TAKING THE ABSURD SERIOUSLY

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ABSTRACT

A focus on the absurd reveals points of tangency between political economy and humanistic geographical approaches. I argue that capitalism's contradictions have broadened and deepened absurd phenomenal experiences, the reflexive internalization of which – in processes of reification or self-alienation - has recursive effects on the constitution of societies. The paradoxes mobilised as part of dialectical reason provide a means of taking the absurd seriously in our emotional and intellectual responses to it. These arguments are illustrated with respect to the consumption of stuff. In conclusion I note how the absurd poses unsettling questions for human geographical theory and praxis.

Key words: the absurd, contradiction, paradox, humanistic geography, political economy

'Every morning at all the big railway stations thousands of people arrive to work in the city – and thousands leave by train to work outside the city. Why don't these people simply exchange their places of work? Or take the long lines of cars crawling past each other during rush hour. Exchange the places where these people work and all the stink and fumes, the dramatic arm-waving of the policemen, could be avoided'. Heinrich Böll *The Clown*.

## I        Introduction

Pause to reflect and much of the geographical arrangement of contemporary life – such as in the epigraph - appears absurd even if it is functional to the capitalist societies in which we live and work. Indeed, we may now live in an 'age of absurdity' (Foley, 2010: 220). The limitations of such periodisation notwithstanding, has the absurdity of experience become sufficiently important for it to deserve more systematic treatment within human geography? The problem is that the absurd 'appears not be a fully accredited philosophical category' (Cornwell, 2006: 2) and figured only briefly as a minor movement in sociology (Goodwin, 1971; Lyman and Scott, 1970; Shoham, 1974).

In this paper I set out to provide some of the analytical grounds for taking the absurd seriously. A focus on the absurd alerts us to important but neglected points of tangency between humanistic and Marxian approaches in human geography regarding processes of alienation (Cloke, Philo and Sadler, 1991: 76; Johnston, 1986: 73). A focus on the absurd also reveals how alienation has evolved, deepened and, to an extent, been internalized as a result of false consciousness in processes of self-alienation, the example used here being the reifications

involved specifically in the modern commodity fetishism of consumer society.[i] Dialectics specifically provide a further methodological point of tangency between humanistic and political economy approaches in geography by helping to unveil (and provide bases for contesting) reification and its recursive connections between the phenomenological experience of the absurd and the underlying contradictions of capitalism.

With a view to taking the absurd seriously, I develop an interpretation of the relationships between the contradictions of capitalism and the absurd as a surface phenomenon, the latter having recursive effects on the former. The paper has five sections. First I explore phenomenological approaches in human geography which set the stage for understanding the contributions of existentialist thought and the philosophy, literature and theatre of the absurd. These contributions offer a practical vocabulary for identifying absurd experiences (in situations, encounters and episodes) but also help to distinguish societal alienation from absurd behaviour (such as accidia) and the partial internalization of the absurd as self-alienation (in the form of stoicism and radical scepticism). Second, I note how political economy approaches suggest how experiences of alienation have magnified over time as a result of capitalism's underlying contradictions. If money and commodities have an immediacy that necessitates dialectical reasoning to uncover their basis in value, then the absurd has a currency that can animate similar dialectical reflection. Third, I show how the paradoxes that can be mobilised in dialectical method have a value in unveiling the reifications that link the surface appearance, experience and internalization of the absurd to deeper lying structural contradictions of capitalism. Fourth, I then illustrate some of the empirical possibilities for scholarship to focus on the absurd when looking at the example of the acquisition of 'stuff'. Our consumption of stuff produces absurd experiences but it is rooted in structural contradictions. The internalization of some of this

absurdity in acts of false consciousness or the reification of stuff is a process of self-alienation that has recursive consequences in fuelling consumer culture at a structural level. Yet, the paradoxes of the contemporary consumption of stuff also provide the cues for transcending the absurd in the likes of ethical consumption. Fifth, and in conclusion, I note the broader relevance of taking the absurd seriously within human geography and the implications of an analysis of the absurd for praxis associated with human geography. Given its apparent proliferation, could we do more to confront the absurd? Appreciation of the absurd raises some awkward questions regarding the possibilities for progressive politics, yet all is not lost nor should it be in an age of absurdity.

## II    The absurd as surface phenomenon

*The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines something that is absurd as 'that which is out of harmony with reason or propriety'. Absurdities are *experienced* as surface phenomena. An absurdity is something that can be distinguished from a structural contradiction because it is immediately obvious and experienced in the here and now and not something that is revealed with the benefit of hindsight or as a result of deeper (dialectical) reflection. Absurdities are contradictions made visible in the experiences of everyday life.

In what follows, a guide to the absurd as a surface phenomenon comes from several related bodies of literature. The literature and theatre of the absurd provide a practical means of identifying absurd experiences. Together with strands of humanistic geography most influenced by existentialist thought and phenomenology they point to processes of self-alienation - the internalization of the absurd as a result of stoical acceptance and radical scepticism. The sociology of the absurd adds that these can result in absurd behaviours (such as accidia). The

point I wish to make is that while consideration of stoicism, radical scepticism and accidia are valuable from an analytical point of view as key ingredients in processes of reification and self-alienation, from a normative perspective they provide no real basis for confronting the absurd in a search for 'the real and the good' (Sack, 2003).

