Part IV Social Worlds

Chapter 19

Family, Work, and Consumption: Mapping the Borderlands of Economic Geography

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This chapter begins with a confession: it's taken me a while to open up the space to produce this piece. This may seem a minor point, but it says much about the nature of academic work in the UK right now and about the intersection of work with other claims: partner, friends, family, pets, leisure pursuits, home decoration, which this chapter, of necessity, engages with too. But it also says something important about the remit of this chapter. In their initial letter, outlining the issues they wanted included here, the editors described their thoughts as a "mish-mash." My initial response was to agree. But then I began to mull over why this set of terms – family, work, and consumption – was proving problematic, troublesome. My argument is that this is because they are terms that sit at the boundaries of economic geography. They are markers: terms whose manner of inclusion or exclusion within economic geography, indeed, whose very inclusion/exclusion, have definite, different, even conflicting implications for our understanding/s of what economic geography is about; terms that question the assumptions and the terrain on which and from which economic geography speaks; which say as much about the producing subjects of economic geography as they do about its objects of analysis.

Take "work." Work, the myriad structured and not-so-structured, controlled and not-so-controlled actions, ideas, routines, and interactions that combine to produce goods and services, is central to economic production, however we conceptualize this. As such, work might be expected to figure in at least some economic geographers' analyses. And yet, until recently, it has seldom been visible. Indeed, when we look at many of the key debates that constitute the economic geography landscape over the recent past – for instance, spatial divisions of labor, flexibility, flexible specialization, industrial districts – work is strikingly absent. Lost behind and obscured by "grander" concerns, work is the absent presence; the material effect of "big" processes, yet somehow by comparison insignificant. Recently, this exclusion has been challenged: by feminist geographers, who have stressed the importance of the gendering of workers and occupations/jobs for regional development; by those pursuing a cultural economic analysis, for whom the meaning/s of work, its

performance, and the repertoires inscribed within it constitute the primary foci; and by social/cultural geographers, whose interest/s in the body, identities, and subjectivities have led to explorations of disciplining, regulating, and performing various constructions of the working body, as well as to analyses of how work figures in the constitution of identities. So, this economic geography landscape is one where work and workers are not just included, but seen as central to what economic geography is about. That this conflicts with other (earlier) visions of economic geography goes without saying. Writing about "Family, Work and Consumption," then, impels one to navigate the borderlands, the contested "marches" of economic geography. Hence the trouble, the "mish-mash."

So what routes can we follow through this borderland? It would be possible to produce a cartography outlining the economic importance of the family, the changing nature of work, and the growing significance of consumption, but this would make for dull reading. Instead, I prefer a more interwoven mapping that centers the interfusions of home–work and home–work–consumption. But before proceeding, and since one of the critical effects of the literature discussed here has been to question our frequently taken-for-granted assumptions about just what does and does not constitute work, it is necessary to dwell on the term "work."

What Do We Mean by ''Work''?

When we in the advanced capitalist economies use the term "work," the accompanying assumptions are that such activities are salaried/waged or financially remunerated and that they occur outside domestic living space. We talk in everyday language about "going (out) to work," readily equating the activities for which we are paid with "work;" the implication being that everything else isn't. Such notions have long been critiqued. They have been shown to pertain only to the advanced capitalist world. Moreover, in assuming as the norm those practices that have been so traditionally only for men, they have been argued to promote a masculine subject position. Correspondingly, "work" is no longer narrowly defined but has been extended to encompass all those activities necessary for social reproduction. So, it includes domestic labor (cooking, cleaning, washing, ironing, etc.) and childcare; and it also includes unwaged labor, such as voluntary work and "family work." And, because it encompasses all these things, the spaces and places of work are not just offices, retail units in malls and high streets or, increasingly rarely, factories, but homes too.

