Journal of Consumer Culture

The neoliberal city and the pro-active complicity of the citizen consumer

Steven Miles

The online version of this article can be found at:

Published by:

$SAGE

Additional services and information for *Journal of Consumer Culture* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://joc.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://joc.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations: http://joc.sagepub.com/content/12/2/216.refs.html

>> Version of Record - Jun 26, 2012

What is This?

The neoliberal city and the pro-active complicity of the citizen consumer

Steven Miles
University of Brighton, UK

Abstract

This article is concerned with the role consumption plays in the neoliberal reinvention of the post-industrial city. Neoliberalism, as imposed for example through the orthodoxy of the creative city, continues to have profound implications for the everyday nature of city life. Above all, perhaps, this orthodoxy has created a city that is increasingly defined by elites through and by consumption. In this context cities appear to have become increasingly defined by disparities of wealth and are thus the product of a situation in which the opportunities they engender are more open to some social groups than they are to others. Acknowledging this to be the case, this article considers the suggestion that a tendency to condemn the neoliberal city without sufficient recourse to how that city is experienced by consumers may result in an underestimation of the subtleties of the neoliberal project. Furthermore, 'consumer studies' may, as a result, be destined to exist on the disciplinary fringes where the paradoxes with which it grapples can be more easily contained. The article calls for a re-evaluation of the neoliberal city as an emotional experiential entity in which active forms of consumption might potentially take place.

Keywords

citizen, city, complicity, neoliberalism

Introduction

In her book *World City* Doreen Massey (2007: 216) expresses the concern that globalization has created a situation in which the city has become defined by elites to the extent that 'cities of the many are claimed by the few'. In this context, neoliberalism has been described as a specific intersection of global shifts in the structure of capitalist economies and states, as expressed in the everyday life of people in the city: a process by which an idealized free market doctrine has been imposed in specific

Corresponding author:
Steven Miles, Centre for Research and Development, University of Brighton, Grand Parade, Brighton, BN2 0JY, UK
Email: s.miles2@brighton.ac.uk

historical and geographical contexts (Brenner and Theodore, 2005). To this end Peck and Tickell (2002) describe neoliberalism as a process – a process underpinned by the misuse of state power. Indeed, although analyses that have sought to understand the impact of the neoliberal city have often recognized the fragmented rather than monolithic nature of such an impact, there remains a tendency to portray this process as an imposition of neoliberal projects on specific territories (Keil, 2002). A diverse range of commentators whose work I will refer to in this article have tried to understand the profound implications of the neoliberal city. However, I will argue that an apparent reluctance to engage with the notion that 'consumers' of the neoliberal city bring a degree of agency to this process has created a situation in which such commentaries run the risk of feeding the very project they are intending to critique.

The strategic role of cities in the re-making of political-economic space has been of increasing concern to scholars interested in assessing the embeddedness of 'actually existing neoliberalism' (Brenner and Theodore, 2002). Brenner and Theodore refer to the 'creative destruction' inherent in the geographically uneven spatial changes that have occurred as a result of neoliberal economic change and the belief that unfettered competition represents the ideal mechanism for economic development, when in reality it constitutes a dramatic intensification of coercive forms of state intervention. Brenner and Theodore (2002) have highlighted the extent to which neoliberalism creates new forms of urban inequality according to whether or not an individual or social group fits the eligibility criteria of the consumer society as part of the imposition of a neoliberalized urban authoritarianism. As such, Brenner and Theodore (2002) argue that the main aim of neoliberal urban policy is to mobilize the city as an arena for market-centred growth and for elite forms of consumption. Indeed, the way in which such processes have created an unequal city has become a particular preoccupation for urban scholars (Hubbard 2004: 666) who are particularly interested in the reinvention of city centres as 'corporate landscapes of leisure' or bastions of particular cultural forms, such as art galleries and marinas, from which marginal groups are displaced. However, such commentators have not usually been interested in what the opportunity to consume might actually *mean* for consumers. Nor have such approaches seriously considered the possibility that these opportunities to consume offer a semblance of agency that may in turn affect the nature of consumers' relationship with the city. It is these issues to which this article turns.

Consumption as the expression of the neoliberal city

Authors such as Ward (2003) have described the changing nature of urban governance and the increasingly high profile that consumption has played in the emergence of the neoliberal city, to the extent that the consumption of the spectacle (usefully symbolized by the Ferris wheels that have cropped up across the UK's cityscapes in recent years) has apparently encroached into the very fabric of the public realm (see Gotham 2005). For Harvey (1989) there are three main characteristics of the neoliberal city: (1) an emphasis on public–private partnerships in which a key priority is to develop structures that attract external sources of funding

