



# **Consumption, Consumerism and Urban Form: Historical Perspectives**

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## **1. Introduction**

That urban form, the disposition of the material and societal fabric and personnel of towns, is produced through the interaction of many factors is something of a truism. Nevertheless, many social and geographical analysts find it both possible and useful to speak of towns in terms of particular factors (the feudal town; the pre-industrial town; the industrial city; the postmodern city; and so forth), arguing that key features of urban morphology and social geography were produced by characteristic social institutions and practices (burgage tenure and defence; oligarchy and market access; factory discipline and class formation; post-Fordist production and social segmentation; respectively). Such labellings, in juxtaposition to two other prominent themes in much recent social scientific work, provide the backdrop for this discussion of some pertinent historical work on consumption and urban form.

One theme has been a dichotomising of 'modern' and 'postmodern' cities; a binary distinction being drawn between the former, in which the key elements of social life revolved around industrial production, social administration and the commercialisation of leisure, and the latter, where industrial class structures are eroded and fragmented by growing service employment, where systems of symbolic representation are increasingly

detached from material grounding in everyday life, and where the politics of identities have become massively more complex and individualised. In short, there are numerous assertions that postmodern cities are cities of consumption, rather than of production; cities of the shopping mall rather than of the factory. Linked to this dichotomy has been another, in the theorising of consumption. 'Modern consumption' has generally been theorised as an activity in itself, whereas 'postmodern consumption' has most commonly been subsumed within the theorising of identities.

Secondly, the past 20 years have witnessed a massive upsurge in academic attention to consumption, involving disciplines across the social sciences and humanities. Interpretations of this sea-change range from hyperbolic claims for the birth of a new disciplinary complex (Miller, 1995) to outright hostility to (allegedly) frivolous research (Harvey, 1989). The upsurge in work on consumption has included greater attention to histories of consumption, primarily urban consumption, and on social and cultural change beyond the knock-on effects of new forms of production and work. If tensions persist between interpretations of consumption in terms of social structures and interpretations in terms of cultural meanings,

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such interpretations need not be mutually exclusive. Relatively suddenly, then, consumption in the industrial-modern-Fordist town became an important historical research area.

The terms 'consumption' and 'consumerism' both occur frequently in many disciplinary literatures, but each has been defined in many different ways, some of which are mutually contradictory. Each may carry highly specific meanings in theoretical literatures, alongside much broader everyday usages. Even the latter, though, may be implicitly defined in ways which prioritise specific commodities, as in much 1970s urban geography which equated consumption, rather narrowly, with housing. This paper is based on a distinction between consumption (relating to the volume and taxonomy of all spending that was in any way potentially variable or discretionary) and consumerism (relating to broader motivational drives to consume in particular ways).

At least implicitly, consumption has often been defined more narrowly, as expenditure only on certain items, such as consumer goods, or consumer goods and leisure. My greater eclecticism seeks to avoid potentially anachronistic judgements of two types. The first issue is selectivity. In what sense was spending on membership of a friendly society 'not consuming'? The ways in which people spent potentially consumable resources on friendly society membership seem, to me, closely connected to the sorts of notions of identity that are central to many formulations of 'consumerism' (Benson, 1994). Secondly, narrow definitions of consumption presume a clear split between unavoidable spending on 'necessities' and discretionary spending on 'consumption', when a major conclusion from much cultural and anthropological work is that no such distinction is sustainable.

Concepts of 'consumerism' became common in the 1980s, as issues of meanings became more central to work on consumption. For Campbell (1985), amongst others, 'modern consumerism' denoted general orientations to the accumulation of goods, the

display of consumption and an unceasing search for novel experiences. At that time, consumption decisions by individuals were generally seen as a process of social positioning, whether explicit or implicit. Subsequently, much current theorising focuses on consumption in relation to identities, through investigations of how meanings are created for, and transferred among, people, commodities, practices and social groups. Consumerism, for such work, is less a drive to possess goods as part of a process of social competition, than a drive to construct an independent identity through consumption activity. Various notions of consumerism(s), past and present, and how they have arisen, have been developed, ranging from emulation (McKendrick *et al.*, 1982), to capitalist manipulation (Fine and Leopold, 1990; Fine *et al.*, 1995), to contextual approaches focusing on reflexive, mutually constitutive, relationships among consumers, suppliers and consumption sites (streets, markets, shops, galleries, homes and so on: Jackson and Thrift, 1995; Glennie and Thrift, 1996a).

Distinguishing consumerism from consumption enables the historical geographical exploration of which facets of consumption underlie ascriptions of identity (of selves and others) and why, in particular times, places and social settings. Not all consumption was necessarily important for social positioning or identity construction, and specifying those that are important is a contextual question, not solely a theoretical one. The importance of context for the interpretation of consumption practices is apparent in several past situations. Instances in which particular behaviour, such as gambling, was interpreted in radically different ways—depending upon *who* was involved—simultaneously demonstrated, and reinforced, social divisions. So too did (mis)apprehensions of, for example, consumption of new styles of clothing, stimulant drinks or drugs. Moreover, many very diverse ways of spending time and/or money on goods, services, entertainments, recreations and organised leisure, were experienced as sociable shared activity, involving activity or reflection over extended

periods of time, not merely momentary financial transactions. The significance of the everyday social embeddedness of actions, and of reflective processes occurring before and after, as well as during, consumption, have both been prominent themes in recent geographical writing (Thrift, 1996; Pred, 1996; Crang and Malbon, 1996).

Although virtually all facets of urban form can be linked directly or indirectly to consumption, certain elements of urban form are paramount in this paper. These include some elements of physical structure, including the locations of retail and wholesale markets, shops, public open spaces, leisure and recreational venues; and some elements of social geography, particularly the degrees of social segregation and of interaction among different social groups in particular consumption spaces. However, it should be remembered that visible morphological changes could result from minor consumption shifts, while urban form could be little affected by major changes in the consumption of tobacco, gambling or insurance (beyond the hypothetical absence of features that may otherwise have appeared): consumption patterns and urban form did not always move 'in phase', and causality ran both ways.

The paper explores connections between geographies of specialised retail, entertainment and recreation spaces, on the one hand, and shifts in spending inside and outside the home, on the other. It is organised thematically. After introducing the diverse historiographic contexts of work on consumption, the next three sections discuss the influence of changing household contexts on consumption and spending patterns; major organisational changes in the composition of marketing and retailing since the 17th century; and geographies of urban leisure and entertainment. These discussions inevitably select from a vast field and primarily concern larger British towns. Some regulatory frameworks shaping consumption are noted in section five, which uses livestock trading and meat-retailing to illustrate how regulation intersected with transformed supply networks

drastically to affect geographies of retailing and consumption. A closing discussion applies the preceding discussions to current debates on the theorising of past consumption practices.

### **Historiographic Contexts and Debates**

A systematic overview of historical consumption faces considerable obstacles, not least from the fragmentation of historical debate by period specialisation. The core research themes and priorities for historians of different periods diverge considerably more than can be explained by differences in available primary sources alone, but reflect differing thematic concerns among specialists on different periods. The consequent uneven attention to particular social groups, and uneven deployment of socially or period-specific concepts, underlies recognition that "the upsurge in historical work on consumption has been a general, but not a coherent, phenomenon" (Glennie, 1995, p. 164). This is not to recommend a uniform treatment of consumption; rather to emphasise that apparently simple long-run comparisons of consumption patterns and processes are problematic. It is also to urge caution in concepts like 'the commercialisation of leisure' or 'the rise of the middle class' which are applied, variably defined, to many periods: they do not provide benchmarks of a transformation from 'traditional' to 'modern' consumption.

Early modernists (working on the 17th and 18th centuries) have concentrated particularly on new luxuries, consumer goods and groceries, all evident from household inventories; and their connections with social differentiation, new social behaviours and new domestic environments especially among urban 'middling sort' consumers (Weatherill, 1988, 1993; Shammas, 1990; Earle, 1989). Key questions concern changes in consumption patterns, especially the social and geographical shapes of the market, and the relative importance for demand of attitudinal changes among consumers (stressed within cultural studies) and shifts in prices and in-

comes (emphasised by economic historians). Diffusions of new goods seem not to have affected households' relative spending on diet, groceries and consumer durables (Shammas, 1990). The corollary is a comparative neglect of spending on non-accumulating items, like gambling and leisure events, which have mainly been discussed in relation to new forms of sociability (Clark, 1986) and new social spaces (Borsay, 1989). The consumption of the poor, in both material and cultural terms, has often been a side-issue, overreliant on contemporary social commentators whose perceptions of consumption often depended on political axe-grinding, and on consumption's visibility rather than its occurrence (Styles, 1994; King, 1996).

