

A Nation of Shopkeepers? The Idealised High Street in Brexit Britain

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In the decade since the global financial crisis of 2007-8, thousands of shops have closed in high streets across the United Kingdom. Wage stagnation, rising business rates and competition from online retailers have been blamed for the consequent “death of the high street” (Marsh). Media coverage of this demise – illustrated by pictures of empty, fly-posted retail units – has tracked the transformation of formerly vibrant locations into desolate spaces recolonised by the ‘wrong’ sort of retail activity – charity shops, betting shops and pawnbrokers. These representations convey a strong sense of the retail industry and as well as the UK economy at large undergoing a period of change, “laid bare for us all to see” (Morrison).

Since June 2016, when the UK voted to leave the European Union, the fate of Britain’s troubled high streets has become freighted with deeper significance. The UK’s relationship with the EU – an ‘anchor’ of Britain’s economic model for over four decades (Weldon 12) – became an object of interrogation and uncertainty, placing Britain’s economic future in question. Brexit was a singular event that appeared “to both disrupt and open up possibilities”, but it can also be understood as a more diffuse phenomenon that “surfaces across multiple ordinary scenes and

situations”, instituting a period of intense and highly contested future-making (Anderson and Wilson 291-2).

This chapter investigates the opportunities to imagine Britain’s economic future that have proliferated in this moment of Brexit. It does so through the site of the high street and its *idealisation*. The dominant narrative of the high street’s decline competes for our attention with a very different set of representations that portray renewed and thriving examples of these places (Griffiths). These ‘model’ high streets have been seized upon as evidence that it is possible to revive town centre shopping districts and the communities that are sustained by them. Through an analysis of various material and textual instances of the idealised high street, I investigate this site as a point of entry into contemporary economic imaginaries. What kinds of desires, hopes and expectations can be traced in the idealised high street? And what do these aspirations tell us about broader economic imaginaries in Brexit Britain?

This chapter introduces and contextualises three instances of the idealised high street and identifies their shared tropes. I go on to argue that the site of the idealised high street supports two related but ultimately conflicting economic imaginaries that afford progressive and reactionary visions of economic organisation and solidarity in alternative post-Brexit futures. In the final part of the chapter I draw on my analysis of the idealised high street to foreground some of the obstacles that exist to the radical democratisation of local economies.

IMAGINING THE ECONOMY

As others have noted, a concern with the ‘imagined economy’, or ‘economic imaginaries’, should not be dismissed as immaterial or trivial (Clarke 17). It follows from a recognition that economic activities cannot be “conducted independently of systems of meaning and norms” (Ray and Sayer 6), and from an intention to create a space for the interrogation of those signifying practices. ‘Imaginaries’ have been defined as “semiotic systems that frame individual subjects’ lived experience”,

and so an ‘economic imaginary’ is a system that “gives meaning and shape to the ‘economic’ field” (Jessop 344). John Clarke observes that the ‘invention’ of the economic “creates the conditions for things called economies to be imagined in different ways, involving different architectures, elements, dynamics, figures and embodiments” (19). This chapter is particularly concerned with the alternative possibilities pre-figured in ‘emergent imaginaries’ (Birch), and in disentangling the co-existence of related economic imaginaries (Swartz).

There are countless practices, discourses, representations and spaces which might be studied in order to gain a deeper picture of economic imaginaries in Brexit Britain. This chapter focuses on a particularly rich site of meaning: the *idealised high street*. In a context in which the complexity of financial markets is understood to contribute to global economic instability, and in which economic globalisation is widely cited as a driver of fiscal challenges, the significance of the local, human scale of the high street is palpable. High streets are spaces in which citizens habitually engage in tangible economic transactions. These transactions are cognitively graspable in a way that national and global scales of economic activity are often not, and so they provide an essential point of entry into public debate about ‘the economy’. Indeed, high streets are often portrayed as representing the economy in microcosm. A tendency towards the fetishisation of high streets in reporting on business and economics presents a misleading picture of their representativeness of the broader economy and of the contribution of retail to GDP, yet it points to the significance of high streets in contemporary economic imaginaries.

