

Working Paper Series

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# Shopping with each other

Liminal Exchanges on the  
Northcote Road

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## INTRODUCTION

We live in a time in which the laws of the market can appear all-conquering, in which the principles of liberal economic theory are becoming applied to an ever widening sphere of processes, to the extent that, for some theorists, even our identities become implicated, as the individual becomes conceptualised not only as the producer and consumer of goods and services, but as 'the entrepreneur of himself or herself' (Gordon 1991: 44). The marketplace however, seems to hark back to a different time, in which 'The Global' had little meaning; when the supply of fresh produce depended on the season and not international freight networks; and where the supply-chains linking producer and vendor were short, if not non-existent. And yet in the UK, the marketplace is undergoing a resurgence. Farmer's markets, where producers sell direct to customers, have led the way; whereas none existed in 1997, by 2003 450 had been established in England (DEFRA 2003: 79; Bullock 2000: 4). There has also been an explosion in what might be termed the urban 'gourmet market'. Borough Market in London, for example, historically a wholesale fruit and vegetable market selling to traders and restaurateurs, has been hugely successful since it started a gourmet market at weekends in 1999. And the Northcote Road market in South London, which will be the focus of this paper, has evolved from a market on the verge of closure in the mid-1990s, to an increasingly successful market in which apparently wealthy customers can pick up everything from fruit and vegetables, to artisan baked breads, stuffed olives and pashminas!

However different these contemporary, frequently urban, marketplaces are from their rural forbearers, their resurgence asks particular questions of liberal economic theory; most obviously, whether its models can account for, or incorporate, the return of the open air market and even, whether despite, or perhaps because of, their smallness and apparent inconsequentiality, they pose any threat to the dominance of 'the large' and its associated economies of scale. Their resurgence also asks particular questions of the researcher. For, despite the marketplace being the very epitome of transactional exchange, it is this very aspect that often receives little attention in both contemporary and

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1. This paper draws on the results of an empirical study of the Northcote Road and its market, conducted in Clapham, South London in 2004. The study consisted of a three-day observation of the market and nine in-depth interviews, with a sample that included both market traders and high street shoppers, not all of whom necessarily used the market. To preserve their anonymity, all names have been changed.

historical renderings. Charles Kenney's nineteenth century description of London's Covent Garden fruit and vegetable market, provides an archetypal and recognisable example of tropes that persist, albeit in transmuted form. He writes:

*[h]ere Nature empties forth her teeming lap, filled with the choicest produce of her happiest generation. The loveliness of the land is there and the fatness thereof. At one glance we pass in review the prime and bloom of vegetation, and communicate directly with the riches of the earth. It is the metropolitan congress of the vegetable kingdom, where every department of the "growing" and "blowing" world has its representatives...Here the Londoner fraternizes with the rustic, and acknowledges that he is not all bricks and mortar—that Nature has still some parental claims upon him which he cannot entirely away with (Kenney 1859: 51-52).*

For Kenney, the marketplace's instrumental function as a place of trade is overshadowed by an overflowing sequence of sensory apprehensions. The market becomes a vessel into which he can pour a gendered narrative, invoking the familiar trope of the Natural as female (bifurcated from, by implication, the Social as male). For Kenney, the market offers the possibility for an urban (male) observer to platonically 'fraternize' with (female) Nature, and in the process come to realise the existence of the subtending organic 'essence' that is usually rendered invisible by the 'bricks and mortar' of the modern city. However, the marketplace as an economic space fades from view.

Kenney's account has correspondences with Ashley *et al.*'s identification of the 'mythology' of the market that has emerged in discursive constructions of the city, which

*have routinely come to privilege the market and the meanings that surround and construct it: meanings such as historical depth, suspended relationships of class and ethnicity, organicism and ecology, familial continuity and rugged entrepreneurialism (Ashley et al. 2004: 114).*

The urban mythology of the market is one that draws on a historically rooted idyll, promising community and human connection, whilst being compatible with individualist, self interested entrepreneurialism.

It is a mythology that is, however, suffused with operations of power, in which who speaks for whom, and in what way, become highly important. In Kenney's nineteenth century account, the separation between *his* act of mythologisation and *others'* instrumental use of the market appears immutable; the human presence of traders and customers is overshadowed by the effervescent emergence of the Natural; Kenney is not so much interested in the instrumental functions of the marketplace as its ability to transport the rural into the city. However, as again noted by Ashley *et al.* (2004: 117), in contemporary marketplaces, analogous processes of mythologisation to Kenney's are predominantly undertaken not by detached observers, but by shoppers and, in particular, middle class shoppers. The power to render contemporary marketplaces as mythic is thus frequently entwined with social privilege; those with the power to speak and be listened to are also those whose presence gives the marketplace both its instrumental reason for being (as a place of trade) and its mythic appeal.

