

The Credit Crunch and the High Street: 'Coming Like a Ghost Town'

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Abstract

Drawing on primary visual data and secondary sources this rapid response piece speculates on the changes to the British high street as a consequence of the credit crunch. The changes are much more profound than simply the loss of a place to shop. For both individuals and wider society the changes to the British high street carry implications for issues of self-identity, social contacts and social exclusion.

Keywords: *Credit Crunch, High Street, Visual Sociology, Urban, Consumerism, Social Exclusion*

Introduction

1.1 The title of this rapid response article alludes to The Specials 1981 dub-reggae anthem *Ghost Town*. The song's lyrics lamented the loss of a vibrant city-life of clubs, music venues and shops that the recession of the early 1980s had transformed into desolate, empty and hostile streets. In the current recession, or more popularly the 'credit crunch', the song may once again possess a relevance given events unfolding on the British high street. Both regional and national media report local shops and national chain-stores closing down and the possible dire consequences this may bring. The threat of many high streets becoming 'ghost towns' appears to be at least a cause for concern, if not a real possibility.

1.2 The changes occurring in the high street are of sociological interest for the following reasons. In a consumerist society the activities, interactions and cultures of shopping are integral elements of people's lives, providing an important locus and focus for social interaction and identity. The high street and other consumerist spaces frame people's lives, providing the landscape in which the production of identity and the meeting of others can take place. The loss of, or substantial changes to, the high street could therefore lead to a variety of diverse negative outcomes, such as a loss of social contacts, and the destabilising of self-identity, in addition to the more expected problems of crime and poor health that are associated with urban decline. And for older and poorer people, for example, the local high street can provide an important resource without which could put them at risk of further or possible social exclusion.

1.3 This article expands on the above issues in order to discuss how high street shop closures are much more profound than simply the loss of a place to shop, but, instead indicate serious challenges and problems for both individuals and society – though, some more positive possibilities are also considered. To enable this discussion primary visual data and secondary documentary data are discussed and analysed first before engaging in a deeper exploration of the above themes. The full effects of the credit crunch are still unfolding, however, with some predicting much worst yet to come - perhaps this a troubled calm before a much more unsettling storm? Much of this essay is by necessity conjecture, attempting to make some form of provisional sociological sense as events unfold in very fluid and uncertain circumstances. Needless to say there is no implication implied in this piece that the high street is the only part, or the most severely affected part, of the economy during the credit crunch. Job losses, and dramatic and painful reordering and restructuring are being experienced at individual, national and global levels.

1.4 Before proceeding further, and for the purposes of this piece, high street here implies a reasonably compressed geographic area that contains a density of shops and other retail outlets in a city, village or town, or a district therein. This working definition does not exclude shopping centres or malls. Much, if not all, of what is discussed here concerning the more traditional high street is also equally applicable for shopping centres.

A snapshot of the high street and the credit crunch

2.1 As I have noted in previous research, unexpected, if not, random events can emerge out of urban environments (Yuill, 2005). Such phenomena can necessitate a certain level of improvisation in order to be able to investigate a moment as it occurs (Yuill, 2005). A certain level of convenience sampling is therefore evident here with images being recorded as and where I have been able to visit between March and April 2009. Efforts have been made though to try and document what is happening in different parts of Britain, with images recorded in Scotland (Aberdeen and Montrose), England (Tooting Broadway and Kings Cross in London) and Cardiff in Wales. The recording of these images was crucially guided by Suchar's (2004) principles of visual sociology in trying to capture representations of dominant issues, themes and structures of a locality. The images recorded in Reykjavik (referred to in the final section) were recorded in March 2008 for the purpose of noting graffiti in urban contexts; the timing of which coincided with the first tremors of the credit crunch affecting that country.

2.2 The primary images of locations in Britain are collated in the Quick-time movie below. Notable in the images is the transformation of retail space into what I term 'abandoned' space, where the intended use of that space is no longer occurring. Instead of functioning shops the images depict shuttered shop fronts, 'to-let' signs, painted-out windows or posters offering substantial discounts. This situation may be temporary, the space potentially open to re-appropriation for that intended use, should the economy recover. In the mean time, however, abandoned space is an absence, not just of a commercial venture, but a spatial void that symbolically and negatively reorders the physical and emotional space and experiences of the street. Woolworths provides a useful example of this multiple 'absencing'. Not only does the store's closure create a physical absence on the high street but also, as reported throughout the UK media, an emotional and symbolic absence is also created (see image one).



Abandoned space creates not just a spatial absence, but also an emotional absence. Much of the media and popular discourse surrounding Woolworths concerned not just the loss of a shop but also of supposed symbolic and emotional attachments.

