. This shift has itself been enabled by the growth of a heterodox series of interdisciplinary networks that have striven to bring together things formerly held apart (e.g., more interaction between socioeconomists and cultural anthropologists). There is, in itself, an interesting geography of interdisciplinarity, which deserves further study (for example, in social studies of finance, US economic sociologists have joined with French engineers and German and British practitioners of the social study of science).

What is interesting is how many of the themes we identified in the preceding section are resurfacing in the most recent work (see table 1).

Let us begin by considering the question of passions. Here we see, on a theoretical level, increasing appeal to the work of writers such as Deleuze and Guattari on immanence and potentiality that, in turn, is based on notions of affect and time,

Table 1 A map of contemporary cultural economy approaches

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Contemporary emphases</i>		
Passions	Subliminal energies, e.g., libido of capitalism (Deleuze and Guattari, Hardt and Negri)	Obsessional consumption (Bataille)	Passion to represent, e.g., brands (Lury)
Moral sentiments	Moral orders of conventions (Thevenot and Boltanski)	Constructedness of markets (Callon)	Ethical economies
Knowledge	Tacit knowledge (M. Polanyi)	Embodied knowledge and things that speak (Law, Latour)	Knowing in communities of practice (Wenger, Knorr-Cetina)
Evolution	Metaphors of economy (Mirowski and McCloskey)	Emergence and complexity (Delorme, Metcalfe)	Variety and redundancy (Grabher and Stark)
Power	Discipline (Mitchell, Rose)	Measurement (Miller)	Corporate narratives (Pine and Gilmour)
Symptoms	Information economy (Castells)	Consumer society (Bell)	Simulation (Baudrillard)

taken from the work of Spinoza in the seventeenth century. Such work stresses movement and process, and is often assumed to fit a mobile, libidinal and quick acting capitalism (Hardt and Negri 2001). Such an emphasis also overlaps with work of an older root that stresses the obsessional and excessive nature of accumulation, as found in the work of writers such as Bataille (1985), who noted the achievements of obsessive consumption. Not all of this entire strand of thought stays at the abstract level. For example, Lury's work on brands draws on notions of quick time within which brands have a transitory existence within the arc of perception; an existence that gives brands a grip on consumers that hardly registers but is still very powerful.

The moral sentiments approach continues to have a grip on current economic discourses, but as a practical ethical dimension of the everyday economy. Reframed in this way, the new work points to the way in which particular ethical justifications are bound up with particular economic practices. So, for example, contemporary work on economic conventions by writers such as Boltanski (Boltanski and Thevenot 1991, Boltanski and Chiapello 1999) is concerned with the identification of multiple orders of moral justification, which provide both motivation and explanation for participants (e.g., the contemporary emphasis on connectivity can be understood as the birth of a new order of justification in, and of, the economy). In turn, such an approach produces a much more variegated account of what constitutes economic practice and the construction of values. It pays particular attention to the utter constructedness of apparently pure economic entities like markets, and also relates to parallel work by writers such as Callon (1999), which

stresses how market mechanisms are, in fact, long chains that can, and do, vary massively in terms of both their rules and their infrastructures. There are, then, multiple orders of ethics that drive the economy, many of which are not conventionally regarded as ethical. For example, it is easy to think of organic food production, fair trade, or workplace democracy as having ethical dimensions, but it is just as possible to think of the market and all other orderings of the economy as having these dimensions too.⁹

Moving on to the question of knowledge, it is increasingly stressed that not only knowledge capitalism but also capitalism in general is powered by tacit knowledges that are to be found in both cognitive and non-cognitive realms. This work finds a common ancestor in the central insight of Michael Polanyi that we know more than we can tell, through what he calls both mental and bodily knowledges. In turn, this insight has been used to build up a whole industry based on the auditing of knowledge as an asset class and the means by which knowledge assets can be enhanced and added to by learning and innovation (e.g., Nelson 1993, OECD 2000). One of the most fruitful means of grasping these insights has been provided by work on communities of practice, which tries to understand the full richness of such processes by attending to the ethnographic minutiae of knowledge transmission/translation in concrete workplaces – from insurance offices to laboratories (Wenger 1999, Brown and Duguid 2000, Knorr-Cetina 1999). Still more recent work has looked at the so-called para-ethnographic minutiae of knowledge transmission/translation in concrete workplaces, by concentrating on those “mute mobiles” in which so much economic knowledge is carried and through which so much economic life is now conducted – paper, chairs, texts, numbers, computers, software, and so on (Latour 1999, Law 2002, Thrift 2003a, Harper and Sellen 2001).

One of the central insights of work on knowledge, learning, and innovation has been the extreme importance of initial conditions in dictating subsequent outcomes. There is a direct link here with the long tradition of thinking of economics in evolutionary terms. However, in new evolutionary thinking, the cultural aspects of evolution are given more weight in three ways. First, there is an acute consciousness of the historical progress of evolutionary metaphors; commentators such as Mirowski (2002) and McKloskey (1998) have shown the power of these metaphors in economic thinking and organization (e.g., rhetorics of selection and adaptation, or assumptions of rational progress) and the way in which they are adapted to historical and geographical circumstances.¹⁰ Second, the current sense of evolution stresses to a much greater degree – in line with developments in evolutionary theory itself and a much greater understanding of the history of evolutionary metaphors – notions of emergence, complexity, and autopoiesis, showing how they work to order and sustain what have become highly variegated and complex economic systems (Loasby 1999, Foster and Metcalfe 2001, Delorme 2001). Third, particular population aspects of evolutionary theory tend to be emphasized. For example, notions of variety and redundancy in the selection environment have become of prime importance in explaining phenomena as diverse as the growth of project modes of working, differences in national and regional economic systems, and the mobilization of latent potential (Grabher 2002, Louca 1997). Here, what may often seem to be initially random cultural perturbations can turn out to be crucial competitive advantages as,

for example, in the putative role that extended family and kinship ties have played in the dynamism of overseas Chinese economic networks.

Power is one of the key aspects of the cultural economy approach. However, in contemporary literature, the understanding of power is increasingly associated with discursive approaches and especially the work of Michel Foucault and followers such as Rose (1999). Such work tends to stress two particular aspects of economic formations. One aspect is the narration of the economy as found in features as diverse as stories of corporate power and advertising scripts, where the narration works as a cultural template of what it takes to become powerful, and, in turn, is an act of enrolment of allies and warning to competitors (Pine and Gilmore 1999). The other is the formation of “economic subjects” who have been configured to perform in, and understand, particular modes of discipline, subjects that are both subject to particular discourses and creators of them. More recently, notions of discourse have been broadened out to include not only words and deeds but also the object world which channels, and very often gives form to, utterances, and in doing so, produces powerful ordering impulses, which have heretofore been neglected, such as measurement standards and algorithms (Miller 1995)

The final mode of contemporary cultural thinking on the economy consists of symptomatic readings of the overall economic trajectories of Western societies. As we have already indicated, these kinds of readings have been popular since the days of Adam Smith. However, a recognizably cultural economic approach probably dates from Daniel Bell’s work on the consumer society and the related growth and influence of the service sector in the 1960s. More recent variants have tended to stress culturally diffracted technological developments. For example, Castells’ (2000) work on the information economy produces an account of a world in thrall to various cultural appropriations of information technologies. Castells takes the media into his account in a number of ways as a result. Other narratives go further. For example, Baudrillard (1994) argues that digital media technologies presage a society based on the absolute power of simulation. Work on the image therefore becomes a prime activity of capitalism.