#### **MAFFESOLI AND CALLON: AESTHETICISATION AND CALCULATION**

The associations between myth and communality that Ashley *et al.* identify as centred around the marketplace, resonate with the work of Michel Maffesoli, in relation to the analogous connections Maffesoli draws between forms of myth and communality in contemporary society more generally (Maffesoli 1996a; 1996b; 1997). Maffesoli's work is interested in the rise of social forms which, he suggests, are excessive, which cannot be accounted for through what he identifies as forms of modern, rationalistic analysis. The visual, the mythic, the affective and the emotional all contribute towards what he identifies as 'a new style' (1996a: 23), an 'ethic of the aesthetic' (1996a: 128), which permeates everyday life, as manifest through a range of everyday, potentially contradictory, even apparently banal, phenomena. It is an account which celebrates the superficial, the quotidian, the hedonistic, the emotive; for Maffesoli, we are living in 'a culture of the image, of the visual, in contrast to the rationalistic culture of the Concept' (1997: 24), in which '[t]hemes such as liberation, activism or the culture of production have all had their day' (1997: 26). Maffesoli offers a bold challenge to a set of key categories around which much of Western society is based, including, controversially, cherished concepts such as liberty, and the importance and potential efficacy of political activism.

Maffesoli's politics will be assessed at a later point. However, for present purposes, it is important to note that Maffesoli should not be too quickly dismissed as a nihilistic postmodern theorist; one of his key arguments is that the aestheticisation of the social world leads not to an obliteration of meaningful social experience, but to the rise of shared communality. His thesis is one which does not shy away from describing, and at times celebrating a world in which epistemological depth is being supplanted by ontological superficiality, whilst at the same time giving an account of the highly social, interconnected, communal character of activities which are more usually characterised by social theorists as individualistic and, at times, meaningless. He therefore describes

*the renaissance of a social individual and a society resting not on distinction from the other, nor any longer on a rational contract linking to the other, but rather on the empathy that makes me, with the other, a participant in a larger ensemble, contaminated all the way by collective ideas, shared emotions, and images of all kinds. It is also what I propose calling the "imaginal" world (1996a: 91).*

Far from nihilistic, therefore, his language is unashamedly utopian; for Maffesoli, the proliferation of images, whether in the media, in politics, or in contemporary thought, represents the emergence of the basis for forms of shared communal experience; alienation is replaced by mass participation, in which a series of loose, ephemeral or 'liminal' social connections combine to create a shared 'imaginal' culture, as revealed in everyday activities such as mass-participation sporting events, festivals, musical concerts, the summer rush to the beach or, as is important in the context of this paper, in acts of mass consumption. It is the latter to which Maffesoli draws particular attention, as he sees the rise of the image as near-indexically linked to consumption; just as the image saturates everyday life, so too does an ethos of consumption. As with the image, consumption too has the potential to generate signs of life; for Maffesoli, mass acts of consumption in particular represent ritualistic displays of these new forms of communality, even if communication with each other is frequently liminal and non-verbal; he writes:

*[I]et us pursue a paradox: the tribal mass rituals of the new consumer society are at once local and emotional and nevertheless shared by*

*large masses...They are present in the frenzy of consumption and spending in large department stores, hypermarkets and commercial centres that of course sell commodities but which above all emit a symbolism. They generate a sense of participation in the life of a common species (Maffesoli 1997: 33).*

Although acts of consumption are pursued essentially alone, the participatory nature of the experience renders the activity as social, albeit not necessarily linguistically-oriented. What may appear as individualistic excess is, Maffesoli argues, a performative activity, undertaken as much for others as for the self. It embodies a dynamic interaction, with the act of consuming generating a personal, emotional response, yet one that shoppers seek in a space occupied by others.

Before assessing the merits of this account in relation to the data gathered on the Northcote Road, it is useful to contrast Maffesoli's sometimes lyrical account of a superficial consumer culture to the more instrumental account of economic decision making provided by Michel Callon. Callon's (1998) account, on the face of it, shares little with Maffesoli. Emerging out of Actor Network Theory, with its interest in the distribution of agency across both humans and non-humans, Callon's work has little interest in the emotive, the affective, and the 'imaginal'. Maffesoli's thesis is very much focused on human interaction, the movement of peoples, on forms of visual representation, and therefore proposes a very different model of sociality to Callon. However, as I will argue, placing these two theorists into productive tension may provide a route towards nuancing both.

Ashley *et al.*'s account of transactions at modern marketplaces provides a good analytical intermediary between the two. On the one hand, their analysis, in a similar way to Maffesoli, undertakes to examine processes of contemporary mythologisation, whilst, on the other hand, attempting to consider how these processes impact on economic decision making. However, in Ashley *et al.*'s analysis of the latter, they remain firmly tied to a culturalist framework; their analysis restricts itself to explaining the resurgence of the contemporary marketplace in terms of a reflexive return to an embedded form of economic transaction, characterised by face-to-face interaction, in contrast to the disembedded and abstracted nature of, for example, supermarket shopping (Ashley *et al.* 2004: 112-114). This does little to move beyond the familiar social

theoretical separation of the economic from the social, in which each is conceived of as a separate realm, even if mutually dependent. Callon, however, challenges this separation, developing Granovetter's (1973) account of the ways in which individual's calculative agency is a result of the form of the social networks in which s/he is dynamically implicated, in which neither network nor subject exists independently; instead both coexist in a dynamic and interconnected relationship, a 'network-agency', engaging in a process of continual mutual redefinition. One of Callon's key advances on Granovetter's thesis, is to argue that in order for calculative agency to be accounted for, simply describing a subject's position in a network is not enough; there must be a mechanism in which those connections that are to be taken into account are separated from those that are to be ignored. Callon employs the metaphors of framing and entanglement to describe this process, in which a set of entangled relationships, both human and non-human, linked in a complex network, are provided with definition, by being either included or excluded from the frame of calculability.

