Ugly beautiful? Counting the cost of the global fashion industry

Louise Crewe

ABSTRACT: This article asks you to think geographically about fashion. We all wear clothes, but how often do we reflect on who makes our clothes, where and under what conditions? Why do we buy and wear the clothes we do and how often do we think about where the value lies in a garment? Why do the phrases ‘Made in Italy’ and ‘Made in China’ have such different connotations? How can a child in Cambodia working in a denim factory have any geographical connection to a Prada store on Bond Street? The following article argues for a relational approach to the study of fashion, one that brings these complex connections between production, branding, retailing and wearing into simultaneous and mutually constitutive view. The article shows how the global maps of clothing supply and retailing expose our complicity as consumers in the production of deeply unequal geographies of fashion.

Introduction

‘In 1997 Nguyễn Thị Thu Phượng died in Vietnam while making Nike trainers. She was struck in the heart by a piece of shrapnel that flew out of a sewing machine’ (McIntyre, 2006).

In August 2006 a 22 year old Uruguayan model died of heart failure, allegedly as a result of starvation, while participating in a fashion show during Fashion Week (BBC News, 2006).

In August 2008 the summer Olympic Games will be hosted by Beijing, China. The Olympic Games are the most effective international corporate marketing platform in the world (Playfair, 2008).


What unites these seemingly unconnected events that span continents and decades, and speak of both death and celebration, the individual and the crowd, labour and leisure? The answer is the global significance of the fashion industry and the contradictions that lie at its heart. These events reveal how the geographies of fashion connect people, places, practices and objects in ways that are scarcely imaginable. Think for a moment about some of these connections. From the sweatshop worker making premium branded sportswear for the Beijing Olympics, to the clothes-hanger models on the catwalk prepared to die for their careers, to the unemployed young designer fresh from college who dreams of a highly paid job in the fashion industry that is unlikely ever to come to fruition, to the under-paid and over-worked shop assistant in Primark, and to us, the consumer, faced with the constant anxieties about what to buy, where to shop, what to wear and how to wear it. It would appear that there are a great many fashion victims, all connected by the invisible threads binding this global system of garment design, production, retail, consumption and wear.

Framing fashion geographically

But why does fashion matter geographically and why might we as geographers be interested in it? It is undeniable that fashion has had a difficult time breaking into the discipline of geography. The icon of shabby non-style, the geography teacher in his (for traditionally, he was a man) corduroy jacket with
patched elbows and ‘practical’ footwear, was always rather more rivers than River Island, more meteorology than metrosexual. The preoccupation of a largely male collective of economic geographers with the ‘real’ business of industry and finance meant that the geographies of fashion and consumption were neglected, pushed to the intellectual margins and deemed trivial, superfluous or even wanton. Those geographers who did engage with questions of fashion typically framed their enquiries in terms of retail geography, looking at catchment areas, drive-times or the modelling of store location. Argued to be an introverted, under-theorised segment of economic geography, retail geography was blinkered and seemingly oblivious to developments outside its self-contained, applied and largely descriptive or predictive loop (Blomley, 1996, p. 238).

But there are signs that this is changing as academics acknowledge the economic, political, cultural and symbolic significance of fashion. The fashion industry is an important creative component in the making of the economy and has made a major contribution to the contemporary proliferation of material culture and ways of narrating self and identity. It has been suggested that understanding the secret life of things may reveal profound insights into the society, economy, culture and polity of commodity-producing systems (Watts, 2005, p. 533). Fashion is one of the most global and the most intimate of commodities. Its chains of sourcing, production, supply and consumption span, unite and divide every imaginable geographical scale, from the world to the body. It is also a ubiquitous commodity, and one that can be both mundane and extraordinary. And of course we all wear clothes. But how often do we reflect upon who made these clothes, where and under what conditions? If our clothes could talk, what geographical stories would they tell (Cook, 2006)? Do we think enough about where our clothes travel around the world, through fields and factories, oceans and air, into shops, homes, wardrobes, onto bodies? How often do we ponder on where the value lies in a garment? Think for a moment about your most valuable item of clothing, and reflect on why it means so much. Is its value derived from where in the world it was produced? (compare the symbolic geographical significance of ‘Made in China’ to ‘Made in Italy’, for example). Or perhaps you cherish the brand or its marketing message (Primark versus Prada, Burton versus Boss). Perhaps the garment was a gift from someone special, or was purchased as a souvenir or memento of a trip, or is unique? Or maybe our clothes accrue value through ownership, possession, history and authenticity, as layers of meaning and memory are trapped within the warp and weft of the fibres. I would suggest that value resides in all of these places and more.