This expansive definition of "work" remains largely unexplored within economic geography, where attention is still primarily confined to work of the paid form (Peck, this volume). But, as we see now, this definition raises critical geographical questions concerning the production, constitution, and relations between the spaces of home and work, as well as key questions about the future shape of paid work. Two examples serve to illustrate these issues. One concerns women home-workers in Southern Europe; the other high-tech (male) scientists in the UK.

Home-working is pervasive in the European South, where it has recently intensified and expanded through the development of diffused, "flexible" production systems and subcontracting networks (Vaiou, 1991). Common in the production of textiles, clothing, leather goods, furniture, electrical appliances, toys, jewelry and

Christmas cards, one of the effects of this "flexibility" has been to incorporate women and ethnic minorities into production. Of greater significance for this chapter though is the way home-working brings the spaces of home and work together: home-working means that the relations of family and of paid work coincide spatially, which means that for the home-worker they frequently collide. Indeed, Vaiou's work shows that whilst gender relations and familial norms in the European South constitute the conditions for the construction of women as home-workers, providing subcontracting firms with a ready supply of cheap, unorganized, compliant labor, the experience of home-working is that the demands collide with domestic routines. An Athenian home-worker testifies:

> I wake up at 6.00 in the morning, prepare food, clean the house and start work as early as I can. I stop for two hours in the afternoon because the neighbors complain about the noise from the [sewing] machine. My food goes down almost unchewed. I do everything like in a car race. I clean the dishes . . . , I run to the market, then back to the sewing machine till late at night . . . (Vaiou, 1991, p. 50)

By contrast, a very different study examines men in high-tech, scientific research establishments in Cambridge in the UK (Massey, 1995). Here paid work is talked about in celebratory terms. It is loved; something which these men are not simply interested in or which they find just enjoyable, but which they are all-absorbed by. This has important implications. Indeed, the way these scientists talk suggests the erasure and/or invasion of home space by paid work. Home then is erased by working practices that frequently involve evenings, weekends, and public holidays, and which override holiday entitlements, and it is invaded by studies, home computers, and modems. Moreover, Massey demonstrates how these scientists' minds are often still "at work" even when their bodies are doing "things domestic" – thinking in the bath, whilst playing with children. So, the predominant pattern within these high-tech research environments is one in which one side of the home–work dualism (work) erases the other (home). A minority of men, however, resist this; by keeping work out of home space and by having strict rules about the hours spent at work.

Apart from their intrinsic interest, the above studies are important; for their suggestions about home space, work space, and their interrelations, and for the differences they reveal between different forms of work. In the one instance – the male scientists – paid work invades and erases the space of the home and the domestic labor occurring there. In the other – home-working – paid work and domestic labor coincide in home space and conflict. This difference itself has much to do with the gendering of particular workers. For men, paid work can invade and/or erase the space of home and its attendant work, precisely because of the existence of a gender division of labor and a connotational system which assigns women as those primarily responsible for socially reproductive labor in the home. For women this same division of labor and connotational system means that whilst paid work can invade home space, it can never erase it and its associated work. The testimony of the Athenian home-worker provides ample evidence of this. But so too does that of growing numbers of women working in professional occupations in the advanced capitalist world. Indeed, as several recent studies show, the impossibility of juggling

both types of work – without completely re-negotiating the domestic division of labor – means that many professional households are resorting to employing paid domestic workers (almost invariably women) for a range of social reproductive tasks (Gregson and Lowe, 1994; Pratt, 1997). So, when we conceptualize work as including both paid and unpaid labor, we have to acknowledge that men and women have different relations to and "investments" in different types of work, and that these relations and investments in turn impinge on negotiations of the home/work dichotomy, and have considerable implications for the (re)constitution of home space and work space.