However, perhaps in a desire to provide his thesis with general applicability, at times Callon's work can obscure local contingency. His own analysis of a marketplace (albeit one that performs a different function), which draws heavily on Marie-France Garcia's (1986) empirical study of a wholesale strawberry market in France, is revealing in this respect. One of Garcia's (and Callon's) key conclusions is that the formatting of the marketplace in question is undertaken in strict correspondence with economic theory, with the aim of excluding from the frame of calculability any and all 'social' influences. The study is chosen by Callon, as it provides a remarkably 'pure' example of the operations of framing. However, perhaps as a consequence of his desire to maintain the analytical purity of his case study, he does exclude one important element from his analysis: his discussion focuses on all the various material framing devices associated with the marketplace, yet the warehouse in which the marketplace is contained is not discussed. And yet, as a framing device, its potency is undeniable: first it establishes a space that is potentially atemporal, in which the potential for seasonally variable weather to disrupt transactions is removed; second, the warehouse provides a location in which wholesale traders are separated, both symbolically and functionally, from local and/or private individuals. The market's function is thus to provide a mechanism

whereby wholesale traders can make decisions regarding quality and price, in a location that is both symbolically and spatially distinct, and operates under different conditions, from the varied locations in which the goods purchased by the traders will later be sold. The warehouse, over and above all the other various framing devices, attempts to remove the marketplace from any local relationships existing outside its boundaries. Whilst this point is not dwelt upon by Callon, an analysis of marketplace transactions must examine the shape and politics of these contingent connections, if attempting to provide a more situated account of the politics of framing. This means keeping in view the importance of how decision making processes are formatted, whilst retaining a recognition that description of processes of exclusion and limitation may themselves act to silence and obscure.

#### **ALL FRILLS AND NO FUNCTION? SHOPPING ON THE HIGH STREET**

Before proceeding to examine the ways in which Maffesoli's and Callon's work can provide an insight into the function and framing of the marketplace itself, it is important to connect the market to broader discussions around the Northcote Road shopping area, as well as to the ways in which the area is seen as connected (or not) to the surrounding city. The shops, the road, its material connections to the surrounding area, the presence and movement of other shoppers' bodies, as well as how shoppers interpret each of these, are all elements which are implicated in the constitution of the contextual 'warehouse' (albeit of a far less readily identifiable kind than Callon's) through which individual economic transactions on the street are performed and translated. Indeed, for most, the market is only one element of a broader shopping experience; an independent butcher, gift shops and numerous small cafés sit alongside a sizeable Starbucks which dominates the centre of the high street, which itself faces, on either side a small Somerfield, and Marzano's, a Pizza Express franchise. Watching a typical day's trading reveals, in a similar way to Maffesoli's hypermarkets, a clear sense of shared endeavour; the shops bustle, mothers and fathers wheel along prams containing well dressed young children, queues form outside the butcher, and Saturdays bring many of the area's middle-class residents to the cafés to sit and read the paper, with some, but by no means all, taking advantage of the changeable contents of the market. Consumption continues apace, although not perhaps with the frenzy that Maffesoli identifies with mass hypermarket consumption.

Indeed, for many respondents, a Northcote Road shopping experience was distinct from the frenetic pace of other contemporary urban experiences; time-pressured, goal-driven, abstracted daily life was repeatedly contrasted to the easy going, relaxed nature of a Northcote Road shopping trip. Tom and Rebecca, for example, neither of whom used the market, both regularly came down to the area to sit in a café and read the paper, have some food or a coffee, the area thus coming to represent a place for 'just chilling out' (Rebecca). For Claire, Northcote Road was seen as a haven: 'when you look out, everyone's just strolling down...It isn't everyone battling to...get to where they want to be'. Claire creates an explicit dichotomy between the goal orientated pressures of everyday life and lazy, untargeted shopping on Northcote Road, while for Mary the Northcote Road was 'simply a nice place to hang out on a Saturday [...] afternoon'. There is also a clear physical distinction drawn: 'strolling' is opposed to 'battling', opposing two very different walking practices. Claire is not unusual in this respect. Whether it be to 'meander' (Sue), 'wander' (Mary) or 'drift' (Sarah), for most the experience of shopping on Northcote Road was framed as physically and temporally distinct. The act of shopping on the Northcote Road was itself also frequently staked out in opposition to, in particular, supermarket shopping, in relation to which, most could only cite utilitarian benefits. Rebecca drew out the contrast explicitly: '[y]ou don't come here to rush...if you're in a huge rush, then just go to Asda, you know' (Rebecca). Supermarkets and high streets are spaces that attempt to frame transactions in very different ways, but the above responses reveal some of the ways respondents engage in processes of reframing: pleasure is very much included in the frame of a Northcote Road shopping experience alongside utilitarian need, whilst supermarket shopping is framed by almost all purely in terms of its utilitarian benefits. This draws attention to the ways in which acts of framing are as much undertaken by the seller as by the buyer; whilst it may be difficult here to isolate these framing operations in relation to individual transactions, it does point to the ways in which the operations of framing undertaken by Northcote Road residents impacts on choices of, at the very least, shopping location.

