A Moral Economy of Shops and Shopping Peter Jackson

Many accounts of modern urban life present a dismal picture of alienated consumers whose sense of community has been thoroughly undermined by the relentless march of globalisation. According to this view, the difference between places is being eroded by the steady imposition of a universal economic rationality, often characterised by reference to global brands as a process of McDonaldization or Coca-Colonization. From this perspective, modern social relations are said to be guided by the heartless and unsentimental logic of the market, leading to a severely curtailed sense of community and morality. Rebecca French and Andrew Mottershead’s photographs present a very different view of the vibrant communities that are created and sustained by local shopkeepers, demonstrating the persistence of place-based identities and the potential for a moral economy to thrive even in the highly commodified world of contemporary shops and shopping. Drawing on the idea of ‘moral economy’ whose roots date back to the work of the eighteenth-century moral philosopher Adam Smith, this essay explores the ethical and moral sentiments that underpin contemporary social relations as observed in French Mottershead’s current work and in recent ethnographic studies of consumption.

Moral economy
Adam Smith is best known for his Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations (1776), written at the time of the Industrial Revolution and now often regarded as a simple endorsement of ‘free market’ economics. Smith’s argument was, in fact, more complex than this and needs to be interpreted in its historical context.

Smith argued that enlightened self-interest, guided by the ‘invisible hand’ of the market, might lead to a more just society than the prevailing world order that was organised in the interests of large corporations such as the East India Company, controlled by royal patronage and promoting unfair competition. This emphasis on fairness and social justice is developed further in Smith’s Theory of Moral Sentiments (1759), in which he argued that economic relations cannot be divorced from moral notions of ‘fellow-feeling’ which we might today express through ideas of reciprocity and regard, trust and obligation. Recent commentators on Smith’s work such as Andrew Sayer have outlined a theory of moral economy, defined as the study of how economic activities are influenced by moral dispositions and norms, and how those norms may be compromised, over-ridden or reinforced by economic pressures. In this view, markets and moralities are not mutually exclusive or opposing forces. Rather they involve reciprocal relations whereby markets depend on and influence moral and ethical sentiments, while social norms, moral conventions and other ethical considerations exert a powerful influence on economic behaviour. Let us see how these ideas might be put to work in understanding contemporary consumption and, more specifically, in analysing French Mottershead’s portraits of shops and shopping.

Moral economies of shops and shopping
At first sight, contemporary shopping environments may not seem very promising places in which to uncover evidence of vibrant moral communities with a distinctively local sense of place. In the UK, in particular, our retail environment has been subject to a process of retail consolidation that has led to a handful of supermarket
chains dominating our grocery purchases and contributing to the demise of smaller, independent stores. Government reports have focused on the threat that the continuous expansion of out-of-town shopping centres is posing to the social and economic vitality of town centres. The Competition Commission has deliberated on the growing monopoly of the ‘big four’ food retailers while the Curry Commission has described the food and farming system in the UK as dysfunctional and unsustainable without radical reform. This does not look like very fertile ground for the development of a flourishing moral economy of shops and shopping.

But the overwhelming evidence of recent ethnographic work on shops and shopping, in the UK and elsewhere, has been to emphasise the tenacity of ordinary consumers in carving out a space within the contemporary retail world through which to express the kind of moral sentiments that Adam Smith remarked upon: notions of respect and reciprocity, relations of trust and mutual obligation, feelings of loyalty and familial bonding. In *Point of Purchase* (2005), for example, sociologist Sharon Zukin writes about shopping in the United States as both a tedious chore and a moral preoccupation, a balancing of freedom and routine, aesthetic pleasure and rational calculation. She describes how shoppers wrestle with the demons of desire as they struggle to express their personal and familial values, concluding that shopping can be an effective way of expressing our creative and ethical selves, giving us pleasure, sharpening our sense of values and creating a public space.

Likewise, in a series of studies in North London, anthropologist Daniel Miller has shown how consumers can express intense feelings of love and familial devotion through their routine shopping practices, in which their purchasing decisions are driven by notions of quality and taste as well as price and value, and where a purchase may be chosen with infinite care, based on an intimate knowledge of the recipient’s personal preferences and desires. Mothers select the food they buy and adjust the meals they cook to suit the tastes of different family members, putting other people’s needs and wants ahead of their own. Shopping for food and other household goods is often characterised by notions of deferred gratification, saving and thrift which Miller likens to anthropological accounts of sacrifice in more traditional societies.