I hope to bring into view these mutually constitutive relations between production, sale, consumption, possession and space. Together they reveal how the geographies of fashion cannot be reduced simply to fibres or garments, or production sites, or to shops, or consumers, but must be understood in terms of relationality: as a recursive loop that is characterised by complexity and connection, fragility and instability, likened to dancing on a tightrope (Rantaia and Lehtonen, 2001). Together these concepts of scale and relationality, both central concepts within current geographical enquiry, may help us on our journey to understanding why fashion matters. By emphasising the relational nature of geographical scale I hope to connect the complex geographies of fashion in ways that go beyond the binary imaginings of spaces ‘over there’ (sweatshops in China, for example) or ‘over here’ (designer stores in London, for example) (Breward and Gilbert, 2006). As Jonathan Murdoch explains, ‘spatial scales are not stacked on top of one another in discrete layers; rather, scale is generated by distance – that is, it stems from the consolidation of power relations between dispersed sites’ (2005, p.
Garments connect global geographies in fascinating ways and reveal highly significant spatial relations, both home and away.

Scale, journeys and the relational geographies of fashion

It is tempting to see the fashion commodity chain as a series of discrete and distant places each with their own specific economic and social geographies (international designer hubs, global production sites, retail stores). And in many ways this has been a spatial construction that has suited big business well. It has enabled brand managers and designers to seduce fashion consumers into paying hugely inflated prices for branded goods while masking the global inequalities that lie at the heart of the international fashion industry. In a classic example of the international division of labour, global companies in an increasingly borderless world have been able to use wage differentials in order to derive competitive advantage. The late Anita Roddick, the founder of The Body Shop, noted how ‘Money without borders leads to sweatshop exploitation of the world’s poorest. Industry after industry seems perfectly happy to use sweatshops and the globe is quickly becoming a playground for those who can move capital and projects quickly from place to place. When business can roam from country to country with few restrictions in its search for the lowest wages, the loosest environmental regulations and the most docile and desperate workers, then the destruction of livelihoods, cultures and environments can be enormous’ (Roddick, 2000, p. 7).

But the excessive attention paid to distant sweated labour practices within the fashion industry has masked a number of other inequalities, asymmetries and connections that begin to scramble many of our trusted assumptions about the taken-for-granted distinctions between production and consumption, near and far, us and them, now and then.

I will draw on a number of commodities (jeans, trainers, t-shirts) to illustrate the importance of...
thinking relationally about fashion space. The first is the
typical example of a pair of branded Lee Cooper jeans,
available for sale at a large discount store called
Cromwell's Madhouse in a provincial British city. The
jeans sell for £19.95 – cheap for a global brand – and
include a label instructing the consumer to ‘wash
inside out separately’. The label tells us nothing about
the origins of these jeans, and I suspect few of us
would spend much time thinking about where the
product was made, or by whom. Yet this pair of jeans
connects us, the consumer, to people and places we
can scarcely imagine, and reveals that we are
complicit in determining the conditions of their
production simply by turning a blind eye in our pursuit
of cheap fashion. The retail store is one stop on a
40,000 mile journey where raw materials and
components criss-cross the globe. The jeans arrived
in a van that came up the A12 from Lee Cooper’s
warehouse at Staples Corner, just at the bottom of the
M1 in north London. Before that they came through
the Channel Tunnel in a lorry from France, and before
that by boat and train from Ras Jebel in Tunisia,
colloquially termed ‘Lee Cooperville’. In one of the
three Lee Cooper factories in Ras Jebel, 500 woman
work furiously, eyes down, muscles clenched, amid the
heat and noise of the huge grey factory. Each
individual here functions like an automaton, hurling
garments onto machines and roaring their sewing
machines down seams, over and over again. There are
no safety guards on the machines and the women
work hard and fast and have to concentrate to avoid
the pounding needles punching through their fingers. It
is alarmingly simple to imagine how the fatal accident
that began this article took place. The average pace is
three tasks per person per minute and there are eight
lines, each with more than 60 people and each
producing 2000 garments per day (Abrams and Astill,
2001).