Such deliberations also raise questions: about the future of paid work; about the increasing social and economic distance between the work required of the Cambridge scientists and the women they might employ to clean for them for a few hours a week; about the cultural baggage that surrounds high-tech and other professional work – extreme competitive individualism, obsession, present-ism; and about the way this type of work refuses to admit home space within its inner spaces. (Think of how desk photographs of partners and/or children are accepted, often as "hetero-badges," yet how their material presence is marginalized, peripheral, reserved for social occasions and/or the boundary points of the working day, dropping-off or picking-up.) So, should paid work erase and be valued over other forms of work? Should it occur in fragmented, sealed-off workspaces? Is it possible to combine different types of work in ways that acknowledge both their difference and equivalent importance? These are just some of the questions currently being asked and thought about by those seeking a more progressive politics and practice of paid work.

Having demonstrated how work means more than paid work, and examined some of the implications of this understanding, we move on to explore further research that has focused on home–work connectivities.

Home–Work Connectivities

In the previous section the emphasis was on home and work as spaces whose meanings are relationally constructed through gender differences, and as spaces with different potentials for mutual invasion and/or erasure. When we talk about space in this way, whilst there is some connection with physical space (the spaces of actual homes and workplaces), it is important to note that we are thinking of home and work as spaces inscribed with and produced through meaning; spaces that are constituted through discourses – notably of gender, sexuality, family, and work. Nevertheless, much of the recent research on home–work connectivities works from two different takes on spatiality; as physical distance (the absolute space – measurable, quantifiable – between home and work locations, and the friction this exerts), and as contextual place. These two strands comprise the substance to this section.

Home–work and physical distance: containment stories and segmented labor markets

One of the most important recent studies of home–work connectivities is Susan Hanson and Gerry Pratt's *Gender, Work and Space* (1995). Building from earlier

research, which emphasized either the work or the home side of the home–work dichotomy, and which stressed respectively either the importance of women's gender roles in constraining female employment and shaping occupational segregation, or the processes of occupational segregation occurring within particular employment sectors, this focuses on the micro scale. It examines how households, communities, and employers in Worcester, Massachusetts, conjoin to produce (and reproduce) particular local labor markets, and, in the process, labor-market segmentation; how tightly constrained ("contained") many Worcester women's labor markets are; how this relates to domestic divisions of labor; and how both local social networks and employers produce restricted employment possibilities for women living in particular areas of Worcester. Along the way we learn how significant physical distance is in shaping women's decisions over what type of employment is possible, and where. Short commutes and the sequential scheduling of partners' employment are seen as desirable and are relatively common practices; transport problems, childcare availability, and domestic divisions of labor serve to reinforce such thinking. So, we see in this study how particular places are characterized by a myriad local labor markets, not one; labor markets that differ for men and women living in the same area of the city.

As some reviewers have indicated, this is a significant intervention in a literature that defines local labor markets in terms of white, male, middle-class experiences, and which conceptualizes their production at a coarser scale. But it is also suggestive regarding context. These stories of containment pertain to white, predominantly but not exclusively working-class women, living primarily in traditional nuclear family households, and in a city which might differ markedly from more important metropolitan areas in terms of spatial extent, political economy, social relations, and local cultures. So, how generalizable is the containment story which Hanson and Pratt tell? Citing more recent work on Columbus (Ohio), Chicago, and Minneapolis-St Paul respectively, they suggest:

> Although the cities represented here reach only into the upper midwest and do not yet include examples from the South or West, the overall message . . . is [that] . . . the processes we describe . . . do not seem to be idiosyncratic to that place [Worcester] (Pratt and Hanson, 1996, p. 350).

Containment, then, seems to be not just a Worcester story. Indeed, it isn't just a North American story.

Compare the Worcester study with recent Dutch work for instance. Droogleever Fortuijn (1996) argues that the limits of what is considered possible and the spatial strategies for combining home and work vary between nuclear family households living in different neighborhoods. Professional households living in a high-status inner city area of Amsterdam-South frequently work close to home, travel to work by bicycle, and develop sequencing strategies which enable them to work from home occasionally and to overlap their working hours/days. Comparable households working in the semi-professional occupations and living in a different inner suburban neighborhood of Amsterdam exhibit male full-time working and female part-time working, with one partner always at home with the children at all times. By contrast, the options for a nuclear family household with children living in Almere – a new town 30 km from Amsterdam – are far more restricted: men for the most part

commute long distances (by Dutch standards), whilst women confine their job search to the limited possibilities within Almere. This latter situation finds echoes in earlier work on British new towns in Northeast England, where locally based female part-time employment constituted the limits of what was considered possible by women living in nuclear family households, and – again shades of Worcester – constituted precisely the type of labor sought by incoming employers (Lewis, 1984).