However, the framing of the Northcote Road as a discrete spatial (and temporal) safe haven, separate from the more familiar pressures of contemporary urban life, was not always successful. Watching the

market, whether on a weekday or at the weekend, provided clear evidence of numerous shoppers hurrying from one place to another; the degree to which being 'too busy' was cited as a reason for declining to be interviewed may be suggestive in this respect (although this is of course a response familiar to researchers in a variety of contexts). Moreover, it is a tension that was commented upon by some of those subjects who did agree to be interviewed; Sarah, for example, whilst suggesting that an ideal shop would take 'a couple of hours', admitted that this was frequently curtailed:

*Joe: And does it usually, and does it matter to you how long it takes, down here?*

*Sarah: Er, depends. I mean, we're very busy people [...] as I work, I mean I'm working tonight, my husband's working at the moment. So yeah, I mean unfortunately we have time constraints.*

For Sarah, 'real-life' 'constraints' thus overflow the framing of the Northcote Road as a space that is distinct from the temporalities that characterise urban space more generally, as a potentially leisurely shop is disrupted by external work pressures. Similarly, whilst crime was largely absent in respondents' descriptions of the Northcote Road and its surrounding area, Rebecca's indirect, yet very personal experience of serious crime at the nearby Clapham Common, seems to have had an impact on the conceptual boundaries she draws around the Northcote Road:

*I think the area is very safe during daylight hours, [but] I think it's feral after dark, frankly. I'm speaking as someone whose boyfriend's been carjacked [...] just off the common just there. I feel very safe on the Northcote Road itself, but the minute you step away, and after dark, no. Not round the common area, it's not safe there, there have been rapes historically...it's not safe, it's not safe at all.*

The world beyond the Northcote Road is 'feral', a dark wild zone, populated by violent—and potentially sexually violent—crime, existing in implicit contrast to the 'civilised' safe haven of a (daytime) Northcote Road, where Rebecca felt relaxed enough to come on her own and sit on a Saturday morning outside a café with a paper and a coffee. However, the fragility of this frame is clear: the 'minute' you step away,

or after dark, threats are imagined as emerging, her triple repetition of 'not safe' used to add emphasis. It seems, however, that for now these perceived temporal and spatial boundaries are enough for Rebecca to place her trust in the protection that the area can afford. To continue with Callon's metaphor, the integrity of the frame, during the day at least, remains intact.

Of the shoppers, only Alice articulated the existence of *ongoing* tensions existing *within* the Northcote Road area itself, operating around continuing echoes from recent shifts in demography. Alice, who had lived in the area for at least three times as long as any of the other customers I spoke to, provided opinions that were consistently different from other subjects, expressing broad distaste for the influx of what were characterised as brash, noisy, and inconsiderate young professionals. Whilst conveying strong support for the market (as will be discussed below), for Alice, the utility of the broader high street was increasingly being lost:

*Alice: Fads has gone, all those useful shops have gone, and I say, they've been replaced by a lot of sort of trendy shops and, er, it's [a] less useful area, for the nitty gritty of life, as opposed to the frills.*

*Joe: When you say frills, what do you mean by, how would you describe frills?*

*Alice: Oh these rather silly little gift shops, selling sort of expensive, er, selling expensive cards and [...] rather useless gifts, vases that are going to get knocked off the mantelpiece by a cat (laughs).*

Alice here articulates an explicit awareness of the superficiality of much contemporary consumption. The vase is used as a signifier for the inherent pointlessness of much of the consumption that she witnesses as occurring in Northcote Road shops; use-value is being replaced by aesthetic value, by 'frills'. The 'useless gifts' and soon to be broken vase become metaphors to describe contemporary consumption's inherent lack of depth, thus criticising the very forms of consumption, prioritising image over content, that Maffesoli valorises. As such the shops on the Northcote Road are in general positioned as other, as 'trendy', as failing to adequately provide a framework to meet the requirements of the 'nitty gritty of modern life', the kinds of utilitarian requirements that, for most respondents, are performed by supermarkets.

The ways that the Northcote Road is framed varies between shoppers, as they differently draw debates around utility, the desire to unwind and relax, worries about personal safety, and critiques of superficiality, into the socio-material assemblage of the high street. This has significant consequences on their economic decisions, in particular in relation to choices as to where and when to shop (or not). However, in order to remain attentive to the politics of these framing activities, it is important to be attentive to the narratives of those parties who use the high street for a very different function, namely, to trade. Both the market traders interviewed had followed in the footsteps of their fathers, who had previously run their respective fruit and vegetable stalls. Both traders also used to live in the area, but had since moved away, and had grown up seeing the market change from selling high volumes of cheap produce to working class families, to its present, perhaps more lucrative manifestation. One of the traders, Chris, shared Alice's concern: for Chris, the replacement of the various practical shops that he remembered from his youth, meant that it was no longer a 'proper shopping area'; its function had changed:

*Joe: So how would you describe the area to someone who had never been here before?*

