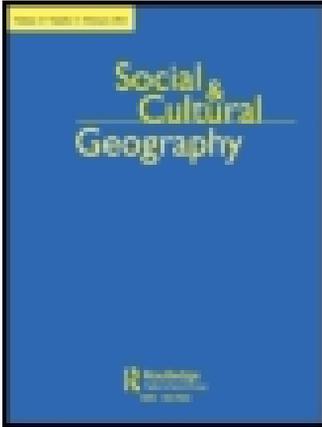


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Rematerializing social and cultural geography

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The recent history of social and cultural geography has been characterized by a series of sometimes heated exchanges between different schools of thought, often couched in terms of a contrast between the 'old' and the 'new' (Kong 1997; Price and Lewis 1993). While such debate might be taken as evidence of the vitality of the field, it can lead to an over-simplified view of intellectual history, denying the significance of historical continuities, exaggerating the coherence of different 'schools' of thought and encouraging hostile caricature rather than accurate characterization and constructive critique. This proposal for 'rematerializing' social and cultural geography is intended to build bridges and to move discussion forward rather than remaining mired in the claim and counter-claim of recent debate.

As most readers of this journal would probably agree, human geography has been revitalized by successive encounters with social and cultural theory during the 1980s and 1990s, by the development of a variety of critical perspectives (inspired by feminism and post-colonialism among other intellectual and political movements) and by the emergence of a reflexive concern with issues of representation and the positionality of the researcher. Though these trends were widely welcomed, attracting renewed interest in questions of spatiality

across the social sciences, they have not been without their critics. Earlier warnings of a 'descent into discourse' (Palmer 1990) were supplemented by more sympathetic critiques, including Andrew Sayer's (1994) reminder of the continuing salience of 'the economic', even as the economic and the cultural have been brought into closer dialogue (Sayer 1997). Don Mitchell (1995) wrote of the dangers of reifying culture, while Nicky Gregson warned that social geography's recent obsession with meaning, identity, representation and ideology was in danger of replacing studies that were more firmly grounded in material culture or concerned with socially significant differences of gender, class, race, sexuality or (dis)ability (1995: 139). While the potential evacuation of 'the social' in social and cultural geography remains a serious concern, it is the other, less remarked, part of Gregson's commentary that most concerns me here, heralding the revival of a 'material culture' perspective in social and cultural geography.

Studies of material culture have long been part of 'traditional' readings of cultural geography, whether in terms of Sauerian studies of landscape evolution and cultural diffusion or Kniffen's careful charting of the transformation of natural objects into regionally distinctive groupings of cultural artefacts and vernacular

building styles. Though it is precisely these studies that have been subject to some of the most virulent attacks by exponents of the so-called 'new cultural geography'—characterized as 'a celebration of the parochial ... a contemplation of the bizarre' (Gregory and Ley, 1988: 116) or simply as 'object fetishism' (Duncan 1990: 11)—there are good reasons for taking material culture seriously within a critical, theoretically informed approach to contemporary social and cultural geography. The recent trans-disciplinary emphasis on cultures of consumption (Miller 1995) offers one particularly promising avenue for further research on material culture, but so too do other areas of current research in human geography, including studies of cyberspace and virtual reality (e.g. Crang, Crang and May 1999; Kitchin 1998), the recent profusion of studies adopting an actor-network approach (e.g. Bingham 1996; Murdoch 1997a, 1997b); and the renewed interest in studies of socially constructed nature where issues such as genetic engineering promise (or threaten) to redraw the line between the human and non-human world (e.g. Whatmore 1997, 1999). More generally, an emphasis on material culture provides a critical window on recent studies of 'globalization' and its cultural dynamics. Far from globalization resulting in a homogeneous world with no social or cultural differentiation, there is mounting evidence of the continued significance of local contexts of consumption as well as increasingly complex geographies of production that defy description in terms of a unilinear process of globalization (Miller 1997). Rather, the 'local' and the 'global' are mutually constitutive, theorized not in terms of unilinear commodity chains but via complex circuits, networks and flows. Tracing the historical geographies of these networks, with all their multiple, leaky inter-connections, remains a significant and so-far mostly unrealized challenge.

Rather than trying to review this burgeoning literature in its entirety, I have chosen to focus on a more manageable project, considering the potential for a rematerialized social and cultural geography within some of my own recent work, looking at three specific studies: shopping in north London, reading men's lifestyle magazines and tracing the commodity cultures associated with various kinds of South Asian transnationality in Britain.¹

Much of this work was stimulated by a series of conversations with Daniel Miller whose own work began with an interest in Indian pottery (concerning the social and cultural significance of ceramic variability in central India) but quickly developed to encompass the ethnography of material culture and mass consumption more generally (Miller 1985, 1989). Building on earlier work in cultural studies, Miller examined the relationship between people and things in terms of a Hegelian notion of 'objectification' defined in terms of processes of externalization and sublation. According to Miller (1989: 27–30), 'externalization' refers to a process of alienation whereby goods and services are first distanced from the institutions from which they originate before being subject to a process of 'sublation' as society reappropriates this externalized form in the development of a social subject. From such a perspective, the meaning of material objects is embedded in specific cultural contexts as people use things (from 'traditional' pottery to 'modern' shopping centres) to objectify social relationships, providing a kind of commentary on their social experience.