As Sam Griffiths notes, high streets are significant both for *what they do* – for their material, functional attributes – and *what they mean* – their symbolic resonances (32). Shopping streets, and the commercial activities that they epitomise, have long played a role in British national identity and ideas about economic well-being (Benson and Ugolini). In more recent years the high street has emerged as an object of “collective concern” (McDonald and Cassidy 307) bound up with public debate about the fostering of ‘community’ in towns and cities (Hubbard; Watson and

Wells). Shoppers, retailers and policymakers alike perceive the high street as ‘the glue that binds a community together’ (Fletcher et al. 485). In their efforts to formulate solutions to its decline, politicians, urban planners and commentators (Alakeson; Harris; Sikka) recognise and respond to the ‘*generative qualities*’ (Griffiths 41) of the high street, underscoring the centrality of this cultural and economic site in contemporary economic imaginaries and its status as a model of the national economy in miniature. The high street, then, is more than just a geographical location in which retail activity takes place. It can instead be understood as a site that opens up opportunities to envision and enact social, political, and economic change.

NOSTALGIA FOR THE HIGH STREET

The current wave of intense focus on high streets and their perceived decline is often accompanied with expressions of nostalgia for these locations as they are imagined to have functioned in the past – whether in the ‘golden age’ before the financial crisis (McDonald and Cassidy), in post-war society (Hubbard), or further back in time (Watson and Wells). This nostalgia is manifested, for instance, in the way that new and existing types of commercial activity cultivate a nostalgic retail aesthetic (Bramall), or incorporate references to the past into their rationale for conducting business (Hubbard). It has also been traced in research informants’ discussion about how shopping districts have changed (Watson and Wells) and their aspirations for the future of these locations (Fletcher et al.).

Nostalgia for the high street of the past is not a new phenomenon. It can be located in a longer history of collective expressions of yearning for the way we imagine ourselves to have shopped in bygone times (Benson and Ugolini). As the cultural historian Raphael Samuel explains, shops have been cultivating a ‘heritage’ feel for decades (Samuel). The notion of the ‘period’ shopping street developed in the museum sector

in the 1930s and by the 1960s had become a leading attraction at museums and theme parks. In the late 1970s the renovation of Covent Garden in central London introduced features such as Victorian street lamps and cobbled paving to the market. Samuel argues that in these decades, a “new version of the national past” began to offer “more points of access to ‘ordinary people’”, and that shopping accordingly enjoyed “a new visibility” (159-60).

Samuel interprets ‘period’ shopping in the 1970s and 80s as a form of “living history”, and as interrelated with the preoccupation of the baby boomer generation with “lifestyles” (196). Yet he is keen to challenge a contemporary critique of ‘heritage’ advanced by historians such as Patrick Wright and Robert Hewison, who disparage such modes of historical engagement as delivering a sanitised, inauthentic and invariably reactionary picture of the past (Wright; Hewison; Samuel 259-71). Samuel is both considerate of the tendency for ‘heritage’ to be appropriated by conservatism and sensitive to the opportunities for “historical reflection and thought” (271) that these popular, engaging, and often embodied modes of encounter promote. He is ultimately confident of the openness of the past to political resignification: “there are no historical propositions”, he argues, “which are insulated from contrary readings” (164).

Griffiths offers a different perspective on the imbrication of the past and present in the space of the high street, or the question of “how the past of a town, city or suburb relates to its future” (33). He draws attention to a tendency in debate about the value of ‘heritage’ – or the historical residues contained in high streets – to insist on the discrepancy between past and present. This view is challenged through an investigation of the function of the historical built environment (considered in the long term, rather than more recent historical eras) in sustaining “communal continuity” through “spatial co-presence” (40). Griffiths concludes that the high street “is not a repository of static meanings to be toyed with but rather a source of time-space orientations towards the world that afford social memory” (50).

This chapter draws on these perspectives in my own analysis of the activation of the historical past in the idealised high street, and its function in the ‘making present of diverse futures’ in Brexit Britain.