If this pace of work is difficult to conceptualise, the
online game www.simsweatshop.com (Figure 1) may
clarify things a little. Here you can become a virtual
sweatshop worker. You are invited to enter the world of
the sports shoe maker. The clock ticks away while you
frantically try to put the trainers together. If you work
hard you will be paid your full wage. If you make a
mistake you will be punished accordingly.

If we return now to Ras Jebel and investigate the
geographies of jean production in more detail we see
that this tiny, busy node is just one moment in a much
more extensive journey for our pair of jeans. It is here
that dozens of different components converge and are
transformed: the cotton is grown in Benin, West Africa;
the raw denim comes from Milan; the indigo with which
the denim is dyed comes from Frankfurt; it is
tonestoned with pumice from Turkey; the thread is
made in Northern Ireland, Turkey and Hungary and is
dyed in Spain; the rivets and buttons are
manufactured from zinc and copper from Australia and
Namibia. And these components in turn raise a whole
series of questions about the real social, economic
and political costs incurred in the making of a pair of
jeans: stonestoning produces several tons of
powdered pumice each year that is discarded in Tunis;
indigo leaches into local streams and kills plants and
fish; Benin’s cotton industry is haunted by corruption
and mismanagement, its labour is hard, the rewards
slight and people are dying from insecticide and
pesticide poisoning (Abrams and Astill, 2001). A pair
of jeans uses three-quarters of a pound of pesticides
and synthetic fertilisers (Harkin, 2007). Pollution from
the copper mines in Namibia is toxic, but concern
about the environmental and health impacts is a luxury
when the alternative is no job and no income.

But the tortuous geography that is the making of a pair
of jeans doesn’t stop here. This is a partial story of
production. For these jeans have been designed in the
US, advertised globally and will end up in someone’s
wardrobe, on someone’s body, ready to begin another
set of journeys and transformations in their biography:
they will be worn, soiled, washed, dried and perhaps
even ironed. But as a recent report on the life cycle of
a pair of jeans reveals, from production to daily use,
washing your jeans can cost the earth (Boeglin, 2006).
Machine washing, tumble drying and ironing results in
47% of the eco-damage caused by an ‘average’ pair of
jeans that is worn one day a week for four years and
washed every third wear at 40°C. This is the

**Figure 1:**
The SimSweatshop
website.
The fashioned body
While we may (un)intentionally ignore the ethics of denim production and retail, jeans can nonetheless provoke anxiety in the minds of consumers. The global denim market may have been a successful fix for global capitalism, but it may be an altogether less satisfactory solution when viewed from the perspective of the embodied consumer who has to search for an acceptable public self in the face of unachievable body ideals perpetuated by marketers, advertisers and celebrities. Hyper-thin has become the new industry standard in fashion, where a UK size 10 is seen as too large for the catwalk and emaciated size zero bodies cease to shock. Clothes, after all, look better on a skinny frame (Spencer, 2006). While fashion has always been notorious for perpetuating abnormally thin bodies (the average model weighed 9% less than the average woman in 1989; she now weighs 23% less (Spencer, 2006), skeletal thinness is increasingly ubiquitous across television, magazines and the screen – the everyday wallpaper of our lives. Victoria Beckham, for example, has a 23 inch waist and wears jeans designed for a seven-year-old child. She has become a macabre icon on pro-anorexia websites, revealing the dark, shadow geographies that fashion and the internet enable. The UK helpline ChildLine has reported an increased number of calls from children as young as ten seeking help for eating disorders, and the Rhodes Farm Clinic for eating disorders in north London has noted a startling increase in the numbers of very young children suffering from anorexia and bulimia (Spencer, 2006). Fashion’s effects can be profound and tragic, as the second statement in the
introduction to this article reveals. And while it is
debatable whether the fashion industry and its
promoters and supporters can be held responsible for
the tyranny of skininess that can disrupt and destroy
lives, the point remains that the normalisation of
emaciated bodies in the fashion world and the
objectification of the celebrity body undoubtedly has
real, material effects, and one is left wondering
whether more models will die on the catwalks during
Fashion Week in Paris, Milan or London.