The literature and theatre of the absurd 'strives to express the sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought' (Esslin, 2001: 24). Given the importance of portraying the absurdity of the human condition found in the literature and theatre of the absurd, the skills of novelists, poets and playwrights to a sociology of the absurd has been emphasised (Harre, 1970). Esslin (2001: 24) explains how the theatre of the absurd tries to 'achieve a unity between its basic assumptions and the form in which these are expressed'. In such fiction, the absurdity of the human condition is not in question, nor is it to be explained or overcome but rather the object is to represent it adequately. The literary techniques favoured in this respect are clowning or fooling, verbal nonsense, allegorical dreams or fantasy (Esslin, 2001: 328). The latter has involved the likes of unexplained metamorphosis, as in Kafka's story by the same name, or the proliferation of matter - a theme I take up later in the paper. Although the instinct of the writer of fiction has been opposed to the conscious effort of philosophers (Esslin, 2001: 25) and social scientists, the contrast may be overdrawn since the betweeness of place (Entrikin, 1991) is something that demands forms of inquiry lying somewhere between artistic creation and scientific explanation (Sack, 1980).

In terms of strategies for empirical research, the study of the absurd leads to a focus on discernible units of action, episodes, encounters and situations to which the actor gives meaning

(Harre, 1970: viii). These units of action can congeal into 'time tracks' with an obvious resonance with notions of structuration by way of Hagerstrand's 'time geography' (Cloke, Philo and Sadler, 1991: 107-119). 'Social and cultural conventions carve out time segments from the raw, existential world, providing direction-giving tracks of meaning upon which man (sic) travels through life' (Lyman and Scott, 1970: 189). There is a pace and a sequence to time tracks and between the entering and terminating of such tracks are periods that they term 'side-tracking' which manifest in waiting, time-out and withdrawal. Later I dwell on absurd *encounters* and *situations* when focusing on the consumption of stuff in retail malls and the accumulation of stuff at home (Miller, 2010).

Heidegger's phenomenology offers an insight into the intentionality, consciousness and subjective meanings attached to behaviour as part of 'a life-long process of becoming' (Lyman and Scott, 1970: 2). For Heidegger, the inevitability of the individual in society subjects the individual to the 'generalised other'. This is a dialectical relation that cannot be escaped in a lifelong processes of becoming. Yet it is the associated thought that one's attempts to adjust to societal norms and values (so emphasised in sociology) can result in a fall from authentic existence that has been taken up in existentialist philosophy (in the idea that 'existence precedes essence') and in the 'drawing the individual out from the crowd' (Johnston, 1986: 73) found in much humanistic geography. For all of the possibilities associated with the radical openness of becoming, it is also true that 'the price we pay for our liberty is contingency, which is never very far away from absurdity' (Eagleton, 2003: 223 quoted in Cornwell, 2006: 3). Today, more than ever then, taking the absurd seriously, I believe, concentrates attention neither on the self nor on society but on the very real imaginative work demanded of being in the world. The literature, theatre and sociology of the absurd can be re-examined for what they reveal of processes of self-

alienation and anxiety of modern life. They point to the 'disjuncture between one's own ideal image of what things should be and what they are now' (Shoham, 1974: 25). More specifically, a focus on the absurd leads us to investigate processes of self-alienation in the form of stoical acceptance, radical scepticism and accidia which can lead to the breakdown of an individual's involvement with society.

Heidegger's phenomenology – so influential within humanistic geographical approaches - provides a starting point for understanding how we not only experience the absurd but may also inadvertently absorb and internalise it. For Heidegger (2010: 172), we fall prey precisely because of our 'concern with understanding and being attuned to being in the world'. For Heidegger, 'only what is unmeaningful can be absurd' (Heidegger, 2010: 147) and although there are conditions in which beings can experience and be absurd themselves, 'the meaning of being can never be contrasted with beings or with being as the supporting "ground" of beings, for ground is only accessible as meaning, even if that meaning itself is an abyss of meaninglessness' (Heidegger, 2010: 147). That is, even if things *seem* absurd and if some specific forms of behaviour might be regarded as absurd, then being itself is not and cannot be.

Yet, there is a sense in which being can be and has become increasingly absurd when we as individuals internalise (and thereby negate) aspects of the absurd in the explicit adoption of the stoical acceptance and radical scepticism which constitute what Bowker (2015) terms the absurd philosophical stance. Stoical acceptance is a prominent theme within existentialist thought and the literature and theatre of the absurd and is the essence of the absurd philosophical stance (Bowker, 2015). The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines stoicism as 'the indifference to pleasure or pain'. This implies a repression of emotions, a withdrawal into one's

self and a failure to engage dialectically as part of being in the world. The further implication of this is that 'stoical thought … insists that the truth is to be found within its *own abstract* thought and concepts. It does not … adopt the more open posture of *letting* being disclose itself …Consequently, stoical thought does not discover any self-determining content within itself' (Houlgate, 2005: 73 original emphasis).

Radical scepticism is a further development of stoicism. From the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, a sceptic is someone who 'doubts the possibility of real knowledge of any kind' there being no 'adequate grounds for certainty as to the truth of any proposition whatsoever'. In its most extreme or radical form, such scepticism is 'the logical consequence of the insistent concern to secure and preserve one's own (negative) freedom of thought above all else' (Houlgate, 2005: 74). The price paid in the adoption of a radically sceptical stance is internal contradiction: 'sceptical consciousness retains its certainty of itself and its own freedom in the very act of calling everything else into question' (Houlgate, 2005: 74). However, 'unlike stoicism … reason does not simply withdraw in to itself … rather it looks also to the world itself and finds reason to be implicit in the very objects and individuality it encounters' (Holugate, 2005: 78). Such internal contradiction can lead in two directions it would seem. On the one hand, while radical scepticism relates closely to the material world, it might be said to produce instrumental judgements which 'see the mix of the moral and its qualities to result from the mix of the empirical' (Sack, 2003: 60). On the other hand, radical scepticism might also be considered to lead to a form of emotional and ethical paralysis because 'knowledge, for the sensitive can be bruising' and since the 'interests of others are often in conflict … having all the information may be paralysing' (Brown, quoted in Shoham, 1974: 53-54).[ii]

Shoham (1974) distinguished *accidia* as an individual's breakdown of involvement with social norms and values as distinct from the alienation experienced at a collective level within society. This is a most extreme and individualised sense of self-alienation resulting in, for example, what societal norms would regard as madness and criminality. Accidia is also troubling in its implications for recent interest among geographers in an ethics of care since it 'refuses the feasibility of value-consensus and dismisses the notion of solidarity as a delusion' (Shoham, 1974).