The agenda for 19th-century specialists has been very different. While elite and middling consumption have not been entirely neglected, working-class consumption and its socio-political dimensions have been central. Popular leisure has been a higher-profile theme than consumer goods ownership. The Victorian rise of mass entertainment industries and of seaside holiday resorts have been conceived as parts of a general commercialisation of working-class leisure. Considerable dispute rages over whether such developments are better analysed as social control (middle-class attempts to mould and police 'safe' working-class leisure patterns) or as essentially creations of the working class, or of sub-sections within it, even as a form of resistance to social control. Whether new forms of leisure consumption were central to emergent working-class political cultures is similarly debated. Did distinctive leisure consumption reinforce the formation of political solidarity, or did it undermine labour solidarity by promoting political passivity? One key conclusion here is that sophisticated feelings about various consumer goods were commonplace among those with minimum material comfort and social standing (Johnson, 1988; Tierstein, 1993). That significant disposable income was not a prerequisite has major implications for early modernists' work based on analysis of possessions.

Uneven source materials undeniably con-

tribute to this fragmentation and remain a real constraint on the exploration of many important topics. Most sources shed light on only certain elements of consumption. Thus probate inventories clearly show the appearance and proliferation of new consumer durables, but they reveal little about spending on perishables or non-material items. Inventories are also uninformative about the acquisition of goods and depict net accumulations over time rather than the dynamics of spending. Such topics have generally been approached piecemeal from much scarcer sources, including contemporary household budget estimates, shopkeepers' books of sales, anecdotal social commentary or court depositions. This partiality of sources is exacerbated where staple sources for one period are unavailable for others: there are few probate inventories later than 1730, for example, and few budgetary surveys or shop accounts from before 1800.

More is involved, though, than the availability of different sorts of documentation for different periods. Some important topics are perennially poorly documented, notably informal and second-hand trading, and poor people's use of consumption spaces patronised by wealthy and middling consumers. Other topics are inconsistently documented, as where interviewees' ambivalence about certain consumption meant that "pioneering statistical investigations into poverty and household budgeting ... conspicuously failed to measure the extent of working class spending" on drink, betting and prostitution (Davies, 1992, pp. 104–105). Even broad assessments of long-run gross changes in relative spending—for example, on housing, food and drink, fuel, clothing, domestic and public recreations, gambling and provision for future security—remain problematic. Lastly, for some topics there is documentation still to be exploited. Germane to this paper, few inventory studies have yet explored intra-urban patterns of consumption, except via comparing 'rich' and 'poor' areas.

The disjuncture between work on early modern middling consumers and 19th-century working-class consumption is much

more than an empirical point, for their consumption has been analysed using very different concepts and has been discussed in entirely different terms. Elite, middle-class and working-class consumption often appear not just distinctive from one another, but entirely separate and self-contained sets of practices. This raises four particular problems. First, influences between them are neglected, other than caricatures of 'emulation'. Secondly, the homogeneous categories submerge increasingly intricate social stratifications within both classes, and also highly gender-specific involvements in consumption and leisure.

Third, the 'middling'/'working' dualism also obscures the "many of 'the masses' [who] played little part in the market for mass leisure" (Davies, 1992, p. 127; Cunningham, 1985). Despite general increases in skilled wages after c.1870, perhaps half the urban population—and up to 70 per cent in some towns—were 'very poor' in c.1900 (with a weekly income under 4s.), which effectively precluded spending on other than bare subsistence, and "a substantial minority of working class families were still living on incomes below or close to the poverty line on the eve of the Second World War" (Davies, 1992, p. 106). Given the very mixed late 19th-century trends in working-class household incomes and consumption, it is unsurprising that both social scientists and administrators attempted, in the 1870s and 1880s, to define formally a 'poverty line' and measure how many households lay beneath it; it is equally unsurprising that these attempts met with mixed success (Gillie, 1996).

Yet the degree to which many households had no resources to spend on leisure, is almost invisible in the expansionist tone of much consumption literature. Lack of resources is relative and, subject to social construction, but British households in the none-too-distant past lacked resources to a degree outside almost all late-20th century experience. Accounts of the creativity of street recreations are important, but ought not to obscure the unalleviated bleak tedium of

everyday domestic life, movingly described in an account of Salford childhood as "long empty hours" in which "those silent figures leaning against door jambs, staring into vacancy waiting for bedtime" (Roberts, 1973, pp. 49–50). The central influence of real or prospective poverty on consumption and social life, even when average real incomes were rising, and at vulnerable life-cycle stages, requires reiteration. Later improvements in material wellbeing did not automatically eliminate experiences of intense poverty.

Fourthly, 'middle class' and 'labouring sort' were not only heterogeneous terms, they have meant very different things over time. Casual elisions risk inappropriate presumptions about common features, as when writers today equate mid 19th- and mid 20th-century middle-class households, overlooking the widespread presence of servants in the former, that enabled such households to engage in extensive food preparation, unlike their poorer contemporaries, or most middle-class households today.

Differing research emphases have predictably translated into geographical asymmetries. Much of early-modernists' attention focuses on London, 'provincial capitals' (for example, York) and county and other towns with broad cultural and administrative functions (for example, Shrewsbury), with little overlap with the towns central to research on Victorian industry and radical politics (including Manchester, Salford, Oldham and Preston). These two groups of towns have been augmented by studies of towns with comparatively diverse economics bases, including Birmingham, Bristol and Newcastle-upon-Tyne, but much remains to be done.

#### *Household Contexts for Consumption Spending*

Forms of involvement in consumption, especially among poor households, depended on conditions of work and on households' internal organisation. Besides affecting income, shifts in work and employment indirectly affected individuals' and

households' consumption by reshaping everyday time-structures and intra-household roles, especially those of women (Willen, 1992). Unfortunately, however, deficiencies in evidence make the importance of households' internal dynamics, and of temporal and geographical variations in household income composition, easier to recognise than to quantify.

Even broad trends are uncertain. McKendrick (1974; McKendrick *et al.*, 1982) argued that an expansion of women's and children's work fuelled a late 18th-century consumer boom, but most subsequent writers are cautious. Horrell and Humphries (1992, 1995) argue that widespread reliance on male earnings preceded industrialisation; that women's and children's contributions to household incomes were relatively small except in factory and outworker families, and bore no consistent relation to total family income. Recent reassertions of the importance of women's consumption have largely focused on middling consumers and their attitudes towards new consumer goods that were highly regarded, by diarists or testators (Berg, 1996; Vickery, 1993).

Household incomes were frail for several reasons. Intrinsic to family life-cycles were shifts in household composition, skills, earnings and spending commitments, while all households were vulnerable to disruption by death or illness. Economic instability was time- and place-specific, especially where narrowly specialised urban economies faced rapidly declining staple industries. Although generalisation about the changing range of income sources to households is difficult, in the long run most working households became reliant on fewer income sources as some waged work became more continuous; as work hours became more regular; as fewer activities were open to women; and with more extensive legislation about the schooling and employment of children.

Changing patterns of work, whether towards regularity or casualisation, could produce contradictory effects. Regular full-time employment boosted household resources, but could constrain the time available for

both consumption and for intra-household self-provisioning of food, clothing and so on. However, considerable debate surrounds the extent of self-provisioning, and narratives of progressive household specialisation are certainly too simple (Styles, 1994; Horrell and Humphries, 1995; Overton *et al.*, 1998). Additionally, the long run replacement of payments in kind by money wages pushed households into obtaining more goods from markets and shops (de Vries, 1993). The casualisation of work was usually coupled with having to be available at particular times, but with no guarantee of work. This unproductive time significantly inhibited the time available for self-provision.

Low incomes and financial insecurity affected not only aggregate consumption, but also its strategies and spatio-temporal patterns. Poor families bought basic items in tiny quantities, but very frequently, making several dozen local shopping trips a week (Benson, 1994). Their more expensive purchases, like cheap meat, fruit and vegetables, were usually bought late on Saturday evenings, when markets were closing and unsold items in poor condition were discounted or discarded by traders unwilling to transport and store low-value items. A *Morning Chronicle* correspondent in 1850 described the 'extraordinary scene' in Merthyr market house's 'bazaar of shops':

From six to ten o'clock of a Saturday evening ... what one might suppose the entire labouring population of Merthyr passes through its crowded halls ... It is not only the field of supply, but evidently the promenade of the working classes (quoted by Carter and Lewis, 1990 p. 110).