and that therefore include a key role for local boosterism; (2) a privileging of the principles and uncertainties of speculation in an environment that would previously have been rationally planned; (3) an emphasis on the construction of place rather than with the construction of territory. In other words, Harvey argues, beyond the desire to improve conditions in specific territories, through housing and education for instance, there is a broader (more speculative) commitment to the image of place that, it is hoped, will have a trickle-down effect for the city as a whole. In this article I suggest that the above characteristics are underpinned by a desire on the part of neoliberal elites to commodify the city. The intention is to create the conditions in which the city becomes an exciting place to live and visit and, above all, in which to consume, so that urban governance is increasingly about how best to lure consumption flows into its space (Harvey, 1989). Harvey goes on to suggest that such a city contributes to increasing disparities in wealth and income. It does so through a model that focuses on the enhancement of the city's image and that is therefore primarily symbolic in nature (see also Jessop and Sum 2000), reflecting a situation in which marginalised groups apparently have no voice. From this point of view the new 'urban glamour zones' of the neoliberal city are the brutal product of a highly selective and discriminating urban renaissance (MacLeod, 2002).

In its most extreme guise the neoliberal city is a city constructed by city boosters, the product of a process in which several different visions of local culture are diluted into a single orthodox stereotyped vision that reflects the aspirations of a powerful elite (Broudehoux, 2007). In effect, the contemporary city is constructed around what Corner (1994) describes as a 'consumptional identity'. The fact that such an identity is in a sense constructed 'inauthentically' insofar as it is created primarily for an economic purpose results in a situation, as authors such as Crewe and Beaverstock (1998) have noted, in which consumption is not always theorized in a particularly systematic fashion. As the poor relation of production it is indeed often regarded as no more than 'a politically suspect contributor to the hedonism and greed of the "enterprise culture" (1998: 290). As Prentice (2001) puts it, the contemporary city does not need to be authentic, it's task is to *invoke* authenticity and it does so through spaces that frame authenticity as something to be consumed, in the form of shopping opportunities, waterfronts, museums, galleries and themed environments. In this context authors such as Goldberger (1996) and Hayward (2004) have pointed out that the virtues traditionally associated with the public realm have effectively been corrupted and sanitized and that a simulacrum of civic public space is the result (see also Swyngedouw, 1989). The move towards a neoliberal city represents a move away from urban planning that prioritizes the medium over the message and image over substance (Harvey, 1989: 13). The neoliberal city is grounded in a sense of place built around the image of prosperity, rather than what is likely to be the more uncomfortable reality that lies beneath, as Jones and Wilks-Heeg (2004) point out in their discussion of the core/periphery effect of UK city Liverpool's year as European Capital of Culture. However, a recognition that such divisions exist is not in itself enough: what is more interesting is why the opportunities consumption offers appear so seductive to both those who

are incorporated into the consumer society and those for whom that city appears to be a mirror to their aspirations.

The neoliberal approach to urban development is usually conceptualized as a global orthodoxy in which the more cities seek to produce distinction between places the more they succeed in producing a sameness across the urban environment for which the process of commodification is to blame (see Gotham, 2005; Ward, 2003; Zukin, 1998). Goldberger (1996: 27) makes an important point when he laments the rise of the 'private city', a quasi-urban environment that does all it can to promote the energizing, stimulating immediacy of city life whilst shutting out the less acceptable unequal face of the city of poverty and crime. Such a contention quite rightly draws attention to the potential social problems caused by the so-called neoliberal city. The city experience is effectively filtered through the rose-tinted glassed provided by spaces for consumption as demonstrated for example by the symbolic hyper-modern city waterfront of cities such as Liverpool and Cardiff in the UK, and Barcelona in Spain. In effect then, consumption, the agent of neoliberalism, is privileged as a key 'mediating phenomena' (Holland, 1976) between the individual and the social structures in which he or she is implied, so that an individual's sense of citizenship can be said to have been reconfigured around a new sense of the public in which the individual's everyday engagement with the neoliberal city plays a key role. This reflects part of a broader process in which a new 'self-culture' emerges so that the individual is apparently able to make his or her life what he or she wants it to be as part of a broader lifestyle orientation.

What is crucial about all this, as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim argue, is that whereas previously the self was always subordinated to the collectivity, thinking for oneself whilst living for others is no longer a contradiction, but a principle underpinning everyday existence (2001: 28). The decline of social connectedness and the utter dominance of a consumer society are far from unrelated phenomena: that, at least in part, social and civic disconnectedness is a product of the consumer society (Miles, 2010). As such, Brenner and Theodore call for a 'reworking of the notion of citizenship and of the individual's relationship to community and everyday life' (2005: 106). The question here is whether such a call to arms is possible without a concomitant readiness to seriously consider the notion, both theoretically and empirically, that consumption constitutes an arena with which consumers are actively engaged in what amounts to a new form of citizenship. As consumers we thirst after the sorts of escape that spaces of consumption appear to offer. We are seduced by the opportunity to consume and the sense of fulfilment and satisfaction that the neoliberal city implies. We actively relish the sense of freedom that consumption implies whilst knowing, well beneath the surface, that it cannot produce on its promises. In this light it is essential to consider seriously the degree to which the experience of consumption is at least in part agentic. The realization that the consumer city is the product of a neoliberal ideology should not lead us to assume that consumers engage with that city in entirely preconceived ways. Rather, potentially at least, consumption offers respite to the consumer as a form of belonging, even citizenship, that is perhaps otherwise unavailable to them.