In my own work with Miller, we challenged the received wisdom that people feel greater attachment to their local corner shop and to independent grocery stores than to large-scale shopping centres or supermarkets. Many residents were ambivalent about the local corner shop, in terms of its pricing strategies and limited range of goods, for example, while over time they had become attached to even the most modern, large-scale, purpose-built shopping centres such as Brent Cross. Here, in North London, older residents often ‘pop in’ to the shopping centre to buy a pint of milk or to ‘top up’ on their weekly supermarket shop, using the shopping centre as others would use their local high street or corner shop. Indeed, particularly for older people, the shopping centre offered a ‘domesticated’ (secure, climate-controlled, pedestrianised) environment which they preferred to their local high street (frequently regarded as an unsafe, hostile and dangerous place). It is easy to romanticise these sentiments, many of which are rooted in the specific history of the area, where notions of local familiarity and attachment are set against the fear of unplanned encounters with strangers (often defined in terms of ethnic or racial difference). But these encounters are shot through with ethical and moral considerations where fear and fascination, desire and dread, play off each other in often unanticipated ways.

Our work in North London also challenged the idea that people’s social investments and ethical relations can be ‘read off’ from the built environment. Why, we asked, did local residents express such antipathy to a ‘big box’ retail store such as Toys ‘R’ Us when they felt no such aversion to a neighbouring store of almost identical architectural design which operated as a food cooperative, selling locally-grown fresh fruit and vegetables? This example revealed the limits of architectural determinism, showing how very similar environments can generate quite divergent views, depending on the nature of the social relations they encompass. In this case, many parents felt intense ambivalence towards their children’s avaricious pursuit of toys and other consumer goods while their feelings towards the food cooperative were unambiguously positive. Their attitudes to the retail environment as a physical space, in this case at least, seemed to be outweighed by their moral and ethical views towards different kinds of consumption.

Miller’s work also sheds light on another paradox of contemporary consumption, in which consumers frequently express a preference for Fair Trade and similar goods defined in terms of ethical consumption, while such goods show up relatively infrequently in their actual purchases. Rather than accusing consumers of hypocrisy by highlighting these inconsistencies, Miller shows how both aspects of our behaviour are informed by our own moralities, such that it may be better to talk about ‘consumer ethics’ (in general) rather than focusing on ‘ethical consumption’ (as a self-conscious practice engaged in by a minority of consumers). On the basis of his ethnographic work, Miller suggests that consumers rationalise their purchase of conventional (non-Fair Trade) goods on the basis of their ‘local’ moral commitments to family and friends, where being thrifty is considered preferable to buying more expensive Fair Trade goods for the benefit of unknown strangers in far-off places. Miller suggests that this sense of local, familial morality is always likely to trump a more abstract ethic of care for distant, disembodied strangers.

More recently, Daniel Miller has undertaken fieldwork in South London (with fellow ethnographer Fiona Parrott). In this new work, *The Comfort of Things* (2008), Miller shows how a group of ordinary Londoners, resident on a single street, use a variety of material things to express often intense feelings of attachment and attachment. These things can be as mundane as a photograph or a CD collection. They can involve attachments to animate or inanimate objects (a family pet or a personal computer). In either case, Miller suggests, an ‘aesthetics of care’ is at work which ‘applies equally and indiscriminately to object and person, since one always turns to the other’. This is not to celebrate the commodity in an uncritical manner or to imply that there are no problems with the socially divided and deeply unequal world of contemporary consumption. But it does suggest that we need to explore the ambivalences and ambiguities of our current practices where all kinds of ethical and moral sentiments are at work in even the most commodified environments.

Photographing people and place
How, then, do French Motterhead’s photographs compare to the insights about the moral economy of shops and shopping that can be inferred from these recent
ethnographic accounts? There are many parallels. In Sheffield, for example, at his electrical components store on Abbeydale Road, Reg Almond strives to compete with large-scale hardware stores like B&Q. Not by trying to match their prices but by meeting the needs of his individual customers, having the knowledge to find obscure or obsolete parts and the determination to repair and renew rather than replace.

Similarly, in Slovenia, Dušanka Suljamić runs a ladies’ fashion boutique in unprepossessing premises in the forecourt of a former petrol station in Ljubljana. Her business relies on her personal knowledge of her customers rather than on passing trade or the visual appeal of the shop front. Dušanka remembers her customers’ birthdays, anniversaries and other significant dates. She knows when family members are getting married, graduating or being christened. She offers a personal styling service, based on her intimate knowledge of her customers. Returning from a buying trip in Milan, Dušanka will phone individual customers for whom she has selected particular garments, inviting them over for coffee and a chat. She enjoys her hardware excursions. Loyal customers are rewarded with complimentary silk scarves or free umbrellas.

In Turkey, Enver Korkmaz runs a butcher’s shop in the Tarlabasi neighbourhood of Istanbul. The neighbourhood has a reputation for crime and disorder (drugs and prostitution) but French Mottershead’s photographic exploration of Enver’s shop reveals a much more complex picture of community life in this cosmopolitan city. The shop is open seven days a week and Enver plays a key role in the life of the community, extending well beyond his commercial role as a butcher. Customers visit his shop for a smoke and a chat. They get food delivered or shout down their orders from upstairs apartments. He keeps an eye on the local children as they play in the street and holds keys for people while they are away from home.