In our work on Brent Cross and Wood Green in north London, for example, we were able to demonstrate how consumers' fears over the 'artificiality' of contemporary shopping centres involved a displacement on to the built environment of their anxieties about the increasing materialism, artificiality and alienation

of contemporary social relations. It allowed us to interpret consumers' stated preference for 'convenience' (everything under one roof in a climate-controlled environment) together with their dislike of 'artificiality' (no sense of place or changing seasons, no escape from the incessant piped 'muzak') while in their actual consumption practices they tended to favour 'anonymous' shopping centres over more 'personalized' corner shops. Consumers' sense of alienation in their social relations came to be articulated in terms of their alienation from nature (often stated in terms of a desire for more greenery and running water). Guilty feelings about shopping for personal 'luxuries' were contrasted with the virtues of thrift and self-sacrifice, particularly by mothers in relation to their families. Children were represented simultaneously as the most materialistic members of the family and as a stimulus to more 'green' and ethical modes of consumption. Through a similar process of objectification and displacement, attitudes towards the changing ethnic composition of our two case-study neighbourhoods were commonly expressed in terms of a hostility towards shoddy imported goods and foreign food and a general fear of pollution through casual contact with strangers. Particularly among elderly white residents in the working-class neighbourhood of Wood Green, standards of cleanliness and hygiene were widely felt to be slipping, while the virtues of familiarity and 'personal service' had given way to an increasingly impersonal and insecure world, characterized by unpredictable encounters with various kinds of difference (especially young, male, working-class blacks).

Theorizing these changes through a material culture perspective helped us to explain residents' highly nostalgic stated preference for local shops compared to their widespread support in practice for modern supermarkets. It

also helped explain the extent of public support for increasingly intrusive means of surveillance in the quasi-public (but in practice privatized) spaces of modern shopping centres. A material culture perspective—whether in relation to particular things ('pure linen', 'filthy toilets', 'stinking cooking', 'a nice cup of tea') or particular places (such as a preference for Brent Cross over Wood Green, the shopping centre over the high street, or the department store over the corner shop)—helps explain more abstract social processes such as those we refer to in terms of artificiality and the transformation of nature, familiarity and the racialization of neighbourhood change, or the domestication of fear (Jackson 1999; Miller et al. 1998). Indeed, in this study there was a danger of reducing the material to the social, of implying that a preference for one type of shopping space over another involved a simple displacement of social attitudes on to the built environment. More complex understandings of the relationship between the social and the spatial, between material goods and their symbolic meanings, have been explored in subsequent studies.

While Miller would be the first to admit that our access to the material world is increasingly mediated, his work is not characterized by the kind of disdain for 'mass consumption' that has marred so much recent work in cultural and media studies. Indeed, Miller was one of the first to discern 'a perspicacity and subtlety in mass behaviour' in contrast to 'the passivity, illusion and denigration implied in many self-proclaimed radical perspectives' (1989: 5). In our study of men's lifestyle magazines, it would have been very easy to write a dismissive account of the magazines' cultural significance, critical of their 'laddish' content and mass appeal. But that would have failed to account for their differential fortunes (with more serious magazines like *Men's Health* mirroring the success of more resolutely 'laddish' titles such as

Loaded and *Maxim*). It would have ignored the new visual codings of masculinity that appeared in the fashion spreads of mass-market titles like *GQ* and *FHM* as well as in more self-consciously 'arty' titles such as *Esquire* and *Arena*. Above all, it would have ignored the ambivalences and contradictions that characterize the way the magazines are read by different groups of readers (Jackson, Stevenson and Brooks 1998; Stevenson, Jackson and Brooks in press). While media commentaries have insisted on homogenizing the magazines as part of a depressingly singular 'lad culture', our own research insists on differentiating among the magazines and, especially, among the different ways in which they are read by their consumers. As well as identifying the discourses on which different men drew in making sense of the magazines, we also sought to distinguish the different dispositions that they took towards those discourses (displaying an ironic disposition towards the discourse of 'harmless fun' or a celebratory disposition towards the magazines' 'naturalness' and so on). We also sought to attend to the magazines' significance as material culture, not just in terms of their lavish style and production values (their glossy covers, 'glamorous' photography, the whiff of perfume emanating from sachets of the latest fragrances for men ...) but also in terms of their significance as *magazines* (designed to be 'flicked through', read 'for a laugh' rather than 'taken too seriously' etc.). In this case, we tried to avoid reducing material culture to social relations, retaining a sense of the magazines as a means to an end (understanding changes in contemporary masculinities) but also as an end in themselves (in terms of their significance as a particular form of commercial culture). Through a combined understanding of their material form and social significance, we were able to explore the significance of the magazines both in terms of changing gender

relations and as a highly successful form of popular culture.

