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# Geographies of dissociation: Value creation, 'dark' places, and 'missing' links

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## Abstract

In this article, we seek to contribute to cultural-economic geography debates on the social construction of economic value. We widen the focus on already well-studied associations between branded commodities and other entities representing nonmonetary values by also considering what we refer to as 'dissociations'. Dissociation denotes practices of weakening or obscuring negative links between a branded commodity and other entities in order to let the desired associations overrule undesired ones. We highlight the strategic agency behind such dissociations and thus focus on actors' proactive relational work to prevent negative associations from becoming salient as well as their reactive practices of managing reputational crises. The article situates the study of dissociations in human geography and pays particular attention to the geographies of dissociation along territorial, relational, and topological lines.

## Keywords

association, brands, dark places, dissociation, relational distance, reputational crises, social construction, value

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## Introduction

In the old days . . . when the airlines were still trying to convince people of the safety of their planes, they would paint the airline's names directly over the plane's doors. That way, when a Pathé or any other newsreel or photographer captured a movie star or politician disembarking . . . the name of the safely landed airline would be visible. But in the advent of a crash . . . the first job of the guy in the field was to rush out to the crash scene with a bucket of white paint to obliterate the name of the airline before the photographers showed up. (Fink, 2000: 65)

The vignette above, taken from a textbook on crisis management, alerts us to important aspects of how economic actors attempt to pursue economic value. In many consumer markets, value no longer represents a factual scarcity nor an approximation of invested labor/material. Rather, sellers increasingly enhance the reputation and desirability of products by charging them with symbolic value (Hirsch, 1976; Levitt, 1980). Symbolic value is not inherent to products but the outcome of proactive and strategic relational work (Moor, 2007). Symbolic value is socially constructed through forging manifold 'associations' (Dacin and Brown, 2002; Pike, 2013, 2015) between the product/provider (e.g. air transport/airline) and other entities that represent some kind of nonmonetary worth (e.g. celebrity or landing safely). The practices underpinning association have fascinated geographers, since, through the work of associating products or services with nonmonetary value, economic actors 'connote, suggest and/or appeal to particular spatial references' (Pike, 2015: 17). The mechanisms of association, however, only build the starting point of this article, not its core.

What we wish to advance here relates to the second part of the vignette: the case of someone rushing out to the crash site not to save lives or take care of the injured but to obliterate the brand's name before it becomes associated with catastrophe. We seek to contribute to cultural-economic geography debates by showing the importance of *dissociative* relational work when it comes to the establishment of value. Dissociations denote a distinct type of proactive and

reactive relational work, chiefly aimed at hiding potentially problematic aspects from consumers' awareness. We will argue that dissociative practices are more than mere omissions in webs of associations. Instead, they denote a set of relational practices that is related to yet distinct from associative ones. Dissociations unfold a geography of their own. They encompass ordinary regions and dark places that usually are avoided by associative practices. Moreover, dissociations systematically utilize distanced, ephemeral, and socially thin relations in processes of value construction.

This article conceptually explores the geographies of dissociation by contextualizing dissociation in relation to value creation practices and their geographies. Following this, we dissect proactive and reactive dissociative practices before analyzing the related geographies of disassociation along territorial, relational, and topological lines.

## Value

### *Value creation in contemporary capitalism: Competition, differentiation, and signaling*

Historically, there has been a shift from standard markets to status markets (Aspers, 2009). In standard markets, metrics of quality (e.g. a carat of gold) indicate that a commodity's intrinsic value exists independently from relations between market participants. Such metrics act as elements of objectification by signaling standardized quality and imply that price need not vary between different sellers. Status markets, in contrast, lack objective benchmarks for value. Here, value rests on highly uncertain criteria like taste, stylistic elegance, aesthetic appeal, or media attention, and participants compete for relative positions rather than absolute benchmarks. Positional comparisons boost highly unequal rewards for efforts with few winners and many participants relegated to lower ranks with little or no return (Fasche, 2017). Competition for status is thus inherently relational in the sense that market position depends not only on one's own effort but increasingly also on relationships between market participants (Aspers, 2009). In arts markets, for instance, an exciting new artist lends value to the

gallery's reputation and vice versa. The gallery, in turn, derives its position from tasteful and affluent collectors who frequent the place (Fasche, 2017).

The term 'value' has strong normative connotations, yet, as Willmott (2010) claims, it is an empty signifier if not placed in a sociocultural context. Value does not exist independently; rather, its content has to be created with the help of relational work that mobilizes meaning inscribed in historically contingent 'ethico-political complexes' (Willmott, 2010: 518). Aesthetics and perceptions of value propositions thus vary between different consumer groups as well as over time and space. With increasing global reach, sellers find themselves confronted with 'geographically differentiated kinds and degrees of commercial, social, cultural, and political resonance' (Pike, 2013: 322). Mercedes Benz, for instance, was forced to apologize for 'hurting Chinese peoples' feelings' after posting an Instagram-ad quoting the Dalai Lama who, in China, is officially regarded as a separatist. Such examples illustrate that shifts toward a commercial focus on status market dynamics or differentiation entail numerous new challenges for providers and that striving for reputation is an attempt to control something that intrinsically evades control (Power and Hauge, 2008; Power et al., 2009).

With the growing relevance of positional competition, the concepts of 'brand' and 'branding' become central to understanding value (Arvidsson, 2006; Moor, 2007; Pike, 2013; Power and Hauge, 2008). A *brand* can be defined as a 'commercial institution' (Arvidsson, 2006: 3). While the noun 'brand' denotes the container that carries symbolic value and can be charged with cultural meaning, the verb *branding* references the process of adding value to goods and services (Pike, 2013: 321). Through branding, concrete products interact with the cultural meaning imbued with the brand. In this sense, a branded commodity is a 'composite of the facets and qualities of a good or service commodity that is deliberately chosen, integrated and communicated by actors as a coherent entity' (Pike, 2013: 321).

Brands encapsulate an attempt to provide symbolic guarantees that a product's performance, materiality, and so on represent a distinctive character or quality. Brands signify 'distinctive,

symbolic meaning that differentiates a product or service from rival (branded) competitors' (Willmott, 2010: 523; also, see Power, 2010). In highlighting distinctiveness, a product's material qualities and a brand's cultural meanings interact in reciprocal ways. The interconnection between meaning and materiality as well as the value of distinctiveness are openly recognized by firms (a good illustration of this is Apple's 2011 lawsuit against Samsung copying the 'look and feel' of its smartphones). Visual and tactile product qualities are increasingly regarded as a monetary value in the 'aesthetic economy' (Hancock and Tyler, 2008; also, see Crewe, 2016; Entwistle, 2002).

The near ubiquity of branding and brand signaling (Moor, 2007) suggests that the dynamics of competition through differentiation and exclusivity signaling have expanded geographically and in terms of market segments. While the logic of status valuation still prevails in markets for high-end or luxury goods such as wine, designer handbags, or contemporary art (Beckert et al., 2017; Crewe, 2017; Fasche, 2017; Hutter and Stark, 2015), the logic of status markets also increasingly pervades traditional consumer or mass markets, where providers use their reputation not necessarily to conquer high price segments but also to claim profitable niches in all price segments.

