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**Article**

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# **Retailing: Production and Consumption's Missing Relation**

by

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Embarking recently on a project researching changes in the retail sector and their effects for shopworkers led me to reflect on the production/consumption paradigm, and especially on its inadequacies for this purpose. During the 1990s many writers did critique this paradigm, largely on the grounds that it had prioritised production over consumption, and the material over the cultural. In drawing attention to the circuit linking production with consumption, a space was created for focusing on the many phases and activities that intervene between the production of a good and its eventual consumption: packaging, transport, marketing, advertising, selling and so on. Over-compensating for a previous productionist bias, the emphasis of much of the new work has been on consumption (particularly on individuals and their buying and using of goods and services), rather than on the many and varied aspects of 'distribution'. However, if we are to do justice to the contemporary retail sector, a far more radical break with the production/consumption dualism is required and for two principal reasons. First, because retail remains a black box within this paradigm, an epiphenomenon of the two terms between which it mediates, but with no significance of its own other than as a 'site' for the exchange of goods and services. Second, because analysis of contemporary developments is held back by a way of thinking that posits two terms, distinct and in opposition. This not only prevents a focus on the actual connections linking production and consumption, but it is also too rigid in its assumptions about what constitutes consumption and production and its neglect of the blurry boundaries between these activities.

A broad, relational perspective is required if we are to analyse the overall circuit linking production, distribution and consumption. This focuses on connections and linkages between the various phases and parts of what is an integral, if not always integrated, process. It enables analysis of the overall articulation of the circuit by demonstrating how, at a given historical time, the operation of any one part of the process and the labour that is undertaken in it connects with the operation of any of the other parts and the labour that is undertaken in them. Production, distribution and consumption articulate with each other but in varying ways that are subject to historical change. Taking the manner of articulation as the central object of investigation means recognising the variability and multiplicity of linkages and connections. And viewing what goes on in consumption and production as subject to change overcomes an essentialism with regard to these categories that is often implicit in the debates that treat them as oppositions. A relational perspective, which looks at the overall articulation of a number of interconnected spheres, as well as the dynamics of each in its own right, opens up, rather than forecloses, analysis.

The following discussion draws on the conceptual framework of the 'total social organisation of labour' (TSOL), which I have elaborated elsewhere (Glucksmann 1990, 1995, 2000), to sketch the beginnings of just such an analysis. By directing attention to how the labour undertaken in one sector or institution connects with that undertaken in another, the TSOL framework permits a view on the overall articulation of interconnecting sectors. The most obvious example is the connection between paid employment and unpaid domestic labour:

labour undertaken in the household economy articulates with the labour undertaken in the formal market economy in the sense that what goes on in one affects and interlocks with what goes on in the other. For a long historical epoch this was a highly gendered division and articulation, men's paid work in the formal economy presupposing women in the household performing unpaid domestic labour. At a later stage, with the expansion of married women's employment, and of mass production, a different kind of connection was established, for instance between the work of (some) women working in factories producing ready-made food or clothing or electrical appliances and the work that (these and other) women did in the home, heating up, washing or using these goods. But which tasks are conducted in which sector is variable as are the socio-economic relations under which they are undertaken.

In what follows I attempt to make a case for the value of a relational perspective capable of focusing on the interlocking series of changes and connections between sectors basing the argument on a number of examples: the orchestrating role of retail and its associated industries; the strategic power of large retailers in relation to producers; the impossibility of drawing strict demarcation lines between activities and tasks that are productive, distributive or consumption-side; links between the expansion of women's employment, and changes in production, retail and consumption.

- The Orchestrating Role of Retail and Its Associated Industries

Retail represents the necessary link articulating production with consumption. The point of sale in a shop is nowadays only the end point of a whole series of processes that have grown up around selling, and which are all oriented to this final exchange. The advertising and marketing sectors, powerful industries in their own right, come under this heading. So do new 'knowledges' and experts, such as retail psychologists and lifestyle designers, and the whole panoply of educational institutions and courses that train recruits in retail marketing, management, design and so on. None of these are directly involved in the act of selling, but this is what they are all ultimately geared to. Similarly, goods have to be transported to their destination, packaged, and displayed. As the scale of commodities for sale has increased from local to national to global operations these functions have expanded in size and importance and also become specialist fields of expertise and employment. In a highly competitive retail market leading companies invest heavily in them. Thus, much activity is required for goods to reach the point of sale. And no understanding of how products get to the point of being consumed is possible without recognition of the orchestrating role of the retail sector understood in the widest terms to include all its associated 'industries'.

- The Strategic Power of Large Retailers in Relation to Producers

The shifting power position of different players in the overall circuit can also be confronted from a perspective that focuses on their connectedness. Britain, for example, has experienced a transition from producer hegemony in the 1960s and 1970s through supposed consumer sovereignty in the 1980s to retailer power in the 1990s. Large retailers have gained pre-eminence over producers, certainly over the companies supplying their goods. Grocery multiples such as Tesco and Sainsbury are the prime example, exercising control not only over the selling of food but increasingly also over the producers whose goods they stock, which now extend beyond foodstuffs to clothing, toiletries, and even banking and finance. Manufacturers of designer underwear, sports shoes and perfume (e. g. Calvin Klein, Levi, Armani ) fought a losing battle to prevent their products being mass marketed at discount prices in high street supermarkets (The Guardian 27.3.98). The increasing size, concentration and monopolisation of retail businesses in the UK have led to a situation where a small number of very large companies now virtually dominate their respective markets. Shops are

also employers of a sizeable proportion of the total labour force: over two million people in Britain work in shops, and they account for nine per cent of the total workforce (1991 Census of Great Britain; Economic Activity, Table A: 598-624).