In China, French Mottershead photographed pork butchers and wholesale markets in Guangzhou province where prices have escalated in recent years, reflecting the rising cost of transportation and the increasing demands of rapid urban growth. Working their way along the supply chain from farmers and wholesalers to market stall holders and their customers, French Mottershead documents the resilience of face-to-face relations in an increasingly depersonalised world of retail exchange. At the Shiyi Village Market in Guangzhou, for example, pork is sold on the basis of its freshness and taste rather than on the basis of brand name or loyalty to a particular retailer.

In Romania, French Mottershead photographed a small kiosk in the Alexandru neighbourhood of Iaşi (the country’s third largest city). Here, the proprietors Elena and Costica have built up their business over 15 years by earning the respect of their customers, selling cheap branded goods like cigarettes and soda and other daily necessities. Regular customers ask Elena to get special items for them and she does her best to help. Some customers have been coming for years, having bought sweets as children and later on buying hair-dye as teenagers.

Finally, in Brazil, French Mottershead photographed a range of retail environments from Lucinha’s quitanda in Salvador (a shopping space located in the front room of her house, selling unlicenced beer and groceries) to exclusive designer boutiques like Daslu in São Paulo where customers arrive by helicopter and are served complimentary champagne. In between these apparently disparate social worlds, French Mottershead photographed train vendors struggling to elude a crackdown by local police and security guards, a paint shop selling specialist materials for graffiti artists, and informal street traders selling replicas of designer-label T-shirts. The picture that emerges defies any easy distinction between separate sectors (formal and informal, regulated and spontaneous). Instead, we observe a more complex interplay between social worlds with different degrees of formality and legality.

Ethnographic and photographic registers
What, then, are the similarities and differences between French Mottershead’s photographic project and current ethnographic studies of shops and shopping? To begin with the similarities: much recent academic work has attempted to document the persistence of local cultures of consumption in a rapidly globalising world. Much academic effort has been expended in demonstrating the ethical commitments that underpin contemporary consumption practices, where shoppers demonstrate their love for family and friends by investing time and energy in meeting their specific needs. As in these recent academic studies, French Mottershead argues that consumers are capable of displaying intense loyalty to modern supermarkets as well as to older independent stores. In Romania, for example, they found consumers rhapsodising about the virtues of a newly-opened Carrefour store, keen on their competitive pricing, their convenience (provided they can access it) and their choice of a wide range of high-quality goods. Even older residents seem to have transferred their loyalty to the newer retail formats and the supermarkets have rapidly won consumers’ trust. Understanding these changing attachments requires an appreciation of recent social and economic changes in Romania. As one interviewee observed, ‘In communist times there was just one type of yogurt, one type of bread, one type of butter. But now we can choose whatever we like.’

Despite the parallels, we should also note the differences in terms of method between ethnographic research and French Mottershead’s photographic project. French Mottershead built up relationships with their interviewees over a period of days and weeks, often working through translators, while ethnographic researchers might take months or years to build trust and establish rapport, usually working in the vernacular. But the differences are relative. French Mottershead employed a version of what contemporary anthropologists refer to as ‘multi-sited ethnography’, working in half a dozen places and trying to draw comparisons and make connections between them. Their work in China takes up the anthropological injunction to ‘follow the thing’, tracing the way cultural meanings are inscribed in the forms, uses and trajectories of material objects. Like academic social scientists, too, French Mottershead were clearly sensitive to the ethical issues of photographing people and places and they make much of the ‘benevolence’ of their photographic discipline.

Where French Mottershead’s work really adds value to ethnographic accounts of contemporary consumption, however, is in their ability to observe change at first hand, to be present at a specific moment, and to record the scene visually (through photography) as well as verbally (through interviews and casual conversations). Like the best ethnography, their photographs show real people in actual places, not ciphers of some abstract academic theory. French Mottershead seem reluctant to write about their observations (beyond the immediate impres-
sions recorded in their blog), wanting their photographs to 'speak for themselves'. But this intention avoids any kind of naïve realism, recognising the distinctive value of different media and respecting the ability of different (visual and textual) registers to communicate subtly different messages. I would encourage people to study the ethnographic accounts of contemporary consumption and to compare them with French Mottershead's visual records. Both ethnographic and photographic accounts are alive to the moral economy of shops and shopping in ways that are frequently denied in more abstract theories of modern urban life. To that extent, ethnography and photography play a complementary role. But it is in searching for the differences between these two registers that we may find the most promising avenues for taking these ideas forward.

1. Andrew Sayer, 'Moral economy and political economy', Studies in Political Economy, Spring 2000, pp.79-103

2. The Competition Commission is one of the independent public bodies that help ensure healthy competition between companies in the UK for the benefit of companies, customers and the economy. The Curry Commission is the UK's Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food


8. For a review of the ethnographic evidence, see Peter Jackson, 'Local consumption cultures in a globalizing world', Transactions, Institute of British Geographers 29, 2004, pp.165-78


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