If nothing else, the media's promotion of ideal
fashioned bodies endorses the anxieties consumers
face when shopping for clothes. Think for a moment
about the hours spent trying to find the perfect pair of
jeans - the looking, trying, gazng in and at mirrors,
mannequins, models and changing rooms. How do we
manage our own embodiment in the public space of
the store where we are visibly reminded of the
materiality of our bodies and haunted by their inability
to fulfil their fantasies? (Guthman and DuPuis, 2006).

Clothes shopping can be an ethical, an economic and
an embodied nightmare. Why do we buy the clothes we
do? Is it a function of cost, and do we reflect on how
Primark and Wal-Mart can sell jeans for £6.00, or
simply turn a blind eye to the distant exploitation that
enables us to buy cheap, fast fashion for a few
pounds? A recent War on Want report argues that
there is a hefty price to pay so that British high street
retailers such as Tesco, Asda and Primark can sell
jeans for £3, namely driving down wages paid to
garment workers in supplying countries such as
Bangladesh which has the cheapest garment workers
in the world, working the longest hours, and living in
the most crowded and unsanitary slums. Wages have
halved in Bangladesh in the past 10 years (War on
Want, 2006). Do we feel just a little bit uneasy as we
mobshop at dawn to grab the latest Kate Moss
collection from Topshop, knowing that Mauritian
factory workers are paid less than £4 per day to make
these clothes? Whose responsibility is it to ensure
that fashion has a social conscience? Is it the
Cambodian factory managers who work their child
employees like slaves? (Just-style.com, 2007). Or is it
the billionaire retail magnates such as Sir Phillip
Green, whose clothing empire Arcadia (which includes
Dorothy Perkins, Miss Selfridge, Wallis, Topshop and
Topman) refuses to join any ethical standards
organisations and continues to source garments from
Asian factories that pay workers less than £4 per day?
Should we point the finger at celebrities such as Kate
Moss, Stella McCartney and Lily Allen who put their
names to shoddily-made collections for high street
chains such as New Look, Primark and Topshop
without so much as a nod or a wink to the unethical
conditions under which their designs come into being?
Or perhaps we should open our eyes and see the
global price that is to be paid in order to satiate our
hunger for new, fast, cheap fashion? Do we think about
how and why China produces 30% of all jeans in the
world as we pull our credit card out of our wallets and
bargain boast about how we are too clever to be ripped
off by up-market retailers? (Research and Markets,
2005). This is just another manifestation of
commodified contemporary Britain, where consumers
know everything about price, but nothing about value
(Leader, 2006). In a recent exposé on the health and
environmental catastrophe that is ‘Made in China’, we
see how many of the goods being supplied for the
2008 Beijing Olympics are being manufactured by
children as young as 12, working 15 hours per day,
seven days per week in Chinese sweatshops (Taylor,
2007). And in a curious twist of fate it emerges that
children in western consumer societies may be more
closely connected to children producing cheap goods
in China than we might have imagined. The recall of
millions of toys and games such as Barbie and Polly
Pocket that were made in China and sold in the US
and UK in August 2007 endorses the global
connections between producers, consumers and their
commodities (BBC News, 2007). The toys, imported by
Mattel from China, contain dangerous levels of lead,
toxic both to those who produce the games and those
who buy them. The global spectacle of the Beijing
Olympic Games reveals a series of less celebratory
economic geographies. The cost of cheap goods is
high, and we are connected to others in ways we may
prefer not to know.

But perhaps the buying of clothes is less about cost
and more about fashion, fit, brand and seasonality
(there are, for example, dedicated fan-sites for jeans
and trainer ‘heads’, where rarity is value and price is
no object). Are we, perhaps, the victims of a fickle
fashion system that dictates we buy skinny jeans in
summer 2007, high-waisted boyfriend cut in autumn
2007, jodhpurs in winter 2007? Do higher price points
have any material effects on global labour or
environmental standards? And if it is the brand that
governs our purchasing decisions, how do we self-
justify spending in excess of £120 on a pair of
premium denim jeans or a pair of ‘old skool’ Adidas
trainers? Fashion consumption, it appears, is both
troublesome and troubling. Aesthetic management is
hard work and the labour involved in achieving a
particular image and identity can be time-consuming
and depressing.