The 'creative' city

The debate around the creative city has been a key driver in the role of consumption in the so-called revitalization of the post-industrial city. Most prominent in this respect is the work of Richard Florida (2002) who argues that creativity lies at the very heart of urban transformation. For Florida regional economic growth is driven by the location choices of creative people. The core concern of a post-industrial city from this point of view is how best to ensure that that city attracts what Florida calls 'the creative classes'. Florida's thesis is that it is not the case that such people move simply for jobs, they have a broader range of cultural and place-specific demands to which cities must respond. Florida presents a human capital theory of regional development in which a people climate is even more essential than a business climate if the neoliberal city is to prosper. The Creative Classes are founded upon a 'passionate quest for experience' where lines between the participant and the observer are increasingly blurred (Florida, 2002: 166).

There is no doubt that such an approach has had a major impact on the thinking of policy-makers. At the heart of Florida's approach is a Creativity Index, a composite measure based on indicators of innovation (measured by patented innovation), high-tech industry (measured by high-tech industrial output) creativity and a gay index – the fraction of gay people living in a city. By using such measures to create a pecking order of urban creativity Florida has produced a measurement that has an inherent appeal for decision-makers looking to pursue an alternative economic future in a policy-making context in which neoliberal thinking is predominant. The model of the Creative City creates a reassuring vision of a future underpinned by a sense of hope and possibility, but one that nonetheless simply puts too much at the door of creativity. Moreover, an approach that, at face-value, purports to be about creativity is arguably actually underpinned by notions of consumption. Any ambition to make a city more appealing to the creative classes is inevitably bound up with a reinvention of the city through the opportunities to consume which that city provides.

For Peck (2010) the creative cities agenda has been instrumental in creating a distinctive and ostensibly deliverable view of urban revitalization that moulds the neoliberal city as much as it reflects it. As such, what has apparently emerged is a 'lemming-like' rush towards the potential riches of neoliberalism. The neoliberal city has coalesced around the economic fallacy that every city can be a winner, and the apparently common knowledge that no city can contemplate opting out of a status quo in which the decline of manufacturing industry has to be replaced and in which the consumption of the city provides one of the few, if not the only, viable economic alternative (Peck, 2010). Commentators such as Peck (2010) have therefore criticized Florida, arguing that the process he describes represents an effort to retake the city on behalf of the middle classes. In effect, the provision of elite forms of consumption becomes a key element of the policy agenda. Consumption really matters here as the creative classes, 'confront the unique challenge of fitting these in around their demanding work schedules, squeezing in a quick bike ride or latte at the art gallery

before logging in for the second shift' (Peck, 2010: 197). For Peck this focus on creativity actively extends an onus on urban entrepreneurialism and consumption-oriented place promotion. The Creative City strategy constitutes a repackaging of urban cultural artefacts as competitive assets, so that the city becomes judged purely in terms of its economic utility. In the process selected forms of elite consumption are publicly lauded so that the needs of a privileged class of consumers are lionized through public policy (Peck, 2010). The irony here, of course, is that despite Harvey's (1989) contention that the city has to appear to be an innovative, exciting place in which the opportunities to consume are endlessly exciting, the end result is potentially a city homogenized *through* consumption. In the above context the neoliberal city can be condemned for the extent to which the market closes down choice rather than opens it up; for the fact that it effectively preaches to the consumer as to the extent of the parameters within which he or she can consume. From this point of view the market has constructed a closed environment in which people crave innovation and diversity, but only within the parameters within which that diversity has been prescribed. The neoliberal city is arguably non-creative, and anti-choice. It constrains choice and ties people to a particular ideology.

The above critique of the neoliberal city is evident in Coleman's (2004) consideration of urban surveillance technologies in the UK, in which he argues that notions of 'public' and 'private' have in recent years been redefined, reconstituting the state form in the process. Coleman argues that the neoliberal state is indeed engaged in a process of 'creative destruction' in which the politics of locality are being recast in such a way that the individual is increasingly subject to the disciplines of the market. From this perspective such a process, particularly in how it relates to place marketing, is about re-imagining the city and making it ripe for inward investment. As far as consumption is concerned the neoliberal state is thus seen to be engaged with constructing entrepreneurial landscapes in which playful consumption can take place without recourse to the 'hard core' policing that surveillance actually implies. As Coleman puts it, 'The contrived spaces of the neoliberal city and their controlled playfulness is staged alongside the perception of a chaos-free and unified civil order, a perception integral to a politics of vision that seeks the realisation of profits and a channelling of capital into the built environment' (2004: 298). But the problem here is that by perceiving of city as an entrepreneurial landscape we are ironically in danger of constructing a critique based on a vision of an alternative order that we ourselves impose. We can of course, accept Peck's (2010) criticisms of the Florida model of the city, but by doing so we also need to be open to an alternative vision of the city in which we can imagine creativity existing beyond the parameters that Florida defines and in which consumption is not merely an ideological imposition, but also presents the possibility of personal and social exploration. So for example, we should not assume that the building of a new urban shopping mall is entirely negative in its impact simply because it symbolizes a society committed to consumerism and all the negativities this apparently implies. It may be that not only will such a mall provide a boost to the local economy (as in the recent example of Westfield Stratford City, London),

but it may also intervene in people's lives in such a way that they become readily and actively complicit in the freedoms to consume that such spaces provide.