Worcester then, as Pratt and Hanson suggest, isn't idiosyncratic, at least so far as its containment stories go. These stories are as familiar within the European context as they are within North America. But this should not be surprising, for there are strong parallels between the households that comprise the primary research base for all these studies; they are almost all white, apparently heterosexual, primarily mid-to-low income, and almost all comprising male/female partnerships with children. They are therefore traditional nuclear family households at a particular life-stage; the very households that would be expected to reveal the containment of women's labor markets. If we seek some different stories, maybe we should be looking elsewhere; at different households whose relation to local labor markets might be more expansive.

The volume of research within economic geography on non-nuclear family households and their relation to labor markets is thin, but there are some studies in social/cultural geography, notably those of lesbian households or that touch on such households, which point to a greater degree of heterogeneity than the containment stories above. Some indication of this is given by a comparison between Adler and Brenner's (1992) lesbian re-make of Castells' ground-breaking study of San Francisco's Castro district and Gill Valentine's (1993) study "(Hetero)sexing space." In the former, the implication is that lesbian households tend to be concentrated in working-class neighborhoods; the inference being that their local labor markets are as contained as those of many heterosexual women living with men and children. But, as Valentine's work conducted in Southeast England suggests, this is an over-simplification. Consider the following interview extract:

> Liz works in London and I work in Eastbourne. We spend a couple of nights a week in Eastbourne and a couple of nights a week in London. We did for a while discuss the option of somewhere else in-between, like Dorking or Chertsey. But in-between is middle class suburbia. I would have to think very long and very hard before I could move into an area like the Dorkings of this world. It is so "straight" (middle class, 30s) . . . (Valentine, 1993, p. 398)

The differences between this home–work relation and that implied by Adler and Brenner are stark. First, and this is where their living arrangement is poles apart from any of the households discussed previously, the members of this partnership do not live in one house. Rather, they oscillate between two. Secondly, and consequently, they spend a number of hours each week traveling. Thirdly, this woman tells us why they haven't chosen to "split the difference." Implicitly, living as a lesbian couple in the suburbia between Eastbourne and London (read: heterosexual nuclear families with children living in small executive "estates") is not an option. That this partnership generates the income to sustain two households and journeying between them, and that they have neither children nor elderly dependents reliant upon local services, is evidently important in enabling such a home–work relation.

Indeed, this relation is well beyond the limits of what would be considered possible, even desirable, by other households. But what is also worth emphasizing is the expansiveness of this narrative. Oscillation, movement, traveling through space; this is what characterizes these women's home–work relation, not the localism of women living in traditional households.

So, when we look at different households, containment stories get disrupted by other narratives. These expansive stories should not be construed as the exclusive preserve of middle-class lesbian partnerships. Media articles in the UK, for example, regularly feature instances of TV presenters/producers, politicians, and so on, who work in, say, London or Birmingham, and live in say Edinburgh or Glasgow. Some of these long-distance commuters are single persons with/without partners; but others are in heterosexual partnerships with children, and more than a few are women. And indeed, when we look a little closer to home, the academic labor force is littered with instances of partnerships that replicate the lesbian partnership above – partnerships that might span East and West Coast USA, or even be transcontinental, but which, simply because of the difficulties of "fixing" two careers in one place, are likely to involve extended home–work relations and frequent long-distance commuting.