Shops are emerging as dominant economic institutions. And in so doing retail ceases to be the 'poor relation' to production or simply a vector for the transmission of goods to the consumer. On the contrary, retail now occupies a central strategic position, orchestrating relations both upstream to manufacturers and producers and also downstream to consumers (Wrigley and Lowe 1996). Tesco and Sainsbury dictate to producers on prices and quality, multi-source virtually everything they stock, produce their own brands to compete with erstwhile better known brands, adopt all manner of sales techniques, displays, layout and discounts to lure purchasers to buy more, and tie consumers to them with loyalty cards. And they employ well over one hundred thousand people each (The Times 1000, 1998).

#### •From Taxonomy to Relationality

Far from being eternally fixed as either production, or distribution, or consumption, many activities are sometimes one and sometimes another, and the line distinguishing between them is blurry rather than rigid. Where a dualistic paradigm cannot entertain this ambiguity or flexibility, no such problem hampers a relational approach. A few examples will illustrate the general point. In past decades bread used to be both produced and sold in bread shops, while today most sell bread that is factory-produced. The bread shop, in other words, is now a retail outlet where it used previously to be also a productive unit. The (re)appearance of the in-store bakery, as a distinct complement to the shelves of pre-packaged loaves, serves to emphasise the supplementary and mimicking function of this segment of the bread market within the superstore.

Or take packaging: is this production or distribution? Many goods arrive at their destination from the factory or warehouse already packaged but many also do not, and large supermarkets now offer the same goods for sale either already packaged or to be weighed and wrapped in the shop on meat or deli counters. Until the 1970s a large proportion of foodstuffs was stocked loose and packaged only at the point of sale, as it is now in many alternative or eco-shops. Thus, an overly taxonomic approach to classifying as *either* a productive *or* a retail function obscures rather than clarifies the relation between activities. Sometimes it is one and sometimes it is the other; there is no rigid cut off point between the two. The development of pre-packaging and self-service went hand in hand (Malcolm 1976), a change in production and distribution also involving a change in consumption, at least in the first, shopping, phase of the process of consumption. So, this example is also indicative of the interlocking set of changes affecting the whole circuit rather than just one phase of it.

And what exactly do we mean by consumption? Buying something, making use of it, or literally consuming it so that it gets used up? Writers differ widely in their deployment of this term, reflecting the impossibility of a hard and fast definition. From the productionist perspective, shopping was conventionally seen as consumption. Yet, many products bought in shops are used as raw materials for further production in the home (knitting wool, flour, DIY goods) and those doing the further production (clothing, meals, car maintenance) would probably not class the work this involves as consumption. Moreover, shopping, in the form of the weekly or routine family shop, has long been re-interpreted, particularly in feminist literature (Cowan 1983, Game and Pringle 1982) as work rather than as consumption or leisure. A relational perspective implies that there can be no intrinsic definition of

consumption. Whether or not activities count as consumption depends on their relational position in the circuit.

Similar observations apply at other points in the circuit. In a service and consumer oriented market, where part of what is bought is the actual service relationship itself (Urry 1990, Hochschild 1983, Adkins 1995) retail and consumption become indistinguishable. When customers base their choice on whether to buy package holidays, air tickets, insurance, from one company rather than another, on the basis of efficiency, helpfulness, the friendly face or voice (Lash and Urry 1994:201), then part of what they are paying for is the retail relationship.

A classificatory attitude is unhelpful to the analysis of activities which are unfixed or shift between production, distribution and consumption. The problem is not one of drawing a new demarcating line between manufacture and service. To do so would perpetuate the analytical opposition between production, consumption and other sectors and divert attention from the characteristic relational nature of the overall circuit.

• Links between the Expansion of Women's Employment, and Changes in Production, Retail and Consumption.

The expansion of women's employment, another development correlative with the consolidation of mass consumption, provides a final example of the integrated changes occurring through the circuit of production, distribution and consumption as a whole. The process of goods and services being increasingly produced and sold as commodities has gone hand in hand with the entry of millions of women to the paid labour force across the industrialised world, and the lengthening of their lifetime period of paid employment. The trend has been for goods formerly produced in the home to be increasingly made by women working in factories and sold by women working in shops (the vast majority of sales workers and shop assistants are women). So a multiple, rather than dual, series of changes interlock with each other, the expansion of women employed in production and distribution (amongst many other activities) connecting with the increasing consumption of goods and services that might earlier have been both produced and consumed within the household. The proliferation of upmarket mail order clothes catalogues targeted at the professional woman provides a contemporary example. Too busy to go shopping for clothes, the journalist, city analyst, doctor, barrister, or teacher finds telephone or internet ordering more convenient and less time-consuming. And in so doing she contributes both to the consolidation of an emerging field of retail, telesales, and to the expansion of a new and distinctive form of employment in call centres, which is also highly feminised.

I hope to have made a compelling case for a relational perspective capable of focusing on the interlocking series of changes and connections between sectors. All the examples are intended to highlight both the centrality and significance of retail to the overall circuit of production and consumption and the ability of a relational framework to come to terms with a huge realm of activity whose existence a production versus consumption dualism cannot even recognise.

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