Mapping an Emergent Field

Cultural economy is in the process of re-figuring every aspect of the value chain, from production through to consumption. In this book, we look at the various cultural transubstantiations of the economic by following this value chain, in six steps. We begin with cultural economy readings on the world of production, followed by readings on finance and money, economic regulation, commodity chains and consumption – all very much the heartland of conventional economic analysis. Then, in order to show that the cultural economy approach extends and enlivens the field of what is conventionally understood as the economic, we have also added a section on the economy of passions.

We have chosen essays that are not only exemplifications, but also stand in their own right as seminal and in some cases path-breaking contributions. Two caveats need to be registered immediately. One is that we have only included contributions that address the Euro-American sphere or its influence. We believe that including just a few contributions from elsewhere, which is all that space would allow, would

have produced a misplaced tokenism. Another book is necessary to deal with the South, which would include important contributions such as those by anthropologists and postcolonial scholars on the cultural economy of indigenous knowledges, non-Western moral orders, non-market rituals and exchange networks, and alternative modernities (e.g., Thomas 1999). A second caveat, again for reasons of shortage of space, is that we have had to exclude certain important topics, since including them would have left us with only one or two illustrative readings under each heading, producing a thinness of content that would have damaged our very attempt to give body and weight to the field. These topics might have included waste generation and disposal, tourism and mobility, the rise of specialized market segments like children's toys (cf. Thrift 2003b), nature and the environment, new forms of property (and especially the new rules of possession being built into entities like software, the radio spectrum, and the genome), the body in all its myriad forms, queer economics (e.g., the pink pound and the difference it makes), the cultural circuit of capital (made up of institutions like business schools, management consultants, management gurus, and the media), trust and social capital, and risk.

Production

Part one includes four readings that illustrate different aspects of the cultural economy approach to production. The first two readings are caught up in the day-to-day existence of workers. In chapter 1 Angela McRobbie shows the way in which the principles of craft design can still exist if workers are willing to make economic compromises in pursuit of cultural goals. McRobbie's fashion workers frame themselves as members of a cultural elite, even though to do so, they have to be willing to self-exploit in ways which she shows are unlikely to benefit them in material terms over the long run. Seán Ó'Riain, in contrast (chapter 2), burrows into the lives of a set of Irish software developers working for American firms. Ó'Riain shows the complex temporal and spatial strategies that these workers have to follow in order to produce kudos for themselves in firms that are strung out between many locations. At the same time, he also shows what a complex cultural object software is, made up of many compromises, which often defy the logical templates it is meant to follow, and comprise many different skills that are both social and technical (Thrift and French 2002). These compromises also arise from extraordinarily heterogeneous associations of things, people, ideas, and other actors that need to be brought into alignment in order to produce an object (see Law (2002) for a detailed account of the vast material-semiotic assemblages involved in the production of the doomed TSR 2 aircraft).

Chapter 3 focuses on the cultural economy of corporate learning and innovation. Over the last 40 years, management practices have taken their own cultural turn, as a result of the growth of new intermediaries like business schools, management consultancies, management gurus, and the business media. Integral to this growth has been the circulation of management ideas. One of the most important of these recent ideas is the notion of the "community of practice" as the key site of innovation and learning in firms (as opposed to the kind of approaches that locate innovation and learning as the product of knowledge possessed by gifted people or

technologies). Originating from work in the 1980s by such writers as Jean Lave, “community of practice” was meant to encapsulate a whole series of ideas from practice theory. It has subsequently become a key management tool, through its canonization in influential journals such as the *Harvard Business Review* (Wenger and Snyder 2000). However, in the course of canonization and application, certain elements of practice theory were dropped for the sake of portability and convenience. The result has been the instrumentalization of the idea, as documented in chapter 3 by Vann and Bowker; an instrumentalization which, it could be argued, was both necessary for the idea to travel and, at the same time, came loaded with compromises that violated a number of the fundamental tenets of the practice theory approach.

Chapter 4, by Callon et al., makes clear that in the service economy, the kinds of issues set out in the previous chapters are not epiphenomenal, but part of the production process itself. More and more products depend upon notions and perceptions of quality, which are inscribed into them by a whole set of intermediaries. In considerable detail, Callon et al. set out the steps by which this process takes place, and the crucial role that reflexivity plays at all points.

Finance and Money

One of the most expansive aspects of cultural economy has turned out to be the study of money in all its forms through detailed ethnographic research. Part of the reason for this is the cultural hold that money has on Euro-American societies, which is clearly of the strongest order and yet its impact and workings are still often very difficult to define. One reason for this is that money is regarded as an economic entity *par excellence*, whose workings are smooth, fast, and rule-driven. Yet the fund of ethnographic research that has now been built up tells a very different story – of the importance of improvisation, manipulation, and the ability to grasp the moment (Buenza and Stark 1999). Chapter 5 by Anna Tsing works mainly at the macro-scale to make these points. She shows how opportunistic individuals and corporations, working in concert with political interests, can manipulate investor expectations and investment behavior in the world gold markets. This behavior amounts to a kind of financial depredation that, however, is rarely counted as such, cloaked as it is in talk of legitimate versus illegitimate manipulations that provides a sense of regulated and orderly practice.

A particularly important element of the formation of cultural economy has been the injection of ideas from science studies and the sociology of science more generally. Drawing particularly on ideas developed in these fields, money and finance have been likened in recent work to a series of networks within which the hard graft of material semiotics takes temporary place. A particular challenge has been presented to those studying money and finance by the fact that so much of the conduct of money and finance depends upon non-human actors – from formulae to screens and from keyboards to electronic contacts. Taking these non-human actors seriously has led to some major advances. Chapter 6 by Donald MacKenzie looks at the dramatic performativity of one particular economic formula and its ability to move markets, accumulate wealth, and then lose it. However, a good part of the business of financial markets is much less visible than this, a stricture that applies in particular

to many kinds of vital day-to-day systems of operation and regulation (for example, clearing systems and other forms of netting). Similarly, in Chapter 7, Karin Knorr Cetina and Urs Bruegger illustrate how central the computer screen has become in the conduct of foreign exchange markets, now traded largely via electronic broking and dealer-to-dealer contact systems. This assemblage of a highly distributed and rapidly changing space of global transactions onto the screen is no simple process of objectification. It produces a constant demand to fill the gaps thrown up by the screen, which is more than a technical operation, since it involves the technical mobilization of various persons. It may well be that, as a result, we are entering a world of “post-social” forms which are beginning to step into the place of conventional social relations, which emphasize thickness and meaningfulness. The result is that markets can no longer be understood as human collectivities, but instead, are based on a kind of specialized mimetic reflexivity.

Economic Regulation

Another key area has proved to be the different forms of economic regulation that populate the world. Despite all the alleged toughness of economic rule making and following, there is substantial cultural variation in both practice and value. Nothing illustrates this contention better than the informal modes of regulation that have grown up in emerging economies, where the state is a comparatively weak actor whose activities have to be supplemented (or displaced) by various private forms of regulation, or where the state has been actively drawn into illegal or shady economic activities. Such lacunae provide fertile ground for cultural traditions that may have been previously submerged under the aegis of the centrally planned state. As Frederico Varese shows in chapter 8, inadequate state regulation in Russia has produced numerous opportunities for the Mafia to thrive, guide state action, and provide a livelihood for large numbers of people.

Regulation as a cultural practice is not simply a “disease” suffered by those who lack formal structures, but can everyday feature of all forms of regulation, including the workings of the world’s most prestigious institutions. From the commanding heights of capitalism, regulation obviously appears to be a different matter. In chapter 9 the journalist Lewis Lapham, well known for his work on the American upper class, extends his gaze to the coteries of capitalist and government functionaries that run the world economy. He shows the way in which marginalization is not just an economic, but also a cultural phenomenon, made up of quasi-imperial judgments about the value and worth of different nations, arranged according to entrepreneurial and other kinds of norms, which are continually reproduced in discursive spaces like Davos in Switzerland, where some of the benevolent rich and powerful come together to extol their own virtues and to instruct others fortunate enough to be allowed in to the event on proper economic conduct.