Chamberlinian competition most commonly occurs in markets that are oversupplied with comparable offers (Power, 2010). In such standard markets, providers seek to secure value propositions through signaling and linking to trusted agents of certification and assurance in order to 'stand out in the crowd' (Hracs et al., 2013: 1144). Providers' reputations become more important to enhance customer loyalty where little or no functional barriers prevent customers from swiftly switching to competing offerings. Furthermore, providers' reputations have arguably greater effect in markets characterized by high demand elasticity. In order to avoid fierce downward, price-driven competition, many providers seek to create extra value that transcends the commodities' functionality by suggesting their competitors' offerings are 'imperfect substitutes' (Scott, 2008: 66). Electricity, for example, is increasingly branded as part of a particular lifestyle

(e.g. of being ‘clever’, ‘flexible’, or ‘ecologically responsible’).

The term ‘brand equity’ highlights the fact that prior investments in a brand’s reputation and meaning can be ascribed a monetary value and that brands themselves become tradable assets. While the process of ‘branding’ still rests on the reciprocal association between a brand and a commodity, ‘brand equity’ potentially detaches the brand from a particular commodity. As a consequence, it is no longer necessary to control the production process to obtain financial profits from brand ownership (Willmott, 2010). Yet, brand value and commodity value are still intricately interwoven, though now with reversed priorities. As the consumption experience of a commodity must not contradict the respective brand’s defining narratives, production and processing are now *subordinate* to branding. If, for instance, McDonald’s claims to use only regionally obtained chicken meat, the pressure for the firm to arrange the value chain in accordance to this claim is high. At the same time, profit margins for fast food secured by brand value offer larger degrees of freedom to deviate in production from other, not publicly emphasized norms. Those parts of the value chain that are difficult to adapt to the mobilized norm of regionality require dissociation.

With the rise of the Internet, the spectrum of actors who participate in building reputations has broadened and involves highly complex and dynamic multi-stakeholder games (Aula, 2010). Consumers, enthusiastic fans, and users increasingly self-organize in user communities and interact in diverse fora, becoming more and more involved in the cocreation of symbolic value (Grabher and Ibert, 2018; Willmott, 2010). Within communities, new opinion leaders emerge who have the power to forge unprecedented coalitions among buyers. Such communities can easily develop a ‘life on their own’ (Wiertz and De Ruyter, 2007: 370). Sometimes they support sellers in their effort to gain reputation, but they can also turn against brand owners and organize powerful opposition. Publicly visible devotion to a brand by user communities can even challenge a brand’s identity, as the ‘misappropriation’ of the

Burberry brand by the so-called ‘Chavs’ illustrates (Mason and Wigley, 2013; Power and Hauge, 2008).

Due to the need to address these challenges of building, sustaining, and defending reputation in a reflexive way (Greyser, 2009), new actors have entered the playing field and become involved in the creation of symbolic value. Increasingly, ‘regulators’ (Pike, 2013: 328) like trademark authorities, governments, consumer protection agencies, intellectual property legislators, and civil society organizations enter the scene to influence the institutional setting within which sellers and customers cocreate symbolic value. Furthermore, a fast-growing market for ‘circulators’ (Pike, 2013: 328) encompassing marketing consultancies, experts on regional cultures, online community managers, bloggers, social media influencers, and advertising agencies as well as symbolic and artistic workers has emerged, providing services to the abovementioned actors. These ‘cultural intermediaries’ (Nixon and Du Gay, 2002) effect the creation, filtering, and dissemination of symbolic value and thus increase the degree of reflexivity demanded of all players who compete on status markets. When these intermediaries are large platform providers, one cannot downplay the role of the structures and institutions that these actors control.

The overlapping relational webs around branded objects frequently give rise to dissonant perceptions of both commodities and brands (e.g. the images of the working conditions in Foxconn factories contrasting with the aesthetic design of the Apple smartphone). In order to retain value across price segments and manage reputation in differentiated markets, providers have to apply great care. It is this relational work that we are interested in and which we consider a precondition for providers’ ability through branding and positional competition to generate profit and/or rent. In particular, we seek to conceptualize strategies of dissociation. In doing so, we unpack how building value edifices involves not only signaling and associating with positive things but also omission, obfuscation, and hiding potentially ‘unholy grounds’.

## Critical engagements with global value creation

Science and technology studies (STS), political economy, and neo-Marxism have critically analyzed commodity production processes and global value chains and have generated important insights. An encounter with these approaches provides valuable opportunities for assessing capitalism, markets, and valuation regimes from multiple perspectives (Castree, 2002; Christophers, 2014; Ouma, 2015), despite clear challenges of positioning the concept of dissociation vis-à-vis ontologically and epistemologically disparate sets of approaches. We hope, however, that such a positioning might also stimulate collaboration between different ‘micro-communities’ (Peck, 2012: 119) within economic and cultural geography who are concerned with economic value creation but do not tend to interact with one another. More specifically, and in line with Bigger and Robertson (2017: 72), we suggest that combining insights from STS and Marxian political economy can provide powerful tools in analyzing valuation regimes by linking Marxian ideas of the economic and moral valences of value and STS’s strong framework for the study of semiotic value. Geographies of dissociation and the relational work of valuation cannot be fully understood without exploring market-making and the performativity of markets.

The first approach we therefore want to highlight stems from the French sociologist Michel Callon (1998, 2007) and involves the concepts of ‘framing’ and ‘overflow’. Callon introduced these terms to reconsider the economic concept of externalities, which rests upon the assumption that economic entities have clear and stable boundaries, be it the boundaries of firm, industry, market, or national economy. In mainstream economics, externalities (instances caused by an entity but having their main effects outside the entity) are thus special moments that deviate from the normal state of affairs. With reference to Goffman’s (1956) dramaturgical approach, Callon suggests that any economic entity does not simply exist but has to be created artificially with great effort by social actors and with the help of many presentation and staging technologies.

Callon refers to this active separation of entities as ‘framing’. However, as any created frame is inherently fragile and notoriously incomplete, the arduously established frameworks are likely to fail in their function to separate the inside from the outside sooner or later. Situations in which elements from the outside intervene in the inside (or the other way around), Callon denotes as ‘overflows’. In this perspective, Callon argues, externalities are no longer exceptions to the ordinary state of affairs but the rule.

Given credence to the idea that economic entities involve presentation and staging technologies, we might assume it is necessary to build up scenes on a theater stage but also to close the curtains in order to obscure the backstage. However, the distinction between highlighting and obscuring seems to be unimportant to Callon, while it is important for our approach in which we seek to conceptualize association (highlighting) and dissociation (obscuring) as two complementary operations in the social construction of value. The idea of overflows inspired us to think more systematically about processes of value contestation, which force actors to react in order to restabilize or modify webs of desired or undesired connections.