One of the effects of the above research has been to demonstrate the emergence of distinctive, unequal geographies of containment and mobility. All of which begs the question, why the emphasis in the home–work literature on containment? For Hanson and Pratt, containment stories reflect their initial insistence on representativeness within the Worcester context. For others, one can only speculate, but the focus on the nuclear family seems to suggest an internalization of this household type as the norm, related to both feminist geographers' preoccupation with the young children lifecycle stage and economic geographers' attention to working-class and/or lower-income occupations. The consequences, however, have been deleterious. What is required is research on home–work interfusions that admits diversity, centers the disruptions other types of household bring to existing understandings of home–work relations, and produces polyvocal narratives to counter the singular containment stories which currently prevail.

Home–work as contextual space

Another way of thinking about home–work relations is to "connect up;" to situate places within the broader context of radical political economy and grander stories about gender relations. Until the mid 1980s, this was one of the main ways of thinking about home–work relations, inspired for the most part by Doreen Massey's *Spatial Divisions of Labour* (1984, 1995). Examples include Linda McDowell and Doreen Massey's (1984) exploration of the intersections between capitalism and patriarchy in four areas in England in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; Massey's own account of Cornwall; and some of the critical but resonant research conducted by the Lancaster Regionalism Group. More recently, such thinking has fallen out of favor; although traces still remain, witness the vestiges in the Worcester study. Readily identifiable with the grand narratives so berated by the turn to postmodernism, these have become largely forgotten stories.

And yet, as Richard Walker (1996) suggests, there is still space for these stories, provided that they are not the only ones we tell, and that we are sensitive to their

partialities. The need to situate places and regions within spatial divisions of labor is as pertinent now as it has always been, precisely because such structures present material limits to what might be considered possible in terms of home–work relations for particular types of households in different places/regions. So, maybe the containment stories of nuclear family households in Worcester have as much to do with Worcester's position within the broader economy of the Northeast USA as with the micro geographies of Worcester; maybe the limits of what is considered possible might not be quite so local for similar households located in different cities? I'm thinking here of identical households to those discussed by Hanson and Pratt but ones located in the Greater London area, where part-time work is less readily available and where long(er) commutes to Central London are as characteristic of women's employment as men's.

Home–work infusions then are one of the means through which certain economic geographers – for the most part feminists – have produced alternative accounts of work. As we have seen, these center the home and household living arrangements and acknowledge the critical effects that these have on work as conventionally understood. Expressed slightly differently, they provide readings situated in the messiness of everyday life and, as such, are positioned in the troublesome borderlands of economic geography. And yet as I write this there is a sense in which some of these debates seem somewhat passé. And that Hanson and Pratt also feel this about their volume is suggested by the insertion of reflexive critical moments within their text. To be sure, I feel a degree of ambivalence about articulating such sentiments. There is, after all, a great deal of importance about such analyses. But academic debates are nothing if not moving feasts, subject to endless "new turns" and reinflections; responses that say as much about power, performativity, and the discourses that constitute academia as they do about changes in the world which we live in, interpret and represent. And one recent "turn" has introduced a different set of directions to research on family (home) and work to those discussed thus far; the turn to consumption.

Home–Work–Consumption

Unraveling the complexities of the home–work–consumption nexus is an extraordinarily difficult task. Nonetheless, two quotations provide some instructive inroads:

> I often ask beginning geography students to consider where their last meal came from. Tracing back all the items used in the production of that meal reveals a relation of dependence upon a whole world of social labor conducted in many different places under very different social relations and conditions of production . . . Yet we can in practice consume our meal without the slightest knowledge of the intricate geography of production and the myriad of social relationships embedded in the system that puts it upon our table . . . (Harvey, 1990, p. 422)

The emphasis here is on relations of dependence; chains and flows that connect places, material commodities, and social labor in a global food system whose end point is a meal. Yet there are subtexts here: consumption is something we apparently do unknowingly; consumption is of secondary importance to relations of production; and food, eating, is about meals, not food per se. Compare this voice, of a well-

known geographer writing in the radical political economy tradition, with the following:

> The next time you arrive home with a carload of goods from the supermarket, . . . before you start packing them away. Subject one or two . . . to some lateral thinking. Treat them not simply as mass-market consumables, but as . . . cultural artefacts, each with its own . . . biography. Have a go at deconstructing your weekly shop. That cheery-looking bunch of bananas for example. Britain doesn't grow bananas – yet – so the odds are they have travelled a long way to grace your fruit bowl. Where did they start their journey? And what about the bunch of grapes? . . . The odds are that you will be able to supply remarkably few answers to the questions. The past decade or two have seen the globalisation of the British shopping basket as supermarkets scour the world to satisfy our newly acquired appetite for exotic fruits or out-of-season greens. . . . Such global supply lines would have staggered our grandparents. . . . but they also mean . . . we know less than ever about the way our food is produced . . . (Nicholson-Lord, 1997, pp. 58–62).

Although referring to the global food system and the chains of production/distribution that constitute it, there are some important differences between this and the previous quote. Foods are cultural artefacts rather than meals, to be thought of as having biographies that are geographical, about traveling and displacement. And the scene described here is domestic, the routine weekly/monthly food shop being unloaded and stored away at home. Rather than looking back from the meal into global production and distribution chains, this quote connects the latter with knowing (and unknowing) acts of purchase and consumption. That it stems from an article on ethical consumption, then, is probably unsurprising.

Together, these quotes characterize much contemporary geographical writing on home–work–consumption. On the one hand there is the radical political economy tradition, which thinks in terms of chains of global–local dependencies, and of retail spaces as sites/spaces of paid work, but which "brackets-out" the home and the activities of consumption occurring therein. On the other is a culturally oriented version of economic geography, which tends (though not exclusively) to "bracket-out" production considerations, centering instead the geographies, practices, and knowledges of consumption-as-use. For the purposes of this chapter it is the second of these approaches that is more important. It is worth devoting some attention to the first tradition, however, given its import within economic geography.

Much of the research in this tradition is notable for the way it uses the metaphor of the chain to work back from an end point – the purchase of a commodity for direct use – through to the processes and social relations of production. One such example is Ian Cook's work on exotic tropical fruits (1994), which connects Jamaican plantations with the decisions made by UK supermarket executives regarding the visual form of these fruits, whilst similar connections have been made with respect to the production of mangetout (snow peas) in Zimbabwe. Here, regulation size stipulations mean that only a proportion of the crop meets presentational requirements, the remainder becoming cattle feed. Such chains are critical in revealing relations of dependence between First and Third Worlds; in exposing the power of supermarkets in shaping and dictating exchange relations with agricultural commodity producers; and for raising moral questions about a global food system which presents perfect, plastic-packaged mangetout to Western consumers whilst

simultaneously consigning huge quantities of less-than-perfect peas to cattle, in a country where levels of basic human food consumption are far from comparable with the West. This is important, but a criticism frequently leveled at this type of work is where it ends. In closing the chain in the supermarket, such research confines consumption to the act of purchase, and denies the role of consumers in shaping the food chain. A plethora of research through the 1990s has argued that the first is a far from sustainable position (Miller, 1987; Jackson, 1993), whilst the second denies the ways in which the globalization of the food system has been hinged to parallel sets of changes in Western consumer food preferences (Goodman and Redclift, 1991; Jackson and Thrift, 1995). So, in "bracketing-out" consumption-as-use and consumers, this type of research re-asserts the primacy of production and retailing over consumption, erasing the home (and the practices occurring therein) from analysis. We are back then with the understandings of work with which we began this chapter; with an economic geography that sees consumption as little more than "surface froth," and with an interpretation of the home–work–consumption nexus that privileges (paid) work over the other two terms.

Another strand of research located loosely within the radical political economy tradition takes consumption more seriously, focusing on retail spaces as sites of paid work and as spaces for the constitution of identities (Leidner, 1993; du Gay, 1996). This research is concerned with the social relations of paid work yet is intrinsically connected with consumption, understood as the act of purchase, and as such goes further into the home–work–consumption nexus than chain-inspired explorations. Yet this still is not far: whilst connections between paid work and consumption are drawn, home space and consumption-as-use/re-use are seemingly off limits – issues, practices, and processes which, by implication, lie beyond the concerns and the subject matter of economic geography.