In this context, it could be argued that consumption potentially at least, provides a particular kind of citizenship in which the consumer's relationship with the city comes to the fore. As such, the statement that public space, for example, is constantly being reshaped *in spite* of the increased commodification of the city (McCann 1999) needs to be tempered given that some of that reshaping occurs through people's experience as *active* consumers. Authors such as Canclini (2001) have suggested that the arena of consumption contributes to the integrative and communicative rationality of society. In an increasingly atomized world consumption comes more to the fore in determining what constitutes a shared identity. Public life is filtered through the market more so than it is through the state. From this point of view there is potential for a reimagining of consumption as a site of cognitive value that can provide an arena for meaningful ways of thinking and doing (Canclini, 2001). In effect, there is a profound possibility that the consumer interest incorporates an infinite variety of sociopolitical concerns so that consumerism becomes equated with a form of citizenship that is played out through the individual's relationship with the neoliberal city. In other words, there are dangers inherent in assuming that this relationship is foisted upon the individual consumer.

The question here centres on how far the construction of the city as a site for consumer citizenship is actually sustainable and where this leaves the consumer citizen as far as he or she can be said to exist. In this context, Christopherson (1994: 416) argues that beneath the playfulness of its surface the signal qualities of the contemporary urban landscape are not spontaneity, as the world of consumption might imply, but control. In the current urban condition, citizenship is effectively mimicking consumer behaviour. No longer a focal point for encountering the unknown, the city is now a managed environment in which the street is neither public nor private but exists at the intersection of both. Christopherson (1994) argues that in order to recover the city as 'the first place' for garnering political sense as to how economics and politics are interrelated in real space and time, the precise nature of the consumer's engagement with the so-called neoliberal city is actively interrogated rather than passively consumed.

In this context, Trentmann (2007) notes how far from being determined by conflict, a contingent symbiosis has emerged in the relationship between consumption and citizenship to the extent that consumption has emerged as a site of action and mobilization. This reflects the diversity of the consumer experience and indeed the dangers inherent in dismissing that experience as nothing more than simply a by-product of a process beyond the individual consumer's control. In short, there needs to be a recognition that regardless of any political reservations that we may have regarding a neoliberal model of consumer choice, we still need to recognize that the parameters laid down by the material politics implied have a genuine effect on consumers' lives. For Trentmann, then, consumption is a key element of increasingly transitional forms of governance. As he goes on to point out, the rich literature on citizenship has privileged the public side of norms and practices

at the expense of the everyday workings of politics. Consumption practices link private and public worlds. Consumers use the systems and infrastructures of consumption to shape their everyday lives; potentially at least, transforming the field of material politics as they do so.

While on the one hand those theorists that are seriously engaging with the arena of consumption do highlight the tensions associated with the relationship between structure and agency, in the context of debates around the neoliberal city there is a reluctance to recognize the complex forms that agency takes in the arena of consumption. What is of much more significant sociological interest in a situation, for example, in which the city is so excessively surveilled is not this fact in itself, but rather the fact that the consumer is apparently prepared to give up the sorts of freedoms he or she loses by being surveilled, in return for the limited freedom to consume. Accepting that neoliberalism enforces degrees of control in a whole variety of forms, the suggestion here is that the consumer is actually prepared to be 'controlled' in order to secure an alternative set of freedoms that may be less fundamental, but that may by the consumer be deemed to be nonetheless *enough*. To recognize as much does not constitute a concession to the neoliberal state but rather allows us to recognize that the extent to which we as consumers are self-authored operates within a very particular set of constraints. Or to put this another way, the freedoms given up through engagement with the market cannot be understood without reference to the possibilities or opportunities that have, however partially, been simultaneously opened up.

The above represents a call to recognize the emotional pull of the consuming experience and how that experience intervenes in consumer's relationship with the neoliberal city. In this context, Illouz's (2009) discussion of the emotional nature of consumption is especially pertinent. As Illouz (2009: 378) points out, 'Consumption leans on an extraordinarily ruthless economic engine, yet it speaks to the softest crannies of our psyche.' Illouz acknowledges that the paradoxical nature of consumption and the power it has to draw consumers inside the arena of capitalism is driven by the perpetually shifting sands of desire, a perspective that is also evident in Campbell's (1989) work on the desirous pleasure-seeking nature of the consuming experience. From Illouz's point of view emotion is a cultural and social phenomena as well as a psychological one insofar as it constitutes an expression of where we sit in a web of social relationships so that the contradictions of consumerist behaviour unite in a particular way of being that may appear irrational, but that in fact is highly strategic in nature. The consumer is in this sense a rational being and one that engages with the market for a reason: to receive the sorts of partial and time-limited pleasures that the market can offer him or her, despite the broader context in which the effects of the market appear to have been less positive in nature. An explicit recognition of the emotional impact of the consumer experience raises the possibility that the so-called neoliberal city is in one sense at least a negotiated entity. As MacLeod (2002) and Lees (1998) put it public space is not pre-given but is constituted by practical moments in the process of becoming. However distasteful a city apparently defined through consumption

