



Food quality and the circulation time of commodities: lessons from the British milk trade 1845–1914



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ABSTRACT

The major resurgence of transport geography over the last two decades has provided us with important insights and knowledge on the spatial aspects of transportation under global capitalism. In spite of its substantial progress, however, the sub-discipline has tended to study the movement of goods in abstraction from their physical properties and to conceptualize commodities as fixed and unchanging. Although this assumption is a reasonable one for a great many commodities, it is less so for more perishable goods, especially food. In an attempt to develop this insight further, this article argues that transport geography needs to pay more attention to the relationship between space–time processes and the physical properties of goods in transit. I investigate this relationship through a study of the development and social impacts of the milk trade in Britain c.1845–1914.

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1. Introduction

Rooted in the context of the neoliberal food regime (McMichael, 2013), the vast literature on “food miles” captures two distinct, yet interrelated dimensions of contemporary food provisioning (Jones, 2001; Halweil, 2002; Smith and MacKinnon, 2007). As an analytical tool, the term expresses the global rescaling of food provisioning and the complex web of social and ecological practices underpinning it. In stressing the growing socio-spatial separation between producers and consumers, it not only draws attention to the interconnectedness of transportation systems, it also highlights two of the defining features of food commodities: distance and durability (Friedmann, 1993). As a normative tool, however, the term has become the catalyst for social and political movements expressing concerns about the environmental effects of expanding geographies of food production and consumption (Paxton, 1994; Weber and Matthews, 2008). It captures the anxiety arising from a world food system producing “food from nowhere” (McMichael, 2009; Campbell, 2009) and stresses the value of knowing where food comes from, while proposing a new geographical imaginary founded upon close proximity between communities and food producers (Holt-Giménez and Patel, 2009; Wittman et al., 2010; Akram-Lodhi, 2013).

Yet distance and durability are not only defining features of the neoliberal food regime: they are at the core of the economic,

cultural and transport geographies of capitalist food provisioning. Although large towns in Britain were still heavily dependent on their immediate surroundings for perishable commodities such as fruit, vegetables, milk, fish and meat c.1850, articles with a longer marketing life, such as cereals, cheese or livestock moved on the hoof, usually came from further afield. Given existing geographies of production, transportation and consumption, towns’ food supply was heavily determined by the different time scales at which perishable goods decayed and the logistical problems associated with the time, space and scale of food relations (Shaw, 2006). In a capitalist economy where the vast majority of people are dependent on the market to obtain their means of subsistence, speedier and more efficient means of transportation are essential not only to deliver mass quantities of food, but also to preserve the quality and overall integrity of the products conveyed. In this, the capitalization of space–time relations proves fundamental to the repositioning of food relations, on a scale sufficient to overcome existing barriers to the spatial circulation of more perishable commodities.

Few technological developments have captured the Victorian mind and imagination, influenced economic development and social change, and attracted institutional attention, parliamentary debates or inquiries as much as railways (Hawke, 1970; Irving, 1976; Gourvish, 1980; Freeman, 1999). This revolution on rail carried more than the powerful forces of fixed capital in its movement. It conveyed mass quantities and volumes of foodstuffs over long distances quickly and efficiently, and therefore contributed to the broadening and rescaling of the sphere of circulation of food

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goods. In this, it profoundly reshaped people's diet and relation to their surrounding environment, as it tore apart previous notions of space and time. Of course, the contemporaries were all too aware of the challenge. "The extent of soil by which great cities are supplied with perishable articles of food", said Dionysius Lardner, "is necessarily limited by the speed of transport" (Lardner, 1850, p. 13). George Dodd showed the same awareness, noting that the "increased speed of transport not only increases the quantity of available produce, but tends to preserve the quality" (Dodd, 1856, p. 116). The latter aspect deserves greater scrutiny.

The major resurgence of transport geography over the last two decades has provided us with important insights and knowledge on the spatial aspects of transportation under global capitalism. In spite of its substantial progress, however, the sub-discipline has tended to study the movement of goods in abstraction from their physical properties and to conceptualize commodities as fixed and unchanging. Although this assumption is a reasonable one for a great many commodities, it is less so for more perishable goods, especially food (Rodrigue et al., 2009, pp. 99, 148). In an attempt to develop this insight further, this article argues that the form or medium of transportation and the physical properties of transported commodities are mutually constituted. In problematizing an intrinsic yet underdeveloped aspect of transport geography, this article seeks to contribute to greater engagement between transport geography and human geography (Preston, 2001; Knowles, 2006; Keeling, 2007; Keeling, 2008; Preston and O'Connor, 2008).