This passage conveys the dimension of sociality, even entertainment, extracted from impoverished circumstances, though whether this instances the new consumption-centred town centre, as Carter and Lewis suggest, remains debatable. 'Inefficient' consumption was also engendered by strategies which sought to protect households' local reputations by masking short-run financial disruption.

tions, via extensive use of pawnbrokers, and consumption of key positional goods (Johnson, 1988, pp. 32–35). The social attributes underlying ascriptions of ‘respectability’ could derive from either work (skills, status and security of livelihood) or consumption (participation in culturally central recreation, possession of key domestic goods, evident ability to afford food and drink, and the avoidance of household disruption through excessive drinking or gambling), or both (Davies and Fielding, 1992, p. 14). Self-control over drinking was particularly important, since spending on alcohol absorbed a high proportion of short-run variations in spending caused by fluctuating economic circumstances and work availability. It maybe significant here that several historians connect increasing late-19th century spending on domestic comforts, partly at the expense of drink, with increasing and more secure incomes (Horrell and Humphries, 1992).

Households’ internal dynamics require emphasis, because of the axiom that households constituted the basic unit of production and consumption in pre-industrialisation societies. This axiom is often justified, but risks obscuring key issues about differential access to consumption among household members. This is especially clear for food consumption, where evidence from widely ranging places, periods and social positions, shows major gender differences in food intake. There was a physiological element here, given the heavy manual character of much labouring work, but there were also strongly developed ideas about meat-eating and the status of male heads of household (Burnett, 1966). Likewise, leisure spending was differentiated within households, and this too linked to households’ reputations, with wives’ roles particularly significant (Willen, 1992). Additionally, women’s leisure was restricted by the time demands of their domestic responsibilities.

The judging of status by consumption behaviour appears particular marked during periods of macroeconomic difficulties. This is not to deny the importance of work-based identifications, especially where leisure ac-

tivities were strongly associated with work and class, but it is to say that people’s hobbies, interests, their local pub or their ability to handle money within a family context, were more explicitly cited at those times. The enhanced importance of consumption activities during periods of major economic dislocation and joblessness is also evident in community histories of the US depression of the 1930s, which emphasise the self-respect generated by hobbies, “a job you can’t lose” (Gelber, 1991).

#### *Organisational and Geographical Changes in Marketing*

Over the past 15 years, the history of marketing and retailing has emerged as a much more complex and variegated picture (compare Shaw and Wild, 1980, with Benson and Shaw, 1992). Two decades ago, prevailing narratives depicted a fairly simple and largely 19th-century process in which urban growth and the rise of specialised wholesaling stimulated the rapid rise of the retail shop and the growth of large retail enterprises. One strand of the latter was the emergence of an entirely new retail form, namely the department store, which purposefully remoulded customers, especially female customers, as consumers newly open to attempts to manipulate taste through advertising and spectacle (Miller, 1981; Williams, 1982; Leach, 1984). Although much writing within cultural studies continues to tell this story in schematic and stark terms, and some conservative historical geographers remain attached to older stage models of retail forms (for example, Carter and Lewis, 1990, pp. 89–95), the theorising of shifts in retail structure corresponding to stages of socioeconomic development was all but abandoned.

The long-run shift from open markets to shops now appears a much more drawn-out process than a mid 19th-century transformation in marketing, retailing and consumption processes. At least seven strands of work have shown that the idea of a single transformative episode, in which ‘traditional’ forms became ‘modern’, is as chimeric for retailing

and consumption as similar expectations have proved in regard to agrarian change, religion, or senses of time.

First, specialist retail shops, exclusively selling goods made by others, were widespread well before 1800. Medieval shops and stalls had included genuine retail specialists, alongside artisans' shops selling their own production. Specialised retail grocers, drapers and mercers proliferated through the 17th and 18th centuries in town and country alike (Mui and Mui, 1989; Shamma, 1990, pp. 225–265). For many goods, shops were important, even the dominant, site of sales long before 1800. 'Shop specific' goods included both new items that had only briefly, if at all, been retailed in open markets, such as tobacco and sugar, and items traditionally sold in markets but which had been 'captured' by shops, such as textiles.

Secondly, all retail channels expanded considerably in the 18th and 19th centuries, stimulated by demographic growth, higher incomes for many households and narrowings in household self-provisioning (Benson and Shaw, 1992). This was especially true of retail markets, now daily in many large towns rather than weekly or bi-weekly. If shops were capturing part of the commerce previously occurring in open markets, this was not a zero-sum game. Scores of new retail markets were established, especially in rapidly growing industrial towns (Shaw, 1985; Scola, 1992, Figure 1). Moreover, different retail channels were functionally connected, not simply competitive. Many shopkeepers held stalls in weekly markets, especially those whose shops were located away from market places, the most prestigious location in most provincial towns. Shops and market traders sold or advanced goods to itinerant sellers (Green, 1982). Itinerant trading regularised the suburban availability of commodities including milk and coal, whilst extending the 'reach' of others through casualised street trading. Itinerants effectively blurred distinctions between areas with and without particular shops, and loosened customers' dependence on the physical carriage of purchased items. Overall, the

long-run shift was clearly towards a more shop-dominated retail sector but, given the overall scale of retail expansion and its interconnected channels, contemporaries routinely experienced shops and markets as complementary phenomena.

A third theme comprises the broadening range, specialisation and changing organisation of retail shops. These followed from several interacting processes of change, some felt very widely, others specific to certain shop types, retail sectors or areas. Most attention has focused on developments within distribution and retailing, but financial factors were also important influences. Buoyant commercial property markets and new financial intermediaries, for example, helped Marks and Spencer, Montague Burton and other chains rapidly to increase numbers of stores (Scott, 1994).

Major changes in commodity production, often geographically far removed from Britain, and in distribution and storage technologies, bore on the technological and capital necessary for retail outlets (especially for meat, discussed below). These effects were magnified where technological changes substantially reduced shop prices to consumers and reinforced long-run shifts in real incomes. At such times, even without autonomous shifts in tastes, patterns of spending across major retail sectors were likely to shift. In turn, this had implications for patterns of retail growth and the character of local shopping districts, which have been particularly examined with regard to food.

That food shops are central to histories of retailing appropriately reflects the large proportion of all spending devoted to food, and that, excluding novel specialised sectors, food was the fastest-growing retail sector during the 19th century—especially in suburban areas (Shaw, 1985, p. 291). Grocery chains grew particularly rapidly in the late 19th century. Thomas Lipton's grocery chain started relatively late, in Glasgow in 1872 but 27 years later included 245 British branches (Carter, 1990, p. 418). Dramatic impacts on retailing resulting from new transport and processing technologies, inter-