Bigger and Robertson (2017: 72) argue that ‘[o]nce we understand the semiotic and political economic valuations in a given setting, we can evaluate the moral basis and implications [of regimes of valuation] and compare them with what ought to be’. It is here that Marxist political economy comes into its own. While socio-constructivist approaches highlight associations and relations in value creation, such approaches are relatively blind to missing links. Political economy provides a complementary critical analytical lens that makes visible what has been left out or obscured through processes and practices of dissociation. Hence, the second approach we want to emphasize builds on Stuart Hall’s notion of ‘articulation’ (cf. Hall, 1980), which is paired with its opposite and constitutive other, ‘disarticulation’, to study the inclusions in and exclusions from global value chains and production networks (Bair and Werner, 2011). As a response to overly optimistic accounts of integration into global production arrangements, and arguing

against an ‘inclusionary bias’, Bair et al. (2013: 2545) develop a dis/articulation perspective around the ‘paradoxical double movement of articulation: the conjunctural connections of commodities, people, and places, and complex processes of separation and exclusion, that together constitute circuits of commodity production’. The dis/articulation perspective inspired our approach of interrelating associations and dissociations, due to its focus on a dialectical process within which inclusion and exclusion are related practices, while they both have their own logics rather than being just the flip sides of the same coin.

Third, and related, at the macro or systemic level, Marxist critiques of the global capitalist economy point to the increasing disconnection of consumers and producers and the hiding of the very social relations, which constitute the production process. Marx’s notion of the ‘commodity fetish’ points to precisely this concealment of the social relations inherent in the capitalist production process. Commodities, congealed forms of labor time, emerge almost magically as things and thus present themselves as relations between things rather than between people (Marx, 2016 [1872]: 83–95). Much work in the field of commodity chain analysis has worked in an effort to ‘unveil’ the commodity fetish through providing information on the production process of commodities and through relinking producers and consumers as a normative and progressive project (e.g. Bair, 2009; Guthman, 2009; Hartwick, 1998). The question of whether the commodity fetish as an inherent structure of capitalist production can be overcome and if commodities can be ‘de-fetishized’ remains debatable (Castree, 2001; Cook and Woodyer, 2012; Duncombe, 2012; Ermann, 2011). Yet this tradition of thought has provoked empirical explorations of the global system of commodity chains and production networks that accurately trace commodities to their makers (Hulme, 2016). Such knowledge is still indispensable to inspire geographical scholarship on ‘the insulating effect of distance’ (Levy, 2008: 31) between places of production and consumption.

This is closely linked to a strand of research established under the moniker ‘Follow the Things’ pioneered by Ian Cook (Cook et al., 2004, 2006,

2017), and it is effectively illustrated by Brooks’ (2015) work on second-hand clothing and Knowles’ (2014) reconstruction of the flip-flop trail, to mention but two prominent examples. By tracing the journeys and geographies of production, consumption, and disposal of commodities, these studies go beyond simply unveiling the commodity fetish. Rather, they offer an analysis of different value judgment logics and highlight the dynamically evolving character of commodities along the process. In doing so, they infuse rigorous and critical political economic analysis with a socio-constructivist understanding of valuation as a situated and culturally contingent practice. Yet the strategy of revealing the ‘true’ story of a product that underlies the ‘Follow the Things’ agenda and other consumer activist groups’ activities has reached limits and arguably lost some of its potential for mobilization (Duncombe, 2012; Hulme, 2016). Moreover, Hulme (2016) argues that in the most recent stage of globalization, many things have become unfollowable, as the respective production systems appear to be in constant flux and many linkages have become notoriously ephemeral or are switched frequently. It is exactly the strategic agency behind such gaps, omissions, and collateral damages that we seek to highlight with the term ‘dissociation’.

Sociologists and geographers have similarly engaged with globalization as a process of enabling the stretching of social relations through space and the opportunity to thereby ‘offshore’ waste and dangerous work (cf. Crang et al., 2013; Urry, 2014), ‘expulse’ unwanted elements (Sassen, 2014), or ‘externalize’ negative effects of Western living standards to geographically distant or less visible places (Lessenich, 2016). Lessenich (2016) advances a more general diagnosis of an ‘externalization society’ that links the spatial organization of global capitalism with the emotional and cognitive dissonance of Western consumers. All of these accounts of globalization and its crafting of ‘dark’ relations and hidden connections are insightful and helpful as they stress the socioeconomic structural conditions of capitalist societies.

However, these literatures do not sufficiently focus on the microlevel practices or the proactive and reactive relational labor undertaken in order to

purposefully create these externalities nor do they stress the multitude of agencies and specific forms of relational work of dissociations which unfold in time and space.

## The work of dissociating

### *On associations and dissociations*

Value is not a quality inherent to products but rather is created purposefully by brand owners and providers through relational work (Moor, 2007). There is a widely shared conviction in economic geography (and beyond) that the key activity in this relational work is to create and stabilize ‘associations’ between brands and external reference points (Birch, 2017; Featherstone, 2017; Hall, 2017; Kirmani and Baumgartner, 2000; Pike, 2015; Power and Hauge 2008; Rantisi, 2017; Smith, 2017). High quality and desirability, for instance, are not inherent qualities of any sports gear but an impression purposefully evoked by emphasizing relationships between athletes, sports scenes, and branded sports goods (Hauge and Power, 2012). Associations are embedded in wide and multidimensional webs of relations that encompass different value registers. Boltanski and Thévenot (2006 [1991]) differentiate between six distinct and coexisting ‘orders of worth’, which form a multidimensional matrix within which judgments of value are negotiated by relating to different qualities, measured against different yardsticks. They identify the ‘inspired world’, ‘domestic world’, ‘world of fame’, ‘civic world’, ‘market world’, and ‘industrial world’ as distinct dimensions to assess value. Along similar lines, Graeber (2001) distinguishes between three registers of value: moral, semiotic, and economic.

This multidimensionality of socially constructed values offers the possibility to ‘translate’ between different registers of value (Aspers and Beckert, 2011). Market price as an approximation of the traditional exchange value is thus only one of several possible frameworks to determine a product’s value (Stark, 2011). Most other registers of value, in contrast, mobilize some nonmonetary frame of reference to assess the quality of a branded good, be it authenticity, beauty, originality, creativity,

reliability, safety, or tradition. Associations across registers of value give rise to reciprocal interaction between frames: creating the possibility to transfer value from one register to another. For instance, the branding of a particular coat as ‘stylish’ or ‘well-crafted’ justifies a high price (Moor and Lury, 2011; Stark, 2011). Translation across different registers rests on reciprocity—the transfer always works in both directions and all entities involved are affected (Fasche, 2017). Hence, depending on the constellation, reciprocal associations can either boost or undermine market price and thus entail considerable reputational risk.

Central to all of the above is the idea that associations are meaningful and ultimately valuable relations between branded products and other entities that represent positive nonmonetary value (Pike, 2015). Meaning relies on plausibility rather than objective truth. Sense making ‘is about continued redrafting of an emerging story so that it becomes more comprehensive, incorporates more of the observed data, and is more resilient in the face of criticism’ (Weick et al., 2005: 415). Against this background, *associating* denotes a set of practices to increase the salience of links that evoke or confirm all of those ideas about a brand’s or product’s qualities that the provider would like various constituencies to hold. *Dissociating*, in contrast, denotes practices of weakening or obscuring meaningful negative links between a brand/commodity and other entities. Both terms, association and dissociation, thus denote relations with the potential to influence a commodity’s desirability, for better or worse.