The important point here is that fashion is rarely, if
ever, simply about surface display and superficiality
(Crewe and Gregson, 1998; Clarke and Miller, 2002;
Gregson, Metcalfe and Crewe, 2007; Woodward,
2007). Although fashion is traditionally seen as
wanton, indulgent, frivolous or trivial, I would argue that
it is rarely thus. Our individual clothing choices and
desires are a means of seeking identification and
materialising the self. Fashion is no less than ‘personhood in aesthetic form’ (Gell, 1998, p. 157) and far from wearing clothes to hide or disguise who we are, it may be that we confront and create our sense of self through the clothes we buy and wear. Fashion is far more than a casual carapace; it is about the projection of self and identity. Our clothes conduct and connect our sense of what lies inside and outside ourselves. And far from being a functional or benign surface, clothes have power. They can fail us and have the capacity to eat us up with anxiety (Woodward, 2007). Our clothes can betray us, they can expose our bodily failure and social ineptitude. In spite of our best endeavours to be who we would like to be, our clothes have the capacity to let us down.

Break-out?
The above discussion has taken you on a long journey through fashion’s geographies. While I hope it has emphasised the geographical significance of fashion and made you think critically about the power and responsibilities we wield as global consumers, the journey hasn’t, I suspect, been a particularly enjoyable one. The relational geographies I have discussed make for a rather pessimistic reading of an industry famed for fun, theatre, performance and superficiality. The power of clothes and the global reach of the industry make for depressing reading: from the global asymmetries of sourcing and production, through the exploitative fashion circus of catwalk shows inhabited by emaciated models, to the environmental and social impacts of fashion supply – wherever we look the vision appears to be intolerable. And our own positionality within the fashion system offers little more by way of optimism – whether we buy cheap throwaway clothes, or premium design-led garments we are complicit in perpetuating a profoundly unequal set of geographies. Add to this the social and economic anxieties that confront us in the buying and wearing of clothes, and there is little, it seems, to celebrate.

But by way of conclusion I suggest three possible ways in which we might engage with fashion in more productive and participatory ways. They acknowledge the importance of thinking, seeing and acting relationally, and require that we free up our bounded notions of the organisation, the consumer, the commodity and place. Significantly, these alternative ways of thinking and acting about global fashion emphasise the very real possibilities that we as consumers have for exerting our agency.

First, and developing the idea of the life-cycle and biography of things, there are interesting possibilities for extending the life of our commodities. Figure 2 shows a pair of trainers that have been imprisoned, sprayed with Old Spice after-shave and free-fallen out of aeroplanes. These Worn Again trainers have been made from old prison blankets, car seats, parachutes, old suits and towels. Each pair is unique and made from 99% recycled materials. The producers of the shoes, Terra Plana, argue that the trainer business isn’t pretty, but that there are ways to produce sexy, guilt-free, ethical trainers that address issues of global trade and sustainability and help to build social and environmental enterprises (www.wornagain.co.uk/)

And while the words ‘recycled’ and ‘fashion’ may not immediately sit comfortably together, second-hand worlds open up enormous possibilities for new ways of doing fashion (Gregson and Crewe, 2003). There are many who believe that the fashion industry is at a tipping point and that the business model will increasingly have to incorporate an ethical or eco-stance. The fashion designer Katharine Hamnett, for example, launched a new range in 2007 that is sourced entirely from an ethical supply chain and uses 100% organic cotton. Eco-style, she argues, is ‘no longer about brown teeth and ugly shoes’ (in Harkin, 2007). In 2006 Topshop launched the ethical concession, The People Tree, although quite how this sits alongside over-priced and shoddily made ranges in the same store remains to be seen. Companies such as Howies use bicycle tyres to make belts, while Goodone scour the recycling textile warehouses of London to create one-off pieces from old clothes. All, in rather different ways, are revealing the creative potential of second-hand fashion.

Second, digital technologies such as the internet are opening up new possibilities for consumer connectedness and control. Consumers are relying less on the authority of conventional branding and

Figure 2: Terra Plana Worn Again Trainers.
advertising campaigns for their consumption
knowledges, and consumption is increasingly
determined by consumer-based opinions, reviews and
recommendations. Large organisations are, in turn,
desperately seeking out new mechanisms to harness
the knowledge of consumers and to refresh their
enthusiasm to consume. The ability of consumers to
short-circuit, or see through, the hitherto concealed
suite of corporate sales and marketing tactics is
enabling new levels of transparency where there is
less scope for hype, spin and con. This may in turn
offer at least the possibility for new forms of agency
and self-determination by consumers who can
increasingly bypass organisations whose strategies
they find unacceptable. This is offering new ways for
consumers to engage with and be critical of
commodification and their objects of desire.