Stoical acceptance, radical scepticism and accidia are distinct from, and a more individualised form of, the collective class-based experience of alienation highlighted in political economy approaches. The emphasis on individual agency within the sociology of the absurd has led Shoham (1974: 4) to argue that humans are not the 'creatures of social or psychological forces – class, caste, race, or deep-lying unconscious states which *determine* their behaviour in the situation'. It is this exclusive focus on agency and self-alienation that can be troubling within a geographical perspective since 'when we assume a decentred attitude toward a world that includes ourselves our individual projects may seem meaningless and absurd' (Entrikin, 1991: 1). Conceivably, however, the latent analytical potential of a focus on the absurd is one that promises the greater integration of humanistic geography's interest in the experiences of agents and the partial basis of experience and agency in, and detachment from, deeper lying structures of society and their contradictions found in political economy approaches and the dialectical thought associated with them. This may be what Shoham (1974: xvii) described as the little explored 'no-man's-land between sociology and existentialism'. It is also what Bennett (2015:16) takes from reading Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*: 'humans do live in an "absurd

situation", but neither the world nor humans are absurd: it is only the union of the world and humans that is absurd'.

## III    Capitalism's contradictions in an ae of absurdity

*The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines a contradiction as 'a state of opposition in things compared' and a 'logical inconsistency'. That is, a contradiction might be regarded as an *underlying state* produced from the structural properties of capitalism – an abstraction not immediately observable let alone experienced directly.

Dialectical thought within political economy approaches has been used to identify the underlying structural contradictions of capitalist societies. This is what Castree refers to as the 'logic of necessity' in Harvey's writings in which phenomenal, sensuous things are worked with dialectically in order to explain the links between surface phenomena and a deeper lying logic (Castree, 1996). The application of dialectical reasoning has persisted within the social sciences despite the limits of Hegel's original formulation by those who use it as a method and by those who view it as ontology – the latter for whom capitalism is 'a society in structured motion' (Castree, 1996: 345).[iii] Here I speculate on whether absurdity has become so pervasive as to now play more than this passive role of offering a window onto structural contradictions. Two questions present themselves.

First, are abstract underlying contradictions so great now as to take on manifestly absurd and concrete phenomenal appearances? Harvey (1985) himself argued that capitalism's contradictions tend to magnify and gain latitude over time. This is also true of the modern state's interventions within capitalist systems specifically (Scott and Roweis, 1977). Each of the different modes of state intervention in capitalist societies – 'bureaucratic', 'purposive rational'

and 'participatory' - produces its own contradictions (Offe, 1975). Indeed, the contradictions that arise from state intervention have become apparent in the unfolding environmental risks of a second or reflexive modernity (Beck, 1992) to the point where they have prompted the increasing individualisation of politics. As Beck (1995: 93) describes 'purposive rationality becomes overextended, insecure and value-dependent at once; its realization turns into a theatre of the absurd, because everyone produces ever more contradictory results, with ever more meticulous methods'. That is, the *'reflexivity of modernity* fuels chronic doubt and perpetually subjects political programs to challenge and revision in light of contrasting claims by experts and the rapid proliferation of alternative models' (Krieger, 2002: 339 original emphasis) or what Krieger describes as a 'politics of dissonance'.

Second, does the experience of absurdity itself become factored into the logic of capitalism? If some of capitalism's contradictions remain invisible, we are surrounded by others on a daily basis (Harvey, 2015: 4) in the form of absurdities. It seems plausible to suggest that absurdity has become so common place as to be accepted and internalized - producing important feedbacks within the constitution of capitalist societies as a result of the processes of structuration depicted by Giddens (1986). Over time, not only do capitalism's contradictions gain latitude, simultaneously magnifying the scope and depth of experiences of alienation but also this experience of alienation induces absurd forms of behaviour (such as accidia) or is ever more absorbed and acted upon reflexively (in the form of stoicism and radical scepticism) and fed back into the logic of capitalism. If existential questions 'are fundamental to the structural conditions introduced by capitalism', then the incorporation of elements of the absurd into the logic of capitalism in this way provides further confirmation of the 'peculiarly explosive potential' of such structural conditions (Giddens, 1986: 196).