THE IDEALISED HIGH STREET: THREE INSTANCES

Samuel’s mode of analysis frequently moves between the discussion of different kinds of illustrations and examples, from photographs to street furniture. In a similar way, I want to introduce and focus upon three specific instances of the idealised high street, which – along with further contextualisation – will serve to foreground certain common tropes.

The High Street is a children’s picture book written and illustrated by Edinburgh-based artist Alice Melvin. The story’s protagonist, a girl called Sally, sets out on a shopping trip in search of a list of somewhat obscure items – a yellow rose, a garden hose, a cockatoo, a tin kazoo, and so on. Arriving at ‘The High Street’, she visits a series of traditional shops, including a toy shop, a greengrocer, a hardware shop, and a florist. Each double page spread features text on the left – composed in verse – and an illustration of a shop front on the right, which can be opened to reveal an interior depicting Sally’s retail encounter. Sally succeeds in acquiring most of the items on her list, but is disappointed when she is unable to buy a yellow rose in the florist. At the end of the story she leaves the high street with ‘memories’ of yellow roses flowering in the adjacent public park. Period high streets are popular settings in children’s picture books (Griffiths), and Melvin’s illustrations evoke classic texts by authors such as Janet and Allan Ahlberg.

Bishopthorpe Road (or ‘Bishy Road’) is a shopping street in York, in the north of England. York is a walled city with two universities and a population of about 205,000. Bishopthorpe Road is located to the southwest of the city, outside the city centre, and the area has been a shopping district for at least 150 years (Clements Hall). It was named winner of the ‘Great British High Street of the Year’ in 2015, in a scheme

run by the Department for Communities and Local Government. It has been the focus of significant and sustained media attention, with one headline declaring it a model of “how to bring a high street back from the dead” (Rushby, “How to Bring a High Street”). Bishopthorpe Road is both a real place – with material, functional attributes – and also an *imagined* place that has been held up as an ideal in extensive media representation of its high street.

The third instance of the idealised high street is contained in a planning document on shop front design issued in 2016 by the ‘Regeneration and Growth’ section of the London Borough of Waltham Forest, an area of northeast London. Aimed at encouraging more people to visit the borough’s high streets, the document gives advice on “how to achieve a high quality, attractive shop front”. It is illustrated by examples of ‘good practice’ from shopping districts in the borough, including Leyton High Street, Walthamstow Village, and Higham Hill Road. Many borough councils across the UK make similar guidance available to businesses in their area.

What common elements do these instances share? And what do they tell us about the idealised high street? First of all, these are all examples, in different ways, of idealised high streets as ‘period’ streets. In each case there is repeated referencing and valorisation of the past, although no particular period is preferred or consistently evoked. The shops in Melvin’s book adopt different architectural styles dating from the mid-19th century through to the 1930s. Edwardian and Victorian shop fronts dominate, with some Art Deco motifs. Each illustration incorporates period features such as pilasters, corbels, mullions, fluting, plaques, and clocks. Stories celebrating Bishopthorpe Road emphasise its history of trading, dating back to the 1870s. Waltham Forest’s planning guidelines attach great importance to the historical built environment through an emphasis on the value of “original features” and “traditional elements”.

These are not exactly the ‘period’ streets that Samuel describes: they are not actively seeking to recreate and immerse the visitor in a particular era from the past. Instead, there is an alignment with Griffiths’s obser-

vation that British high streets tend to “escape definition in terms of conventional historical periods” (35). These instances of the idealised high street share an aspiration to remove certain markers of the present-day from shop fronts, so that, in so far as it is possible, all that is left is ‘period’. In this sense, Melvin’s high street is a perfect illustration of Waltham Forest’s planning guidelines, and many of the shops in Bishopthorpe Road have been renewed in ways that would also meet with the council’s approval. The aspiration to remove markers of the present-day also extends into the street itself, where pedestrian, car-free space is favoured. Ice cream is sold opposite Melvin’s toy shop from a vending tricycle, while in the Waltham Forest planning guidelines, an apron-wearing, retro bicycle-riding delivery boy makes an appearance outside a strongly endorsed delicatessen.