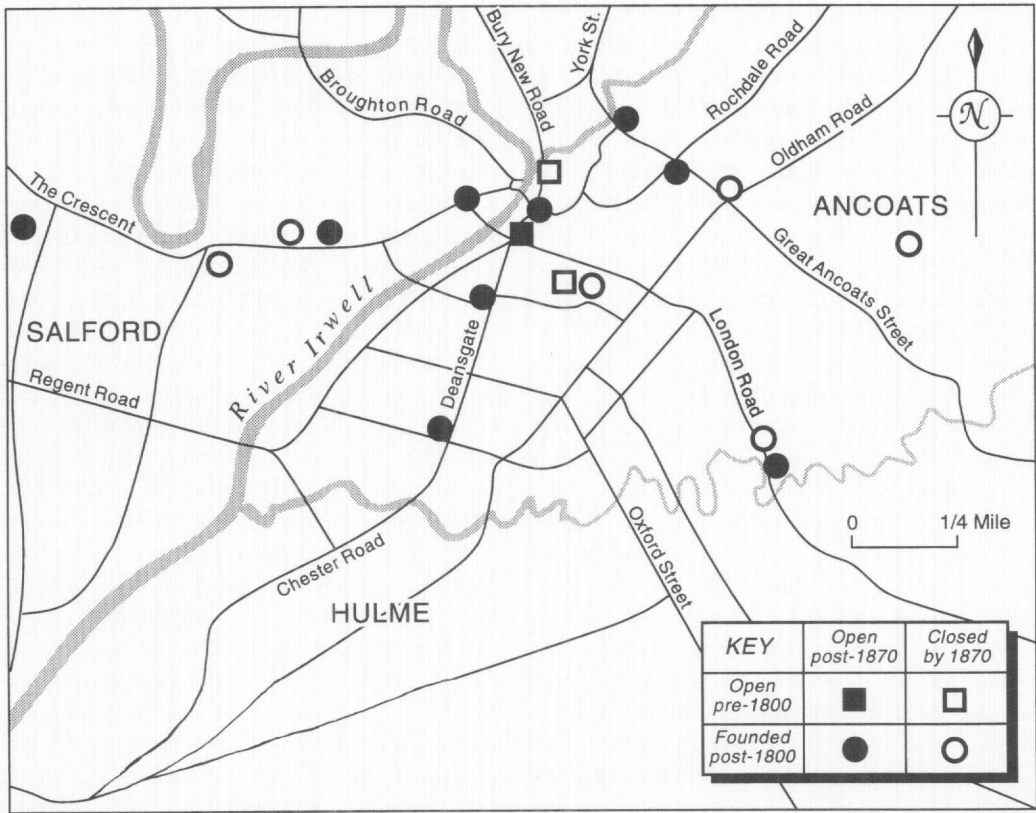


Figure 1. Markets in early 19th-century Manchester and Salford. Source: Redrawn from Scola, 1992, pp. 35, 153.

national supply networks and greater local government regulation were not restricted to foods, but they were less marked in the retailing of household durable goods such as textiles, clothing and furniture, where demand was often less price- or income-elastic than for food.

Although general accounts often assume that retailing and consumption changes originated in major cities and subsequently diffused, this may simply be wrong. For example, Green (1995) argues that new clothes, shoes and furniture in early 19th-century London moved from a largely bespoke system of goods made to order, even low in the market, to one dominated by ready-made goods. The changes were impelled by greater division of labour, deskilling and lower pay in production, and

by increased spatial separation of making and selling through increased local specialisation (Dennis, 1990, pp. 430–431). One effect was to reduce an ongoing process of contact between vendor and purchaser to a momentary transaction.

Ready-made items were not, however, altogether novel. The army, navy, militia, colonial export merchants and trading companies routinely bought clothing and shoes in bulk, and stimulated specialised supply areas and inter-regional trade. Trade inventories show that shoe-size systems were used in several 17th-century towns and the large-scale stocks held by artisans and shopkeepers indicate substantial trade in ready-made items. The extensive second-hand trades meant that many poor households routinely acquired clothes ready-made rather

than bespoke (Roche, 1992, p. 508). London may represent a clinging to bespoke production, sustainable because of intensive labour and the capital's great size, rather than the vanguard of ready-made production.

Fourthly, the revolutionary dimensions of the department store in 'making the modern consumer' have been refined: some of the hyperbole over their novel dimensions has diminished with the recognition that early studies of department stores (Miller, 1981; Williams, 1982) had stressed continuities in stores' paternalist organisation, as well as their size, and their cultivation of bourgeois consumption.

The day-to-day operation of department stores ... was far more complicated than the image of pure commodity consumption in 'palaces of awakening desire' would lead us to believe (Lawrence, 1992, p. 82).

The degree to which department stores were unique or first in naturalising consumers' encounters with goods has become widely debated (Glennie, 1995, pp. 185–190). In larger towns, new retailing strategies and devices had been introduced by established businesses, and by highly specialised shops, although these were seen as intimidating by many customers (Glennie and Thrift, 1996a, pp. 37–38). In both London and the provinces, several existing drapery and grocery stores expanded their premises and range to become department stores between the 1850s and 1870s, but it is hard to see these as a revolutionary break with what had gone before (Fraser, 1981). Earlier changes in shop forms and layout from the late-17th century involved "a reshaping of consumption spaces incorporating some of the features [later] central to department stores", and made earlier shops important sites for the acquisition of consuming skills and experience (Styles, 1994; Glennie and Thrift, 1996a, p. 31, 1996b). Shopping for most female consumers was elaborated and refined, rather than 'invented', during the 19th century. Only in certain specific social groups can we point to women hitherto unin-

involved in either household management or luxury consumption.

Moreover, 'the department store' now appears a differentiated rather than a unitary category, as social and geographical distinctions amongst stores have received more attention. By the early 20th century, large cities possessed hierarchies of department stores, from prestigious, high-status and expensive top-grade stores, to medium-grade, middle-class places, and stores oriented to poorer shoppers of lower classes, with cheaper items in both quality and price—though even these stores sought to distinguish themselves from general chain stores, such as Woolworth's (Lawrence, 1992; Benson, 1989, p. 25). However, since department stores also depended on their ability to attract repeatedly many different sorts of customers, social segregation of department stores was blurred by stores' specialising or promoting certain departments to a wider range of customers (Lancaster, 1995). There have been few specific studies of store failures, but an inability appropriately to match merchandise, display images and clientèle was an important factor, and the importance of customers' faith in particular stores for certain lines of items is a feature of oral history material (Benson, 1986, 1994). Stores' fates were not entirely in their own hands. Their reputations among consumers depended on their location relative to rival stores, to transport links and to changing social geographies. In this respect, stores were no different from other shops or shopping localities. None of this is to suggest that department stores were not important phenomena in modern consumption, but it is to dismantle the kind of narrative in which they appear as the sole source of changes in consumption spaces and practices.

Fifthly, other new retail forms emerged in 19th-century retailing, including chain shops and co-operative retailing movements (Purvis, 1990; Gurney, 1996). With over 3 million members in the early 1900s, the latter represented much more than a shop chain. Despite some middle-class presentation of co-operation as a form of working-class cap-

italism, the rhetorics of co-operative retailing were very different, emphasising a combination of thrift, self-help and respectability, alongside the assertion of a 'moral economy', with the provision of educational and cultural facilities linked to retail societies. Although the 20th-century image of co-operative retailing has been subdued, even at times puritanical, 19th-century co-operatives effectively contested the nature of 'consumer society'. They also shaped—and were shaped by—wider retailing and shopping practices, depending on local contexts of retail competition (Gurney, 1996). While not strictly 'retail', the formation of building societies also attests the impact of self-help or mutual movements on spending patterns.

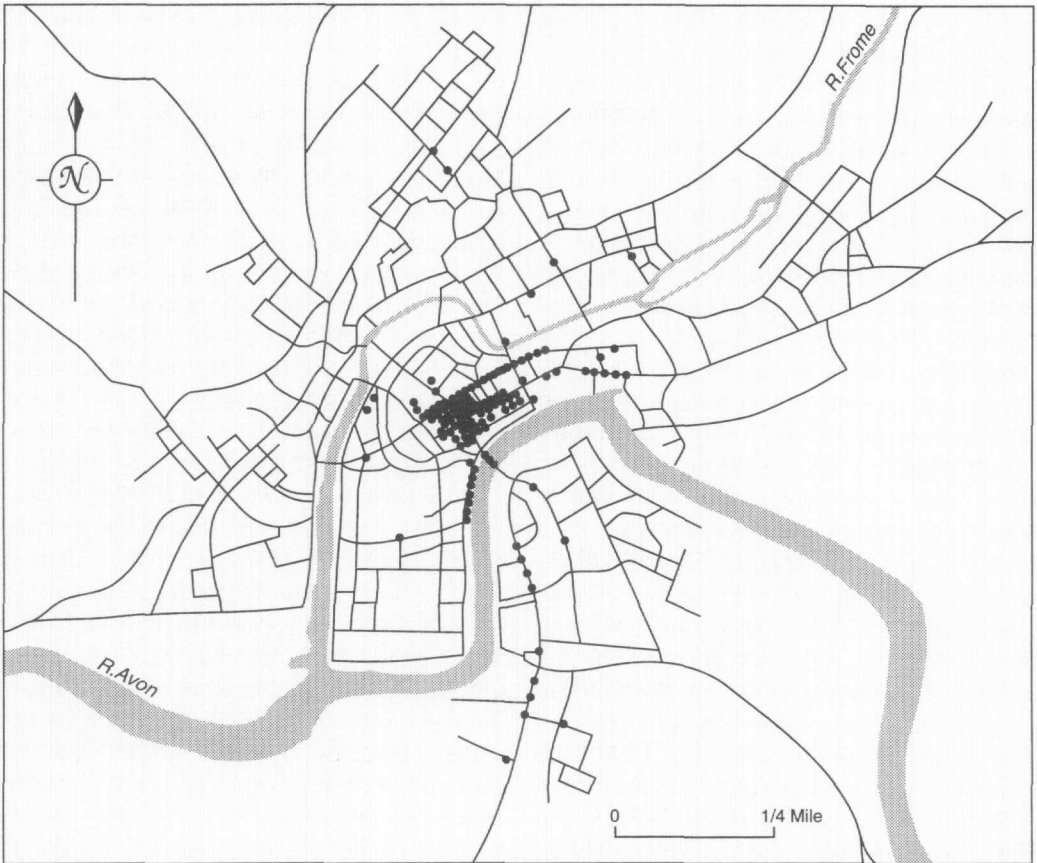
The sixth theme is that of changing retail geographies. Retail patterns were, of course, substantially affected by long-run changes in city-centre land use, not merely specific drives to decentralise within retail sectors. In major commercial cities like London and Manchester, banking, financial and legal businesses squeezed long-established shops from many early modern shopping districts (Kynaston, 1994; Scola, 1992). Nevertheless, the City remained one of London's major shopping districts for both elite and middling households well into the 19th century. The changing geography of the capital's shops was also shaped by almost continuous westward extension of high-status residential areas, spawning successive westward development of spacious shopping streets like Haymarket, Oxford Street, Regent's Street and Bond Street. These were the pre-eminent locations of London's department stores and luxury shops, and numerous contemporaries contrasted the character of these shops with those in Paris, where the main shopping areas remained in increasingly congested central districts, promoting the development of arcades.