*Chris: For someone who's never been here before, well [...] it's probably be [sic] very very nice place to come, but...it's not a shopping area as such any more. You know, like, I wouldn't call it a shopping...area, you know, I wouldn't personally come down here shopping.*

Here Chris is encouraged to adopt the viewpoint of someone from beyond the Northcote Road area. He reciprocates by imagining that, from their perspective, the area would (probably) be seen as 'very very nice'; and yet, despite being in the business of encouraging people to shop, when reflecting on his own shopping practice, he concludes that this would not be enough to draw him to the area. Furthermore, in a similar manner to Alice's identification of the replacement of utility by 'frills', for Chris, there was no doubting the fact that shoppers' use of the Northcote Road was at root a leisure experience, one likened to 'being on holiday', an assessment he is asked to expand upon:

*Joe: What do you mean by that?*

*Chris: Well you know like, you're on holiday, and all the bars and all that, coz on the night it's what it's like down here, it's like being, you know, in Greece or something like that. You know.*

*Joe: Especially if the weather's nice.*

*Chris: Yeah, if the weather's nice. And like, if you live round this area, you're sort of like what I call on holiday all the time, you know, that's the feeling they must get, you know.*

Notwithstanding Chris' constant desire to reassure me that his customers were in general 'very nice people', he suggests here the existence of a divide between his own experience of the Northcote Road and theirs. For him, the Northcote Road was primarily a place of work, involving getting up at half-past three in the morning, setting up and breaking down the stall, in all weathers; for 'them', however, the use of the Northcote Road, and their life in general, is seen as a perpetual holiday, in which the area becomes analogous to a Mediterranean playground. As a market trader, he feels in a position to assess the ways in which his shoppers frame their transactions, imagining them as incorporating as important elements in their choice to shop at the Northcote Road their experience of the area as a place of leisure, with frames coming to include the 'feeling' of being on holiday. However, Chris' own position as a potential shopper should not be overlooked, even if – or rather, for the very reason that – he chooses to rarely shop in the area himself, for the simple reason that the factors that are implicated in the decision not to purchase are as important as those that are. In this case, he includes in his framing of the Northcote Road the feeling of being other, of not often being included as one of the targets of the products and services that the local shops and other traders have to offer.

### **LIMINAL SOCIALITY AT THE NORTHCOTE ROAD MARKET**

Whilst the traders consistently articulated an alternative representation of the relationship between the market, the area and its residents, for the local residents, including both Alice and those who shopped exclusively at the cafés and highstreet shops, the market acted as the foundation upon which a form of collective unity could be built. For all, the market was synonymous with community, with supermarkets, by contrast, either being dismissed out of hand, or valued only for

their utilitarian benefits. Furthermore, when pressed, none of the respondents held any significantly negative views of the market, with only a few citing relatively minor problems, such as the difficulty of getting the shopping home (Sarah), or the lack of a definable queuing system (Claire). For those that did not use the market, this decision was predominantly framed as personal choice: in Tom's case it was not 'my thing', preferring to buy ready meals from the local supermarket, the market by contrast not being able to offer the necessary levels of convenience; for Rebecca, the market required access to codes and customs to which she did not feel privy, it was a space in which she did not 'know how to shop' (an assertion that will be discussed in greater depth in due course). However, as will be demonstrated, the ways in which the market offered goods for consumption was often framed as secondary to its ability to offer the potential for forms of sociation, whether or not respondents shopped there.

For a minority, this meant the opportunity to engage in regular forms of linguistic interaction. Both Alice and Sarah considered the market traders as 'friends' (despite Sarah not being sure of one of the trader's names), both describing how much they enjoyed chatting to them. The traders themselves recognised this need, with Chris noting how 'they actually like that contact with, you know, that first names thing'. Similarly for Dave, chatting with his customers was both something he enjoyed and 'part of the job'. Both traders were well aware of how important the role they performed for their customers was: not only did they serve an instrumental function, providing them with fruit and vegetables, but they also ensured that their customers were given the contact and personal recognition they demanded. However, as Alice makes clear, it is the potential to engender forms of liminal, temporary, often non linguistic interaction that market offers, that provides, in her case, the market with transformative power. Despite generally seeing the effects of the area's gentrification as negative, for Alice, the market offered a potential site for unity. Whereas she generally disliked the influx of new residents into the area, their impact on the market was seen as positive and important, in part because their high levels of spending would 'mean that the stall holders will be getting enough business to stay here'. This instrumental benefit was however seen by Alice as of secondary importance to the more abstract benefits the arrival of families and couples to the area had provided. For Alice, their

use of the market gives the area 'vitality', something she expands upon: '[w]ell you just, with the people coming and stopping, and buying things, and stopping, and you get *voices* and *movement* and, er, *signs of life*, you know (laughs)' (emphasis added). The continued success of the market was thus the silver lining to gentrification; individuals who were usually framed as Other, are here transformed into the source of the area's character, echoing the processes of mythologisation identified by Ashley *et al.*, in which the marketplace is imagined as a space that can (temporarily) suspend broader social stratifications. As she continues, 'I would hate this area, I really would hate it without the market, it would be absolutely dead'. It does not appear overly important for Alice that she does not directly interact with these Others, only that their presence continues, as revealed by their 'signs of life', in which the vibrancy of movement and sound become as important as the instrumental function of the marketplace. It is, to echo Maffesoli, the signs of 'participation in the life of a common species' that the market offers for Alice, the being in the presence of others, even if direct linguistic communication with them is rare, or even non-existent. The market, and its potential to generate these liminal signs of life thus become crucial to her framing of the Northcote Road market as an important site for consumption, in which her broader negative assessments of the contribution of the new residents to the area are held outside of the frame.