might be on political grounds, it is important to recognize that consumers are not simply recipients of the patterns of consumption that such a city implies and, in one sense at least, new consumer technologies (such as chip and pin) have ensured that the partial freedoms of the neoliberal city, to many consumers, are or at least take the appearance of, being instantaneously accessible.

Spaces for consumption

As a means of demonstrating the complexities inherent in how consumers engage with the city, I will briefly consider 'spaces for consumption' as physical-emotional environments. Spaces for consumption represent a meeting point between the society or structures that determine us and the way we interpret them as individual agents. Spaces for consumption such as shopping malls, cinema complexes and themed restaurants, are apparently determined by consumption, in the sense that they symbolize a world in which there is apparently no other possibility than that to consume. Zukin (2005) points out that spaces for consumption are inherently contradictory: they offer pleasure and entertainment and yet the processes that create such pleasures intensify the abstract underpinnings of a neoliberal city so that it becomes ever more dependent upon the flow of symbolic capital. From this point of view spaces for consumption are only liminal in so far as they institutionalize market culture in the landscape. This may be so, but what does such a process actually mean for the consumer?

In many respects the airport is the ultimate space for consumption, a gateway to the neoliberal wonders of the contemporary city into which the consumer is enticed and hence enclosed. It provides a useful means of illustrating some of the complexities involved in the institutionalization of market culture in the neoliberal landscape. The airport is symptomatic of a broader process in which space and place have in effect been de-territorialized in the name of consumption. In this sense the airport could be portrayed as the archetypal space for consumption or 'non-place' (Augé, 1995): as the traveller engages with those spaces in a partial way so that he or she effectively becomes the subject matter of his or her own spectacle. The airport could thus be interpreted as providing an apparently and reassuring sense of identity-loss and yet a sense of pro-active role-playing *through* consumption. In this respect Iyer (2001) describes the airport as a sort of condensed metaphor for global city life in which pleasurable waiting becomes the norm (Iyer, 2001). The airport traveller is captive and experiences a state of heightened consumer limbo greater than even that of the shopping mall.

For Fuller and Harley (2005) the airport is in fact a city in its own right: a city that dispenses with old distinctions between the public and the private while offering a sense of freedom through the escape that consumption opportunities provide. In this sense the airport is a self-referential advert for the limitless possibilities of consumption (Gordon, 2008). The airport bestows the consumer with shopping in its perfect state (Sze Tsung Leong, 2001) and yet, the airport could equally be deemed to be symptomatic of an active form of consumption in which their spaces are re-

appropriated by consumers who embrace the space for their own ends. The shopping that is undertaken in the airport therefore reflects Zukin's (2005: 2) contention that shopping can be more than simply about the maintenance of the self: it constitutes a public realm in which consumers struggle to create an ideal of value, it offers a place between the state and civil society, a heterotopic space that actively hides the means of exploitation that underpins the market economy, but in which doing so also provides a means by which we 'restore, rather than steal, our souls'. It is in this way that spaces for consumption therefore offer solutions, albeit largely symbolic in nature, to some of the complex dilemmas of contemporary society.

The above contention draws attention to the actual experience of spaces of consumption in which the consumer takes possession of the neoliberal city rather than being possessed by it, a notion that Hetherington (2007) also considers in relation to women's historical engagement with the shopping mall. The neoliberal city may imply alienation, but it is also real and constitutes the stuff of significant social relations. Spaces for consumption are more than a site of ideological seduction in which the consumer is subjected to the limited choices of a world defined through consumption. These spaces offer choices that consumers act upon and the fact they choose to do so is as interesting as the fact that such choices are so constrained in the first place.

Spaces for consumption are worthy of more in-depth attention insofar as they traverse notions of public space and the public sphere. They constitute what Mullins et al. (1999) have described as a 'third space', other than that of home and work, that stimulates the senses whilst bringing people together for sociability and other such contact and in doing so have drawn attention to the neoliberal destruction that apparently characterizes spaces for consumption. The danger here is that the destructive potential of neoliberal spaces of consumption are assumed rather than interrogated. For example, Eick (2010) discusses the phenomena of 'fan miles' at the World Cup, 'The creation of the fan mile can either be understood as a privitization of public space or as an introduction of market proxies into public space', the World Cup effectively offering experimental grounds for measuring and policing urban citizens. Such a critique runs the risk of being almost as ideological as the organization, in this case FIFA, that it critiques. As Gotham (2005: 242) points out in his discussion of festivals in the US city of New Orleans, although the intent of most spectacles is 'to pacify people, ferment political indifference and stimulate consumption', they can equally be creative and enabling, reflecting the ambiguous set of social relations characterized by the consuming experience.