Analysis of trade directories from the late 18th century onwards enables intra-urban retail geographies to map shop locations, but can say little about the size and staffing of shops. Considerable insight into that topic can be derived from certain other sources.

Figure 2 maps 'shopmen' aged between 18 and 45 recorded in militia ballot lists for Bristol during the 1770s (Glennie, 1990). The term 'shopman' described adult waged shopworkers, not apprentices or temporary assistants (both of whom were excluded from the ballots), and their presence identifies larger shops than those for whom only a master was recorded. Such shops were heavily concentrated around Corn Street, Wine Street and the Exchange, with few or none in the areas where shops were most numerous overall, north and east of the concentration of shopmen.

The equation of transformed consumption with department stores and specialised luxury shops has provided a rationale for 19th-century studies of retailing to concentrate on town centres, with a corresponding neglect of the growing numbers of suburban shop clusters (Shaw, 1988). Middling-sort local clusters have been discussed mainly in terms of the range of shops present, and the spread of chain shops, and as distinct from the corner shops in poor districts, with their characteristic very late opening, sales in small quantities and readier extension of credit to poorer customers. This division lends itself to a hierarchical view of retail provision, featuring a hierarchy of retail localities from very diverse city centres, through suburban clusters containing chain stores, local provisioning and a smattering of less common, but nevertheless low-order, shop types; with poor suburbs containing a narrow range of shops, as very pale imitations of central shopping areas. One more sophisticated approach compares intra-urban distributions of several retail sectors to identify and discuss "intra-trade spatial affinities" (Brown, 1987, p. 14). Brown identifies several strong similarities among Belfast, Sheffield and Coventry, notwithstanding their very different planning histories.

Finally, local clusters have recently begun to be considered as landscapes and consumption spaces in their own right, with exploration of whether they were more distinctive sites of practices among vendors, purchasers and observers, than diffusionist accounts al-



**Figure 2.** 'Shopmen' in Bristol in the 1770s. Sources: Bristol Record Office, Ward militia ballot lists, 1768, 1770, 1771, 1779; City Rates Books, 1774–75.

low (Jackson and Thrift, 1995). Two elements within this theme are noted here, namely the status of retailing within housing developments, and the presence of distinctive shop types. Until the 1870s, little working-class housing was strongly 'planned', and the firms, charities and local government who engaged in large-scale projects thereafter concentrated on the provision of dwellings (Pooley, 1985; Dennis, 1990). Local authorities oversaw the creation of schools and public parks, albeit often in a piecemeal way, but many landowners or charities were explicitly concerned to control the uses of buildings through restrictive covenants. Some Victorian private developments included pubs and shops for rent, but much was small-scale,

strongly speculative and concerned only with high-density housing.

Larger-scale local authority housing in the early 20th century, which accelerated working-class suburbanisation, produced similar outcomes. In inter-war Liverpool, more than 33 000 new homes rehoused some 140 000 people. The Corporation's planning, though, focused almost exclusively on housing, with little local provision of shopping, recreational, transport or educational facilities. The resultant estates, "bleak and utilitarian", magnified a spatial segregation of consumption spaces, both directly through the location of shops and entertainment, and indirectly, through the sorts of informal activities that could be improvised in the ab-

sence of specific local recreational spaces or facilities (McKenna, 1991). Local inhabitants nevertheless possessed acute perceptions of local social differences, and characteristically consumed rented housing through frequent short-distance moves. This sensitivity to very local place distinctions requires emphasis, since it did not necessarily correspond to similarities and differences in built environments, or retail and consumption facilities, as measurable by historians.

If poor areas are conceived of as the end-points of a downward hierarchical diffusion of shops, they would be merely crude shadows of wealthier districts, whether central or suburban. However, some distinctive dimensions of labouring or working-class consumption were linked to particularly appropriate shops. Pawnbroking and the early fish and chip businesses provide two contrasting cases. Pawnbroking, of course, was no novelty; like informal second-hand dealing, and moneylending, it was endemic in pre-industrialisation Britain (Woodward, 1985; Lemire, 1988, 1991; Styles, 1994). Most towns by *c.*1750 contained several specialist pawnbrokers and second-hand furniture dealers, alongside smaller-scale operators. While subject to a degree of local clustering, these businesses characteristically were situated amidst their client populations of (mainly) poorer households, or those at particularly fluid stages of family life-cycle; and they contributed a distinctive element to these districts. Their distribution shifted as populations, and the scale of intra-urban social segregation, increased through the 19th-century (Figure 3).

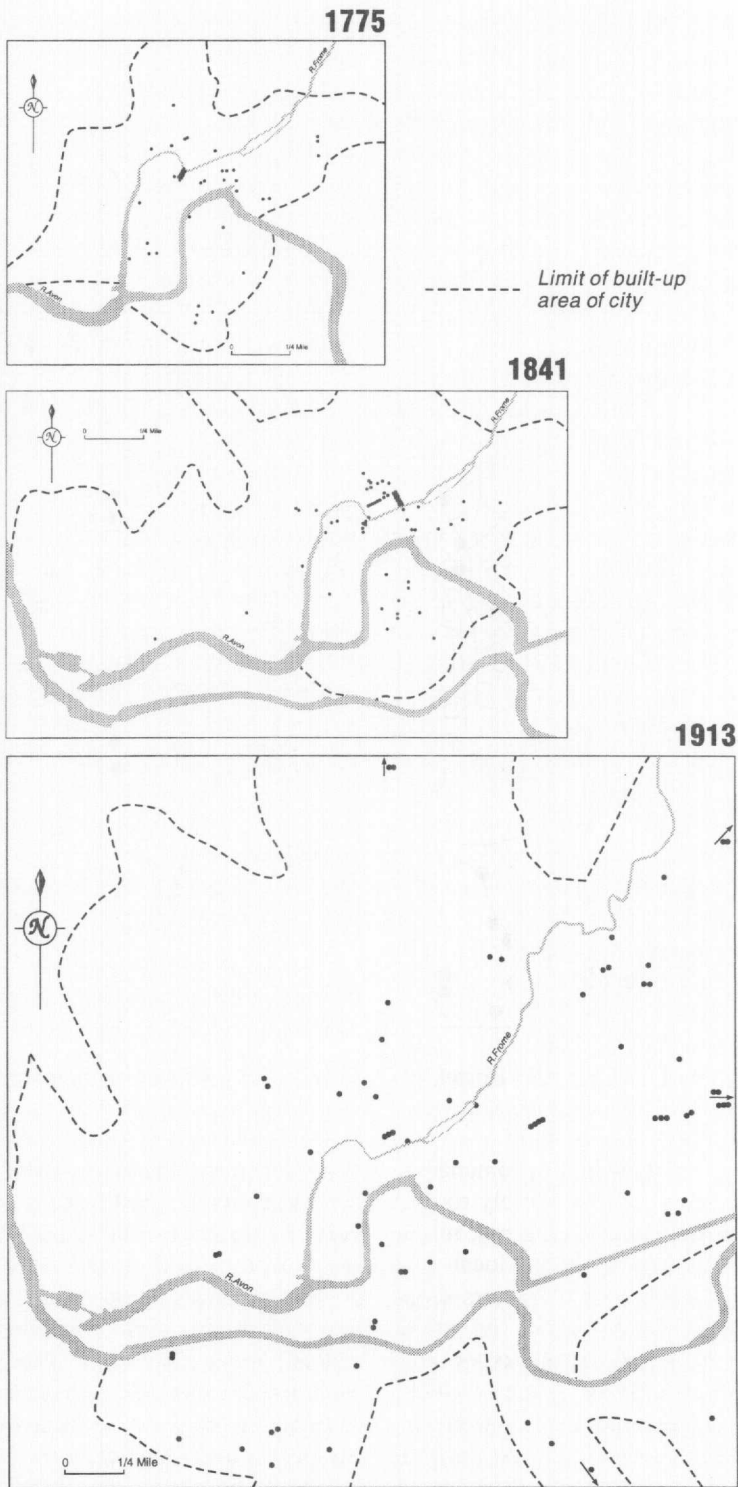
Fried fish shops were relatively novel, and working-class locations were their points of origin, not late stages in a hierarchical diffusion. In the later 19th century, initially in Lancashire and East London, the fish and/or chip shop rapidly became a characteristic feature of urban working class neighbourhoods. By 1914, thousands of these usually very small-scale businesses were selling mainly to poor households with very limited food preparation facilities. With typical transactions involving 1*d.* (less than  $\frac{1}{2}$ *p*)