A further trope around which many of the interviewees' responses were organised was, like in Kenney's narrative, the association of the market with rurality, with its corollary connotations of historical depth, organicism, ecology and familial continuity, as noted by Ashley *et al.* above. In particular, for some, the market embodied the potential to effect a (partial) transformation of city space into a close knit village. For Claire, without the market the area would 'feel a lot less...countrified', and for Sarah it had 'the feel of a village', something she is asked to expand on:

*it's the sort of centre of the village if you like, [...] where people come and meet [...] either accidentally or it's preplanned, it's, er, a place where you can see a face consistently that you recognise and that is familiar, and that is friendly, and that's missing in a lot of city, in parts of the city. [...] You know what to expect, and it's, it's part of your routine.*

The market provides the area with a 'centre', a locus around which to draw a conceptual boundary which distinguishes the area from other more amorphous city spaces, drawing perhaps on associations with the central role of the marketplace in pre-industrial British rural life. The market is a place of familial contact, of routine, of safe, predictable encounters. These conclusions are, however, arrived at through an emotive, empathetic judgement drawing on what Maffesoli might term the imaginal qualities of the marketplace; the area *feels* like a village, it *feels* countrified. Sociation is also not necessarily communicative; for Sarah that which is 'seen' and 'recognised' becomes perhaps as important as what is done or spoken, with what might otherwise be fleeting visual stimuli becoming transformed into meaningful, stable social reference points through routine and repetition.

For Tom, Rebecca, Sue and Claire, all of whom shopped at the market rarely, if at all, the market was seen as an important communicative space, even if it was others that interacted, not them. Thus, Sue notes that for families, shopping at the market was a highly social experience, but, as a retired single woman, an activity she feels she can rarely take part in. Claire liked the 'friendliness' of the market, whilst at the same time revealing and that, if she did shop there, she was not necessarily looking to engage in linguistic interaction because 'I don't tend to talk to people (laughs)'. Tom and Rebecca both revealed the value they placed on mundane moments of intersubjective connection: Tom pointed out a scene we had both witnessed prior to the commencement of the interview: 'Yeah, I mean people chat and like this guy [David] was chatting to some old bloke here, only a minute ago, who was, knew his dad or something [...] People...each stallholder is different, it's not like shops, people talk to them more, etc. So it's, yeah, it's all part of the thing'; Rebecca, who had never used the market, noted how, as a result of the market, 'people talk to each other in the street', going on to tell me how she ended up talking to a man who sat down next to her whilst his wife shopped at the market, concluding '[y]ou know, it's, people like one another in this area'. Both Tom and Rebecca thus drew attention to the importance of the market stimulating communication, even if, as in Tom's case, he is not included. Rebecca's story also shows how these liminal forms of communication can, on occasion, lead to a direct, if temporary, social bond with another, in the form of unanticipated conversation. Even without this communicative interaction, however,

for each of these respondents it is enough to either just browse and occasionally buy, or to sit, watch and listen, with Claire and Rebecca both referencing the 'atmosphere' of the market, and Tom its 'buzzy' quality.

Indirect forms of participation with the market also extended to the consumption – in a non-economic sense – of the market's aesthetic qualities. Rebecca's apparently contradictory response is illuminating in this respect. At an early stage of the interview she asserts that 'I don't really know how to shop at the market. [...] That sounds really bizarre, but everything looks a bit raw and ready doesn't it. And then I'm just used to things being pre-wrapped'. She is put off both by her unfamiliarity with the rituals of the marketplace and the unprocessed quality of the food on display which *looks* raw. And yet, earlier she reveals the aesthetic value she attaches to this same produce: 'it's fresh. And it's just lovely to see all of these beautiful, fresh fruit', before later, after the interview had been formally concluded, commenting: 'it's horrible actually, because I'm, I love sitting in front of all the different colours of the vegetables but *I don't really participate at all*' (emphasis added). The messy act of consuming at the market, complicated by unknown consequences and unprocessed produce, does not prevent a form of aesthetic consumption, in which no goods ever exchange hands; instead the fruit and vegetables on display act as a colourful but untouchable tableau which Rebecca comes to the market to simply enjoy. Her act of framing is hence not rooted in a desire to engage in economic transactions at the market at all; her prioritisation of the aesthetic promise of the market over the economic, and its potential to embody and stimulate liminal forms of sociality, mean that Rebecca creates what might be described as an aesthetic frame, or what Maffesoli might term the entering of an 'imaginal world' in which the confusing and perhaps threatening social obligations and rituals of market transactions are managed and reified, being replaced by the image of the market as an aesthetic and atmospheric backdrop. This act of aesthetic framing is, however, fragile and comes at a cost. Her own (in)actions are described as 'horrible', suggesting the presence of a guilt which threatens to overflow and destabilise the achieved separations. The aesthetic sensuousness of the market also generates obligations, as she perceives a duty to complete her aesthetic consumption with an economic and/or social transaction, in the perceived imperative

to participate and/or buy. In her not always successful framing of the market, Rebecca articulates the existence of a complex entanglement, between the aesthetic, the social and the economic, something that she only partially succeeds in disentangling. Ultimately therefore, she feels more comfortable relying on the more familiar frames established by supermarkets and the process of disentanglement they enact, in part, through the material separations provided through their acts of pre-packaging.