Second, these instances of the high street present shopkeeping as a decent and even aspirational way of earning a living. Retailers have historically been conferred an ambiguous and often maligned social status, with “trade and shopkeeping [...] generally associated with notions of greed, pettiness and narrow-mindedness” in the 19th and 20th centuries (Benson and Ugolini 6). Samuel contends that in the “living history” of late 20th-century heritage culture, labour and industry began to be “retrospectively dignified”. The shopkeeper was “rehabilitated and given an honoured place” in the national story, becoming “an emblem of ‘knowledgeable and friendly service’” (161). The shopkeepers of Bishopthorpe Road embody this rehabilitated image. In press coverage of the street’s fortunes, they are portrayed as enterprising, determined and civic-minded, “used to rolling up their sleeves and getting on with it” (Rushby, “It Could be Terrible”). Fascia signs feature first and second names: titles such as Millie’s Fruit & Veg, McBride’s Opticians, and Thomas the Baker communicate the status of these shops as small, family enterprises, with owners who are proud to put their name to their business. In Melvin’s high street a commitment to the locality and community is emphasised through the depiction of shopkeepers’ quarters above their stores. The broader context is one in which Adam Smith’s description

of the English as a ‘nation of shopkeepers’ has been recuperated by Conservative politicians such as Iain Duncan Smith, who has praised shopkeepers for modelling ‘entrepreneurial spirit’ (Dominiczak).

Third, these instances of the high street express a strong commitment to independence, individuality, and uniqueness, qualities set in contrast with the blandness and homogeneity that are associated with big brands and retail chains. These types of businesses are of course entirely absent from Melvin’s book, while they are tolerated in the Waltham Forest planning guidelines only so long as they do not overly ‘dominate’, or break with the ‘cohesiveness’ of the street. The Bishopthorpe Road traders proudly proclaim that their shops are 90% independent. This feeling that ‘independent’ is best, and that big brands and chain stores are an unwanted presence on the idealised high street, can also be readily evidenced elsewhere. For example, in 2017 the book retailer Waterstones opened a series of unbranded bookshops – named ‘Southwold Books’, ‘The Blackheath Bookshop’ and so on – in high streets across the UK. Managing Director of the chain James Daunt justified their approach by explaining that these stores were opening in “quite sensitive high streets with predominantly independent retailers on them [...]. If you want to enhance a high-street you need to act as an independent” (Sayid).

Fourth, these instances conceive of the ideal high street as delivering something more than retail opportunities. Media representations of Bishopthorpe Road ascribe its revival to the fostering of community spirit. Central to the narrative of the street’s recuperation is the closure of the road to traffic for a community street party (Rushby, “How to Bring a High Street”). Likewise, Melvin incorporates community spaces into her vision of the high street, with activities such as band practice and puppet shows in evidence. An emphasis on ‘social places’ can also be found in the 2011 Portas review – a report on Britain’s high streets carried out by a celebrity businesswoman. Portas describes her vision for high streets as “destinations for socialising, culture, health and well-being, creativity and learning” (14), practices that we see depicted and given space in the idealised high street.

ECONOMIC IMAGINARIES IN BREXIT BRITAIN

Ben Anderson and Helen Wilson note that the moment of Brexit, inaugurated by the outcome of the referendum in 2016, is one in which ‘diverse futures’ have been made present, often in ways that involve the activation of the past. These futures “open up an opportunity to reflect on how spaces for new and emerging forms of solidarity, both progressive and otherwise, are created, reworked, or closed down” (Anderson and Wilson 293). The idealised high street can be understood as an example of such a space, and specific instances of the tendencies I have described have been interpreted as fostering reactionary forms of solidarity. In a scathing response to Waltham Forest’s shop front scheme, Owen Hatherley has criticised the borough’s insistence on a unifying retro aesthetic, which has the effect – he claims – of purging the urban high street of its diversity, conviviality and appeal. “London streets don’t need to look like a historically illiterate retcon of a 1940s that never happened”, he argues, “they’re fine looking like what they are, hugely successful experiments in multiculturalism” (Hatherley).