Given the sheer multitude of possible connections, attempts to charge branded commodities with symbolic value have to make some selected links *salient*. Associations are selected references that decision makers and marketers deliberately boost in order to evoke an intended impression in the eyes of the beholders (Dacin and Brown, 2002; Hudson, 2008). Hence, of all possible links only those that are, or could easily become, salient are of interest. Of all possible relations, those which are charged very positively or very negatively—depending on the normative valuations in a market segment or consumer group—are of interest. Such segmentations have a geographical expression, as many

normative judgments are made against the background of territorially embedded institutions and cultures (Pike, 2013).

Dissociations, like associations, require active relational work. Associations are constructed in the literal sense of the word. They assemble incommensurable entities—narratives, material clues, symbolic representations. Such assemblages are inherently instable and thus require continuous effort to remain salient (Weick et al., 2005). Often the most desired associations are inherently unstable when under critical scrutiny and a significant, ongoing effort is often made to stabilize associations. For dissociations, relational work entails a different logic and often points in the opposite direction. Dissociation work aims at avoiding the assembly of negative associations. It seeks to take advantage of the inherent instability of assemblages by attempting to create gaps and omissions in webs of relations and to actively demobilize undesired translations between different registers of value.

### *The agency of dissociation*

As we have argued, a plethora of actors is involved in mobilizing associations and dissociations. The spectrum ranges from retailers, consumer associations, activists, and regulators to brand owners—to mention but a few (Pike, 2015). However, ‘in its most elementary form the domain of . . . corporate associations consists of two entities, those decision makers who create and market an intended corporate identity and those constituencies toward whom this corporate identity is targeted’ (Dacin and Brown, 2002: 256). Thus, in our conceptualization, the providers are the agents of dissociation while consumers are the target of such activities; in practice, the relations between both actors are complex.

Consumers and users contribute ‘active interpretative work on the “decoding side”’ to the value propositions made by providers (Willmott, 2010: 522). Rather than passive recipients of value propositions, they are better understood as cocreators of value. Their contribution includes the endorsement and re-instantiation of positive associations and encompasses considerable effort and time (e.g. by contributing content to brand-related online forums)

to charge brands with additional meaning. Consumers, however, also participate in dissociating. Psychologists of consumption (e.g. Kunst and Hohle, 2016; Rothgerber, 2014) use the term dissociation to analyze a psychological mechanism of consumers coping with situations of cognitive dissonance. Consumers have an unconscious or implicit willingness to ignore (or quickly forget) signals disrupting the consumption experience. In such cases, consumers subconsciously repress or consciously suppress uncomfortable thoughts related to negative impacts of their actions (Šedová et al., 2016). In particular, these studies analyze paradox constellations, in which the joy of consuming a commodity is inextricably linked to moral doubts. For instance, many consumers ‘enjoy eating meat but dislike causing pain to an animal’ (Kunst and Hohle, 2016: 758). Consumers dissociate themselves from unpleasant aspects by naturalizing or rationalizing their behavior (Rothgerber, 2014). Te Velde et al. (2002) identify ‘detachment’ (enhancing the emotional distance), ‘shifting responsibility’ (the locus of responsibility shifts between producers and consumers), ‘concealment’ (refusal to look at problematic aspects), ‘misrepresentation’ (biased ways of presenting economic practices), and ‘moral circles’ (establishing a boundary between entities deemed worthy of moral considerations and entities that are not) as means to achieve dissociations. Hence, there is complicity in dissociation on the consumer side.

Providers have to take into account that they are confronted with reflexive customers who in a networked world have unprecedented means to interact and self-organize. Drawing on their own knowledge and ethical sensitivities, consumers have the chance to ‘capture’ and reframe the meaning of a commodity. In a study of meat-eating environmental studies students, Šedová et al. (2016) show that this well-informed group of respondents suffers from their inability to dissociate from the consequences of their behavior because unlike other consumers they cannot refer to their functional ignorance. In management studies, perceptions by external stakeholders are increasingly taken seriously as a major source of risk (Power et al., 2009). Reputation is seen as a valuable but increasingly fragile corporate asset that ‘will garner more attention in corporate

risk portfolios' (Aula, 2010: 46). Consequently, firms internalize concerns about how external constituencies perceive their activities (Power et al., 2009). Based on this, they develop awareness of the dynamics of reputational crises (e.g. Sohn and Lariscy, 2014) and build up expertise in proactive and reactive measures of crisis management.

Dissociative agency is distributed across buyer and seller domains which maintain, as Te Velde et al. (2002: 217, italics in original) argue, 'a tacit pact of *collective non-responsibility*'. Methodologically, it is a challenge to identify dissociated entities, to prove a conscious interest in dissociating, and to describe dissociation in terms of a distinct set of practices. To clarify our approach to dissociative agency, we therefore distinguish the more strategic agency of brand owners from the more habitual agency of consumers. Wherever actors on the non-provider side (consumer initiatives, civil society organizations) launch strategic initiatives, we perceive them as part of ongoing struggles to associate and dissociate. Still, our main focus is on efforts undertaken by providers and brand owners (supported by a plethora of consultancies).

Our argument rests on the assumption that practices of value creation are shaped by and shape opportunities and constraints that are embedded in structural conditions. Our analysis is thus not one of 'misbehavior' of some individual rogue actors. Rather, the critical potential of analyzing geographies of dissociation lies exactly in the attempt to understand the underlying rationality of individual and collective agencies who act reflexively with regard to emerging market conditions and thus cocreate them. To come to terms with the embeddedness of agency in larger systemic entities (e.g. existing market arrangements and value chains), we will distinguish between proactive and reactive strategies of dissociation.

### ***Proactive dissociation and 'strategic ignorance'***

In the case of global value chains and production networks that bridge many dimensions of distance, the intention to dissociate might be hard to prove. Manifold economic, political, historical, and geographical contingencies have worked in conjunction

to create today's global economy. What can be claimed, however, is that the resulting complexity leaves much space for 'strategic ignorance' (McGoey, 2012). This term points at the possibility that individuals and organizations may sometimes find it advantageous to cultivate and preserve individual and collective forms of ignorance. For McGoey, strategic ignorance encompasses 'practices of obfuscation and deliberate insulation from unsettling information' (2012: 555). Embracing strategic ignorance, though, can be pursued both proactively or reactively. Difficulties in observing or understanding practices in distant places and the complexity of many product processes can suggest opportunities for forging 'knowledge alibis': the 'ability to defend one's own ignorance by mobilizing the ignorance of higher-placed experts' (McGoey, 2012: 563). If not even experts fully appreciate, let alone understand the complexities of globalization, how can a simple manufacturer?