It is apparent that not all economic geographers share such views, however. Indeed, within current research it is becoming increasingly common not just to extend chains from production and retailing into cycles of use/re-use but to think in terms of disruptive conjunctures of relations and knowledges between consumers and producers. Recent research on twelve North London households epitomizes such tendencies, centering how "our mundane, everyday routines of food shopping, cooking and eating are developed in relation to increasingly internationalised food supply networks" (Cook et al., 1998, p. 163). Moreover, in focusing on consumer knowledges, on what consumers know about the origins of the foods they eat, and about their relations to global food systems, they develop the idea of "structural ambivalence" – that consumers have both a need to know and an impulse to forget the origins of the foods they eat. Of critical importance in enabling the development of this notion is the biographies which foods have within the home. Once bought, individual foods are worked on and incorporated within household relations (and see too Bell and Valentine, 1997). So, food is used to construct the space of the household and the relations and identities that constitute it; practices that construct the home as a relatively autonomous zone. Ironically, though, it is global food systems which are being used to do this; hence the need to forget and "bracket-out" the origins of the foods eaten.

Whilst Cook et al. see the importance of household relations – love, caring, authority, and resistance – and domestic divisions of labor to the biographies of

food, it is food as a cultural artefact and culinary cultures which comprise their primary interests. Others, however, have rather more to say about the place of home within the practices of consumption. One such recent study is an interdisciplinary project on shopping, place, and identity, again conducted in North London (Miller et al., 1998). Home and family sit at the heart of this research. Countering the myriad studies that depict the act of purchase, and shopping practices more generally, as hedonistic pleasures, Miller et al. emphasize the embeddedness of shopping within inherently social, and primarily familial, relations. Shopping, consequently, becomes hard work for women, a set of practices that are not just about routine domestic reproduction but which are reproductive of "the family" and family identities. Love, sacrifice, denial, guilt, as well as sheer drudgery then are what this study uncovers about shopping (see also Miller, 1998); a combination of actions and emotions which exemplify the home–work–consumption nexus and the complexities of its intersections.

Thus, when we look at some of the recent geographical work on home–work–consumption, we see how this tends to play up the connectivities between the work entailed in home/household relations and practices of consumption, and to "bracket-out" production considerations as conventionally understood (i.e. as flows of goods and social relations of production). Instead, when production figures at all it is more likely to do so as consumer knowledges. Now part of this is a response to the research shaped by radical political economy. It is an attempt to tell different stories from different starting points, which accord different privileges to the all-too-familiar but still necessary tales of global–local interdependence and social relations of paid work. Nonetheless there are questions worth raising as a critical reflection on this research program. These concern the nature of the commodities which geographical research in this area has honed-in on thus far, and their knock-on effects in terms of thinking about consumption.

One commodity dominates contemporary research on home–work–consumption: food. This is readily understandable, for at one level food is a basic commodity, necessary for human and animal survival and comprising a large part of each household's weekly expenditure. Food has other academic advantages though. In today's context of scares over, for instance, BSE ("mad cow disease"), E-coli, salmonella, and GM (genetically modified) foods, it provides a classic case study for examining producers, retailers, consumers, and the state conjoining in regulating, negotiating, and/or resisting one of social science's current buzz words, risk (Marsden et al., 1998). Moreover, food and the performances accompanying its purchase, preparation, and eating are central to the expression and reconstitution of key social relations; and food is also an admirable commodity to "think through," both metaphorically and in terms of material relations of power and inequality. That it is also inscribed with and simultaneously constitutive of distinctive geographies no doubt helps too! There are, nonetheless, two points I would make about this emphasis on food in the consumption literature.