The contours of power are highly visible in Lapham’s chapter, but a lot of regulatory power also resides in presuppositions about how the world is which are so widely held that they are never challenged. Foremost among these must surely be the importance of number and the associated values of calculability and precision. Another important element of cultural economy has been the attempt to make the values of countability transparent. Peter Miller’s chapter on accountancy is a

particularly revealing example of why number matters, how arbitrary many of its practices actually are, and the power that can be deployed by those who lay claim to understanding it. As recent accountancy scandals show, number is often a movable feast masquerading as an immovable standard.

Commodity Chains

Spanning the globe are a whole series of transactional networks which allow commodities to be transferred from one market to another, in the process very often being transformed both materially and semiotically. Much exciting work has been carried out recently on the nature of these commodity chains and the transformations they are able to effect. Stoller's ethnographic study of West African market traders in New York (chapter 11) shows that these global networks do not have to be the preserve of large transnational corporations. Even those with relatively little economic wherewithal are able to participate, by weaving together consumer demand in the West with trading opportunities in Africa and Asia. These skilled arbitrageurs have to have cultural skills in order to produce economic opportunities: skills of being attuned to Western markets, skills of intercultural negotiation, skills of tuning in to global trading opportunities, and skills of improvisation.

However, it is of course the case that the vast bulk of trade along commodity chains is carried out in larger and more organized structures than those that Stoller's traders normally tap. In chapter 12 Hughes uses the example of the cut flower trade between Kenya and the supermarkets of the West to show the concentrated work of connection that needs to be continually reproduced in order to not only produce profits, but also to preserve perishable goods in a form that consumers located thousands of miles away from producers will find appealing. A vital element in these chains of connection is the ability to read a continually changing market and to make this reading count across the chain of links. Hughes shows how this ability is as much a process of cultural interpretation and depends on a rich variety of intermediaries to do the cultural work.

Clearly, these commodity chains are spatially inflected and built up from below, through located values, symbols, products and practices. In chapter 13 Murdoch and Miele document one particular contrast, that between fast food trade networks and the so-called slow food movement. This movement is trying to rework the predominant cultural registers of food in the West by changing judgments on the worth of food and consumption. It therefore values the sensual pleasures of taste and smell, and the temporal pleasures of gradual gratification by attempting to create local spaces of production and consumption that are fitted to these pleasures. Interestingly, the chapter thus shows that economic value and worth in both fast and slow food markets is built around a cultural valuation rather than vice versa; an "order of worth" encoded into material arrangements in commodity chains.

Consumption

One of the areas where the cultural economy approach has made most impact has been in the study of consumption. For a considerable time, an alliance of anthropologists, geographers, and sociologists has been concerned with trying to show that the

economics of consumption are culturally constructed by considering the broad canvas of “commercial cultures,” in recognition of the degree to which Western culture and commerce have gone hand in hand for many centuries (cf. Jackson et al. 2000). Daniel Miller has been a key worker in this area, trying to marry material culture approaches with ethnography in order to understand modern Western consumption. In particular, he has been concerned to outline the key emotional origins of shopping practices. In chapter 14 he develops an argument that shopping is beset by obligations to others, many of which might well be described as bonds of love. The variegated set of shoppers that he follows nearly all display an acute awareness of the needs and wants of others as they shop: economic relations are necessarily social relations.

In chapter 15 Alison Clarke shows some of the same impulses taking shape in the context of home shopping. Focusing on mail order catalogues, she shows the different economies of regard that are associated with even the humble catalogue: senses of authenticity, foppery, and affluence circulate even in these outlets, and drive some consumers to display what almost might be conceived of as compulsive behavior. The economy of regard clearly lies at the heart of the responses of firms in the mail order business, as elsewhere, but the particular dimension has often escaped conventional economic accounts. Even in the humblest outlets for consumption, the same kinds of behavior can be found, with the result that different kinds of consumer conventions often apply (see, for example, Crewe and Gregson’s (1998) study of the cultural economy of car boot sales, where forms of sourcing, circulation, transaction and pricing are quite different from those found in more conventional outlets, but where values like thrift continue to have a hold).

In chapter 16 Haidy Geismar studies a market in which that history is formalized and becomes a part of the price mechanism. She is particularly acute on the importance of auction mechanisms in so many markets, a set of mechanisms that is again expanding as a result of the Internet. By taking as her main topic the sale of tribal art, Geismar also shows the degree to which value is made from the colonial entanglement of objects, which in turn has produced senses of cultural authenticity that have become the basis of a new form of “soft” cultural imperialism that defines cultural worth by price.

Finally, it is important to remember the actual practices of retailing, including the myriad workforces that are employed in acts of sale. In chapter 17 Philip Crang points to the different performances that are required of retail employees according to the context in which they find themselves. By drawing on his own ethnography of restaurant work, Crang is able to show the multiple personas that waiters need to adopt in order to be attuned to the practice of sale. In particular, he shows the degree to which reflexivity has become a vital part of the act of serving, especially as Euro-American societies, driven by the media, have ratcheted up expectations of what constitutes good practices of eating and serving.

Economy of Passions

Part six aims to show the extraordinary affective investments that are made in commercial cultures that are often depicted as hyper-rational or even sterile. Crang shows the emotional work that is involved in working in certain kinds of

restaurants. Arlie Hochschild's classic work (chapter 18) makes the same point, but then extends it by showing the degree to which this emotional work is now a matter of explicit training, so that employees are able to participate more fully and more effectively in the act of sale. Using the example of flight attendants, she shows the growing expectation that employees will be emotionally literate, and the stresses and strains that this expectation produces. She also shows the way in which both employee and customer participate in a fantasy of service to which they both subscribe – though often to wildly varying degrees.

This fantasy is fully realized with the case of sex workers, outlined in chapter 19 by Lisa Law. Here, the act of exchange and the act of sex are clearly one and the same thing, but that instrumentalism has to be concealed in a play of calculated subservience. In Law's analysis, which focuses on bar workers in the Philippines, this act is complicated still further by the intercultural nature of these kinds of transactions. Here, what we see is the charge of sexual desire converted into the raw currency of exchange.

The case of sex workers in Southeast Asia can be seen as only one part of a massive illicit global economy trading on passions like sex, drugs, and gambling. This economy comes together in certain strategic sites around the world, of which one of the most notable is Las Vegas. What is striking about the Las Vegas outlined in chapter 20 by Denton and Morris is the degree to which its prosperity has become central to the prosperity of the American economy, driven by systematic alliances between casino owners, politicians, criminals (from US syndicates to the Japanese Yakuza), the urban elite, and property magnates, which have, if anything, become more deep seated. After reading chapter 20 it is difficult to be quite so judgmental about how anomalous the situation outlined by Frederico Varese really is.

It would of course be impossible to produce a book on cultural economy that does not address the rise and rise of the cultural industries as an integral part of Western economic formations. Chapter 21 concentrates on the archetypal cultural industry of advertising, the industry that is often considered to be at the center of modern consumer capitalism. Celia Lury's interest is in the brand, that here and not-here icon, which stands for so much and for so little. Focusing on the Nike swoosh, Lury argues that the brand has effectivity because it triggers a response in that very small space of time before cognition takes hold. Using video evidence she shows the way in which the brand acts as a kind of halo around numerous activities in modern life, framing them rather than giving them meaning. We are all continually being lightly touched by brands and this brush with cultural economy has now become an integral part of not only what we consume, but also who we are.