Another imminent strategy to enhance strategic ignorance is to point to higher scales of ignorance. For instance, in light of the *global* financial crisis, a New York court judged two individual fund managers to be innocent even though there was sufficient evidence that they lied to their customers and caused tremendous losses for them. In the judge's opinion, it seemed inadequate to find two individuals guilty in a situation in which the entire market collapsed (McGoey, 2012). Ignorance can turn into a strategic asset for dissociations if participants can be sure that this ignorance is widely shared in the entire system. This is also the reason why 'whistleblowers'—insiders who dare to unveil the mechanisms of collectively nurtured ignorance—are frequently subject to social exclusion, punishment, or stigmatized as 'traitors' (McGoey, 2012).

Opportunities to create knowledge alibis are not only found in the emergent complexity of globalization, they can also be fostered more actively. Many firms and industries actively promote or enhance 'strategic ambiguity' by supporting 'independent' research institutes which reframe research problems (Casswell, 2013). They enhance ambiguity in the sense of an 'ongoing stream that supports several different meanings at the same time' (Weick, 1995: 91). As contradictory interpretations do not

dissolve with enhanced knowledge, strategies of fostering ambiguity can be pursued with gestures of openness and transparency. For instance, unlike the tobacco industry, the alcohol industry has been particularly successful in creating strategic ambiguity. Diageo, a global producer of alcoholic drinks and owner of several globally known brands, funded the UK National Organization for Foetal Alcohol Syndrome, which trains midwives in how to advise expectant mothers of the risks of drinking during pregnancy. This engagement enhances ambiguity in public opinion on alcohol consumption as, on the one hand, it highlights the dangers of drinking during pregnancy while, on the other hand, it also promotes the idea that consuming alcohol outside of pregnancy is not only unproblematic but even responsible (Casswell, 2013). The sustained efforts on the part of the alcohol producers appear like a ‘consistent and coherent strategy . . . to establish their credibility as “partners” in efforts to address the global expansion of alcohol-related harms’ (Casswell, 2013: 681).

The case of digital content moderation illustrates the constitutive role of geography in cocreating strategic ignorance, a dimension we explore in more detail below. Social media firms like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter provide technological platforms that enable the sharing of ostensibly user-generated content. This content largely encompasses affectively and positively charged experiences, like birthday messages, vacation and food pictures from friends, funny notes taken from newspapers, and cat videos. Disturbing and illegal content including (child) pornography, torture, sexual solicitation, self-harm, or racism appears much less on these platforms. The limited publication of these images results not from well-behaved users nor clever algorithms alone, which filter and ban content. Exact figures are hard to establish, but estimates suggest that more than a hundred thousand workers, euphemistically called ‘content moderators’, sort and delete disturbing user-generated content for social media firms (Chen, 2014). Content moderators are confronted with up to twenty-five thousand disturbing images a day and many of the workers show signs of dissociative disorders (Riesewieck, 2017). Digital platforms dissociate themselves from

these practices as far as possible. First, platform providers establish organizational distance between themselves and the human labor required to perform the cleaning by outsourcing the task to third-party firms that have to sign nondisclosure agreements. Second, they take advantage of the ‘insulating effects’ of physical distance by offshoring the task to distant countries, in this case the Philippines (Levy, 2008: 31).

### *Reactive dissociations and reputational crises*

Taken together, these arguments on fostering strategic ignorance and ambiguity may explain why, on the one hand, much problematic information about exploitative labor conditions or disregarded ecological legislation is easily accessible and freely available yet remains inconsequential for the social construction of symbolic value. However, from time to time, these undesired facts still surface unexpectedly, for instance, in the case of emergencies or scandals unveiled by journalists, competitors, or activists (Power et al., 2009).

We interpret such a reputational crisis (Sohn and Lariscy, 2014) as an instance of ‘overflow’ (Callon, 1998). The arduously established framework of associations and dissociations that constitutes a branded product’s symbolic value stops working as soon as additional associations, this time negative, become salient. Such negative associations might emerge without the involvement of particular agents. More typically, however, stakeholders who follow their own, sometimes hostile, agenda mobilize them actively. Greenpeace’s strategy of identifying and blaming antagonists by emphasizing problematic aspects in their corporate practices is a case in point. Here the political movement purposefully utilizes the mechanisms of reputational crises to force producers to change their practices (e.g. Löfstedt and Renn, 1997). Providers respond by applying reactive strategies.

One such reaction is simply denial: providers refuse to accept negative associations in order to prevent them from becoming salient. Denial is perhaps the most direct attempt to destabilize negative associations. However, denial is also a risky response to reputational crises because despite the

negation it re-instantiates exactly those links that are to be weakened. Another possible way of dealing with reputational crises is silence. Providers try to diminish the topic's relevance by ignoring it, often in a demonstrative gesture: the issue is so unimportant, the underlying message goes, it is not worth mentioning. The silence option rests on the expectation that the public will forget sooner or later. The public's readiness to forget increases if additional, distracting news attracts their attention.

If no distracting news appears by chance, producers might decide to create them. It was no coincidence, perhaps, that the soccer club Bayern Munich announced the transfer of German national striker Mario Götze in 2013, shortly after their President Uli Hoeneß had been sentenced for tax evasion and at the very time the public started to speculate about the involvement of the football club in his affairs. Distracting news should be strong enough to overrule a negative association and ideally transport a highly emotional message. It is not all that important whether these emotions are positive or negative. Negative distraction often mobilizes the so-called 'whataboutisms' (Edward, 2009), practices of pointing to other allegedly more serious scandals ('what about...') in which the stakeholder is clearly not involved.

Another widely used way of enacting reactive dissociations is simply to admit the truth (Greyser, 2009: 589f.). Typically, confessions go hand-in-hand with apologies and humble pleas for forgiveness. In such cases, sellers count on the general willingness of the public to forgive the repentant sinner and trust in people's forgetfulness.

Scapegoating often goes hand-in-hand with confessions of scandals (Greyser, 2009). The rationale behind this is to delegate responsibility to some clearly defined entity, be it a mid-level manager within the organization or an external supplier, and to publicly disengage the relationship with this entity. The dissolution of the functional tie interrupts the flow of translations between both entities and protects the brand value from further corrosion.

A riskier strategy is to affirm the stigma and bear the scandal without any excuse. Such surprising moves can have charismatic effects as the confessors take the risks associated with the affirmation of

negative associations and demonstrate that it is still possible to succeed (Turner, 2003). Charismatic responses are particularly promising in contexts where the breaking of taboos is common or even widely admired. In the fashion industry, for instance, public attention, no matter if positively or negatively connoted, represents a value in itself. Here scandals and public provocations enhance brand 'visibility' without the cost of advertising and marketing.

For dissociations to work effectively, decision makers attempt to replace affective and aesthetic messages with rational argumentation. Rationalization is a means to reduce the consumer's empathy (Kunst and Hohle, 2016). In situations of reputational crises, the spokesperson with suit and tie rather than the 'cool' advertising icon will most likely talk on behalf of the brand owner with 'facts and figures' replacing the 'look'n'feel'.