While Hatherley offers a valid insight, it is worth testing the limits of this argument. Does the space of the idealised high street *only* serve to engender reactionary forms of solidarity? And are ‘period’ settings such as those that characterise the idealised high street *inherently* generative of such outcomes? In what follows, I pay close attention to the centrality of the idealised high street in contemporary economic imaginaries, emphasising the extent to which diverse constituencies make imaginative investments in this site. I argue that it can be understood to support conflicting imaginaries that afford both reactionary *and* progressive visions of economic organisation and solidarity in alternative post-Brexit futures. Yet, as I will discuss at the end of this chapter, a certain identity and overlap between these alternative visions helps us to recognise the exclusions that are perpetuated in both economic imaginaries.

A Nice Row of Shops: The High Street in Little England

It is not difficult to discern elements of the idealised high street that support visions of the future that are exclusionary, protectionist, reactionary, and indeed racist. We might begin by foregrounding certain normative statements about the social that are asserted through the idealisation of the high street. The types of shops, the products that they sell, the people that sell them, and the people that buy them, all describe a world and imply particular shared values. Bishopthorpe Road is described in one news story as ‘an almost perfect parade’. That perfection is achieved when the right selection of unique, independent stores – each representing a distinct, ‘traditional’ trade – are assembled in a cohesive way: the butcher, baker, greengrocer, toy shop and so on. The assemblage of these traders serves to project a wider community of high street users who share an opinion of what the ‘perfect parade’ should offer, because they share values and ways of living. They need the same kinds of products and use them in the same kinds of ways. It is “a nice row of shops run by nice people for nice people” (Haywood).

‘Nice’, here, is a way of talking about cultural and economic capital: the shared values and ways of living endorsed by the street are tied up with affluence and middle-class taste. Elsewhere, however, idealised high streets erect exclusionary borders that operate along both classed and racialised lines. Waltham Forest’s shop front design document elaborates key design considerations by reference to a drawing of a ‘traditional shop front’ and a series of visual examples, each designated an example of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ practice. The shops identified as examples of poor practice are invariably those serving a particular ethnic community. They are deemed to lack the requisite ‘respect’ for original architectural features, and are criticised because they appear ‘cluttered’, ‘seek undue attention’, and ‘dominate their surroundings unnecessarily’. In this way, the design considerations expressed in this document communicate hierarchies of value, quality, and belonging that are bound up with broader nationalist imaginaries.

It would be highly misleading to suggest that any of these three instances of the idealised high street anticipate an explicitly racist vision for the future. On the contrary, Melvin's book offers an attentively multicultural depiction of the high street, incorporating shops run by people of apparently different ethnicities and visited by a diversity of customers. It is important to recognise, however, that such acts of inclusion are circumscribed by the terms and terrain on which they are made, which include the foregrounding and valorisation of the 'period' qualities of the built environment. Writing about 'micropubs' – very small public houses, which have been celebrated in visions of high street regeneration – Hubbard construes their "socially and culturally exclusive" dimension (20) as fostered in part through the design and decoration of these spaces, which are "characterised by artefacts and signs which invoke banal nationalism" (17). Offers of inclusion in the high street are also framed by the resurgence of a narrative of British self-sufficiency and calls for "ethnocentric consumption" (Lekakis). While this is a highly contested terrain of discourse – struggled over by nationalists, free marketeers, and environmentalists – it is often informed by a highly selective recollection of Britain's interrelationship with, and dependence upon, other countries and places, and in particular with the countries that made up its former Empire (Virdee and McGeever).

