

[Andy C. Pratt](#)

## Retail therapy

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Retail therapy

Andy C Pratt

Department of Geography and Environment

London School of Economics

Houghton Street

London WC2A 2AE

a.c.pratt@lse.ac.uk

Analyses of consumption are much like retail therapy. The notion of retail therapy suggests that shopping offers a solution to real problems. But, of course, looked at more closely, it becomes clear that retail therapy is anti-therapy: it is an avoidance technique, a distraction; it is not about the confrontation and resolution of problems. So it is with research that is focused on consumption, illuminating through they are, they are ultimately both limited and limiting.

In traditional analyses consumption is characterised as secondary, or derivative, of production. Therefore production, as the source of all (true) value, has been the focus of attention. Consumption studies are positioned in such a way that they only capture the distribution of goods in economies via a combination of consumer choice and distribution channels. In an historical phase, in the developed world at least, where both choice of products and distribution channels were limited such a division of labour seemed to pass unquestioned.

However, the structure of developed economies has changed in that last 50 years, characterised by a shift towards the service sector. In this sense there does seem to be a striking disjuncture between the analytical tools that appear crafted for a manufacturing economy being blunted on a service economy. Against such a background a fulsome turn to consumption appears to offer fresh and timely insight. To be sure, in consumption orientated approaches consumers are given agency and their motives may be acknowledged to be contradictory, and not solely economic. An extension of this is some analyses of the 'new economy', perhaps best summed up in Reich's (Reich, 2000) phrase, 'the age of the terrific deal' where it is the work of financial mediation and re-mediation that is the source of wealth. In Reich's version the radical shift is that the power of making the deal is pushed back to the consumer without the need for intermediaries. Thus, the tables appear to have been turned, the consumer is 'king': producers succeed or fail according to the click of a customer's mouse.

Consumption and production approaches seem to offer two sides of the same coin. It is as if a Gestalt shift has occurred. However, the appearance of totality is illusory: this is a dualism. If we are to engage in real therapy we need to look to the underlying cause. In this case a claim could be made that the villain of the piece is Talcott Parsons. Why? As is well known Parsons played a seminal role in framing and popularising the study and methods of economic sociology, a formulation that has recently underpinned many social and economic geographies. Rather like Giddens' (Giddens, 1984) more recently, the analytic strategy of Parsons was founded in a reading of the 'greats' from which he fashioned a new synthesis of sociology. Unlike Giddens (who notably ignores economic sociology), Parsons spent an early

part of his academic career as an economist. Central to this new synthesis, outlined in The Structure of Social Action (Parsons, 1961), is the ‘analytical factor view’ whereby

*‘economics was to study the allocation of means in the means-ends chain that constitutes human behaviour, sociology would concentrate on the ‘value factor’, i.e. the ‘ultimate common ends and the attitudes associated with and underlying them, considered in their various modes of expression of human social life’ (Parsons 1961: 529, overall quotation (Velthuis, 1999)).*

The Parsonian legacy is the discrete analytical separation of the economic, social, political, etc., additionally, the unquestioned framing of such a division by neo-classical economic concepts and taxonomies. Thus, social-economic, or production-consumption, polarities are fixed as immutable binaries that are to be analysed by particular disciplines and techniques. In the spirit of reviving the ‘greats’ it is worth remembering that we have been here before. Nearly 150 years ago, Karl Marx (1973: 99) was critiquing a similar problem in his Outline of the Critique of Political Economy (Grundrisse):

*“Production thus not only creates an object for the subject, but also a subject for the object. Thus production produces consumption (1) by creating the material for it; (2) by determining the manner of consumption; and (3) by creating the products, initially posited by it as objects, in the form of a need felt by the consumer. It thus produces the object of consumption, the manner of consumption and the motive of consumption. Consumption likewise produces the producer’s inclination by beckoning to him as an aim-determining need.”*

Marx too was struggling to move beyond the taxonomic shackles of classical economics. Marx's point was that neither production nor consumption are appropriate categories, or analytical points of departure. Can we move beyond the fragments? Can consumption and production be put back together again? The seminal position in sociology is that represented by the work of Mark Granovetter (Granovetter, 1985, 1992) who offers the concept of embeddedness to resolve the dualism. Sadly, the full extent of Granovetter's argument is seldom drawn upon to full effect. The crux of Granovetter's intervention is not to view embeddedness as context, as it is commonly deployed by researchers, a move which as we have noted would represent a return to Parsons, but rather his point is to engage with a full social constructivist account of 'the economy' as currently constituted by 'economics'. It is debateable whether Granovetter's writings deliver on this point. However, from a geographical point of view we might push this programme further and suggest that such an account should not be exhausted by the social relations of production, or on the other hand by and exploration of cultural significance, but instead it must also engage with the spacing and timing of people and things<sup>1</sup>.

Of course, such a prescription may seem to be an impossibly tall order. But, we can see indicative steps being taken through a number of approaches (see special issue of Economy and Society 2002; (Jackson, 2002; Zukin, 2004). Although there are internal differences, such approaches tend to acceptance of the quasi-anthropological dictum to 'follow the actors and actants through society without fear or favour' (Latour & Woolgar, 1986). Such a methodological approach does not signal a return to empiricism, but instead is indicative of strategy: one that is deployed to bypass the

existing taken for granted classificatory categories and to encourage researchers to re-think the 'production' of particular effects. This is a point of view also finds rich expression in the later work of Foucault too; and hence the evocation to write a 'history of the present': how the here and now came to be here and now (Burchell, Gordon, Miller, & Foucault, 1991).

Such a research direction contrasts strongly with popular network approaches, with which such approaches and their aspirations appear to share similarities. Popular network analyses are dualist, they seek to connect, not mediate or transform, their constituent components. Second, they predominantly focus on production linkages. Third, they totally accept pre-given 'nodes' or 'objects'. Defining nodes constructs flows; such an approach is quasi-empirical in that it fails to account for the construction of either, and it falls back on unexamined taxonomic categories of economics.

My conclusion is that consumption approaches may end up as a potential distraction. This is not because they, or their subject material, are frivolous or lacking in rigour. Rather, it is because they are potentially conceptually limited and mono-dimensional. In fact, they share a remarkable similarity with production approaches. The challenge is to transcend the production-consumption couplet, along with its siblings, culture-economy and social-economy, and to fully apprehend their multi-faceted situatedness in terms of space-time-matter. Only when we have travelled down this road will have truly undergone substantive therapy.

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<sup>i</sup> I would argue that the notions of culturalisation and economisation (see for example Scott 2000) can be subjected to the same critique as that advanced here with respect to the terms production and consumption.