Another aspect of rationalization is the expected contextualization of critique. Firm representatives normalize negative associations that become salient, for instance, by pointing to similar (or even better: worse) scandals of other firms under similar circumstances. Practices of dissociation might even exaggerate rationalization. For instance, firm representatives disguise undesired negative associations by providing an abundance of information and by talking about them in a scientific or technical jargon, which is unintelligible to most audiences (think of the lists of ingredients provided by food retailers). The use of euphemistic terms (e.g. replacing 'killing' or 'slaughtering' with 'harvesting' to conceal the link between meat and the living animal) additionally weakens the consumer's empathy (Kunst and Hohle, 2016). Such rationalizations are often accompanied by the discursive practices of 'othering' (Spivak, 1985): claiming that beings subjected to suffering are culturally or biologically different from an invoked 'us' and thus suffer less.

Of course, it is useful to combine some of these reactive measures rather than relying on only one. The possibilities of combination are manifold and depend on the situation and may vary between different industries or markets. Moreover, reactive measures work against the background of proactive measures of dissociation. The richer the

opportunities for knowledge alibis or strategic ambiguity, and the more ignorance resides at superior societal scales, the more effective the depicted reactive strategies will be.

### From geographies of association to geographies of dissociation

As indicated in the example of digital content moderation, practices of dissociation involve multiple spatial dimensions. Geographers have rarely used the term *dissociation*. An exception is Willis et al.'s (2016) study of the impact of childhood sexual abuse on the personal geographies of adults, titled 'Spaces of Dissociation'. In their study, dissociation addresses responses by victims to traumatic experiences in their past. Willis et al. (2016: 206) use dissociation synonymously with terms like 'silencing', 'denial', and 'looking the other way', and they acknowledge that 'not just individuals but entire societies can . . . dissociate . . . in relation to childhood sexual abuse'. Willis et al. (2016) therefore conclude that dissociations influence the way people perceive and use space.

Striving to advance human geographical engagement with dissociative practices, in this section we consider the geographies of dissociation, starting with relational conceptualizations of space, then complementing them with the aspect of territoriality, and finally connecting these to physical and topological space. In each of these steps, we move from the already well-known practices of association to our understanding of dissociative practices.

#### *Relational proximity and distance*

In terms of proximity, geographical associations make use of the intuition that 'near things are more related than distant things' (Tobler, 1970: 236). Yet proximity is not restricted to the amount of physical distance, but also extends along several dimensions of *relational* (i.e. social, organizational, institutional, or cognitive) proximity (for a review, see Boschma, 2005). Associations that seek to take advantage of a supplier's or customer's reputation will most likely stress the cooperative nature of the collaboration and the long-standing, reciprocal, and

trustful nature of the relationship (suggesting social proximity between both). Brand owners frequently privilege external suppliers with a strong reputation over ordinary ones by offering a partial integration into the organization, for instance, by means of authorization (e.g. *authorized* dealers or workshops) or by labeling them as 'preferred suppliers' (thereby enacting organizational proximity).

Relational distance is a heuristic term to assess the intensity of dissimilarity and the multitude of dimensions along which dissimilarity in a relation occurs (Ibert and Müller, 2015). In general terms, associations are enacted and strengthened by proximate constellations characterized by a high degree of nearness, similarity, and multiplexity (proximity occurring along several dimensions). For dissociations, by contrast, actors seek to enhance the intensity of dissimilarity and at the same time rely on a low degree of multiplexity (proximity occurring along only one or few dimensions). Ideally, dissociations enact high degrees of relational distance along several dimensions.

First, dissociations refer to different instantiations of *organizational distance*. In this respect, different levels of distance within and between organizations involved in production and value networks reflect efforts to differentiate what 'we' do from what 'they' do and therein divide ethical responsibility between 'partners'. This can take many forms. For instance, stages in the provision of a commodity that are mobilized as valuable by branding tend to be close to, or even integrated within, the organizational structure of a brand owner's company. Problematic aspects (like poor working conditions, low wages, pollution), by contrast, can be exiled from the providers' organization by subcontracting and outsourcing work to 'third parties', often creating multiple tiers of suppliers. A good example of dissociating oneself from other participants in production networks is the use of intermediaries (e.g. Barrientos, 2013). Such third parties usually follow their own agenda and filter information while processing it between the other participants. They thus allow access to exploitable resources and at the same time disconnect a brand owner from potentially value-degrading practices.

Second, the *social distance* constituting problematic relations becomes frequently an issue in instantiating dissociations. Socially distant relations are characterized by transience, low frequency of interaction, and emotional superficiality. For dissociations, it is necessary to downplay the social richness of potentially problematic relationships (e.g. dissociative practices that stress market relations over other governance forms). Market relations are ephemeral and partners remain largely independent from another. The partnership remains purely functional and does not require any kind of shared values. Across the market interface, it is thus easier and more widespread to change partners frequently. Transactions across the market interface distribute ethical or moral responsibility between buyer and provider with the consequence that both partners can easily shift the responsibility to the respective counterpart. As a result, both sellers and buyers feel more comfortable with immoral decisions (Falk and Szech, 2013) but enact a complex system of collective non-responsibility (Te Velde et al., 2002).

Third, along the *cognitive dimension* (Nootboom, 2000), proximity and distance are measured by the degree of similarity of participants' mind-sets and cognitive frames. If these are very similar, participants understand each other well and will most likely share values and normative ideas. With increasing dissimilarity, the relationship offers opportunities for mutual learning spurred by the dissonance of overlapping dissimilar mind-sets. In the case of Swiss luxury watches, providers stage complex learning experiences around the act of purchasing the esteemed item, with the aim of educating their customers to enable them to appreciate the outstanding accomplishments in craftsmanship necessary to create the branded item (Jeannerat, 2013). A moderate degree of cognitive distance therefore seems to make positive associations even more exciting. From a certain point onward, however, increasing cognitive distance dissociates social actors from each other. The lack of mutual understanding gives rise to negative feelings and casts doubt on the trustfulness of the respective others' values and norms. For instance, in their branding efforts, pork producers will never highlight the skills needed to deal with an insufficiently stunned animal

in a slaughterhouse as valuable knowledge, even though it is inherent and crucial in the pork production process.

Conceptualizing dissociation in terms of relational distance helps reframe properties of 'market structure' (such as arms-length relations involving multiple subcontractors along value chains) as results of an active management of relations for the purpose of reputation maintenance in a world of positional competition. Distanced relations that can be easily disengaged if deemed necessary are an important prerequisite to successfully manage reputational crises.

### *The role of territories*

One of the most intuitive geographical references in practices of association is the mobilization of *territorial* imaginations. Jessop et al. (2008) define territories as spatial subunits demarcated by boundaries and constituted by inside–outside constructions. Associations to territories most typically operate by mobilizing some ideas of origin and origination (Pike, 2015; Power and Hauge, 2008). Territorially bound institutions build a common link between commodities and territories as they constrain the production process to a given territory—for example, the Cognac region—and thereby enable particular ways of creating value out of traditions. In such cases, 'regulators' (Pike, 2013), who operate at the national or regional scale, might act to preserve and formally approve traditional and/or 'rigid' (Moodysson and Sack, 2016) systems of rules that help deduce value from regional origins.