or  $\frac{1}{2}$ *d.* of potatoes with 'scraps' (flakes of batter detached from fish or potatoes in the frying process), often several times a week, they played a crucial role in maintaining working-class food intake. Even though many sales did not involve fish, these outlets sold around half the national fish catch by weight (Walton, 1992). Their incidence in Bristol illustrates many of the features identified by Walton, with dense concentrations (well over 1 shop per 100 households) in some localities, and both main road and minor street-corner locations, the latter usually independent of retail outlets other than public houses (Figure 4).

Such examples of working-class consumption may appear almost trivial, but that apprehension is effective testimony to the dominance of middle-class elements in definitions of consumption. Whether measured as a proportion of shop growth, as a component of working-class spending, or as a focal point for everyday socialising, especially for children, the fried fish and/or chip shop was, like the pawnbroker's, a focal point of local life for large numbers of households. They are the tip of an iceberg of largely unexplored research topics in working-class consumption.

#### *Shifting Geographies of Leisure and Entertainments*

Almost all towns contain leisure spaces ranging from the highly specialised, built and patronised for very specific purposes, to the multi-purpose, including the spatial and street infrastructure itself. It is tempting to depict long-run shifts as the replacement of the latter by the former, but this is misguided, since such spaces have co-existed for societies with very different patterns of leisure. From the 17th to 20th centuries, historians have identified people's capacity both to adapt events to available public spaces, and to organise recreation in very structured ways, as creating distinctive urban forms at various scales, ranging from distinctive districts in large cities (for example, around theatres, art galleries or museums, Lorente,



**Figure 3.** Locations of Bristol pawnbrokers and second-hand furniture dealers, 1774–1913. Sources: Sketchley's *Bristol Directory*, 1774; Kelly's *Bristol Directory*, 1841; Wright's *Bristol Directory*, 1913.

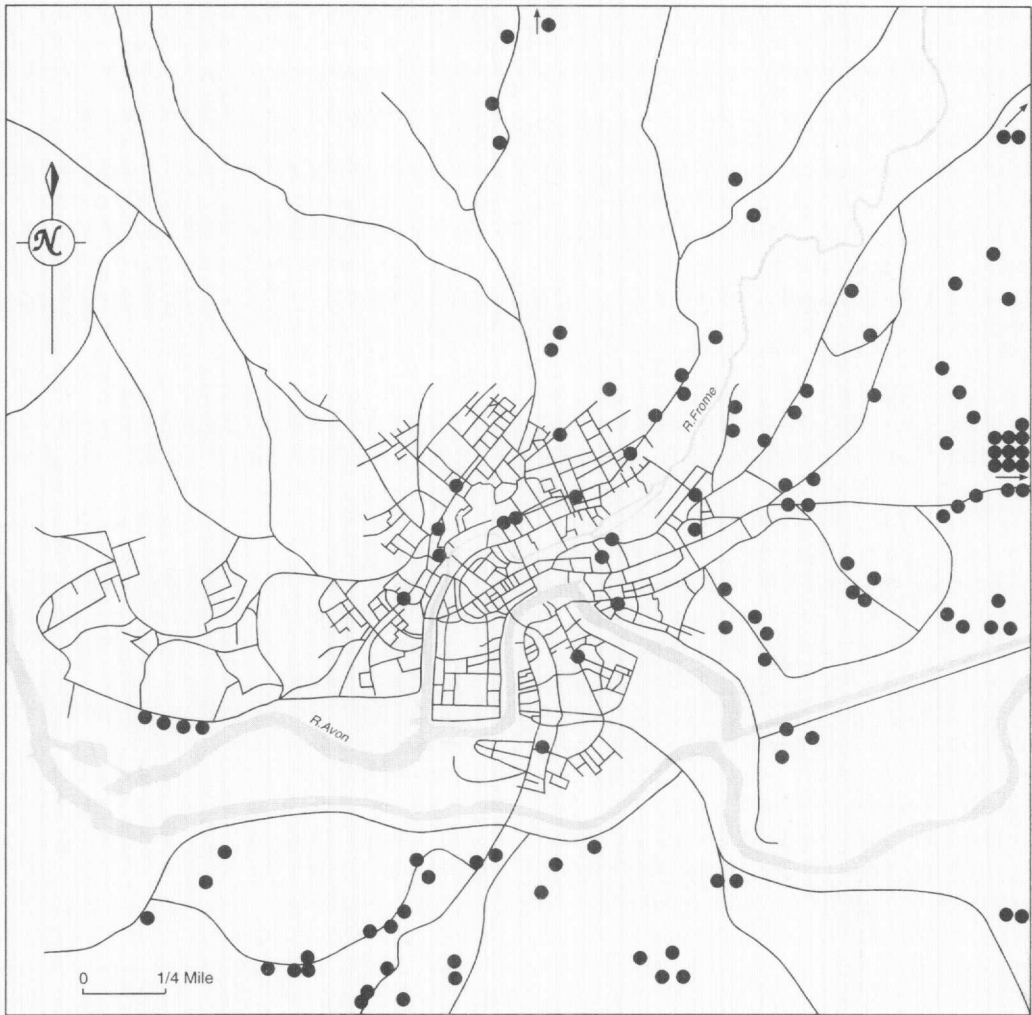


Figure 4. Fried fish outlets in Bristol, 1913. Source: Wright's *Bristol Directory*, 1913.

1995; or public gardens and promenades, Borsay, 1989), to key sites (assembly rooms, public halls and open space, cinemas, music halls), to ubiquitous-but-variable local foci (public houses). Not that rigid barriers separated general and specific spaces, as where touring shows (such as waxworks or animals) hired public halls or spaces (Altick, 1978). Spectacular exhibition sites were often temporary takings-over of multi-purpose spaces, contributing to blurrings of perceived boundaries between exhibitions, department stores and public spaces (Richards, 1991).

'The commercialisation of leisure' is an-

other label applied to many different periods—and with good reason—as sporting, musical, theatrical (and later film) entertainments were seized on and actively promoted by entrepreneurs or publicans, as opportunities for trade, often associated with specialised arenas. Activities also became more formalised through specialised arenas, codification of rules, commercial supply of equipment and entry charges. Yet influences flowed both ways: such commercialisation could stimulate new recreations in public space, as when the professionalisation of football and cricket spawned booms in large-

scale amateur participation. New activities usually augmented rather than replaced traditional leisure in Britain, as in the US (Fischer, 1994).