Conclusion

This is a book that acts as both a summary of what has so far been achieved in the expanding field of cultural economy and as a ground for further work. The field continues to rapidly evolve, so that it is not just filling out every dimension of what is conventionally regarded as the economic with cultural filigree, but is also producing new senses of the economic, which heretofore have not existed. There is much still to do, but we hope that this book will create more adherents who will have the wherewithal to do it.

NOTES

- 1 Of course, many economists would argue that it is the improper application of economic knowledge that has brought us to this pass.
- 2 For example, considerable policy interest has grown in psychometric tools of assessing risk and hedging against uncertainty, in measuring and building social capital as the mainspring of economic regeneration strategies, in processes of tacit knowledge formation and creative improvisation in order to unlock business innovation and adaptation.
- 3 However, there are obvious interesting intertwinings with orthodox Western economics. For example, Maurer's work on the spatial distribution of Islamic economic theory includes key sites in Leicester and San Francisco, powered by experts who have been trained in both Islamic and Western orthodox principles of economics. Similarly, Islamic principles have a tendency to appear as a weapon of moral sanction in President Mahathir's Malaysia rather than as the foundation of the country's industrialization program.
- 4 Even Alfred Marshall, often invoked as a founding figure by many practitioners of economics narrowly defined, was clear that the discipline should be broadly defined. His *Principles of Economics*, first published in 1890, opens with this statement: "Political economy of economics is a study of mankind in the ordinary business of life; it examines that part of individual and social action which is most closely connected with the attainment and with the use of material requisites of well-being. Thus, it is on the one side a study of wealth; and on the other, and more important side, a part of the study of man" (Marshall 1961: 1).
- 5 The pre-tax profit margins on an SUV are currently about \$8,000 compared with a figure close to break-even on smaller cars.
- 6 Brought forth in part by rising income inequality
- 7 The car manufacturers have taken the NRPE campaign seriously. Bill Ford has met the NRPE leaders, while Chevrolet has sponsored a series of rock concerts, called "Chevrolet Presents: Come Together and Worship," a move which failed to impress the NRPE director who was quoted as saying that "It encourages Christians to buy cars, many of which despoil God's creation" (Rushe 2002: 18).
- 8 "In the race for wealth, and honor, and preferments [man] may run as hard as he can, and strain every nerve and every muscle, in order to outstrip all his competitors. But if he should jostle, or throw down any of them, the indulgence of the spectators is entirely at an end. It is a violation of fair play which they cannot admit of. This man is to them, in every respect, as good as he: they do not enter into that self-love by which he prefers himself so much to this other, and cannot go along with the motive from which he hurt him" (Smith 1759, pt. ii, sec. ii, ch. 2; cited in Morrow 1969: 48).
- 9 Similarly, these orders come with hopes and dreams that might be considered to have a religious dimension (see Maurer 2002).
- 10 Mirowski (2002) shows how these evolutionary metaphors bear a complex relation to other families of metaphors, and especially machinic and linguistic metaphors.

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Chapter 14

Making Love in Supermarkets

Daniel Miller

For many purposes the main division in the street where I conducted fieldwork lies between the council estates on one side and the private housing on the other. But the significance of this division cannot always be assumed. Although she lives in an owner-occupied maisonette, Mrs Wynn comes across immediately as quintessentially working class. Her husband is an electrician but has been unemployed for several months owing to an injury. She is a childminder, taking into her home other people's children while they are out working. Between his injury and the fact that someone recently ran into their car while it was parked outside their house, they were not having an easy time of it. Nevertheless, as often proved to be the case, her concerns in shopping bear little upon the contingencies of the moment, and relate more to longer-term issues surrounding the personal development of each member of the family. She was pretty fed up with the consequences of these unexpected events, but shopping as a topic drew her back to things that at one level were more mundane. But these were relationships which she cared about a great deal and was constantly thinking about and forming strategies to deal with. In conversation she notes:

*A*¹ My husband is quite fussy vegetable wise and he's a big meat eater, but yes I've been doing a lot of stir fries because I found I could get him to eat a lot more vegetables if I do stir fries, and he likes Chinese. He likes spicy stuff. He's got a lot better than when I first met him because his mum's Irish and over-cooked everything and was pretty basic and he's got so much better in the years.

Q Do the kids eat the same as him?

A No. Jack my son's got very fussy, definitely in the last year. I would say he's a good vegetable and fruit eater but he's the basic chips and burger and I'm afraid so.

Q Do you cook separately for them?

A Pasta he loves pasta. Yes, and separate times as well.

Later on in the same conversation she notes:

A I try not to buy a lot of convenience [foods]. I do buy meat that is marinated and stuff like that and then think what can I do with it, but now and again I will sit down and get

my books out and have a look. I did it last week just because I was getting a bit tired of things. But also what I will do is buy the sauces and the stir-fry things, stuff like that, and then just add it to everything so it makes a bit of difference, but I seem to get stuck doing the same things over and over again. So, every now and then, I've got to get my books out to remind myself or think of some new things.

Q Is it you that's bored?

A No. He will say as well, we've had this a bit too much. I'm a great chicken eater and he says chicken again!

Later still she starts discussing the purchase of clothing for the family, making it clear that she buys her husband's clothes. She notes that out of preference he would just wear some old T-shirts, and often would then go on to use these as cloths during his work. It's not just his clothing she buys. In practice she prefers not to let him do any of the shopping. She feels that if she lets him shop, then he misses things on the list she has made, or buys himself things like biscuits on a whim.

A So it's more hard work. I'd rather him stay here and look after the children and I'll do it. Then it's a break for me and you know.

These views were reiterated when we were out shopping in a local supermarket. She again noted the problems with getting her children to eat what she wants them to eat rather than what they would choose for themselves. She claimed to be quite strict with the children that she was paid to look after, but with respect to her own children, she tended to be much more lenient – 'anything for a bit of peace and quiet'. Again and again her actual purchases are related back to household preferences. When she buys mint-flavoured lamb at the butcher's she notes in passing that this had gone down really well the week before and that she had been asked to get it again. Equally, some jam tarts purchased previously because they were under offer (going cheap) had been well received. The only exceptions to this orientation to the household in her shopping come with the purchase of some bread rolls and frankfurters for a friend who will be coming round for tea. Also at another point in our expedition she buys a fancy ice cream called Vionetta which she declares is 'a treat for herself'.

By no means all the shoppers I accompanied were like Mrs Wynn, but she is representative of a core of households. She should anyway be quite a familiar figure from many previous feminist studies of the housewife. The feminist perspective on such housewives will be discussed below, but many researchers have acknowledged that which would be clearly evident here. However oppressive the outside observer might find this subsumption of the individual to her husband and children, the housewife herself insists that she merely expresses thereby a series of responsibilities and concerns with which she strongly identifies and of which she is generally proud.

Mrs Wynn acknowledges that she is constantly monitoring, even researching, the desires and preferences of her household. These include both foundational goods which are expected to be constantly present and available in the house, but also transient desires which arise from a preference for at least a subsidiary element of change and innovation. But she would by no means regard herself as merely the passive representative of these desires. Indeed if she merely bought what the other

members of her household asked for, shopping would be relatively easy. The problem is that she wishes to influence and change her husband and children in quite a number of ways. She is constantly concerned that they should eat healthier foods than those they would choose for themselves. By the same token she wants them to wear either better quality or at least more respectable clothes than those they prefer. She sees her role as selecting goods which are intended to be educative, uplifting and in a rather vague sense morally superior. It is precisely their unwillingness to be uplifted by her shopping choices that creates the anxieties and battles of shopping. In vindicating their decisions, such housewives often lay claim to a wider perspective than that of other family members. They see themselves as having the foresight to prevent the embarrassment and disdain that others might feel if they let their families dress as they choose, or determine their own food choices.