The above complexities begin to point towards some of the limits of Maffesoli's thesis. Aesthetically mediated, liminal forms of sociality are indeed revealed as important social forms; shopping in Northcote Road is shown to be a performative act, in which fleeting and non-linguistic forms of sociation play key roles in the creation of meaningful human connections. However, this is not enough; the pressure that Rebecca feels to reciprocate her aesthetic voyeurism with a linguistic and/or economic transaction, as well as the traders' recognition of the importance of getting to know their customers, and Sarah and Alice's valuing of the traders as 'friends', also point to a desire for meaningful interaction, in relation to which the more superficial, liminal forms of sociation respondents value must be seen as sitting. Similarly whilst the area might *feel* like a village, or become *countrified*, these imaginal renderings are nonetheless temporary acts of framing which do not fully displace the fact that the Northcote Road is an urban city space, which can be, and sometimes is, disrupted by external pressures. Rather than focusing on epochal transformations, as Maffesoli has a tendency to do, it may be better, following Callon, to focus on the ways that banal, quotidian everyday, not always verbal forms of sociation become implicated in diverse, and always incomplete acts of social (and material) framing. With this in mind, what might be termed the mythologisation of the Northcote Road as a rural, communitarian space, is inevitably an unfinished, incomplete abstraction.

Maffesoli's (lack of) politics also needs to be reassessed. In part this is as a result of the responses provided by the shoppers on the Northcote Road, which, to a certain extent, undermine Maffesoli's blanket dismissal of the relevance of forms of political activism in what he sees as a superficial, consumerist, world. For many, the act of shopping at the market was, at least in part, a political act, even if this politics

was perhaps sublimated in the act of consumption. Tom, for example, recognised that the popularity of the market was ‘maybe [...] a bit of a reaction against supermarkets’ and Mary opposed the local and the small to the global and the large: ‘[w]ell, everything’s so enormous, and sort of, I don’t know [...] mass globalisation. Huge chains of everything, so it’s nice to have, individual people doing their own thing.’ Mary’s anti-globalisation stance, coupled with the broader reaction against both the impersonal nature of forms of mass consumption and the alienating experience of daily life, reveals a desire to develop competing models of consumption, in which the local and the communal is opposed to the global and the abstracted. In so doing, these shoppers reveal that their consumption has an implicitly political dimension, as the choice to shop at the Northcote Road is conceptualised as a form of defence, in reaction to what is seen as the abstracted nature of contemporary life, characterised by a lack of depth, few opportunities for social interaction with strangers, and in which the local is being threatened by the creep of the global. If we are to take our respondents seriously, this is a politics that, however implicit, is important not to dismiss out of hand. Although very different from the organised grass-roots campaigning of twentieth-century civil rights movements, which Maffesoli considers to be of dwindling relevance, it is a politics that nonetheless relies on the conviction that the individual, acting in a communal group, can effect change, however loosely this group is comprised. As Evans argues, ‘[I]t might be useful to suggest that rather than accepting Maffesoli’s ‘transpolitical’ thinking it is important to maintain a belief in some of the typical claims and ambitions of modernist politics which are concerned with justice and decency’ (Evans 1997: 241). It is important to maintain a commitment towards retaining aspects of modernist politics, whilst coupling this with an analysis of the full complexity of contemporary social relations, a commitment, following Haraway, to ‘make a difference in the world’ (Haraway 1997: 16), whilst at the same time acknowledging the partiality and situatedness of knowledge. Part of this commitment must be to be attentive to subjects’ own politics and to grant at least partial legitimacy to their attempts to make a difference, even if these are articulated through, as in this case, forms of consumption.

However, is there more that could, or should be said? Callon remains largely silent on whether, or how, researchers should bring their politics