In order to understand this historical process more concretely we can - in the spirit of Hegel's dialectic thought that philosophical ideas and modern freedoms are the necessary and contingent products of specific times and places (Houlgate, 2005) - briefly set the emergence of an age of absurdity in crude historical context. Conceivably, during the emergence of capitalism with the development of the factory system and other forms of mass collective labouring, experience, let alone recognition, of the absurd were negligible when set against collective experiences of alienation. The literature, theatre and sociology of the absurd emerged only by the late capitalism of the 1950s and 1960s partly in reaction to the underlying contradictions of modern capitalist societies – including underlying limits of scientific reason and its application in workplaces and government bureaucracies - as well as the horrors of successive world wars (Bennett, 2015; Esslin, 2001). If at this time the absurdity of the human condition forced itself upon our consciousness in earnest, it turned out to be a more complex emotional and intellectual experience than at first imagined. We failed to take the absurd seriously since many of the deficiencies of modern society derive from 'our understanding our freedom in a partial one-sided way' (Houlgate, 2005: 23) and these reflexive but one-sided understandings have had their own unanticipated consequences. Although recognised at that time and since in specific and extreme forms of behaviour such as accidia (Shoham, 1971), absurdity has had a more subtle and pervasive effect: it has been internalized in the form of what Bowker (2010) calls 'the absurd philosophical stance' involving stoicism and radical scepticism. These are behaviours which, via feedback, produce unintended consequences in terms of the magnification of at least one structural contradiction of capitalism – the contradiction between the self and society. Today, as a result, we live in an age of absurdity. Not only are the everyday experiences of the absurd more apparent but some of them have also become part of societal norms as the unanticipated

consequences of a measure of previous societal internalization of the absurd. The normative question beyond the scope of this paper but which I return to in conclusion is: does the adoption of such a self-consciously absurd philosophical stance radically undermine the possibilities for a progressive politics and an ethics of care? [iv]

## IV     Reification and self-alienation in an age of absurdity

In at least one respect Marxian political economy and humanist critiques of Hegel (following Heidegger) are united in their rejection of the rationality of the existing historical world (Sinnerbrink, 2007: 48). Humanists have emphasised existential despair and subjective demands in the overcoming of alienation. For Marx, the alienation of labour generates a social (collective) demand for revolutionary praxis. Both the lack of any final synthesis possible within humanist perspectives and the failure of historical events to usher in the communism anticipated by Marx pose the question of whether we now live more than ever in an age of absurdity?

In this connection, renewed focus on the 'negative dialectics' of critical theory provides the basis for integrating political economy and humanistic geography when taking the absurd seriously. Processes of reification are important in revealing how self-alienation generates recursive relationships between the surface appearances of absurdity and the structural contradictions from which they stem. Particular constellations of social relations ensure the unity of the capitalist system but also generate the reification of the products of human labour; the products of human labour come to have a life of their own and are veiled by a necessary illusion

(Held, 1980). In this way, for example, commodity fetishism - the accumulation of 'stuff' – can be self-alienating (Miller, 2010).

For Heidegger, the inevitability of the individual in society subjects the individual to the 'generalised other' but the attempt to adjust to societal norms and values (so emphasised in sociology) is a fall from authentic existence and can, as with accidia (Shoham, 1974), lead to the breakdown of an individual's involvement with society. Perhaps the key point to draw from the sociology of the absurd is self-alienation as an ongoing *process* - and a potentially deepening and broadening negative dialectical process at that, whether measured in the short term of day-to-day existence or the inter-generational long term of historical progress. There is a dialectic inherent in our being in the world since the body 'as an *origo* that is always already split between taking its own stance as definitive for orientation and taking its cues from the environing world' (Casey, 1993: 88). Dialectic reason thus appears inherent in the practice of being in the world; a world we know instinctively as somewhere between the knowing subject central to and above the world and ourselves as decentred - as simply labour in the social division of labour (Castree, 1996).

It is these thoughts associated with phenomenological approaches in humanistic geography flowing from Heidegger's writings that present another specific point of tangency with the political economy tradition within human geography by dint of the relevance of dialectical reason in understanding and overcoming the absurd. Dialectical thought has been said to contribute to a framework of the absurd since 'the perspective of identifying contradictions in one's existence, necessary to the thought of any dialectition, when carried to its logical conclusion, leads to the position of the absurd … The "absurd position" is the *conscious realization* that there is no final synthesis' (Goodwin, 1971: 833-834 original emphasis).

Contrasted to the fatalism so closely associated with the negative dialectics of critical theory, in this positive light, dialectical thought provides one means of transcending the normative impasse so closely associated with the self-conscious adoption of the absurd philosophical stance noted above.

In the lexicon of structuration theory (Giddens, 1986: 180), paradoxes might be thought of as the discursive or rhetorical interpretative schemes that allow for a measure of reflexive 'de-reification'. *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines paradox as 'a statement or tenet contrary to received opinion or belief, a statement that is seemingly self-contradictory or absurd, though possibly well-founded'. Sainsbury (2009: 1) defines paradox as 'an apparently unacceptable conclusion derived by apparently acceptable reasoning from apparently acceptable premises'. Paradoxes act as dialectical formulations that can help to unveil the connections between surface appearances of the absurd and deeper-lying contradictions, not least because of the explanatory power hinted at in the qualification 'possibly well founded'. Paradoxes are part of the *rhetoric* of dialectical presentation (Castree, 1996: 354) and reasoning and suggest 'there is no better response than to accept that contradictions are revealing of truth' (Sainsbury, 2009: 150).[v]

To the extent that paradoxes are merely playful conundrums they may form part of interpretative schemes that actually allow for the self-alienation accompanying the internalisation of absurd experiences in the form of stoicism and radical scepticism. However, paradoxes are also serious. 'Historically, they are associated with crises in thought and with revolutionary advances' (Sainsbury, 2009: 1). The thought that 'while other resources are dwindling, absurdity is multiplying and flourishing and filling the earth' (Foley, 2010: 220) could be considered

paradoxical and prompts us to think why this might be so. If the contradiction between appearance and reality, between surface events and deeper lying causal processes is perhaps capitalism's most fundamental contradiction (Harvey, 2015) and if absurdity is what is produced from the tension between the self and society, it is paradoxes that provide the interpretative schemes by which we can begin to take the absurd more seriously in our emotional and intellectual responses to it.