Of course, all these efforts could be reduced to her interests. It could be argued that she is buying better clothes because she feels she will be made to suffer the opprobrium of criticism by others if she doesn't. She buys healthier foods because she would have to look after the person who otherwise becomes ill. But for us to try to figure out whether the constant hassle of arguing with her family, in order to persuade them to adopt her preferences, actually pays some kind of long-term dividend is the kind of daft calculation we may safely leave to economists, sociobiologists and their ilk. There is no reason to suppose that Mrs Wynn engages in any such weighing up of cost or benefit. As far as she is concerned, the reasons that she researches their preferences and equally that she then tries to improve upon them are the same. Both are assumed by her to represent the outcome of a responsibility so basic that it does not need to be made explicit or reflected upon. In short, her shopping is primarily an act of love, that in its daily conscientiousness becomes one of the primary means by which relationships of love and care are constituted by practice. That is to say, shopping does not merely reflect love, but is a major form in which this love is manifested and reproduced. This is what I mean to imply when I say that shopping in supermarkets is commonly an act of making love.

One could use other terms than love. Care, concern, obligation, responsibility and habit play their roles in these relationships. So also may resentment, frustration and even hatred. Can these latter be the ingredients of something we may properly term love? As long as it is clear that we understand by this term 'love' a normative ideology manifested largely as a practice within long-term relationships and not just some romantic vision of an idealized moment of courtship, then the term is entirely appropriate. Love as a practice is quite compatible with feelings of obligation and responsibility. As Parker (1996) has noted, love for infants is inevitably accompanied by hatred and resentment, and this is perhaps rather more evident for partnerships. The term is certainly justified by ethnography in as much as these shoppers would be horrified by the suggestion that they did not love the members of their family or that there was not a bedrock of love as the foundation of their care and concern, though they might well acknowledge some of these other attributes as well.

I never knew Mrs Wynn well enough to be able to gain a sense of the more intimate moments within her household. I don't know how free she felt about expressing her love in explicit forms. In general, a reticence with regard to more overt expressions of emotion is regarded as a typically British characteristic, and was

commented upon by those born elsewhere. But this reticence about love need not imply its absence, so much as its being essentialized as so natural that it becomes embarrassing to feel the need to express it. One consequence of this reticence is that love has come to be primarily objectified through everyday practices of concern, care and a particular sensitivity to others, within which shopping plays a central role.

During the course of this essay the term 'love', which first appears here as the common term by which relationships are legitimated, will become used to represent a value that leads us towards the problems of cosmology and transcendence. These terms are not intended to obfuscate or make complex some simple phenomenon. They merely remind us that within a largely secular society almost all of us still see ourselves as living lives directed to goals and values which remain in some sense higher than the mere dictates of instrumentality. Daily decisions are constantly weighed in terms of moral questions about good and bad action indicated in traits such as sensitivity as against style, or generosity as against jealousy. Though these may not be made explicit, the accounts we use to understand each other's actions depend on the continued existence of cosmology as a realm of transcendent value.

The terms 'cosmology' and 'transcendent' suggest values that are long lasting and opposed to the contingency of everyday life. They are intended to imply that although we focus upon the particular persons, children, partners and friends who occupy our concerns at a given moment of time, the way we relate to them is much influenced by more general beliefs about what social relations should look like and how they should be carried out. At one level then, love is a model of one particular type of identification and attachment. It is one we are socialized into and constantly informed about. This ideal is then triggered by an individual, such as a family member who makes it manifest. A relationship then builds its own specificity and nuance which (sometimes) goes well beyond the transcendent model with which we started. When the term 'love' is used, as here, in a more general sense, actual relationships are found to develop on the basis of much wider norms and expectations which pre-exist and remain after the relationship itself.

The term 'love' then indicates more than a claim to affection made during courtship. It stands for a much wider field of that to which life is seen as properly devoted. In later parts of this essay it will be more closely related back to devotional practices in which the term 'cosmology' is more obviously appropriate since the context is more clearly that of religion. The ethnography suggested that just as devotion is the taken-for-granted backdrop to the carrying out of religious rites in other times and places, so in North London love remains as a powerful taken-for-granted foundation for acts of shopping which will be argued to constitute devotional rites whose purpose is to create desiring subjects.

I would call Mrs Wynn a housewife, even though for the present she is the sole wage-earner of the family, because, for her, housewifery is her principal *raison d'être*. As feminist research has made clear, a person such as Mrs Wynn is more likely to view her earnings as simply part of her housewifery than as a job equivalent to that which her husband would be engaged in were he fit. As someone who identifies with being a housewife, the requests made by her family for particular foods are not viewed with resentment but are in fact desired by her. This is made quite explicit in another conversation with a working-class Cypriot woman.

Q Do you enjoy cooking?

A Yes I do, I'm afraid I do.

Q Does your family appreciate it?

A Oh yes, they do they love the food, my daughter when she comes home she says 'Oh mum food', she opens the fridge as soon as she comes in.

Q Is your husband particular?

A Oh he doesn't like very hot, very spicy food, but no he just eats what he's given really.

Q Does he make any requests?

A Oh I wish he would! No he doesn't.

Here, as is so often the case, there is no evident resentment at being identified unambiguously with housewifery. On the other hand, there is a considerable desire that this should be appreciated by the family members, and not taken for granted. A specific request for an item when shopping is taken as a kind of bringing into consciousness of the role played by the shopper and is most often viewed positively, even if it becomes a cause of contention. The subsequent argument is itself an opportunity for the housewife to demonstrate that she is only contradicting the request because of how much she cares for the person and therefore the consequences of what she buys. In general, the problem many housewives expressed was the lack of valorization, most particularly of the moral, educative and provisioning roles that housewives see as of immense importance. They would not normally use the term 'love' for such concerns, but it is clear from what they do say, that it is love alone that can satisfactorily legitimate their devotion to this work. It is also clear that to be satisfactory the subjects of love should desire and acknowledge that which the housewife sees as her ordinary devotional duty.

In the last two decades we have become far better informed about the work involved in keeping a home going and activities such as shopping. This is almost entirely thanks to a series of important empirical studies of housework inspired by the feminist critique of housewifery as unvalorized labour. Within a short time a normative pattern was uncovered and well documented which suggested that women tended to be largely responsible for the basic provisioning of the household, while men tended to be responsible mainly for extra items that were of particular interest to themselves, but were relatively unimportant in, for example, provisioning for children. Male work outside the home was found to be fully acknowledged through wages and through an endorsement of its centrality to the maintenance of the home, as in the phrase 'bringing home the bacon'. By contrast, women's work in the home was not only unpaid but even the homemaker tended to downplay the sheer weight of labour involved in keeping house. This degree of exploitation and the asymmetry of power was reinforced rather than redressed in consumption, where housewives were found to give the best of their labour in meals and comforts to others while often denying themselves the pleasure they strove to create for others.²

In general, our fieldwork revealed similar patterns to those uncovered in this previous work, and merely demonstrates that these generalizations still largely hold for the 1990s in this area of North London. Our research thereby also confirms the main conclusion of these other studies as to the basic asymmetry of housework and the exploitation of female labour. By the same token these previous studies provide the bulk of evidence for the centrality of love and care as the ideology

behind mundane domestic activities such as shopping, to which this case study becomes merely an additional exemplification. The primary examples are these highly conventional expressions of care and concern within households. But there is a wide range of other ways in which love is expressed, which will be illustrated below. Examples include love within egalitarian couples, by the elderly, between friends, siblings and a gamut of other relationships. Even if love is extended to this degree, however, I am obviously not claiming it is ubiquitous. Not every shopping practice is about love; there are others that relate more to selfishness, hedonism, tradition and a range of other factors. What I will claim, however, is that love is not only normative but easily dominant as the context and motivation for the bulk of actual shopping practice.