Territorial mobilizations most typically also require symbolic representations. Associations frequently seek to take advantage of the symbolic value of cities and regions that represent brands themselves (Jansson and Power, 2010; Moor, 2003; Pasquinelli, 2014; Pasquinelli and Teräs, 2013). In these cases, references of origin will most likely be highlighted (and sometimes even made up) by producers as 'products and commodities take on the qualities of the places from which they come' (Molotch, 2002: 655). Fashion designed in London appears to be as trendy and unconventional as the place itself while fashion design rooted in Milan is

supposed to be glamorous and elegant (Jansson and Power, 2010). References to territories are historically contingent. The ‘Made in Germany’ trademark is widely ‘perceived as a signifier of product quality and reliability. However, it was first introduced in Britain through the 1887 Merchandise Marks Act, to signify the provenance of German goods not as quality products but rather to label (and “shame”) them as low-quality imports from a highly protectionist economy’ (Hess et al., 2016: 162).

While, for the purpose of making associations, actors frequently highlight territorial origins and make those connections to territorial-institutional regimes traceable, dissociative work seeks to disguise or downplay steps of the commodity’s production process that are located in territories within which low standards allow for ‘regulatory arbitrage’ (Dicken, 2015: 233). In such cases, economic activities tap into diverse territorial-institutional settings in order to take advantage of, for instance, lower ecological standards, meager wages or permissive work regulations. These practices are frequently and deliberately disguised. For instance, in fashion ‘it is common practice not to let customers know where the products are manufactured’ (Ermann, 2011: 115; also, see Hagemann, 2015; Reimer, 2009; Tokatli, 2014). In the case of some Bulgarian fashion labels, this practice allows positive associations to overrule the negatively connoted relations to sites of production. The companies have registered their brands in the United Kingdom and make references to the ‘Italian lifestyle’ (Ermann, 2011) while at the same time dissociating the respective labels from domestic manufacturing plants. Thanks to dissociations, image rents of reputable places can be appropriated as a source of value, even in cases in which they are not even based in these geographies, as the example of Gucci (an Italian fashion firm) and its self-association with Hollywood illustrates (Tokatli, 2012).

Similarly, potentially problematic aspects of a production process tend to be located in territories that lack a particular image, are unobtrusive (e.g. peripheral places or ordinary regions), and are located well away from the paths of consumers while symbolically charged places that attract the consumers’ attention are circumvented. The pork

industry in the South Oldenburg region in North-west Germany (Klein and Tamasy, 2016) exemplifies how sellers construct value with the help of dissociations. Within Germany, the public image of the region is closely associated with the dominant agri-industrial complex of pork and poultry production. The region’s image is dominated by widely held negative associations to do with the living conditions of animals in livestock factories, nitrate pollution of arable land, and exploitative low wages paid to the mostly Eastern European workers in the slaughterhouses. In the domestic market, sellers thus try to conceal the regional origin whenever possible. For German buyers, pork and poultry from this region lacks any clear references to places of origin. Instead, the labels evoke some stylized idea of traditional rural life with references to farmhouses (preferably with timber frames), windmills, and farm animals grazing in green meadows.

At the same time, however, during the past few years the industry has won significant market share in China. For Chinese customers, who are not familiar with the particularities of German regions but have little confidence in the trustworthiness of domestic agricultural production, the label ‘Made in Germany’ signifies trustworthy institutions securing quality and health standards (Klein and Tamasy, 2016). This successful reorientation combines two related strategies of dissociation. First, to seek a new group of consumers that does not share the same concerns as the previous one. Second, by making efforts at rescaling territorial embeddedness from a problematic scale to a more supportive one: here from regional to national. Rescaling reshuffles the constellation of linkages to institutional settings. Of course, such rescaling can take place in both directions, upwards and downwards.

The territoriality of dissociation ties into the wider discussion of ‘circuits of meaning’, circulation, and regulation (Hudson, 2008; Pike, 2015). Institutions regulating production (and consumption) are territorial. Furthermore, the images associated with places and territories as well as ethical and political sensitivities largely depend on territorial cultures of reception. As with the creation of positive associations, the targeted management of

territorial dissociation requires the expertise of professional circulators.

### *Physical and topological space*

Physical space—its topologies and proximity-distance relations—provides a ‘grounding’ for both aforementioned spatial dimensions. It enhances their effectiveness, but at the same time it creates vulnerabilities and access points for contestation. In the case of associative practices, physical proximity, defined not necessarily in metric units but in degrees of physical accessibility and overlap of mobility paths—and thus a measure for the likelihood of a first-hand encounter (Ibert and Mueller, 2015)—strengthens other forms of proximity. Trustworthy suppliers, knowledgeable collaborators, and reputable customers are often located in the neighborhood.

Judgments of value take place in situations in which social and material constituents have to come together in time and space in a particular way (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006): the theater critic attends a premiere and the gourmet participates in a wine tasting session (Hutter and Stark, 2015). Cultural-economic geographers have frequently used a topological entry point to analyze the particular affordances and limitations of such localized situations for forging associations (e.g. Livi et al., 2014). Topologies of valuation study, for instance, the design and spatial arrangement of retail shops and shopping areas more broadly (Crewe, 2016; Ermann, 2011; Jansson and Power, 2010). In such work, flagship stores are often noted elements of associative practices. They are characterized by openness, accessibility, waste of showroom space to highlight particular items, and clear references between place and brand (Nobbs et al., 2012). Most typically, these kinds of shops are located at reputable addresses in urban centers. The spatial arrangement provides a ‘360 degrees consumption experience’ (Mores, 2007: 25) that structures perceptions and thus channels possibilities to make associations. The example of Swiss watches illustrates that the use and consumption of branded commodities is often ‘staged’ by producers to evoke a special experience of the commodities’ ‘look and feel’ (Jeannerat, 2013). The entanglement of a

product with a particular locality can additionally be emphasized if manufacturers use materials that are only accessible in a limited number of places worldwide and if these materials are positioned prominently within the commodity (e.g. a Carrara marble top to the kitchen units).

While the geography of associations focuses on highly visible and clearly positioned places, the topologies of dissociation encompass a rather different set of places and sites. These places are typically inconspicuous. They occupy locations remote from public spaces and centers of consumption and lack a recognizable ‘address’. The respective buildings are often hidden behind walls or hedges. The facades are designed in a way that reveals nothing of the building’s functions. Brand names or labels are markedly absent, doors are locked, and the buildings have no windows (Hagemann, 2015), since ‘[i]f slaughterhouses had glass walls, everyone would be a vegetarian’ (Paul McCartney, quoted in Kunst and Hohle, 2016: 759).

These hidden spaces are vital to the daily operation of the global economy. They range from special economic zones with relatively low labor standards where garments and electronics are produced to back offices from where the mundane and often repetitive grunt work of the service economy is provided, usually physically distanced from the more glamorous front offices (Kleibert, 2015). Arguably, economic geography has paid too much attention to the bright sides and sites of economic activities and requires a closer engagement with the ‘dark side’ (Coe and Hess, 2011; Phelps et al., 2018).