Third, the economic and political significance of
consumption gives consumers (potentially)
unprecedented powers as global citizens. As a whole
range of recent forms of consumer mobilisation such as
No Sweat, Buy Nothing Day and Students Against
Sweatshops have revealed, consumer activism,
boycotting and buy-cotting can have significant
economic and political ramifications. As consumers
acknowledge the profound geographical inequalities
resulting from globalisation, they may use their
economic and cultural capital to resist the worst
excesses of the free market. And what is for me
particularly exciting about this is that it opens up new
possibilities for more ethical and equitable systems of
provision. As David Harvey (1996) argued so well, ‘It is
important for the politically responsible person to
know about and respond politically to all those people
who daily put breakfast upon our table (or clothes on
our bodies), even though market exchanges hide from
us the conditions of life of the producers’ (author’s
emphasis) (Harvey, 1996). A widely circulated report of
e-mail correspondence between Nike and one of its
consumers reveals the enormous negative impact that
activist consumers can have on brands. Nike launched
an internet promotional scheme that enabled
consumers to buy personalised Nike trainers. While
superficially this may have been a smart marketing
move, Nike hadn’t anticipated the ways in which
consumers would attempt to subvert the brand
message. Having selected the word ‘sweatshop’ to be
stitched onto a personalised pair of Nike shoes, Jonah
Peretti received the following correspondence:

From: perettl@media.mit.edu

My order was cancelled but my personal NIKE ID
does not violate any of the criteria outlined in your
message. The Personal ID on my custom ZOOM XC
USA running shoes was the word ‘sweatshop’.
Sweatshop is not: 1) another party’s trademark, 2) the
name of an athlete, 3) blank or 4) profanity. I
chose the iD because I wanted to remember the toil
and labour of the children that made my shoes.
Could you please ship them to me immediately?

From: nikeld_personnalize@nik.com

Your NIKE iD order was cancelled because the ID
you have chosen contains, as stated in the previous
e-mail correspondence, ‘inappropriate slang’.

From: perettl@media.mit.edu

Thank you for your quick response to my enquiry ...
Although I commend you for your prompt customer
service. I disagree with the claim that my personal
iD was inappropriate slang. After consulting
Webster’s Dictionary I discovered that ‘sweatshop’ is
in fact part of standard English and not slang. The
word means ‘a shop or factory in which workers are
employed for long hours at low wages and under
unhealthy conditions’ and its origin dates from
1892. So my personal iD does meet the criteria
detailed in your first email. Your website advertises
that the NIKE iD program is about ‘freedom to
choose and freedom to express who you are’. I share
Nike’s love of freedom and personal expression. The
site also says that ‘if you want it done right, build it
yourself’. I was thrilled to be able to build my own
shoes, and my personal iD was offered as a small
token of appreciation for the sweatshop workers
poised to help me realise my vision. I hope that you
will value my freedom of expression and reconsider
your decision to reject my order.

From: nikeld_personnalize@nik.com

Regarding the rules for personalization it also states
on the NIKE iD website that ‘Nike reserves the right
to cancel any personal iD up to 24 hours after it has
been submitted’… With these rules in mind, we
cannot accept your order as submitted.

From: perettl@media.mit.edu

Thank you for the time and energy you have spent
on my request. I have decided to order the shoes
with a different iD, but I would like to make one
small request. Could you please send me a color
snapshot of the ten-year old Vietnamese girl who
makes my shoes?

<no response>
When consumers become politically and economically aware, their power opens up interesting possibilities. As the e-mail correspondence between Nike and one of their consumers reveals, gestural marketing politics by big organisations simply won't work and there are some very real corporate dangers in ceding creative control to unpredictable consumers. Perhaps it is time for a re-framing of economic geography and a return to an activist relation to the world?

Useful websites
www.labourbehindthelabel.org
www.cleanupfashion.co.uk
www.cleanclothes.org
www.ethicalconsumer.org
www.tuc.org.uk/extras/playfair.pdf

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Louise Crewe is Professor in the School of Geography, University of Nottingham, University Park, Nottingham NG7 2RD (tel: 0115 951 5441; e-mail: louise.crewe@nottingham.ac.uk)