Some Varieties of Love-making

Sheila, like Mrs Wynn, provides for a nuclear family within a clearly working-class milieu, in this case living in council housing. Her husband Bob works night shifts for the army and she works as a shop assistant. Unlike Mrs Wynn, however, their relationship is based on far more extensive sharing of activities such as shopping. This is in large measure due to the fact that his night shift is more compatible with shopping than her day shift. Beyond this is a more complex relation of gender. He works in the highly macho environment of the army, but is himself a clerk. He constantly expresses preferences for rather macho taste, but it is understood that this covers a rather less forceful disposition and a rather fearful personality. This comes over, for example, in his clear terror of the pigeons that fly around the high street and to which most people give little or no regard. The gender divisions are then traditional but not given, in that they have to be constantly re-expressed to hide what is otherwise a more confident and strong woman. For her part she does indeed want him to shop but because of her sense of love and family devotion she desires at the same time to protect his rather more fragile self-confidence from this aberration from their mutually conservative notions of gender differences.

The result of these contradictions was evident in the constant comic banter between the spouses when I accompanied them both shopping. In turn this was related to a clearly held view as to the importance of easy-going compromise as the foundation to their ideal of how their relationship ought to be. Shopping choices and negotiations then come to play their part in the constant reiteration of what they regard as the positive elements of their relationship. This ideal is made clear in earlier conversations.

A But Sheila is normally easy because she always says to me 'Well we're pretty easy-going'. Like you know as long as we don't hate something, like we'll say Oh alright that's fair enough.

Q What about other opinions?

A No we don't, we're not for things like that. We get what we like. Well to be truthful the kids, they don't. They're like us, really easy-going, 'Oh that's alright yeah, that's it'. Charlotte, when we first did the wallpaper she said 'Oh it's disgusting', but a week later she said 'No it's nice, I like that wallpaper Dad'. Normally the kids are easy-going.

Within this idea of 'easy-going' is negotiated an arrangement whereby the individuality of each family member is made explicit, but the demands that this individuality may put on the group limited. So the father is allowed to have tastes that are seen as natural to a 'proper man' as in:

A They don't eat what I call proper. The whole household to me. I'm the only one who eats proper meat, what I call meat, I don't call them things beefburgers and all that, I'm talking about lamb chops, pork strips, legs of chicken.

Q Butcher's?

A Yeah a butcher's – exactly. I like my meat. I love my meat.

Similarly, the daughter is expected to have the propensities recognized as normal for a sixteen-year-old girl, but only in as far as they can be put together in a feasible shopping package. Demand for further autonomy is referred back to that individual, unless this seems to her mother to be a 'reasonable' request for special consideration.

A Occasionally she'll ask for something, cotton balls or, and food wise she'll ask 'Oh I like them so and so I haven't had them for a while'. You know whatever. She likes them chicken bites doesn't she, she'll say 'dinosaurs [a shape of processed chicken] when are you getting some more dinosaurs', so I say 'If you want it just say what you want' 'cos Charlotte's not a real meat eater I mean she gets on me nerves sometimes.

Q Do you still buy most things for her?

A Oh yes, I'll say to her sometimes the day before 'Do you want a chilli tonight or something or would you prefer just something with chips or', but she'll let me know like in advance though.

Q Things she gets for herself?

A That's her hair things.

Q Clothes, music?

A Well we help with the clothes sometimes, but if she just wants to get a T-shirt, something like that, she'll get herself that out of her pocket money. She gets her hair sprays and hair colour whatever. The cleansing lotion we normally get because she can't use soap and water, so she has to have cleansing, so you know we get that for her.

During the shopping expedition the banter between them consists mainly of criticisms spun off as jokes. Sheila, as many North London housewives today, heads first for the National Lottery, while he takes the list for shopping. On her return he says to me in a loud – to be overheard – voice 'you didn't see how much she spent when she went off to buy cigarettes did you! She gave you the slip that time!' Later she interrogates him about a red-wine casserole sauce for chicken that he seemed to have slipped into the shopping basket without her seeing, and then again about some better-quality coat-hangers. She laughingly notes how 'You are going to see a fight now', and that he had better take them back. Yet this is said in a way that is clearly an acknowledgement that she accepts the purchase as a *fait accompli*. He tries but then fails to choose a jam, since he knows the kids don't like ones with pieces of fruit in, but doesn't know enough to be sure what they do like since 'the kids is her department'. Later at the shampoo counter she pretends she finds one for 'no hair' (since he is receding). 'She always gets one over me', he remarks. A key element within this comic banter is her constant criticism of his lack of shopping skills; for example, his forgetting to pack the bread in such a way as to prevent it

becoming crushed. Taken in context, however, these criticisms are a mechanism she uses to affirm that as a man, although he may shop, he is not a natural shopper. He is thereby able to receive such 'criticisms' as praise for his natural manliness, something which he recognizes. I can see him light up with pride at each barb levelled against him. All such criticism is gratefully received.

Their individual shopping choices are part and parcel of the same shoring-up of conventionality. Compared to most shoppers, they tend to a much higher proportion of branded as against supermarket own-label goods. Also their food choices are amongst the most overtly 'British' of any of the grocery shopping observed. Apart from the elderly, most shoppers tend to take advantage these days of the highly cosmopolitan possibilities of the supermarket. But this family's shopping basket has mainly items such as mint sauce, chops, shortbread, corned beef, sage and onion stuffing, vinegar, pork belly and chipping potatoes, which together form a portrait of 'Britishness' in the rather 'bulldoggy' sense that he brings from his workplace. It is this that gives meaning to the cheap 'wine-based' casserole sauce being slipped into the basket as his guilty secret – his French bit on the side.

The couple also have to contend with a problem with their son, which time and again becomes a key point of contention for working-class shoppers on low incomes. Almost invariably sons desire the special football stripes (clothing) for their team and these are extremely expensive. In this case, the new Spurs (a football team) stripe would cost £66, which they really can't afford. In fact, they have resorted to borrowing the money from a building society account which contains funds given to their son from his grandparents. Although at one level they know they are stealing from their own son, they reason that it is more important to be able to provide something which has become a key element in a boy's constitution as a member of his peer group. Indeed, this is precisely the kind of 'love that cannot be denied' which can lead to theft by impoverished families, who, as in this case, would see themselves as scrupulously law-abiding by choice. I could never imagine this couple stealing on their own behalf, but they are simply too driven by love for this not to be imaginable as action on behalf of others. This example also makes clear that love should not be isolated as something opposed to wider social concerns. Here love takes the more exquisite form of parental anxiety over how the son will be treated if he does not live up to the expectation of his peers. Similarly, love may incorporate class consciousness, emulation and other factors discussed in research on consumption (see Slater 1997: 33–99 and Warde 1997: 7–42 for recent examples), in as much as these are turned into intra-household needs and anxieties.