'Our Town': The High Street in a Democratised Economy

In addition to the reactionary vision of economic solidarity I have just detailed, the idealised high street also supports an alternative and much more progressive imaginary, and serves as a site of investment in hopes and desires for a radically reconfigured economy. These desires can be traced, for a start, in the positive vision of good, meaningful labour that the idealised high street nurtures. As I have already discussed, the idealised high street configures shopkeeping as a decent and civic-minded way of earning a living. This model of autonomy over one's working life offers a sharp point of contrast with other present-day media narratives about employment conditions in the United Kingdom, with their

tales of exhausted warehouse workers and destitute food delivery drivers. An emphasis on autonomy, control, and meaningful influence over the economy can also be traced in the assertion (in all three instances) of the more-than-economic value of retail activity to a local community, and – in the case of Bishopthorpe Road – is extended to explicit engagement with the social ownership movement (Clements Hall). Finally, the status of the idealised high street as an imagined microcosm of a broader national economy means that it is a site through which the challenge of combating wealth extraction by multinationals can be defined and addressed at a local level. London Borough of Waltham Forest, for instance, express a commitment to “retaining more wealth in the borough” (13) in their planning guidance document.

These tentative investments in models and practices that might transform local economies and communities resonate very strongly with the Labour Party’s current ‘institutional turn’, which has been defined in terms of an “emerging new political economy [that] is circulatory and place-based” (Guinan and O’Neill, “From Community Wealth”). For Joe Guinan and Martin O’Neill, “decentralised public control of the economy” could offer a means of co-opting Brexiteers’ aspiration to ‘take back control’: it could “reconstitute the basis for democratic participation by giving people real decision-making power over the forces that affect their lives” (Guinan and O’Neill, “The Institutional Turn” 10). A widely discussed example of this new political economy is the so-called Preston model (Guinan and O’Neill, “From Community Wealth”), named after the town in the Northwest where the council have introduced local wealth-building strategies. ‘Anchor’ institutions such as colleges, housing associations and universities have been encouraged to contract local companies, generating a multiplier effect: “pounds circulate and recirculate throughout the local economy, creating jobs which in turn lead to more spending on goods and services, which then leads to the creation of more jobs, and so on” (Hanna et al.). The council has also supported co-operatives and other alternative forms of ownership that deliver opportunities for workers to “participate in the economic decisions that affect their lives and the future of their city” (Hanna et al.).

The Preston model itself has been recognised as an “important form of prefiguration”, and has been construed as a template which can help people to “imagine, experience, and get involved with systemic economic transformation” (Guinan and O’Neill, “From Community Wealth” 390). Because of its centrality to everyday economic imaginaries and its status as an imagined microcosm of a broader local or national economy, the site of the high street could also provide a terrain for the elaboration of radical ideas such as social ownership or community wealth building.

BEYOND THE HIGH STREET

Guinan and O’Neill describe community wealth building as “a left alternative to both extractive neoliberalism and xenophobic nationalism” (“From Community Wealth” 383). Should we be surprised, then, that the idealised high street provides the imaginative resources to expound both their radical vision and a reactionary economic nationalism? James Meek has argued that it is a mistake to assume that “‘good’ localism (the ideal of the ‘thriving local community’, locally sourced food, preservation of vernacular local architecture and the traditional local landscape) can be neatly separated from ‘bad’ localism (hostility to immigrants and new ways of doing things)” (16). Similarly, reactionary and progressive economic imaginaries can be fostered on the shared terrain of the idealised high street. The challenge, then, is to identify the obstacles that exist to the left’s annexation of the site of the high street – and discourses of localism more generally – for the purpose of elaborating a radical economic vision. The analysis of idealisations of the high street initiated in this chapter can help us to recognise some of the barriers that exist to the radical democratisation of local economies.

