Spatio-Temporal Dimensions in Consumer-Oriented Activism

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This research focuses on the spatio-temporal parameters of consumer-oriented activism. Drawing on data from a three-year ethnographic study in a turbulent area of Athens, it develops a conceptualization of time and space that moves beyond absolute-objectivist, to acknowledge perceived and social constructed dimensions.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research on the interface between politics, ethics and consumer culture has grown substantially since the 1990s (e.g. Arnould 2007; Shah et al. 2007). Encapsulated in terms such as anti-consumption (e.g. Iyer and Muncy 2008), consumer resistance (e.g. Penaloza and Price 1993), radical consumption (Littler 2009) and consumer-oriented activism (Barnett et al. 2011), the extant studies have followed two main paradigmatic traditions. The first takes a more socio-cognitive perspective and attempts to understand instances of consumer activism in terms of individual attitudes and decision-making processes (see Harrison, Newholm and Shaw 2005). The second, paralleling developments within consumer culture theory (Arnould and Thompson 2005), attempts to provide a more contextualised understanding, focusing on themes such as identity projects, consumption communities and socio-economic factors that determine the scope and nature of consumer-oriented activism. Yet, despite significant advancements, the temporal and spatial elements of consumption remain largely unexplored and under-theorised. In fact more generally, researchers have only recently started to explore the spatio-temporal parameters of all consumption activity (e.g. Visconti et al. 2010). Accordingly, in this research we attempt to develop a more nuanced understanding of the role of space and time in consumption, by acknowledging both objectivist and relativist dimensions.

The empirical site of our analysis is Exarcheia, an anarchist neighbourhood in Athens that has been the birthplace of the 2008 Greek riots and is renowned for its anti-capitalist, anti-consumerist ethos. We draw on data that includes field notes, participant observation and interviews, to illustrate how this turbulent area provides a rich site for exploring the relationship of space and time with consumer activism.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Our findings point to a conceptualisation of consumption spaces that moves beyond conventional understandings of actual-material space as simply ‘a kind of container in which . . . entities are found and . . . events take place’ (Abbott 2008 cited in Hones 2011, 686). In resonance with seminal contributions to spatial studies by Lefebvre, Soja and Harvey, we propose a triadic view of space as absolute, perceived and constructed. For instance, whereas absolute space in our data included the built environment and its various facets, from street art and graffiti-covered walls to frequent intersections that enable the spread of riots (Makrygianni and Tsadvaroglu 2011), perceived space included the more experiential-phenomenological aspects, such as “a sense of tension and urgency” that almost all of our informants mentioned when visiting the area. Finally our notion of constructed space includes place as the ever-contested product of social relations (Lefebvre, 1991). Within Exarcheia, this becomes evident in Exarcheia residents’ ongoing struggles against the commodification of their city, from throwing bricks and firebombs at Apple stores and Starbucks, to occupying squares and constructing guerrilla parks.

Subsequently, we attempt to theorize the intersection of space with time that is beyond the linear-chrononological (Kern 2003), by drawing on Bahktin’s (1981) notion of the chronotope (literally meaning time-space). In analyzing our informants’ narratives in relation to (anti-)consumption practices, we identify three key chronotopes, the Bakhtinian Public Square, the Here and Now and the There and Then, that although distinct, they are also interlinked. The chronotope of the public square reflects informants’ pride in their communal spaces where many of the anti-consumption practices take place and are shared. For instance one of the Exarcheian public squares used to be a deserted parking lot earmarked for (commercial) redevelopment by the mayor and city planners until it was occupied and bulldozed by locals. It is now transformed into a very impressive park and public space that operates on the basis of anti-commercialisation and gift economy. In talking about the park, many of our older informants mentioned how it reminded them, somewhat nostalgically, the spirit of past Athens, a period in which community living and social interaction around squares was common. Concurrently, residents’ attempts to fight against the commodification of their public space, point to that space can be not only the context but also the object of (anti-)consumption; consumption as in and of space and place (cf. Goodman, Goodman and Redclift 2010). The here and now chronotope relates to experimentations with doing things differently, of creating societies within society and moments of “cracks” (Holloway 2010), as opposed to waiting for mass insurrection and total overthrow of free market capitalism. It is mainly this chronotropic logic that fed into various forms of consumer-oriented activism in Exarcheia, including, among others, various alternative food networks and forums for the exchange of knowledge and services; collectives who contribute to an economy of solidarity by supporting ethical producers and importing coffee from the Zapatistas, collective cooking events, self-managed squats and “no ticket” cinema screenings, music and artistic events. Finally, the there and then chronotope includes residents’ utopic visions of an ideal society that makes them continuously question the current socio-economic system, of which consumer culture is a key part.

The third part of our analysis examines the intersection of different spaces and chronotopes. As the surrounding city deeps further into recession and increasingly faces the “there and then” of the past, we observe moments of explosion (solidarity trading events and occupancy movements in other neighbourhoods in Athens; cf. Vradis and Dalakoglou 2011) but also of implosion (dramatic fall of living standards and explosion of violence) that (among others) have redefined...
the types and nature of consumer-oriented activism. For instance, in some collectives the notion of anti-consumption has become redundant as it has quickly given way to solidarity for all those that now have to live below the poverty line.

In the final part of the article we consider the spatial and chronotopic parameters of alternative consumption spaces and practices. For instance, more conventional forms of consumer activism, such as Fair Trade purchasing and boycotting, are still embedded within a chronotope of a here and now, albeit in spaces that are far less lived and contested (e.g. supermarkets), whereas the chronotope of the public square is to some extent recreated in anti-consumerist festivals (Kozinets 2002) and in frequenting coffee establishments (Thompson and Arsel 2004). Implications and avenues for future research are discussed.

REFERENCES


Littler, Jo (2009), Radical Consumption: Shopping for Change in Contemporary Culture, Open University Press.