Overall, though, the growth of commercial leisure and specialised venues was probably less important than three other pressures on multi-purpose public spaces. First, mainly middle-class and civic concerns with the moral and social control of urban working populations, and with disorderly, disreputable or merely unfamiliar behaviour, stimulated restrictions on—and policing of—public space. This impulse also created new recreational spaces, such as municipal parks, especially between 1840 and 1870 (Conway, 1991). Exemplifying middle-class reformism, parks were intended as a counter to overcrowded and unsanitary conditions, disease and moral turpitude, coupled to an awareness of the large-scale loss of traditional recreational lands. Often lengthy bye-laws attempted to create a well-ordered environment, accommodating 'improving' recreations. Secondly, new building, especially housing, pushed traditional recreational and political activities to peripheral sites, as Harrison (1988) shows for Bristol, Liverpool, Norwich and Manchester. Thirdly, recreational uses of major streets were curtailed by growing volumes of road traffic, and its protection through bye-laws. While loss of open spaces displaced some public activities onto thoroughfares, these tended to be civic or national occasions, like Queen Victoria's jubilee celebrations in 1887 and 1897.

Whether recreation sites were becoming concentrated in specialised districts, such as London's West End 'theatreland', or became displaced to peripheral locations, they necessitated greater planning among their participants, especially of time and transport. Where facilities were more dispersed, their use was more readily accommodated within everyday life. The dispersed pattern of London's 600, or Manchester's 100, cinemas in 1914, illustrates that commercialised leisure did not necessarily uproot leisure activities from local life. Where cinemas were fewer,

and clustered in city centres, it affected both how cinemas were used and the social profile of their audiences (Low, 1949; Davies, 1992). These patterns affected not only the spread of information, but also wider attitudes to visual experiences, especially because photography was a largely middle-class concern until the 1920s (Thrift, 1990).

Both traditional and new recreations (including cinemas and dance halls) were gender- and age-specific:

Women and young people turned increasingly to the cinema during the inter-war decades, [while] many among the older generation of men proved deeply conservative in their choice of leisure (Davies, 1992, p. 114).

More work is needed to refine this general picture, especially before the 1920s. The sparsity of contemporary surveys is frustrating (though revealing), and knowledge of the composition of football crowds, for example, has rested largely on the information on those killed in major stadium disasters, as at Ibrox Park (Glasgow) in 1902 (Walvin, 1982).

Similar comments apply to uses of the streets themselves, especially by children. Leisure conduct without direct spending, such as playing, watching, sitting and talking, was particularly important for women, children and the worst-off men. Public spaces also conveyed a degree of anonymity from policing and regulation, as in the case of cash betting. There are strong parallels here with contemporary stress on the significance of informal uses of malls and other modern consumption spaces, and everyday life as identity-forming self-entertainment (Shields 1992), and with ethnographic work consistently highlighting such creativity in the experience of everyday life, even if this can rarely be seen as socially transforming (Willis, 1978; Jackson and Holbrook, 1995).

There remain some undesirable separations among related lines of work. Work on the built environment, at both micro-scale



(Cruikshank and Burton, 1990; Girouard, 1990) and macro-scale (Clarke, 1992) has developed chiefly in contact with architectural history, rather than with work on either social geographies (Baigent, 1988) or on specific facets of retailing and consumption (Benson, 1989; Scola, 1992; Benson and Shaw, 1992; Benson, 1994). And the latter clutch of topics have usually been tackled in isolation from one another. In both cases, too, there persists a marked polarity between very general and very particular work. As has been remarked of contemporary work on consumption, this situation results in literatures "prone to rather heroic assumption" about connections between consumption practices and social geographical change (Jackson and Thrift, 1995, p. 209).

### *Regulatory Contexts*

Like retailing, the regulation of trading, retailing and consumption has a long and complex history, far from the unidirectional rhetoric of many accounts, whether these are orientated to the rise of markets free from traditional constraints, or to the shackling of free markets by new forms of regulation. The impacts of regulation have usually been analysed in terms of success or failure in achieving their objectives. Little work has squarely focused on regulation's indirect, often unanticipated, consequences, but these are prominent in many studies, as in Clapson's (1992, 1995) accounts of growing involvement of women in street bookmaking, after the 1853 Betting Houses Act and 1906 Street Betting Act prohibited ready-money betting.

Medieval regulation of retailing was mainly oriented to the protection of purchasers, especially of food, but came under increasing pressure in the 17th century from commercial interests, that became increasingly identified by central government with the national interest (Outhwaite, 1991). The key regulatory figures were magistrates and JPs, responsible for implementing central government restrictions on the movement, storage and price of grain, and urban author-

ities, usually concerned to protect revenue from local markets. Retail regulation was only sometimes directed to retailing issues such as the personnel, venues and times of trading, prices and qualities of goods, weights and measures. Often it involved broader goals related to law and order, or public health. These were paramount by the mid 19th-century strengthening of local government powers, especially in regulating urban space, in operating municipal utilities and transport, and in indirect subsidies to housing.

The regulation of meat and livestock trading provides a classic case study demonstrating the interaction of regulation with technological changes in transport and storage, and organisational change in retailing. Regulating authorities intervened at several points, including livestock markets, warehouses, slaughterhouses, food 'factories', cookshops, retail markets, shops and streets (for itinerant traders). Early regulation focused on channelling animal sales into markets, and with the quality of retailed meat, but until the growth of very large cities, the networks connecting farmers, drovers, retail butchers and customers were comparatively simple. They were nevertheless spatially extensive, since the product's ability to walk to market reduced transport costs and sidestepped the limitations of meat-preservation technologies. Long-run urbanisations were associated with marked geographical displacements of livestock breeding and rearing to more peripheral parts of national, and international, space economies (Galloway *et al.*, 1997; Blanchard, 1986). Such von Thunenesque patterns are unsurprising, although their large scale at early dates is striking.

Many urban butchers were also cattle dealers, acquiring fattened animals directly from farmers, owning both slaughterhouses and retail shops themselves, and selling meat to small retail butchers. As working-class meat consumption increased, so did numbers of small retail butchers, often specialising in pork and cheap cuts of other meats. Considerable numbers of animals, especially

pigs, were kept by townspeople, fed on by-products from processing industries, like milling and brewing. The 378 pigsties recorded in a survey of Reading in 1847, and the 1000 animals a week slaughtered for local consumption in early 1860s Hull (Shaw, 1985, p. 288), illustrate the urban "omnipresence of the pig" (Scola, 1992, p. 39). Widespread animal keeping, in conjunction with the congestion of open spaces, livestock markets and urban slaughterhouses, were all prominent in the perceptions of those attempting to improve urban sanitary standards and public health (Lawton and Pooley, 1992, p. 212–214). Growing towns commonly planned new livestock markets, especially for cattle, utilising new regulatory powers and explicitly legitimated them as both economically important and beneficial for public health. The 1848 Public Health Act and the 1855 Nuisances Removal Act gave local authorities powers to restrict the numbers and locations of slaughterhouses, and Shaw shows how this concentrated slaughtering into fewer hands, increasing the power of slaughterer-wholesalers relative to retail butchers (Shaw, 1985; Scola, 1992).

Such trends were reinforced by other factors. Growing imports of live cattle from North America from c.1850 were rapidly dwarfed after 1870 by the meat imports made viable by the new chilling and freezing technologies, whose impacts on North American production have been analysed by Cronon (1994), and subsequent debates (see, for example, *Antipode*, 1993; *Journal of Historical Geography*, 1994). By 1900, nearly half of UK meat consumption was imported (Perren, 1975). The distribution of imported meat was from the start handled by large organisations, and stimulated the rise of multiple retail butchers whose shops could—unlike most retail butchers—handle frozen meat. In Bristol in 1913, for example, 4 companies accounted for 102 of approximately 350 butchers' shops. Little concentration of ownership had occurred among the pork butchers: only two shopowners had more than one shop and they had two each.

Chronology remains a slightly problematic

issue. Concentration in retailing was clearly accelerating in the later 19th century, especially in the many industrialising towns with rapidly growing populations. But Shaw's picture of "simple marketing channels prior to 1850" (Shaw, 1985, p. 289) underestimates the much earlier emergence of sophisticated systems around London and many provincial ports, especially victualling centres for the navy and army. The contrast before and after c.1850 is so marked for many towns because of their transforming growth through those decades. Where towns were already large, the changes appear over a longer period, and as a less coherent set of developments.

Diverse supply networks and regulatory contexts contributed to differentiation within food retailing. Chain multiples emerged with little regulatory stimulus in grocery and fishmongering, linked to the supply of canned foods, frozen fish and processed foodstuffs like margarine. Some new goods, such as imported fruits, had specialist shop outlets, although most fresh fruit and vegetable retailing remained in local markets well into the 20th century.