## V    The proliferation of matter, the absurdity of stuff

To the extent that 'urges can outrun one's actual attunement and understanding …crowd out other possibilities' (Heidegger, 2010: 189), then stuff, the proliferation of matter, that 'stands rival to nature' (Miller, 2010: 153) is an important subject for gauging the absurd.  The fetishization of commodities entailed in the accumulation of stuff provides one of the best examples of how reification (the objectification of the subject and the subjectification of objects) involves self-alienation and a measure of false consciousness.

### 1. Encountering the absurdity of stuff

Recalling the representative techniques of the theatre and literature of the absurd, much of the absurdity of the proliferation of matter can be observed and is experienced in specific encounters, or situations in which we find ourselves, with stuff.

One important and fairly ubiquitous *encounter* with the absurdity of stuff takes place in the specialised settings – the 'cathedrals of consumption' – of modern retail malls. On the one hand, they are spaces in which we as consumers have by now acquired an incomplete reflexive self-awareness and enjoyment as flâneurs. On the other hand, they are also places that are unable

to completely eradicate the existential angst produced by the acquisition of stuff. Something of the contradiction between the self and society produced in encounters within retail malls is captured by Goss (1993: 19) who notes how 'the contemporary shopper, while taking pleasure in consumption, cannot but be aware of … authoritative censure, and is therefore … driven by a simultaneous desire and self-contempt, constantly alternating between assertion and denial of identity'.

However, perhaps the most absurd *situation* in which we find ourselves in relation to stuff is in our own homes. The proliferation of matter was the subject of Ionesco's *The New Tenant* where furniture gradually clutters up the scene during the play (Esslin, 2001: 158). It is also a theme powerfully conveyed in Miller's description of the 'elephants of stuff' – houses – which become vast containers for all kinds of objects. As 'a relation between material and imaginative realms' (Blunt and Dowling, 2006: 22), home can be seen as the epitome of the real and the good (Sack, 2003). For Heidegger, dwelling provides some solace in the face of a compression of space-time that brings no nearness (see also Casey, 1997: 272-274). 'To dwell, to be set at peace, means to remain at peace within … the free space that safeguards each thing in its nature' (Heidegger, 1951, quoted in Briganti and Mezei, 2012: 24). In our attempts to be at peace with our own nature, the house is where we seek to attend to and draw near to things. Yet, houses, the 'non-I that protects the I' (Bachelard, 1958: quoted in Briganti and Mezei, 2012: 20), rather than being passive vehicles in which to express ourselves through the collection of stuff, are just as likely to engender anxiety. Their permanence reminds us of our own transience.

As Miller goes on to observe in *Stuff*, it is also the case that 'every time we create a thing we also create a contradiction, a possibility of oppressing ourselves if the thing we made then

develops its own autonomous interests' (Miller, 2010: 59). The fact that the 'generalization of technical mediation has extended well beyond its earlier economic limits' (Feenberg, 2015: 498) means that processes of self-alienation extend to the many technologies that are now taken for granted parts of everyday life and work. 'Not only are more and more gadgets demanding attention, their solicitations are ever more cunning' (Foley, 2010: 95). Indeed, Shoham (1974: 101) some time ago observed how 'technology, assembly lines, and gadgeting turn boomerang-like on their initiators'. Technical mediation of consumption enables the internalisation of some of the most apparent absurdities, obscuring capitalism's contradictions through processes of co-option (Marcuse, 1991) signalled in the likes of 'prosumption' (Thrift, 2006). As 'objects with agency', the devices consciously brought into existence to 'make markets' as part of a process of 'economization' nevertheless have their own unanticipated and unintended effects - 'they articulate actions; they act or make others act' (Muniesa, Millo and Callon, 2007: 2). Indeed, the self-alienation at the heart of this process of economization points up the tangency between humanistic and political economy traditions in geography since 'the economy' is located neither in individuals nor in society and economy as a whole, but in the 'intermediary realities that … establish both a theoretical and practical a link between the two' (Caliskan and Callon, 2009: 378).

In this process, the stuff with which we surround ourselves has been subject to some strange, absurd, reversals in meaning. The signs or causal properties attributed to alienable material objects can become detached or undergo transformation in their circulation to take on socially produced meanings as inalienable symbols (Keane, 2001). In extreme, this can lead to the sort of referential mania – or accidia – the subject and said to be the intention of Nabokov's unresolved and unresolvable short story *Signs and Symbols* (Leving, 2012). In more mundane

terms, in the process of economization 'consumers … participate, like other actors concerned, in the objectification of those qualities' (Callon et al, 2002: 202-203) producing strange or absurd outcomes. For example, the giving of gifts 'has become the main refuge of formal exchange' (Miller, 2010: 101). Fashion, brands can get produced and be exposed to their own contradictions - an example being the adoption of an upper class brand such as Burberry by football hooligans (Foley, 2010: 60).

Fashion brands also provide an extreme window onto the scale and value of absurdity as it has now been incorporated into capitalism. For while 'fashion in London is much more about anxiety than it is about industry' (Miller, 2010: 34), brands have also become a significant store of value within the contemporary economy (Pike, 2013). It is easy to 'treat the excesses of a world that has become alien to us as excesses that are alien to our world' (Debord, 1995: 198). However, as Debord (1995: 198) goes on to observe 'people who denounce incitements to wastefulness as absurd or dangerous in a society of economic abundance do not understand the purpose of waste. … the commodity form itself lays down laws whose … application gives rise not only to private life as a distinct reality but also to that reality's subsequent conquest by the social consumption of images'. That is, the apparent absurdity of wasteful conspicuous consumption should be taken seriously for what it reveals about the contradictions of capitalism. Rather, any excesses in the consumption of fashion are integral to the absurdity of modern life. Taken to extremes, fashion or 'the sheer fad item perfectly expresses the fact that, as the mass of commodities become more and more absurd, absurdity itself has become a commodity in its own right' (Debord, 1995: 44).