Our dissociation perspective engages with a special case of such inconspicuous sites, which we call ‘dark places’. This term not only highlights the lack of visibility, openness, and transparency. Rather, it also stresses the fact that these localities are made for purposes and practices that in the eyes of the majority of consumer groups would be condemned as unethical (and in this respect ‘dark’) and are thus placed beyond the consumers’ view and consciousness. An example of a ‘dark place’ is a layer-hen hatchery, which consists of industrial incubators developing eggs into chicks. Once hatched, the newborn chicks pass down a production line to be sexed and sorted and all male chicks are then separated out

and killed, usually shortly after hatching (Harari, 2014). In such an environment, different ways of killing these chicks humanely, like ‘quick maceration’, ‘gasifying’, ‘cervical dislocation’, or ‘electrocution’, are negotiated among participants and valued in terms of their effectiveness and efficiency. Other examples include sweatshop factories, laboratories performing experiments on live animals, hostels for migrant workers, or shores for informal shipwrecking (for the latter, see Crang et al., 2013).

Finally, the relocation of activities across national borders, or offshoring (Peck, 2017), often for the sake of labor and regulatory arbitrage, conveniently serves the purpose of increasing the physical distance and heightening secrecy (Lessenich, 2016). Offshore spaces, whether for financial activities in tax havens, or as sites of environmental and social exploitation, are often places that enable illegitimate and/or morally reprehensible activities (Urry, 2014). In the symbolic dimension, dissociative linkages tend to strip away or avoid any visual cues to materials, practices, processes, or origins that might ‘paint a bad picture’. For instance, in food retailing, meat is freed from any concrete reference to the dead animal to which it belonged (Evans and Miele, 2012). Manufacturers obtain ‘problematic’ raw materials, such as cotton, wheat, corn, or leather hides from several regions worldwide. These practices require far reaching processes of commodification, in the course of which living organisms embedded in nature are transformed into entities with fixed boundaries that circulate freely across physical distances and become tradable swiftly between market participants (McKenzie, 2006). As a result, these materials are difficult to trace back to their origin, as they are pooled, sorted, and then re-bundled into different quality classes.

As the examples show, practices of dissociation both address and exploit the organization of circuits of matter across physical distance. Sites of production and/or circulation can be made invisible (inconspicuous, inaccessible, unidentifiable) or can aid in reducing traceability, or both. Once again, considerations of cost efficiency and image control are brought in alignment through strategic agency. Crucially, increased geographical separation of production and consumption not only serves the purpose of

dissociation but may also increase cultural rifts and unevenly distributed sensitivities which induce a need for dissociation. For instance, Te Velde et al. (2002: 213) describe the physical distance between farmers and their animals as ‘very small’ while the emotional distance is ‘great’; for consumers this relationship is reversed. Furthermore, the literature frequently refers to causal links between the upscaling of agrarian production (including organizational disintegration and spatial fragmentation) and the commodification of the living animal (Kunst and Hohle, 2016; Te Velde et al., 2002).

## Conclusions

In this article, we have suggested a widening of the analytical lens on economic value creation from associations to include dissociation practices. We argue that dissociations denote a group of, so far understudied, practices of value creation: practices of managing the reputational risk inherent in a seller’s market position in a world of positional competition and symbolic signaling. Dissociations enact distinct geographies and spaces. These can be analyzed relationally, territorially, and topologically. We pointed to the opportunistic appropriation of specific territorial institutions and scrutinized different forms of relational distance (social, organizational, and physical distance). The topologies of dissociation are often characterized by dark places and peripheral regions, which are useful locations precisely because they lack visibility, prominence, or accessibility. Dissociations require proactive relational work to *create desired gaps and omissions in webs of relations* and to *actively demobilize undesired translations between different registers of value*. As such, dissociations are not merely the flip side of the coin (omissions in relational webs of association) but a distinct set of practices that are utilized in the social construction of economic value. They can be proactive, utilizing existent and carefully maintained market structures as well as being reactive. Against this background, we suggest that the social construction of value as an interdependent process during which deliberate and purposeful acts of creating associations and dissociations are carried out in order to position branded

commodities within multidimensional spaces of symbolic value.

Throughout, we have used examples from such diverse fields as fashion, content moderation, alcohol and tobacco lobbying, and the pork industry to illustrate our conceptual claims. The propositions put forward in the article, however, require more robust and systematic empirical substantiation in future studies. Firstly, our proposed heuristic could be tested and further validated through qualitative in-depth case studies. Such studies could enhance understanding of how the different aspects of the framework work together. Secondly, comparative research across carefully selected sectors and markets might help fathom out the empirical scope of the conceptualization and to assess variance along several dimensions.

Another important aim of our intervention is to further inspire future cultural-economic geographical analysis of value creation to be more critical. Globalizing capitalism is an inherently geographical process that generates an ever-changing archipelago economy of prosperous ‘islands’ in a sea of highly uneven development. While this has been admirably captured in the literature on global production networks and on dis/articulation among other approaches, here the focus was the investigation of included rather than excluded peripheries, the active obfuscation of network links rather than their absence. Such an investigation, we have argued, needs to take seriously different registers of value and orders of worth. A ‘geographies of dissociation’ perspective can provide the analytical lens to shine more light on the dark places created by dissociative practices and render more visible the missing links that brands and producers try so hard to establish as nonexistent.

As we have noted, there is already literature that examines the politics of knowledge along commodity chains, critically examining and reworking the concept of commodity fetishism, and thinking through ways in which knowledge of capitalism’s ‘dark places’ can engage audiences in positive, activist-inspired ways. Our approach has been inspired by these activist geographers and could not have been developed without their detailed analyses. Like many of these studies, we also have an ‘educational’ agenda (Duncombe, 2012) in the sense that we hope the concept of dissociation opens up new perspectives on

otherwise hidden aspects of global value construction and invites human and economic geographers belonging to different tribes (Peck, 2012) to collaborate more actively. Unlike activist research, the dissociation perspective is not primarily developed with the aim of getting immediately and actively involved as a ‘stakeholder’, but rather to critically analyze the practices of making or contesting value propositions and to take all the stakeholders’ construction work equally seriously as constituting parts of the same social practice (see Schütz, 1953).

By heuristically employing notions of ‘registers of value’ and ‘orders of worth’, we highlight the cultural contingency of value and value signals. The geographies of dissociation perspective thus does not ‘unveil’ the commodity fetish but uncovers the strategic agency of various stakeholder groups when selectively mobilizing normative values or opportunistically enhancing ambiguity or strategic ignorance. Our educational agenda is thus not primarily one to inform consumers about the hidden aspects of global capitalism by juxtaposing an unpleasant ‘truth’ and an allegedly ‘fake’ world of consumption but rather to enhance reflexivity and responsibility for all participants and to better understand the underlying rationality as well as the scope and limitations of their agency. Yet looking for new ways to unveil interest-driven forms of mobilizing strategic ignorance and purposeful ambiguity, as well as the geographies of dissociation more generally, is by no means a-political.

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