to bear on what they research; Maffesoli, however, is unambiguous: ‘we need not necessarily take a moral stance. It is not our task to say what should be but to *insist on what is...* What is today is the plenitude of groupings and communal and communicative myths. *That is enough*’ (Maffesoli 1997: 26; emphasis added). Maffesoli’s politics disavow any responsibility for looking beyond that which is seen or heard. This is not, however, enough. As Les Back forcefully argues, ‘the service that sociology can perform in our time is to point to those things that cannot be said...It is in silence that inequitable relations and gross political complicities are hidden. Here the sociologist is a guide to those things that are muted’ (Back 2007: 165-166). This points to the need to look beyond what is said and thus away from Maffesoli’s trenchant amorality and Callon’s tendency to steer away from political contingency. For my respondents, the act of appealing to the value of the local in opposition to the global is, I argue, itself an act of framing, which obscures from view many of the complexities which emerge when the local is thought along different lines. The Northcote Road is variously framed by my respondents as a space which is potentially political, aesthetic and mythic, qualities that each become routinely meshed into the economic decisions that shoppers make at the market. However, excluded from these frames are those living less than a mile away in some of the most deprived areas of London. For, despite the proportionally large non-white population in the borough,<sup>2</sup> the Northcote Road market largely remains a white, middle-class enclave, frequently ignored by local, non-white, non-middle class shoppers, just as they are ignored in the respondents’ narratives. Transactions at the market are framed as a local political act, with the local invoked as an unproblematic, almost wholly positive category, to be used as a bulwark against the unwelcome global economic abstractions of capitalism. However, this is a politics that is applied only to a conceptually bounded space, locating the local only around the high street and the market, excluding other local disparities from its frame of reference. It is a politics whose attempt to imagine a more local, communitarian form of consumption against the abstractions of global capitalism is important and should be recognised, but one which by defending the local uncritically, obscures its potential inequities, keeping the moral and political difficulties posed by the complex social and spatial organisation of the contemporary city firmly outside its frame.

2. At the time of the 2001 census, out of the 376 local and unitary authorities in England and Wales, Wandsworth was ranked as having the 28<sup>th</sup> largest proportion of self identified non-white residents (Office of National Statistics 2007)

## CONCLUSION: SHOPPING WITH EACH OTHER

Midway through *In The Skin of a Lion* Michael Ondaatje writes: 'The first sentence of every novel should be: "Trust me, this will take time but there is order here, very faint, very human". Meander if you want to get to town' (Ondaatje 1988: 146). Ondaatje's sentiment seems fitting here; the evidence gathered on the Northcote Road does, as Maffesoli suggests, reveal how, amongst a collection of apparently discrete individuals, a shared sentiment can emerge. Whether it be the wish to wander, or the wish to watch, the market appears to offer a space where time can slow down, walking becomes meandering, and buying becomes looking, listening and feeling. It offers an apparent local utopia, promising community and unity, a space where divisions appear reconcilable and where the city seems to retreat, the abstractions of modernity appearing suddenly weak and vulnerable. The market emerges as an aesthetic and mythic object, in which shoppers value other shoppers for their ability to contribute towards an atmosphere in which familiarity and moments of intersubjective interaction replace the anonymity that characterises much of city life.

Despite shoppers' participation being as much non-verbal as verbal, it is important to recognise both as highly social, providing residents with feelings of belonging and security. A series of hopes and associations become implicated in the many and varied frames upon which purchases both at the market and the surrounding shops depend, including the possibilities for interaction, liminal or otherwise; the hope for unity; and, for some, the opportunity to 'make a difference', in shopping as a political act. Shopping at the Northcote Road may be performed alone, but it is also performed *with* each other and, importantly, *for* each other. The exchanges that surround the Northcote Road market provide shoppers and spectators with a series of subjectively defined meanings, combining to transform seemingly individualistic acts of consumption and the market itself into a shared endeavour. Moreover, in the act of sharing, difference is momentarily forgotten, with formerly differentiated interest groups coming together to conceptualise a space that includes within its boundaries any who participate, whether by forms of aesthetic consumption, by becoming implicated in liminal forms of sociation, or by consuming its products.

However, a bounded utopia is not a universal utopia; whilst shoppers include within and exclude from the frame of calculability a range of factors, the divisions and tensions that exist beyond the marketplace rarely intrude. Occasionally tensions do surface, disrupting otherwise smooth narratives: crime lurks beyond the Northcote Road's conceptual boundary; traders like their shoppers, but feel divided from them; shoppers consider the traders friends, but can't remember their names; and the temporary alliances between long- and short-term residents are shown to be fragile once discussions move beyond the conceptual space of the market to include the broader Northcote Road area. Potential disruptions posed by social stratifications organised around class and race are, however, excluded all-together, with local inequalities being rendered near-invisible by high street shoppers. Shopping for each other therefore also means shopping without others.

Calculative agency is arrived at through a complex and contested process. Economic logic does not disappear: prices on the market are still set; competition still reigns; laws of supply and demand may still hold; but included in individual transactions and decisions about where and whether to shop are a host of processes, which cannot be simply separated into the social and the economic. Yet, to focus exclusively on these internal processes would obscure the tensions that persist beyond the frame. As Maffesoli suggests, human, communal order emerges, and it does so without necessarily depending on verbal forms of communication. Nonetheless, in this case, as a form of human order it is divisive, ignoring that which disrupts its idealised world-view. In broadening the social sphere, Maffesoli reveals some of the range and diversity of social associations that can potentially come to be woven into economic decisions, while Callon's work reveals how fragile the frames upon which these decisions condense may be. That being said, neither account pays enough attention to the ways in which these processes can be enmeshed in highly contingent local processes of boundary construction. The researcher's responsibility is thus to pay attention to the acts of framing undertaken by those s/he engages with, whilst at the same time recognising that the acts of inclusion and exclusion which are rendered visible need to be themselves seen in relation to that which is rendered as unseen. That which simply 'is', is rarely enough.

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**NOTES**  
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