2. *The capitalist contradictions of stuff*

Evolutionary economics provides important insights into how the alienating effects of stuff often become magnified over time. The effects of historical accidents often become magnified and locked-in through 'network externalities' and this often includes the selection of sub-optimal technologies or means of provisioning (Arthur, 1989; David, 1985). It turns out that the stuff that surrounds and helps to define us and our potential is at best less than we imagined or, at worst, has its own unanticipated, limiting and alienating effects on us.

Something of the absurdity of provisioning in contemporary life revealed in one major conceptual focus of economic geographic research - global production networks (Henderson et al, 2002) – is captured in inverse in Spufford's (2010:17) *Red Plenty* – a part factual, part fictional account of centralized planning in the former Soviet Union. 'Seen from plenty, now would be hard to imagine. It would seem not quite real, an absurd time when, for no apparent reason, human beings went without things easily within the power of humanity to supply, and lives did not flower as it was obvious they could'. Of course the apparent absurdity of this inversion rests on the obfuscating powers of ideologies mobilized within contemporary consumer culture. These ideologies ensure that although 'many of us live in a world where more and more people are quite distant from any cosmology identified with established religion … our secular world is just as haunted today by shadowy spirits that seem to perform strange magical feats that conjure vast powers out of the dross' (Miller, 2010; 74).

Indeed, the false consciousness involved in the reification of stuff ensures that the deeper environmental and labour value contradictions involved in trade and production that are implicated in the stuff that we consume are rendered largely invisible in the complexity of the global production networks involved (Princen et al, 2002). There is an 'increasingly bizarre and

bitter disjuncture between a fluid core of producer-consumer practices … and an impoverished periphery in which something close to anarchy often reigns in what is often an extended battlefield … that the modern state is meant to banish' (Thrift, 2006: 300) but which remains largely and for much of the time obscured for communities in the global north in the 'magic' of specialized consumption spaces and the processes by which containerization has ensured an apparently seamless process of provisioning.

Retail malls are specialized spaces in which the social relations of production are necessarily veiled from the consumer (Sack, 1992). As specialized spaces of consumption they involve elaborate attempts 'to sever themselves from the processes and other places that make up networks of production, circulation and consumption' (Sack, 1992: 3). In modern retail malls, then, 'designers manufacture the illusion that something else other than mere shopping is going on, while also mediating the materialist relations of mass consumption and disguising the identity and rootedness of the shopping center in the contemporary capitalist social order. Retail malls have been regarded as pseudo places which work 'through spatial strategies of dissemblance and duplicity' (Goss: 1993: 19). The modern magic they weave upon us 'involves a collective superstition that it is the object itself - much like the "primitive" fetish - that confers upon the owner a power over nature and others; whereas such power, in fact, lies in the social relations that ascribe the power of possession' (Goss, 1993: 20). As Goss (1993:40) elaborates, 'the shopping center appears to be everything that it is not. It contrives to be a public, civic place even though it is private and run for profit; it offers a place to commune and recreate, while it seeks retail dollars; and it borrows signs of other places and times to obscure its rootedness in contemporary capitalism'.

The apparent magic of the mall is closely associated with the cargo containers so central to modern logistics. Despite being 'coffins of labour', for affluent consumers in the global north, they can also appear to be bearers of something of the magic found within 'cargo cults' in the way the global logistics industry combines with the economies of various offshore jurisdictions to organize the seamless appearance and disappearance of stuff. One estimate suggests that the US imported four times as many varieties of goods in 2002 as in 1972 (Broda and Weinstein, 2004, cited in Levinson, 2006:3). Thus, 'there is something astonishing for many in the Global North as they access an amazingly wide range of material objects arriving in their houses from the other side of the world to be consumed and disposed of at a whim with paltry apparent consequences' (Birtchnell and Urry, 2015: 28). Yet, as Cowen (2014: 229) notes, 'the use of the virtual space of the Internet as a metaphor for the actual material space of supply chains is fascinating and ironic. … If the Internet connects people and movements even as it subjugates them, so too does the "physical Internet", paradoxically in ways that are often *more* material and *less* visible'.

3. *Reification, paradoxes and the dialectics of stuff*

The contradictions of processes of economic globalization 'create opportunities for alternative forms of production and distribution to become more viable, and … open the way for strategies aimed at developing certain products on the basis of specific qualities. These strategies are facilitated by the emergence of new patterns of consumption on the basis of new values that are socially created and shared in a context of growing social differentiation' (Renard, 1999: 484). Yet, arguably it is the surface manifestation of these contradictions – their absurd aspect - rather

than the underlying contradictions themselves that has done much to call forth the likes of ethical consumption initiatives.

If we are presented with the absurd in the encounters and situations described above, some of the absurdity associated with them is also obscured from us in the process of self-alienation. Lyman and Scott (1970: 18) describe how man (sic) 'with his imagination … not only contributes social life but also multiplies his wants, enhances his desires, and pictures his possibilities'. In *Where Stuff Comes From*, Molotch notes how the proliferation of stuff has an important function. 'Given the inherent ambiguity of all reality and the nagging suspicion that we always exist on the edge of existential chaos, objects work to hold meanings more or less stable, solid, and accessible to others as well as to one's self' (Molotch, 2004: 11). It is this reification of stuff that provides the ideological motor in contemporary consumer society since 'what it is to be a person is linked to the accumulation of discrete, separable or alienable things, owned by individuals as private property' (Lury, 2011: 35).