It is surely dangerous to make assumptions about what it is that constitutes the urban social (Amin, 2007). And yet there are very few examples of approaches that have sought to empirically understand the sorts of networks that cut across the conventional production–consumption divide. The work of Crewe and Beaverstock (1998), which looks at the agglomeration of production and consumption activities around Nottingham's Lace Market in the UK suggests that consumption can have a key role in enhancing people's relationship with vibrant urban spaces, but is a notable exception in this regard. Indeed, as Crewe and Beaverstock (1998: 305)

suggest, production and consumption are engaged in a form of *transaction* that needs to be fully understood.

The tendency to take the urban social for granted and to predispose debates around the neoliberal city with an onus on the limitations that such a city imposes may be damaging as far as it underestimates the subtleties involved in the consumer city. The paradoxical nature of spaces of consumption appeals to us not purely in our role as consumers, but they also fulfill an emotional appeal: they give us a sense of pleasure and in that respect their effect isn't simply the product of the consumer's imagination. That effect is real. Although spaces for consumption may not provide us with the sense of communal belonging to which we aspire, the sense that these spaces are doing so, even in a partial fashion, is perhaps enough in itself. Typically, such spaces for consumption offer a sense of expanse so that the consumer feels he or she is having a different kind of experience to the norm, whilst transcending the limitations of time and space by, for example, dining at a themed fast-food restaurant. It is also worth remembering that distinctions between the more explicit spaces for consumption such as shopping malls and many formerly non-commercial settings such as parks, schools and museums are becoming increasingly blurred in the sense that the latter are having to adapt to what has become an economically competitive environment (Ritzer, 2005). Such spaces encourage a situation in which consumers engage less with each other and more with the physical space itself. A key element in this process is undoubtedly that of architecture. Note, for instance, Klingmann's (2007) discussion of 'brandscapes' in which she argues that the function of architecture has moved further and further away from the function of objects in favour of an incitement of symbolic meaning as part of an experiential transformation. In this context, the contemporary city, as Jayne (2006) points out, can only be understood as part of an interplay between the real, the imagined and the experienced, so that, 'Everyday life inevitably circumvents and subverts the dominant order from within. While people are largely powerless to challenge the system that is imposed upon them, people escape without leaving, and in a consumer society the everyday activities of ordinary consumers exerts a promise of other ways of being' (2006: 117).

Conclusion

Catterall (2006) suggests that being a consumer is somehow antithetical to that of being a citizen and that therefore spending too much time in the marketplace is something that should, *necessarily*, be regretted. Whilst recognizing the validity of Catterall's concern that it is indeed essential to pay attention to the needs of those citizens who do not identify with the consumption practices that shape the contemporary city and indeed the potential for the pro-active de-commodifictaion of space (see Montagna, 2006), we should not imply, on the other hand, that all those who do identify with the city in such a way are simply answerable to a neoliberal agenda; an agenda in which the consumption of images is apparently nothing more than a front for profit-making and social control (see Gotham, 2005). Indeed, as

Leitner et al. (2007: 5) suggest there is a real danger that by inadvertently portraying neoliberalism as a one-dimensional process its hegemonic status is actively reinforced by the distance implied by a particular kind of 'academic gaze'. Furthermore, 'keeping neoliberalism at the center of critical analysis can reify its ubiquity and power, even when the intent is critique, as insufficient attention is paid to the multiple and complex contestations that may reify, but also rework and seek to supplant neoliberalism'.

The neoliberal city provides a means by which a sense of happiness, however partial or momentary, can be achieved (Leitner et al., 2007). As Di Ciccio (2009) puts it, a successful city is founded upon the fervour and human drama of its citizenship, an environment in which mutual reliance can flourish and one that embraces failure as much as it does success, only then can the ambition for 'cities for people, not profit' be realizable (Brenner et al., 2009). Binnie and Skeggs's (2004) contention that the production and consumption of the gay village in Manchester, UK, reveals itself as the 'leitmotif' of urban regeneration should not lead us to assume that such spaces, apparently defined by the practice of consumption, cannot be engaged with in a positive fashion or fashions. As uncomfortable as it might feel, the city of the people and the city of profit are sometimes one and the same thing. The possibility that consumption may play a role in opening up opportunities in the city, as well as closing them down, has deeply profound implications for how we understand the neoliberal city.