The first is that food is an unusual commodity in that, once eaten, it is not – at least as regards the norms of human consumption – available for further cycles of use/re-use. Regardless of the length of time it may/may not sit around in our cupboards, refrigerators, and freezers, the length to which it can be put to use is no longer than the time it takes to prepare and eat or, in the case of perishables such as

fruit, go moldy in the displayed fruit bowl. This contrasts with many other commodities purchased for household consumption, notably items of home decoration and furnishing, consumer durables, consumables – CDs, books, videos, computer games, toys – or indeed clothing. Most of these are embedded within practices and rituals of ownership/possession by household members. Yet such commodities remain woefully under-researched in geography. This, then, is one of those "hotspots" for future research. For the moment though, the gap is significant, not least in terms of its implications for geographical representations of consumption. Indeed, the emphasis on food tends to foreclose the type of extended analyses of cycles of use/re-use insisted on by most contemporary theoretical representations of consumption (and see too the growing body of empirical work on the second-hand market: Gregson and Crewe, 1997). We should be aware then of the critical effects of focusing on particular types of commodities in geographical writing, and attempt to diversify the range of goods which we "think through."

A second point concerns the lack of reflexivity within much of this writing on food, with embodied subjectivities being a notable absence. This is an important omission with respect to this commodity, as a personal interjection suggests. My relations to food are complex, with hints of anorexia. I go through phases, in turn connected to body image, of minimalist eating, denial, and excessive exercise; I find meals, particularly formal sit-down meals of the course-after-course variety, physically and psychologically challenging; and I am vegetarian, and therefore at certain times/places "a problem" to feed. None of this is unusual; what I describe is part of what years of feminist research on the anorexic body and related eating disorders has documented. But it means that when I come to engage with geographical writing on food I feel a strong degree of revulsion; a desperate need to insist on a space for voices such as mine, and an acknowledgment that this celebratory, almost reverential, style of writing about food be connected to the embodied subjectivities that permit such writing. These are authors whose material bodies and sense of self enable them to engage with food in straightforward ways, through culinary "voyages of discovery" and subjects whose positionality is most definitely middle-class. Such points, and their implications, need to be acknowledged.

Conclusions

Conclusions are part of the performance of academic writing, suggesting it is possible to summarize in a comprehensive, synthetic way, which looks forward and stakes out the terrain of "progress." This is part of the expectation here, I am sure. Student texts, after all, carry such presumptions, both from their audiences and producers/publishers But, and as contemporary geographical writing is beginning to suggest, ending in this way is problematic (Bell et al., 1994; WGSG, 1997). This is because conclusions of this nature revert to privileging one narrative, one voice; a writing tactic that therefore erases as it summarizes; and a style that is inappropriate for expressing geographies of tension, contradiction, and polyvocality. That I want to resist such re-instatements here should be apparent, as should the fact that this is not to duck the issue; what I have attempted to show in this chapter is the multiple nature of contemporary geographical research on the family, work, and consumption, as well as its complex connections.

That there is no conclusion here, then, is important. Instead, I want to end by returning to the trouble with which I began. As I argued there, this chapter represents the borderlands of economic geography; its concerns define its limits, its boundaries, and expose (usually unarticulated) subject positions. And, as with many such challenges, the response on the part of many economic geographers has been either to ignore them (the business-as-usual approach) or to dismiss them as not proper economic geography. Usually this is done by re-inscribing a boundary around paid work and/or retail spaces, thereby excluding the rest as "surface froth," read irrelevant, not economic, cultural even. Thinking about the concerns of this chapter then also requires one to take a position with respect to contemporary debates about "the cultural" and "the economic" (cf. Crang, 1997; Sayer, 1997). But what it has also done, I hope, is to open up the issue of spatiality – how we conceptualize space – for closer scrutiny within economic geography. And it should be apparent that this, a set of issues debated more fully recently in cultural geography, has critical effects on the economic geography we produce. If this chapter has succeeded in making these points, and in creating some trouble, then it will indeed have done its work.

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