This article proceeds in three sections. In the first section I briefly explore the recent work of geographers on materiality and vital matter and their insights into transport geography. Following William Cronon (1991) seminal study of the common history between city and country through commodity flows, I investigate the relationship between space–time processes and the physical properties of goods in transit in the second section through a study of the development of the milk trade in Britain c.1845–1914. I then explore, in the third section, the social impacts of the milk trade, questioning the neutrality of transport technologies and the view that they are inherently "progressive". Indeed, the social and technological history of the milk trade conveyed not only millions of gallons of milk as abstract exchange-values, but millions of gallons of contaminated, dirty, poisonous and heavily adulterated milk as concrete use-values with important consequences for people's health. I conclude with some remarks about the important lessons that transport geography can learn from this case study, noting its deep actuality in a globalized world where distance and the logistical problems and solutions surrounding it underpin economic processes in general and food relations in particular.

2. Transport, materiality and commodity fetishism

In charting a new research agenda for transport geography, I want to briefly survey three complementary geographical conceptions of materiality in relation to human and non-human entities. The first approach is rooted in the work of Marxist political economists on the false society–nature dichotomy. Seeking to go beyond early forays into the production of nature thesis (Smith, 1984; Roberts and Emel, 1992; Harvey, 1996), recent work in this tradition has explored the other side of the coin, so to speak, by investigating how nature produces society as well. Far from a passive and inert realm, these scholars have convincingly shown how commodities' biological processes and physical properties are actively involved in shaping technological development, legal frameworks, labor relations, investment strategies and social and political life.

Resource geography has produced important insights in this regard. Karen Bakker's (2004) work on water, Philip Le Billon's

(2001) research on oil, Paul Robbins's (2007a) work on suburban lawns and Scott Prudham (2005) research on Douglas-fir logging all problematize how far and in what ways non-human nature resists and challenges commodification, and actively shapes capital's space economy. Similarly, Gavin Bridge (2004, p. 396) insightfully notes how natural gas "is an uncooperative commodity: it may have *use-value* and be in plentiful supply, but producing its *exchange value* requires the labors of science, capital and law. And even when engineered as a commodity, the physical qualities of the resource can impede the realization of profits from its exchange." Bridge reminds us that commodity production in general, and the extractive industry in particular, are processes of abstraction founded upon the ability to overcome, if only for specific timescales, the limits imposed by the physical properties of matter. Indeed, this literature stresses the political economic implications of non-human nature for socio-spatial forms, and how, as Bruce Braun aptly puts it, "biological processes are not simply recalcitrant, but may be said to shape or reconfigure the landscape of capitalism" (Braun, 2008, p. 669).

A second important body of work comes from the call to "rematerialize" cultural geography (Jackson, 1999, 2000; Philo, 2000; Kearns, 2003). The main result of the growing concern with material cultures has been a renewed interest in the spatial lives of things reconnecting Marxist political economists' work on geographies of production with cultural geographers' research on geographies of consumption. These biographies of things have produced detailed analyses tracing back the spatial journey of commodities (Leslie and Reimer, 1999; Hughes, 2000; Hughes and Reimer, 2004; Mansfield, 2003). Furthermore, cultural geographers have been particularly attentive to the meanings associated with commodities, and how they in turn inform and shape their geo-historical presence (Crang, 1996; Cook and Crang, 1996; Cook, 2004). One important dimension of this literature is its ability to unearth the "productive" capacities of consumption in making, unmaking and remaking geographies of commodity chains, thus showing how the construction of specific meanings, cultural associations and material cultures is central to the geography of capitalism.

Building on David Harvey's call "to get behind the veil, the fetishism of the market and the commodity, in order to tell the full story of social reproduction" (Harvey, 1990, p. 423), studies of material culture not only stress the social nature of commodity production, they also emphasize the material culture associated with commodity consumption. These geographical imaginaries constitute what Ian Cook and Philip Crang (1996) have called a "double" commodity fetishism: namely, the objectified nature of the commodity form and its subjective cultural reconstruction through publicity, adverts, signs and images. This allows studies of material culture to retrieve "the importance of the tangible world of things in constructing social reality and draws attention to the meanings that attach to the surfaces of commodities" (Bakker and Bridge, 2006, p. 12). In a powerful demonstration of what can be gained from such an approach, Matt Huber (2013) has shown how the production and dependence on oil cannot be understood in abstraction from spatial and cultural experiences of freedom and movement.

Finally, a third body of work has questioned vital matter, emphasizing how humans and non-humans produce our socio-ecological surroundings. This literature highlights the inner vitality of things and their transient, interconnected nature. Its critique of mechanistic causality breaks with conceptualizations positing non-humans as inert. The notion of assemblage is particularly important here as it recognizes the complex and ambiguous heterogeneity between living and non-living entities (DeSilvey, 2006; Anderson and Wylie, 2009; Edensor, 2011). In exploding anthropological rationalization through an ontology that gives no precedence between objects and subjects, this neo-vitalist

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