Many of the theorists I have discussed in this article have made significant contributions to our understanding of the localization of capitalist formations (e.g. Brenner and Theodore, 2002). However, there is considerable empirical work to be done in assessing how such processes are played out in practice. The key may lie in an understanding of the relationship between consumer subjectivities and their relationship to wider political-economic structures. Swyngedouw's (2009) call to secure the 'properly political' as dissenting, questioning and conflictual ironically reinforces a position in which an understanding of consumers' everyday engagement with the city remains a matter of, as yet largely unchartered, empirical urgency. As Swyngedouw (2009) himself suggests, a political space is always a space of contestation. Consumption plays a key role in framing how such spaces are contested. In the contemporary neoliberal city such contestations are very often going on in spaces for consumption where the aspiration to consume is paramount. The neoliberal city appears to annul democracy for complex, personalized reasons and as such reflects Žižek's (1999) contention that in any approximation of 'post-politics' people's (and hence, presumably, consumers') concrete needs and demands *must* be taken into account.

Of course, the above recognition raises some significant questions for the status of consumer studies as an area of research, and specifically how this area relates to the critical disciplines of the social sciences. Debates over consumption appear at times to exist on the disciplinary fringes. For many social scientists consumption represents a symptom of broader sociological change rather than an arena within which such changes are actively played out. The danger for research into consumption is that a reluctance to engage in the lived political complexities implied by a consumer

society and the dominance of a way of thinking in which it is easier to condemn dominant power structures than it is to interrogate their inherent paradoxes may ensure such research is destined to a life on the academic fringes. As far as it does exist the 'discipline' of consumer studies needs to challenge and indeed reinvent dominant modes of social scientific thought. And in doing so it must inevitably focus on the actual lived realities of consumption rather than their assumed effects.

Regardless of the political dimensions of consumption, and its apparent role as a tool of neoliberalism, a starting point has to be that consumption is a *potentially* active and emotional process, otherwise an analysis of the relationship between the city and consumption is, as I have tried to demonstrate above, inevitably constrained. Spaces and places are laden with meaning, but that meaning cannot be understood if research is predisposed to imaging what that meaning might be. Only if we recognize the ways in which consumption, can potentially at least, be re-appropriated in multiple ways, through, for example, ethnographic research that recognizes the complexity of complicity, can the policy agenda aspire to a more inclusive urban social (Jayne, 2006). For too long policy agendas have ignored the specificities of experiences and the contexts upon which they are dependent. We will only be in a position to come to any conclusions as to whether patterns of consumption can be pro-actively aligned with new forms of political allegiance when the range of meanings the consumer attaches to the market is fully established (Miles and Miles, 2004). Crewe and Beaverstock's (1998) call for a serious engagement with the social practices of cultural production and consumption is still to be answered. The task, as Touraine (1988: 18) puts it 'is to break through the sewer of dead or perverted ideologies, as much as through the illusion of pure individualism or the fascination of decadence, in order to bring to light the presence of the actors and to help their voices be heard'. The consumer citizen may ironically provide a focal point for a more balanced understanding of the neoliberal city and how it is that city operates. A recognition that the neoliberal city is ideologically, at least, a two-way street, is long overdue, but nonetheless a necessity if research is to begin to understand the multifaceted meanings underpinning the urban consumption experience.

References

Amin A (2007) Re-thinking the urban social. *City* 11(1): 100–15.

Augé M (1995) *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Super-Modernity*. London: Verso.

Beck U and Beck-Gernsheim E (eds) (2001) *Individualization*. London: Sage.

Binnie J and Skeggs B (2004) Cosmopolitan knowledge and the production and consumption of sexualised space: Manchester's gay village. *The Sociological Review* 52(1): 39–61.

Brenner N and Theodore N (2002) Cities and the geographies of 'actually existing neoliberalism'. *Antipode* 33(3): 349–79.

Brenner N and Theodore N (2005) Neoliberalism and the urban condition. *City* 9(1): 101–7.

Brenner NP, Marcuse and Mayer M (2009) 'Cities for people, not for profit, introduction'. *City* 13(2–3): 176–84.

Broudehoux A-M (2007) *The Making and Selling of post-Mao Beijing*. London: Routledge.

Campbell C (1989) *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*. Cambridge: Wiley-Blackwell.

Canclini NG (2001) *Consumers and Citizens: Globlaization and Multicultural Conflicts*. Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press.

Catterall B (2006) Editorial. *City* 10(1): 1–2.

Christopherson S (1994) The fortress city: privatized spaces, consumer citizenship. In: Amin A (ed.) *Post-Fordism: A Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp.409–27.

Coleman R (2004) *Reclaiming the Streets: Surveillance, Social Control and the City*. Abingdon: Willan.

Corner J (1994) Consumption editorial. *Media, Culture and Society* 16: 371–4.

Crewe L and Beverstock J (1998) Fashioning the city: cultures of consumption in contemporary urban spaces. *Geoforum* 29(3): 287–308.

Di Cicco PG (2007) *Municipal Mind: Manifestos for the Creative City*. Toronto: Mansfield Press.

Eick V (2010) A neoliberal sports event? FIFA from the *Estadio Nacional* to the fan mile. *City* 14(3): 278 – 29.

Florida R (2002) *The Rise of the Creative Class*. New York: Basic Books.

Fuller G and Harley R (2005) *Aviopolis: A Book About Airports*. London: Black Dog.