One danger in moving too far beyond the binaries so strongly connected to dialectical thinking is that human affairs are replete with dualities and – in paradoxical formulations – recognition of these provides a means of confronting the absurd.[vi] For Miller (2010) there are a series of ironic contradictions or paradoxes to the contemporary human condition. He does not label these absurdities, although it is clear they produce a sense of absurdity. He highlights the greater freedoms we now enjoy but which only create anxiety, the greater sense of empowerment that also feels oppressive and the individualism that seems only to lead to greater conformity (Miller, 2010: 38).

In addressing the absurd it is as well to remember that although stuff is ubiquitous and many problems can be associated with its proliferation, 'whatever our environmental fears or concerns over materialism, we will not be helped by either a theory of stuff, or an attitude to stuff that simply tries to oppose ourselves to it' (Miller, 2010: 5). This has led Miller (2010: 60) to suggest the need to 'replace a theory of stuff as representation with stuff as one part of a process of objectification or self-alienation' and the value of recovering something of the idealism of Hegel's dialectical reason from Marx's historical materialist inversion of it. Hegel emphasised the philosophical process itself – self-alienation being a process necessary for personal and societal development.[vii] That is, 'humanity is estranged from its normative ends and its creations escape its conscious control' (Bronner, 2011: 37).

Hegel's idealism lies in the belief that the estranged world can and should be transformed into a more human one. It might be objected that 'rooting alienation within the structure of consciousness can be seen as insulating it from reality' (Bronner, 2011: 37). Yet, it is the harsh reality of the production, circulation and consumption of commodities to which we can become inured (Appadurai, 1986), were it not for the patent absurdity of the biographies of these same commodities. It is the conscious awareness of the vast distances over which, the intense division of labour involved in, and the mobilisation of resources to provide for our consumption of commodities that is more immediate than the material reality of stuff in which 'places far away from the end market can still be part of an international supply chain, so long as they have well-run ports and a lot of volume' (Levinson, 2006: 269). In spite of how functional (profitable) arrangements within global production networks can be on capitalism's own terms, it is their absurdity which presents paradoxes (rather than the immediate recognition of the systemic contradictions of underlying arrangements) that we are able to respond to emotionally and

intellectually. It is the absurdities of consumption and our interpretation of them through the contemplation of paradoxes that have provided some of the important cues for ethical consumption initiatives. In this regard, 'theorizing about global political responsibility requires more than just telling stories about spatially extensive networks of connection and entanglement' (Barnett et al, 2011: 9).

If the shopping centre in which we encounter so much stuff 'sells paradoxical experiences to its customer' (Goss, 1993: 40) and if the situations in which we find ourselves at home force us 'into taking positions on wider cosmological issues of authenticity, truth and identity' (Miller, 2010: 96), it is these paradoxes that furnish us with the interpretative schemes that, in turn, ensure that an element of the absurdity of ever expanding consumption possibilities need not be taken for granted let alone internalized. The prospects for confronting absurdity in an ethics of care or a global sense of place may be greater than often appreciated since 'power to influence patterns of consumption is widely distributed as a result of its being bound up in a variety of shared political projects' (Barnett et al, 2011: 202) or 'micro-worlds of regulation' which do not correspond with territory, state and nested hierarchy (Amin 2004). And while it is the case that ethical consumption 'might be *less* significant in purely economic terms than is often claimed' it may also be that it is '*more* significant in political terms than is often acknowledged' (Barnett et al, 2011: 202 original emphases).

Taking the growing appearance and experience of absurdity seriously involves taking the paradoxes of life in contemporary capitalist societies seriously; paradoxes provide the important cues for our own emotional and intellectual responses to the absurd and normative agendas that I touch on briefly below by way of conclusion. It is important to interpret and act upon the

multiplying paradoxes of an age of absurdity since abolishing alienation calls for abolishing reification or confronting it not just accepting its inevitability (Bronner, 2011: 40).

## VI    Conclusion

'The world has grown larger, new encounters with old civilizations have taken place, identities have multiplied' (Bronner, 2011: 115). The false consciousness that has obscured an ability to recognize and act upon the collectively experienced forms of alienation traditionally emphasized in Marxian analysis has been added to by false consciousness associated with the adoption of an absurd philosophical stance based on the heightened individualism of stoicism, radical scepticism and behaviors, such as accidia, that are considered absurd.

An agenda focused on the absurd can appeal to different theoretical traditions within human geography. In this paper I have underlined the importance of retaining both humanistic and Marxian insights in any dialectical understanding of the absurd in contemporary society. I sought to illustrate how absurdity is apparent in the proliferation of stuff and the organization of its production and consumption in global production networks that have come to the attention of human geographers and are contested by ethical consumption initiatives. However, it may also be that a focus on the absurd can usefully animate research on substantive concerns that include, inter alia, our encounters with (sub)urban landscapes (Relph, 1976) and sites (such as retail malls and airports) within them (Goss, 1993; Sack, 1992) and the bureaucratization of society (Graeber, 2016) and even our own plight as educators and researchers.