Of course, this couple does not possess the eloquence of writers about household relations, such as the playwright Ibsen. Yet there is no reason why Ibsen could not be properly invoked. The family tensions and contradictions evident in their relationships are not just between individuals fulfilling roles, but revolve around the basic attributions of gender and its burdens of expectations in the form of male strength and female sentiment. These are precisely the issues found in Ibsen's fictional accounts of the classic bourgeois family. Shopping here allows for considerable play with performance and facade and the complex empathy and humanity that allows love to be the instrument rather than the victim of such contradictions. My contention is that this couple (as those writers) often reveal ways in which a larger sense of humanity struggles to express itself within a structure whose fundamentally

oppressive nature would otherwise overwhelm them. It is hard to imagine a more unlikely figure of philosophy than Sheila, yet it was clear on the several occasions that I also observed her in the shop where she worked, listening and sometimes chatting extensively to fellow workers and customers, how she strives to bring to this, her second marriage, skills and sentiments gathered from her constant exposure to the trials and tribulations of other people's everyday domestic relations.

My next example requires us to cross, not only the road, but also that considerable boundary between the two major class contexts of British society, in order to review an extract from a much longer discussion about furniture shopping. Here are found a comparatively egalitarian couple, where the husband is said to do as much cooking as the wife, but their core shared interest is in art and design. The husband actually teaches design and the wife has a strong interest in the arts. For them, the emphasis on the commonality of taste becomes a particularly significant expression of their existence as a compatible couple in love.

A Well we needed a sofa. We decided we didn't have enough seating in our house. We had a little sofa, then we had a couple of chairs so it was hopeless. So we were looking for a sofa and they're all so expensive and we were going around everywhere thinking 'Oh no', you know and they were all horrible. So we thought let's go to IKEA, they're fairly cheap there and the things seem fairly sturdy enough. We've got book cases and stuff from there before, and we went along, and we saw a sort of sofa bed we thought we'd get so we could have people come over and sleep, stay over, sort of dual purpose and we nearly went to buy one, and we were on our way out, when we went into the bargain basement corner, and there was this sofa, and we didn't immediately say 'yes that's it', we sort of went 'um yeah'. Actually we hadn't thought of leather, but yeah yellow's OK. Then I suddenly thought that would be just right, that'll just do us just fine so I sat on it while Allen went up to the cashier and said 'yes we want that sofa, I want to pay for it now before someone else gets it' 'cos there was only one like £750 and it was like £400 so and we squeezed it into the back of our Golf [car]. It could barely fit, took the legs off. We strapped it on, came home and my brother was like 'Hey you've got a new sofa' so it worked out quite well really. Allen's always worried that the cat's going to be scratching it up and stuff.

Q Does the cat scratch?

A Yeah yeah she just sort of walks around and hangs on. There are a few little bits but it's worn quite well. We're quite pleased with it really. I think it looks pretty good. It doesn't obviously look IKEA or anything so. Some of my friends really hate IKEA so you have to choose carefully what you get from there.

As in the case of the football stripes, this conversation demonstrates the interweaving of intra-household love, here expressed as the taken-for-granted sharing of taste, and the firm eye kept on the effect this has on the image of the couple exposed to external criticism.

These three examples express relationships that are already well established. Shopping can also shed light on relationships that are coming into being. There is a less common but equally germane case of shopping as a specific act of courtship – that is, part of a series of activities that enable a couple to decide whether they could or should be regarded as what is so eloquently termed 'an item'. We remain within the middle-class milieu of a young divorced woman, who is both a journalist and student at a design college, shopping with her boyfriend. Although he had not yet

moved in with her, they had at least broached the topic of buying a house together. At this stage the crucial factor in shopping was my presence. This was an occasion to learn about each other's taste and forge a relationship in terms of shopping compatibility. But there was also the question as to how they appeared as a couple to an outsider. The sheer effort that I felt they were putting into showing me how happy they were together should not be seen as thereby false. It reflected their own question as to whether, when revealed in the reflected gaze of the anthropologist, they would find themselves to be in love.

They have both just bathed and dressed, they are in jeans, but are equally well trained at looking good in blue denim. Almost every shopping choice is exploited as an opportunity to construct an agreement as to whether to go his way, her way or in a way that could be defined in the future as 'their' way. This started from the decision as to whose car to use. During the journey they are exchanging knowledge about the best place to buy items (mainly car-related items). Although both have said that they do not normally enjoy grocery shopping, they are clearly out to have a good time. They have little gestures of fun; for example, she rushes to pick the bag of tea just before he gets there. She then holds it above the trolley and lets go in a kind of 'plop' gesture, as opposed to merely putting it in. They put their arms around each other, they perform little acts of showing off, such as when she pushes and then 'rides' on the trolley for a couple of feet. At one point she picks up a mini fudge to give him as an immediate gift. They also engage in conspicuous compromise: for example, at one point she picks up butter, he a low-fat spread, and they then decide to have a small tub of each. The shopping is not only about finding common tastes. Compared to most shoppers she spends quite some time simply picking up items she would not normally have considered. She does not buy any of them, but it is clear that the opportunity for changes represented by her new relationship is also a catalyst for her trying to imagine new possibilities for herself and whether she could be the kind of person who buys this or that product.

As so often with shopping, however, there are nuances and contradictions below the level of the more overt building of relationships. For one thing, the fact that she has stressed that this will be a small shop, and he that it will be a large one, is not unconnected to the fact that it is her turn to pay the bill. Furthermore, as so often with love, the relationship that is being forged while shopping is not based on equality. Even within what appears to be a feminist middle-class relationship with a more experienced divorcee, they establish a clear asymmetry. In general, she is trying to develop a more intimate knowledge of him and his desires, while he is establishing that he has the final word in most decision making. He vetoes choices such as a soyabean mix by saying he doesn't like soya, but I saw no cases of her vetoing him. They are both vegetarian but she sometimes eats fish. He wants them to end up with an agreement based on his preference, and manages to drop enough hints to make her say at one point: 'Why do you keep going on about it?' As decisions accumulate it becomes clear that although she will permit an unequal relationship, this should not be so overt as to prevent her from finding ways to hide this fact from herself. In addition they both have other relationships of care to mark. He normally takes his mother shopping and here buys extra goods for her. She has her daughter to think about, and as so often buys goods which are slightly less 'junky' versions of those requested by her daughter. These are accompanied with the

typical explanation that 'I would like to wean her onto something healthier'. Within a few weeks of this shopping expedition the couple informed me they were engaged.

Few opportunities arose to observe such 'shopping as courtship' expeditions. Apart from individuals, the single most common shopping genre was also the most fraught, which is when mothers shop with infants. Here the relationship between power and love becomes far more explicit, as do the contradictions of love. Mothers with babies are constantly torn between a sense of pride and desire to show off their infant to appreciative fellow shoppers and the anxiety that mounts as babies lose 'patience' and start to cry, struggle and embarrass their parents. Such ambivalence continues as toddlers express often unmitigated greed, negating the sense of innocence and nature that the parent would wish them to express.³ This is also the most unambiguous relationship of love in that no amount of anxiety, frustration or embarrassment can undermine the fundamental belief that the relationship being expressed and developed in endless battles and compromises should be called love.

Around those varieties of love that remain clearly within a normative centre lie other examples that are both more problematic and in some cases better regarded as exceptions. Clary illustrates the problems that arise when relentless poverty becomes in and of itself a constraint to the expression of such sentiments. Clary is a single mother living in a council flat, who simply cannot manage on the meagre government support she receives. Her present hardship is exacerbated by having been caught without a television licence, so that she is also paying off a fine. The father of her two children is much better off, and she feels particularly vulnerable because she simply cannot compete with his generosity when the children go and stay with him, and she is worried about the indulgences they become used to while there. In effect, her love is manifested largely as anxiety about shopping, rather than in shopping itself. The social science literature on consumption often seems to echo most journalism in making the daft assumption that it is mainly the rich who are materialistic. Clary, however, like most people I worked with who live in considerable poverty, is much more materialistic than the rich, because of the miserable consequences of her lack of goods. For Clary, this is reflected not merely in her persistent worrying about goods she cannot afford but also the deeper sense that she is a failure as a mother as a result of this. These anxieties constantly surface in conversations, as in a discussion about birthday parties for children at the school.