One of the most pressing issues is the question of *whose* ideal is represented in *The High Street*, Bishopthorpe Road, and Waltham Forest’s planning guidance, and in a more generalised idealisation of the high street. Who gets to desire and imaginatively invest in the high street and

local economies at large? Who gets to debate “the kind of high street they would like” (Griffiths 39)? It is clear from my analysis that the idealised high street is a site in which affluent constituencies’ desires are prioritised and in which classed and racialised exclusions are perpetuated. The identity and overlap between the alternative visions I have sketched out – the ‘bad’ localism of the Little Englander imaginary, and the ‘good’ localism of the Preston model – help us to recognise the exclusions in operation when it comes to the preferred subjects of dominant economic imaginaries. As Guinan and O’Neill note, social and economic inequalities prevent certain citizens from participation in the collective imagination of shared futures: “economic instability precludes active determination of a community’s economic development, making the ambition to shape our collective future seem unattainable” (“From Community Wealth” 389). Those who seek the radical democratisation of the economy must therefore instigate democratic participation in *acts of imagination* vis-à-vis the economy. They must identify new ways of articulating and representing socially and economically marginalised subjects’ desires for their local high streets and communities (Watson and Wells), and of bringing these imaginaries into dialogue with dominant idealisations.

My analysis also points to the limitations of the model of the high street as a microcosm of the local or national economy. Suzanne Hall has noted the tendency for ‘the local’ to be treated as a “confined territorial entity where parochial concerns are legitimised over broader concerns” (2585). Relatedly, the high street is fetishised in contemporary economic imaginaries to the extent that the significance of retail is over-emphasised, and the economic transactions that shopping involves can appear disconnected from the wider economy. In order to support proposals for the radical democratisation of local economies, it will be necessary to develop a vision of the idealised high street that decentres the spaces and practices of retail while bringing a more extensive range of economic processes into focus. Emergent research on the institutional turn emphasises the importance of institutions that are publicly owned or working for the collective good. While the site of the high street and

the transactions that take place in it provide a tangible point of entry into public debate about ‘the economy’, it is imperative to build a vision of local economies that extends beyond retail, animating its relationship to other sectors of the economy and other kinds of economic transaction.

In so doing, there is also an opportunity to extend the emerging expectation that high streets must make a ‘more-than-economic’ contribution to local communities, to posit other ways of measuring that contribution beyond traditional indicators such as GDP, and ultimately to displace the “imagined autonomy of the economy” (Clarke 30). In relation to this challenge, the dénouement of Melvin’s picture book presents a timely reminder of the interconnectedness of the high street and local public infrastructure, and of the fact that shared experiences of collective goods – such as memories of yellow roses admired in a public park – can be much more valuable than private acquisition.

Third, my analysis of the idealised high street underscores the necessity of interrogating the role of nostalgia in contemporary economic imaginaries. The idealised high street sustains both reactionary and radical visions of national identity and of the role of the economy in a future society. Both have a nostalgic dimension, and so it is vital to scrutinise the ways in which nostalgia for former modes of economic organisation can naturalise exclusions on the basis of race or class. As my discussion of the Waltham Forest planning guidance makes clear, an understanding of the built environment of the high street as ‘heritage’ can certainly be used to reinforce such exclusions. Yet, if we look beyond this overly-thematised issue, and if we take a cue from Griffiths’s emphasis on the “historical potential of the high street to generate patterns of social co-presence, encounter and engagement” (41), this functional and symbolic site can be understood to harbour ‘historical’ resources that are potentially far more disruptive and challenging. For example, high streets are sites where the exclusions and divisions of the past (Watson and Wells) might in fact be reactivated and traced through to the present moment. The incorporation of the desires and investments of socially and eco-

nominally marginalised subjects for their local high streets and communities could activate their potential to deliver meaningful “cross-cultural contact and related economic experimentation” (Hall 2573).

CONCLUSION

The idealised high street is a compromised site of meaning in which diverse hopes and desires for a shared economic future are invested. This means that it is open to contestation. It can be articulated to progressive politics – to Labour’s institutional turn, for example – but it can also be articulated to reactionary, protectionist and ultimately racist visions of Britain’s future. If we are to achieve ‘economic system change’, it will be necessary to foster economic imaginaries that sustain such a transformation. The extension of democracy into economic life will necessitate meaningful critical scrutiny and redress of the ways in which economic imaginaries sustain deep exclusions. The idealised high street is a cornerstone of contemporary economic imaginaries and it will remain a space that opens up opportunities to envision and enact social, political, and economic change.

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