From a normative point of view, it may seem like a tragic state of affairs that human geography should focus on the absurdity of contemporary life. An agenda focused on the absurd poses as many questions (on the relation of self to society and of identity politics to broader

based collective politics) as it answers (regarding the epistemological value of emotions and the recognition of ordinary evils) for considerations of an ethics of care within human geography (Cloke, 2002; Lawson, 2007; McDowell, 2004; Massey, 1994). Normative agendas might be thought to be largely absent in the face of 'the deep chaos of modern life and its intractability before rational thought' (Harvey, 1990: 44). For Bowker (2014) fears about subjects' destructive desires have combined with fears about rationality in a way that has made the absurd stance seem attractive. The problem with this appropriation of a concern with absurdity is that it 'denies possibilities for the ethical subject in the face of absurdity' (Bowker, 2014: 5). That is, the explicit adoption of 'the absurd posture announces an ethic that appears less guilt ridden than its alternatives but that is, in complex and concealed ways, more violent, more destructive to selves and others' (Bowker, 2014: 5). Yet, if we live in an age of absurdity, then questions of the alienation of the individual may be more relevant now than when originally emphasized in the literature, theatre and sociology of the absurd. At the time these movements were being promulgated, collective opposition to the institutions of the capitalist system was both possible and effective in a way it seems hard to imagine today. As Knox (2009: 133) describes, the 'high water mark of … [the] alienation generation was 1968, the year of sit-ins, protest marches, strikes, civil disorder, and riots.  The heady mix did not last long … The failure of 1960s radicalism … produced the preconditions for the emergence of a "postmodern generation" characterized not by collectivist idealism but by self-oriented materialism'.

From a normative point of view there are good reasons not to treat the absurd as a coherent philosophical position (Bowker, 2014). Indeed, my point about taking the absurd seriously is precisely that our experiences of absurdity have become sufficiently important, generalised and normalised that we should seek to confront them both analytically and in praxis

rather than internalize them as part of philosophical positions which preserve conditions of irresolution and meaninglessness (Bowker, 2014: 9). The absurd can be accommodated to dialectical reason. Critical theory's 'negative dialectics' – so useful from an analytical point of view to understanding processes of reification and self-alienation – *do,* in their more positive aspect, provide cues for normative agendas. Absurdity 'is not tragic but comic, a reason not to reject it but to draw from it a strange new sustenance and relish' (Foley, 2010: 48). The paradoxes that each of us can readily grasp in an age of absurdity are playful but they are also serious. They provide the cues from which to draw new sustenance from the absurdity of modern life. That is, 'awareness, coupled with the act of rebellion, results in the transcending of the absurd' (Goodwin, 1971: 841) since awareness of absurdity also provides freedom and choice to act. If 'free will is a concept that geography has never really addressed directly' (Sack, 2003: 79), then taking the absurd seriously may help redress this situation.

The possibilities for action appear more than ever to lie in the sorts of individual awareness and action envisaged originally in the sociology of the absurd. For Bronner (2011: 115), one possible course of action is to 'transform private troubles into public issues' when seeking to overcome the way in which society stunts individuality. For some, it is precisely the spread of technology and bureaucratic administration that open new possibilities for de-reification (Feenberg, 2015) through a micropolitics of democratic rationalization.[viii] Such micropolitics might be seen in what Amin (2004) refers to as 'micro-worlds of regulation' (Amin, 2004) and in what Harvey (2015: 287 and 281 respectively) terms a 'secular revolutionary humanism' composed of 'decentralised and networked oppositional forms'. Alternatively, confronting the absurd and thereby confronting the alienation produced under capitalism might be accomplished by way of a 'magical Marxism' (Merrifield, 2010: 9) having

'little to do with rationality or economic reason'. Our sense of being in the world is not lost, though it is, as always, in need of some work.

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[i] The manifestation of absurdity and the absurdity of stuff in particular are unlikely to be unique to capitalism but may have greater resonance in the present of capitalism.

[ii] Underlining the sense of normative paralysis associated with the contemporary sensibilities of some geographical research (Phelps and Tewdwr-Jones, 2008).

[iii] For some, dialectical method associated with Hegel proves too limiting (Jones, 1999). Yet 'dialectics … survives despite criticisms of its occasional idealism, teleologies, totalities binarisms, and, at times, its downright clunkiness' (Dixon, Woodward and Jones, 2008: 2549) in a plurality of dialectics (Bond, 2014).

[iv] This presumably would be the case if negation is not additive and cumulative as Bhaskar (1993) suggests. We might entertain the thought that the individualization of politics (Beck, 1993) and reflexive incorporation of the absurd into the logic of capitalism raise the prospect of subtraction and reversals in development.

[v] If 'the determination of identity is inseparable, indeed indistinguishable, from the determination of difference' (Houlgate, 2005: 36) then paradoxical formulations would seem central to thinking through these contradictions since 'if one determines the categories of thought freely and self-critically, one will see that they *are* self-contradictory' (Houlgate, 2005: 6). 'The dialectical

principle … is where apparently stable thoughts reveal their inherent instability turning into their opposites' (Houlgate, 2005: 38).

[vi] Another danger is what Miller (2010) describes as a tyranny of theory when it is left unbalanced by empirics.

[vii] Leaving aside the limits of the historical optimism described above, what Miller (2010) appears to be invoking here is what Wartenberg (1993) identifies as the sense of Hegel's 'absolute idealism' in a logic of conceptuality (in which concepts determine reality), rather than 'subjective idealism' in which reality is dependent upon constructs of the human mind. Hegel's view is one in which finite beings are dependent - they are parts of a larger idea of reality. Reality contains 'the concept of its own development' as a result of a logical system of negation and contradiction which provides a way to 'abstract from our specifically temporal understanding of development' (Wartenberg, 1993: 110 and 113) respectively.

[viii] Feenberg (2015) identifies three movements opposed to the reifications of contemporary capitalism: those involving critique of technocracy in the 1960s; the environmentalist and feminist critiques of the 1970s and 1980s, and; the micropolitical activism of democratic rationalization of today. With reference to the internet, he argues that such micropolitics 'may lack long-term organization and is often focused on a single issue and sometimes a single location' but that it is a 'special and irreplaceable form of activism in a technological society' acting to limit and redesign systems of technological mediation.