[Click here to launch Video 1](#)

2.3 Secondary sources also strongly indicate the seriousness of the situation facing the British high street. Market research group Experian (2009), for example, project from the rapid decline in retail 'footfall' (people out shopping) that by the end of 2009 there could be up to 135,000 empty shop units throughout the UK. A report by the Local Government Association (2009) has reported that over four out five councils in England and Wales have experienced an increase in the number of empty premises already; with 85% of respondents attributing that decline to the economic downturn and 65% of respondents also claiming that the closures are having either a significant or moderate impact on their town centres. The Communities and Local Government department (2009), responding to these actual and projected effects on the high street, have promised £3 million pounds to convert empty shops into locations suitable for other uses.

2.4 Local and national press reports indicate that certain areas may be more vulnerable than others. As they already experience high levels of deprivation any further downturn in the national and local economy could see the Scottish towns of Clydebank, Kirkintilloch, Rutherglen, Cumbernauld and Kilmarnock becoming the worst affected by the credit crunch and their high streets becoming retail 'ghost towns' (BBC 07/01/2009). Small English market towns and smaller towns throughout Wales are also predicted to suffer. Retailers in Harrogate, Staffordshire, Aberdare, Cardigan, and Exeter for example, have already reported concerns over the future of their high streets and the number of empty shop units (BBC 24/10/2008, 04/03/2009, 08/01/2009, 14/04/2009; The Plymouth Evening Herald 2009). High streets that are supported by high-density populations or by populations with distinctive cultural capitals, or ethnic composition, may conversely escape the worst effects of the credit crunch (see image two). Nor is it every business that will suffer. Several large-scale discount operators such as Lidl, Wal-Mart and New Look appear to be benefiting as consumers switch to these supposedly cheaper outlets.



Tooting Broadway so far appears to be as thriving as ever. The particular ethnic composition of the area and the distinctive shops that are a feature of Tooting may guard against the worst effects of the credit crunch.

Discussion

3.1 One caveat to enter before proceeding further: the forthcoming comments should not be read as an outright endorsement of consumerism as being a totally benign social process. Here, I concur - to some extent - with anthropologist Daniel Miller (2001) who raises the challenge that many sociological critiques of consumerism need to reach much further in their analysis and understanding of the dynamics of living in a consumerist society. While not dispensing with a critique of consumer capitalism we are compelled to acknowledge that consumerism may not be the chosen circumstance of history, but it is the material and symbolic context that provides the cultural objects with which people make their identities. People may therefore be 'alienated', *qua* the wider ramifications of Marxian alienation theory, concerning exerting control over their lives. At the end of the day, however, it is difficult, if not impossible, to construct some form of meaningful life beyond the society in which one lives. One should therefore be not just mindful of critiquing consumerism but understanding how it shapes and is purposefully interpreted by people in their everyday lives

3.2 In a study of a small Scottish suburban North East town, for example, one of the main foci of the locals' social lives was meeting their friends and acquaintances in the local Asda superstore (Yuill 2006). More casual daytime interactions occurred there than at any other place in the community. People would meet and converse in the aisles, while the café operated on an informal timetable of different groups of users during the day. In the morning young mums would meet their friends, giving way to older people joining their friends in the afternoon, to be replaced by secondary school students in the early evening seeking a place beyond their parent's control. Consumerism for the local people was an important mediating element in creating these interactions and the structuring of links with neighbours and friends. Much of their life narrative and identity was framed by and performed in the spaces provided by the superstore. Jones *et al.* (2007) found a similar relationship between shopping and social interactions in their research on the high street's role in sustaining local communities. In one area they found that 95% of long-term residents whom they surveyed reported often meeting people they knew when out shopping. Indeed, as Miller *et al.* (1998), and more recently Savage *et al.* (2005), observe shopping plays an important role in the construction of self-identity and attachment to place and other people. The loss of the high street could therefore be highly disruptive and destabilising for many people in terms of their own identities and sociability.

3.3 Other urban commentators have also noted the important role shops play in creating connections between people and maintaining a positive and lively urban culture. In her classic urban essays reflecting on New York streetwalk culture Jacobs (1961) identified that for a vibrant city environment to exist certain elements were required, chief of which is the presence of a mix of shops, bars, cafes and other such venues in a neighbourhood. This variety offers three distinct benefits for Jacobs. Firstly, it generates vibrancy and street-level 'buzz'. An area can be experienced as exciting and interesting as a result of the density of shops and people using them. Secondly, by being out on the street people are compelled to make connections with each other. Using the same facilities as others on a regular basis can also create bonds of familiarity and trust. The presence of retail outlets, thirdly, provides an informal safety mechanism that can be effective in diminishing crime. Shopkeepers are among the 'natural proprietors of the street' (p 35), keeping a watchful eye on what occurs outside their premises.