Goldberger P (1996) The rise of the private city. In: Vitullo MJ (ed.) *Breaking Away: The Future of Cities*. New York: The Twentieth Century Fund.

Gordon A (2008) *Naked Airport: A Cultural History of the World's Most Revolutionary Structure*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Gotham KF (2005) Theorizing urban spectacles. *City* 9(2): 225–46.

Harvey D (1989) From managerialism to entrepreneurialism: The transformation in urban governance in late capitalism. *Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography* 71(1): 3–17.

Hayward K (2004) *City Limits: Crime, Consumer Culture and the Urban Experience*. London: GlassHouse.

Hetherington K (2007) *Capitalism's Eye: Cultural Spaces of the Commodity*. London: Routledge.

Holland R (1976) *Self and Social Context*. Cambridge: Macmillan.

Hubbard P (2004) Revenge and injustice in the neoliberal city: uncovering masculinist agendas. *Antipode* 36(4): 665–89.

Illouz E (2009) Emotions, imagination and consumption: A new research agenda. *Journal of Consumer Culture* 9(3): 377–413.

Iyer P (2001) *The Global Shift: Jet-Lag, Shopping Malls and the Search for the Home*. London: Bloomsbury.

Jayne M (2006) *Cities and Consumption*. London: Routledge.

Jessop B and Sum N-L (2000) An entrepreneurial city in action: Hong Kong's emerging strategies in and for (inter)urban competition. *Urban Studies* 37(12): 2287–313.

Jones P and Wilks-Heeg S (2004) Capitalising culture: Liverpool 2008. *Local Economy* 19(4): 341–60.

Keil R (2002) 'Common-sense' neoliberalism: Progressive conservative urbanism in Toronto, Canada. *Antipode* 33(3): 578–601.

Klingmann A (2007) *Brandscapes: Architecture in the Experience Economy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Lees L (1998) Urban renaissance and the street: Spaces of control and contestation. In: Fyfe N (ed.) *Images of the Street: Planning, Identity and Control in Public Space*. London: Routledge, pp.236–53.

Leitner H, Sheppard ES and Aringanti A (2007) Contesting urban futures: Decentering neoliberalism. In: Leitner H, Peck J and Sheppard ES (eds) *Contesting Neoliberalism: Urban Frontiers*. New York: Guilford Press, pp.1–26.

Massey D (2007) *World City*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

McCann E (1999) Race, protest, and public space: Contextualising Lefebvre in the US city. *Antipode* 31: 63–184.

MacLeod G (2002) From urban entrepreneurialism to a 'revanchist city'? On the spatial injustices of Glasgow's renaissance. *Antipode* 34(3): 602–24.

Miles S (2010) *Spaces for Consumption: Pleasure and Placelessness in the Post-Industrial City*. London: Sage.

Miles S and Miles M (2004) *Consuming Cities*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Montagna N (2006) The de-commodification of urban space and the occupied social centres in Italy. *City* 10(3): 295–310.

Mullins P, Natalier K, Smith P and Smeaton B (1999) Cities and consumption spaces. *Urbam Affairs Review* 35(1): 44–71.

Peck J (2010) *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Peck J and Tickell A (2002) Neoliberalizing space. *Antipode* 34(3): 380–404.

Prentice R (2001) Experiential cultural tourism: museums and the marketing of the new romanticism of evoked authenticity. *Museum Management and Curatorship* 19(1): 5–26.

Ritzer G (2005) *Enchanting a Disenchanted World*. London: Pine Forge.

Swyndegouw E (1989) The heart of the place: the resurrection of locality in an age of hyperspace. *Geografiska Annaler* 71B: 31–42.

Swyngedouw E (2009) The antinomies of the postpolitical city: In search of a democratic politics of environmental production. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 33(3): 601–20.

Sze Tsung Leong (2001) The last remaining form of public life. In: *Project on the City 2: Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping*. London: Taschen, pp.128–55.

Touraine A (1988) *Return of the Actor: Social Theory in Postindustrial Society*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Trentmann F (2007) Citizenship and consumption. *Journal of Consumer Culture* 7(2): 147–58.

Ward K (2003) The limits to contemporary urban redevelopment: 'Doing' entrepreneurial urbanism in Birmingham, Leeds and Manchester. *City* 7(2): 199–213.

Žižek S (1999) *The Ticklish Subject – The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*. London: Verso.

Zukin S (1998) Urban lifestyles: Diversity and standardisation in spaces of consumption. *Urban Studies* 35(5/6): 825–40.

Zukin S (2005) *Point of Purchase: How Shopping Changed American Culture*. London: Routledge.

Steven Miles is Professor in Urban Culture at the University of Brighton, UK, and author of *Spaces for Consumption: Pleasure and Placelessness in the Post-Industrial City* (Sage, 2010). He is interested in the ways in which consumption impacts on notions of identity in personal, social and geographical contexts. His key publications include *Consumerism as a Way of Life* (Sage, 1998) and *Youth Lifestyles in a Changing World* (OUP, 2000) and he is co-author of *Consuming Cities* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) with Malcolm Miles.