### Concluding Discussion

Retail and leisure-sector developments, frequently market-led, have been important in long-run refashionings of both the physical and social spaces of towns, but to view urban form as passively reflecting successive waves of consumerism would be unjustified. Links between consumption and urban form ran both ways. Both were affected by changes in production, institutions and regulation. They did not necessarily change hand-in-hand and, in affecting urban form, the composition of consumption could be more important than its volume. Some major changes in consumption involved neither special venues, nor particular suppliers, and so had few specific positive impacts on urban form. The connections were often contingent rather than necessary. Inertia in the built environment meant that new activities could spread without visible specialised facilities until consid-

erably later: football stadia provide one example.

The complexity of networks involving not only movements of commodities and capital, but also circulations of meanings; diverse sites and conditions of exchange; multiple notions of social identities; technological and other knowledges; and varying frameworks of regulation—all often influencing one another, hardly requires emphasis. This complexity of changing consumption activities, cultures and geographies fits uncomfortably with the histories of contemporary consumption found in much theorising on consumption, whether ‘social structural’ or ‘cultural’. In part, this reflects the frequent use of highly simplified histories, or more accurately genealogies, of consumption to bolster analyses of contemporary consumption. But the implications of such discrepancies go beyond issues of accurately contextualising the present. Three of their implications are briefly considered, relating to disciplinary orientations; to situating the present in the long run; and to theorising consumption practices.

*Disciplinary orientations.* I want to begin by agreeing with Miller’s (1995, p. 27) argument that many claims about consumption “confuse the character of a particular consumer society with an assumed characterisation of the intrinsic nature of consumption itself”. Extensive generalising about ‘modernity’ and ‘consumer society’ has frequently involved rather schematic, structural discussions of consumer practices and urban form. These theoretical priorities, combined with the centrality of class as an organising dimension in social analysis, underlay widespread emphases on the social-structural dimensions of consumption, with class position the main determinant of consumption roles, within income and time-constraints. The identification of new forms of late 20th-century consumption as denoting a throughgoing change in consumption itself, has spawned important identity-based theories of consumption (Beck, 1991; Giddens, 1992; Beck *et al.*, 1995). Reflecting influences from fem-

inism, the sociology of science, and ethnographic writing and methods, alongside claims that consumers are now freer to construct their own social personalities through processes of biographical narrative construction, such theorising has rapidly become influential. It seems, however, no less susceptible to Miller’s observation.

For many historians, distinctions between modern and postmodern consumption(s) seem differences of degree rather than differences in kind. There have been other societal transformations in which comparatively rapid social change has been accompanied by redefinitions of the meanings of consumer goods, consumption rituals and ways of selling. Such periods of flux and working-out create enduring images for commodities or practices, but the later stability, even ‘naturalness’, of these images to later commentators belies their initial appearance amid a flurry of soon-to-be discarded practices, that with hindsight can be regarded as quaint or amusing. Which identifications eventually become dominant is not inevitable, even where social power is very unevenly distributed. For most historians, showing how a degree of indeterminacy in consumption practices, underdetermined by social structures, subsequently unfolded, exemplifies the essence of their activity as historians.

Many social scientists view their own activity in fundamentally different ways. Where macro-structures of social, economic and political power are staples of social analysis, it is no surprise that everyday consumption meanings are analysed by mapping them onto social categories. Most historians have long been distrustful of such formulations—for example, of consumer meanings as straightforwardly produced by systematic manipulation on the part of distributors, producers and advertisers—and this ‘manipulation thesis’ has been extensively critiqued (Lancaster, 1995). At the same time, they are sceptical of the disregard for historical context that they widely perceive (rightly or wrongly) in cultural studies.

*Situating the present in the long run.* Commentators and theorists interested in the gen-

ealogy of the present, especially when they identify themselves as living in a time not merely of change, but of particularly significant change in a world-historical perspective, cannot but be heavily selective in discussing certain elements of society. Within late 19th and early 20th-century theorising of consumption, particular attention was directed to élites (in the cases of Veblen on conspicuous consumption, and Sombart on luxury) and on metropolitan cities (for Simmel on money, urban life and fashion, and Benjamin on urban life). It has almost always proved very difficult for these theorists to think other than that their own particular time is of enormous long-run significance.

Looking at other identifications of one's own time with sea-changes in the whole of human history, both in early modern Europe, and in the later 20th-century—and noting too that the same observation is made of historians with regard to their views of the periods in which they specialise—what is to be done? At least five responses are possible; they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. One may reassert a particular period as the most important, because of the importance of the criteria upon which it is identified, compared with the less fundamental character of other changes. This could be done in various ways, one maintaining an overall 'transition to modernity' framework, another abandoning the idea of unitary transformations, depending on the distinctions drawn between 'vital' and 'other' changes.

A third possible reaction inverts the status of stable and changing consumption. When 'normal' consumption is seen as a highly dynamic set of practices, it is not periods of rapidly changing consumption that appear exceptional and in need of explanation. Rather, it is prolonged stability in consumption behaviour (as in the case of class-based consumption differences during the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries, in the face of a massively expanded range of consumer items) that are exceptional and in need of explanation.

A fourth reaction opposes distinguishing,

whichever way the labels 'normal' and 'exceptional' are applied, between consumption change as requiring explanation, and consumption stability as needing no particular explanation, or even explaining itself. Such views hark back to the 'structuration' theories in vogue during the 1980s. Two of their central claims were that stability requires the active maintaining of existing social relationships through everyday practices, and that the actions that produce change and those that reproduce stability possess similar connections to social structures. Proponents of this view may still argue for the central importance of particular periods or places in long-run changes, but not that the course of events was part of some wider inevitable scheme.

Finally, it is possible to take a radically different perspective on the whole issue. Viewing current times as pivotal in a long-run world transformation from one state to another could be seen as part of a pervasive Western explanatory style, it may be similar to the description of unfamiliar cultures through a process of 'othering' that has been described by some cultural theorists. On this reading, the transition framework is primarily an issue of rhetorical style, shaped by the power embedded in the social positions from which history is written, rather than an account of historical change. Rather, many postmodernists call for contextualised, 'thick' description of consumption from a proliferation of viewpoints, but the abandonment of history's traditional intentions to explain. Much of the historical literature has taken such issues seriously in the past decade, though shying away from thoroughgoing relativism and what they perceive as postmodernism's claims that history is no more than perceptions of meaning, and that because narratives are human creations they are all equally fictitious or mythical (Lloyd, 1984; Stanford, 1986; Callinicos, 1987; Jenkins, 1991; Appleby *et al.*, 1994; Evans, 1997).

These are very much ongoing debates, but they are not primarily susceptible to empirical resolution. They depend very much on

appeal to alternative views of historical priorities and of historical explanation, on rhetorics of argument and on broader disciplinary (or narrower institutional) strategies. Academic or other 'consumers' of historians' accounts of consumption should not hold their breath whilst awaiting historians' unanimity.

*Theorising consumption practices.* Notwithstanding the hostility to theorising in much cultural work, the past decade has seen something of a surge in practice-based theorisations, including social constructivism and actor-network theory. This 'turn' has been ascribed to a variety of theoretical, political and empirical shifts, though space precludes a discussion of these here. The principal attractions of these 'non-representational' theories in addressing consumption lie in their focus on the understandings, intellectual and embodied, embedded in everyday consumption practices, whether by ruling élites or their poorest subjects (Thrift, 1996, pp. 6–8). It would be rash to suggest that historical work on consumption practices corresponds simply or straightforwardly to that description, and rasher still to imply that this reflects many historians' engagement with theoretical literature. Yet in important ways, the priorities of at least some non-representational theories distinguish themselves from representational theories in terms very similar to historians' reservations about, as they see it, engaging with theory at all.

When Bourdieu (1990, p. 39) writes that

To slip from regularity ... and from the formula which describes it, to a consciously laid down and consciously respected ruling, or to unconscious regulating by a mysterious cerebral or social mechanism, are the two commonest ways of sliding from the model of reality to the reality of the model

he provides a description that can be applied to the crude historians-versus-social-scientists distinction made nine paragraphs ago concerning attitudes to indeterminacy and theorising. Or again, Taylor (1993, p. 56)

makes the specific point that abstracting "the crucial dimension of action in time", whilst making something (like spatial or social position) "the ultimate causal factor is to make the actual practice in time and space merely derivative, a mere application of a disengaged scheme". This view that practical understandings and abilities unfold only in the exercise, demands attention to historical and geographical contexts as integral elements of interpretation and description, not merely as inflections superimposed on general processes that are 'known' theoretically.

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