A Yeah Ruth has been to quite a few, and one of Mark's friends had to go to McDonald's and it's really expensive, especially when there's about twelve or fourteen children, and I can't even afford to get Mark a birthday card let alone a party or anything. I mean it's his birthday on Tuesday and he's gone down to their [the father's] house for the week, so I mean I've only just sent a card down. It's all I can afford. It's very difficult when you're on your own and you haven't got any money, and I feel quite embarrassed when they have to keep going to parties, and I haven't really got a present but I sort of manage to get something.

The same anxiety permeates the experience of shopping with Clary. On one occasion – an extremely hot day – when we had walked to the shopping centre to save on fares, the children start to ask for drinks as soon as we arrive. I decide to buy ice lollies for all four of us (I was pretty thirsty too!). But Clary is immediately nervous. Eating slows them down. The lollies melt before they can be eaten properly and she

has to hold her daughter's lolly for her, and eat some of the looser ice cream to stop it falling off. She then becomes upset about their sticky hands and faces, and makes clear by various gestures that I should not have bought them lollies – that she sort of knew that this is what would happen. She then buys a pack of tissues she cannot afford in order to clean the children up. Pride, love, guilt – one could attach so many labels to Clary's feelings and actions (and add insensitivity to mine). For most parents love is often subsumed within anxiety, but for Clary anxiety is often about all she has.

The concept of making love in shopping is even more problematic when the issue is not one of lack of money, but lack of a relationship to which love can be directed. In this particular area there are two main varieties of single-person household. The first and most numerous is that of the elderly. In general, these tend also to be amongst the most impoverished households, occupying the most run-down part of the council flats. There exist amongst the elderly some of the most self-obsessed individuals in the street; for example, one elderly male who had never married and clearly regarded other people (in particular inquisitive anthropologists) with considerable malevolence. Despite my perseverance in enquiry I could uncover very little beneath his armour of autonomy. It should be said, however, that this individualism did not always result in selfishness, and that he, along with a number of other elderly persons, took part in the routine shopping for those elderly in the flats who were invalids and unable to shop for themselves.

Many amongst the elderly show considerable ingenuity in turning shopping into acts of love for both their descendants and their ancestors. I will provide an example of the latter. This involved an older (she would not like to have been called elderly) woman who clearly shopped incessantly as a means of keeping occupied. The problem then arose as to how to keep such shopping going when in reality she had little in the way of goods she needed and little by way of money to buy them. In practice she develops 'projects' which fortunately are very hard to come to fruition. Several of these relate to gifts she will have to buy for Christmas, a wedding or a christening that she can start thinking about months, even years ahead. A more elaborate project revolved around an ancestral shrine. This consisted of the decoration of the flat with photographs of her parents and other deceased relatives. So, for example, she needed a particular photo frame to match exactly one she already had, but which she could never find, combined with other elements such as the right artificial flowers that would festoon the portraits. Through such devices she manages to engage herself in daily acts of shopping where most of the time is spent considering others and maintaining the same subsumption of the self that was crafted through decades of housewifery, but now returns as affection for her ancestors.

The other major form of single-person household in this area is that of single professional women who have developed strong career aspirations aided by feminism, but have had difficulty in finding men they regard as equal to themselves. Quite often, however, as in the couple described shopping/courting together, even where they are not in established households they have relationships of various degrees ongoing or on the horizon. Many of them seemed to have reached an age where their shopping is directed towards the imagined establishment of a household,

though in practice this may well end up as a single-parent household. They are therefore closer to housewives than they are to the more clearly individualistic teenagers. Just as it should not be assumed that materialism is best associated with those who possess goods, so also it should not be assumed that it is the single person who is most individualistic. On the contrary, if anything it is the lonely who are more obsessed with relationships than those who can afford to take them for granted.

Perhaps most revealing of the problem of a lack of objects of love is Christine. She is a secretary and has few of the class and career aspirations of the dominant group of single women, and few aspirations with regard to partners either. Rather, she has entered a cycle of mild depression that saps the confidence that would help her in either one of these aims. For those who see shopping as a vicarious activity, where interest in commodities replaces the search for social relations, she might well have been a candidate for intensive shopping. But as I argued with respect to an earlier study of kitchen decoration in North London (Miller 1988), the evidence is quite the contrary. Concern for particular goods tends to come from the development rather than from the absence of meaningful relationships. An inability to relate to people usually means an inability to relate to goods also. As such, Christine finds little pleasure in shopping. Her conversation is replete with statements such as 'I haven't shopped for clothes for ages' or

Q Do you like shopping?

A No not really! I used to. I've gone off it now. I'm trying to decorate so I've been looking for furniture and that's just been awful.

Or

A I don't like shopping for food because it's too heavy to carry back. No I don't really enjoy the shopping, not at the moment, but that's probably my frame of mind at the moment, I'm not really interested in that sort of thing.

The only exception is when she can shop with a female friend, a shopping companion of ten years' standing – and then there is her cat. On several occasions the conversation also meanders wistfully back to a time when she did enjoy shopping, when there was some point to it.

There are, however, those for whom the generalizations I intend to develop on the basis of such material would not hold. Teenagers are certainly 'other' directed, but the other is often mainly a mirror (both literally and figuratively) in which they wish to gain a better sense of who they are. While they may talk of love rather more easily than their elders, they are less likely to conform to that version of love being described here. They may well be the group which comes closest to the conventional vision of shopping as devoted to the development of individual identity. There were cases of married women who could by no stretch of the imagination be seen as largely subsuming their own desires within service to their partners. There were relationships that were breaking up or where shopping was used to manifest rivalry and jealousy. But even taken together these amount to a minority perspective held against a norm of shopping as an expression of care and concern.

To conclude: the ethnographic evidence has been used to redirect attention from shopping as an expression of individual subjectivity and identity to an expression of kinship and other relationships. It could be argued that it is misleading to talk of making love when one has here such a variety of relationships, but this would be to ignore the crucial role of ideology in legitimating these relationships. As one listens to and takes part in the practice of these relationships it becomes clear that it is almost forbidden to understand or justify any dyadic formation except in the context of love. Parents are well aware of their responsibilities to their children and even of their legal requirements, but they would be highly offended by the suggestion that these alone are the cause of their devotion. Couples may have individual interests at stake and conflicts in practice, but they present the situation to themselves as founded on love, without which their relationship not only could but should be ended. Siblings and friends are understood to be cared for with more reason than obligation or reciprocity. Love is essential because it asserts the ideal of agency within any given relationship. What is rejected is any language of obligation that suggests we maintain relationships solely out of enforced behaviour. To define a relationship in any terms other than love seems to be taken as a debasement of that relationship.⁴

NOTES

- 1 Throughout this essay 'A' is the informant's answer to a question and 'Q' is the question asked. The speech is reported verbatim and I have not tried to convert it into formal grammar or 'accepted' words.
- 2 Examples for Britain start with Oakley (1976), and a good selection of the genre may be found collected together in Jackson and Moores (1995). Feminist research is complemented by other genres of sociological research of which Finch (1989) is a particularly important representative and whose results have largely confirmed the centrality of woman as carer and worker within the family.
- 3 For further details of this ambivalence as expressed in the tension between mothers and infants during shopping, see Miller (forthcoming).
- 4 This is notwithstanding that, according to Campbell (1986: 27), it was only in the eighteenth century that love was considered sufficient grounds for marriage in Britain. Now it is the only grounds that seems to be able to claim general legitimacy.

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