Our current work on commodity culture and South Asian transnationality aims to take material culture even more seriously without ignoring the social relations within which all such transnationalities are embedded. For, as Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton argue:

The constant and various flow of ... goods and activities have embedded within them relationships between people. These social relations take on meaning within the flow and fabric of daily life, as linkages between different societies are maintained, renewed, and reconstituted in the context of families, of institutions, of economic investments, business, and finance and of political organisations and structures including nation-states. (1992: 11)

Our project focuses on two different kinds of material culture associated respectively with the food and fashion industries. This allows us to move away from a preoccupation with a single type of commodity and to contrast the cultural meaning of different kinds of goods. At the simplest level, it can be argued that 'Indian' food now plays a significant part in the culinary lives of a wide range of (Asian and non-Asian) British consumers, while 'Asian' fashion (shalwar kameez, saris, bindis etc.) are much more restricted to British-Asian consumers, though this too may now be changing as a result of the recent marketing emphasis on 'Asian chic' ('British, Asian and hip', *Independent on Sunday* 1 March 1998). The material culture and symbolic meaning of food and fashion may also differ in terms of their actual geographies of production and consumption (degrees of linearity and circularity, connections to transnational communities in Britain and the sub-continent, sourcing of materials, the exploitation of family or foreign labour etc.). It is here that the study of material

culture most needs to be re-connected to a critical understanding of cultural materialism as practised in the tradition of political-economy, without simply 'reading off' symbolic meanings from the mode of production. Such an approach might strive to reconnect the geographies of textile production and the clothing industry with the aesthetic understanding provided by recent developments in fashion theory. Following Appadurai's (1986: 5) advice to chart the social life of particular commodities, we are interested in tracing the transnationalities of 'things-in-motion' in order to illuminate their human and social context. Rather than trying to narrow down the meaning of transnationality as has recently been advocated (Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt 1999), we are approaching transnationality as a social field that can be inhabited from a variety of different perspectives rather than as the exclusive preserve of a particular 'ethnic' group. We aim to emphasize a wider range of transnationalities than is typically identified in the literature including those associated with the biography of transnational firms and individuals, the 'stylization' of transnational goods (where an 'ethnic' identity may be exaggerated or denied, where 'tradition' or 'authenticity' may be emphasized or down-played) and the dynamics of transnational consumption (including those who are not directly involved as members of a particular ethnically marked transnational community as well as members of such communities). In the marketing of 'Asian' food and fashion in Britain we are interested to explore whose version of 'India' is being sold to whom, and how the projects of the nation-state are implicated in these developments through the role of Non-Resident Indians, for example. More widely, through our emphasis on material culture, the project aims to bring back into connection the geographies of clothing and textile production with studies of the consumption of fashion and design, theorized not in terms of simple commodity chains but via the diffuse

networks of discourse and practice that characterize such transnational geographies.

Geographers are already contributing in significant numbers to the revival of interest in material culture. In my own department, for example, current research includes the study of clothing for 'outsized' and maternal bodies, music consumption in the home, the culture of books and book-buying, the nature of voluntary work in charity shops, the transformation of self through domestic consumption (including the practices of DIY and home decorating), 'ethnic' food and culinary culture, various forms of ethical consumption, and the gendered and racialized meanings of dieting and fitness regimes.² From my own department and beyond, geographers have also contributed to the inter-disciplinary *Journal of Material Culture* with studies of culinary culture, car boot sales, maritime heritage and prison food (Cook and Crang 1996; Gregson and Crewe 1997; Laurier 1998; Valentine and Longstaffe 1998). Such work rigorously avoids the 'object fetishism' with which an earlier generation of geographers was (perhaps unfairly) charged, taking the materiality of objects seriously in analysing processes of commodification, social differentiation and the attribution of symbolic value. As Miller implies in his essay 'Why some things matter' (1998), our emphasis should be on when and where the materiality of material culture makes a difference rather than assuming its importance in an *a priori* manner. That there is potential for rematerializing social and cultural geography is surely now beyond doubt. One of the aims of this journal might be to play a part in further realizing that potential.

Notes

- 1 Each of these studies has been funded by ESRC and carried out collaboratively: the shopping project with Daniel Miller, Nigel Thrift, Bev Holbrook and Michael Rowlands (ESRC award R000234443), the magazine project with Nick Stevenson and Kate Brooks

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- 2 The research referred to here is being undertaken by Rachel Colls, Vicky Beale, Ben Anderson, Paul Stallard, Kate Brooks, Becky Ellis, Polly Russell, Allan Williams and Rachel Pennant. Their work is mostly still unpublished. For further details see <http://www.shef.ac.uk/~g/pg/current.html>

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