3.4 The loss or absence of the elements of urban life outlined above can result in a decline in the texture of urban space and an increase in the disorder of that urban space resulting in several negative outcomes. Reading the past reveals that boarded up high streets can lead to an increase in disorder and an upsurge in violent crime. Such symptoms of urban decay animated Skogan (1992) and other 'broken window' theorists, who advanced the observation that there was some form of connection between urban decline (measured in terms of incidents of graffiti, littering and vandalism) leading to criminal activity – though, one can argue that such perspectives conflate causes with symptoms (see Herbert 2001). Poor health could be another consequence of urban disorder. A great deal of medical sociology has pointed to a relationship between place and health (for example, Shaw *et al.* 1999). Urban decline in an area can further compound the effects

that class, ethnicity and poverty can exert on health. Curry *et al.* (2008), for instance, found that areas high in disorder are also prone to high levels of mental distress and depression and in Klinenberg's (2002) social autopsy of deaths in the 1990 Chicago heat wave, it was the absence of shops and the presence of 'bombed out' empty plots in certain working-class quarters of the city that witnessed the highest death rates.

3.5 For certain groups the loss of the local high street may see an increase in social exclusion. Older people, poorer people and people with disabilities face material and symbolic barriers that may prevent them accessing out of town shopping centres (Miller *et al.* 1999). Poorer areas, as indicated earlier, are more likely to suffer the most closures, with those on low-incomes being disproportionately affected by the credit crunch. As Robinson *et al.* (2000) observe, for people on low-incomes choices on where to shop are conditioned, in part, by transport costs. The absence of a local high street could therefore create many challenges for people who are lacking in material resources to access other venues. This deficit is just not simply a loss of shopping but yet another element that possesses the potential to compound the overall deprivation of an area while further impacting on individual's sense of identity (as explored above) and relationship with place.

3.6 The commentary has thus far struck a pessimistic tone. This need not be the case. As noted in New York in the 2003 Blackout people can make creative and celebratory use of urban space, albeit temporarily, in demanding and radically different circumstances (Yuill 2004). And as Gilroy (2009) cautions, what to one person is disorder and danger is edgy and exciting to another. Space, after all, is not just experienced materially but also 'lived by the means of poetic images, photographic compositions, artistic reconstructions' (Harvey 2006 p131). Times of urban disorder and deserted high streets in the past have also inspired street-level art as people attempt to interpret and interpret the changes and circumstances surrounding them. The Specials *Ghost Town*, alluded to in the title of this piece, is but one example of an art form emerging out of testing conditions. Many other examples from the past could be noted, ranging from the early work of The Clash in the UK, to a variety of hip-hop acts in the US, such as Sugar Ray Dink's *Cabrini Green*, or the more controversial NWA and their urban tales of Compton, all of whom have taken urban disorder as a spur to creative expression.

3.7 The constantly evolving and transformative capacities of graffiti can also reorder dead space into something living, welcoming and imbued with meaning. Quicktime movie two recorded in and around Reykjavik indicates how graffiti, at least for those with a particular cultural capital, can, in many respects, prevent 'abandoned' space becoming 'desolate' space. Other new spatial practices have already emerged in some high streets. In Manchester, for example, art galleries, cultural spaces and advice centres have taken, perhaps only for the short term, residence in otherwise empty shopping malls (BBC 2009e).

[Click here to launch Video 2](#)

Conclusion

4.1 The full effects of the credit crunch are still to be played out and, no doubt, much future sociological work will focus on the changes and differences that it may make to both British and global society. The high street may be emblematic of those changes. As an element in people's lives the high street offers much more than just shops. It acts as a mediator of social interaction and weaves into the narratives and identities of ordinary people. A functioning high street also provides resources for people who are at risk of marginalisation due to their age or class, in addition to indicating the vitality of a particular area. These comments are not to praise consumerism but to highlight that for many people the activities and cultures surrounding shopping are integral to how one makes a purposeful life in contemporary modernity. The fragility of such ways of being is, however, brought into sharp focus when the fault lines of capitalism are triggered by crisis and the mundane moments of daily life are suddenly turned upside down or removed. Perhaps, though, more positive developments may come to pass and the high street could become something other than a site of consumerism? All of which waits to be seen and the issues outlined here can be revisited at some future point.

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