

Andy Pike (2015) *Origination: the geographies of brands and branding* Chichester, Wiley-Blackwell.

Origination represents a key geographical contribution to understanding the ways in which place and space are centrally bound up with the development and reworking of branded goods and services. The book argues for the conceptual importance of “origination” as a term which captures the ways in which a range of actors (producers, circulators, consumers and regulators) work “to construct geographical associations for goods and services commodities;” and the circumstances under which these associations explicitly “connote, suggest and/or appeal to particular spatial references” (p. 17). The idea of ‘origination’ provides a helpful window onto both the stabilisation and coherence of meaning and value in brands across spaces and places at certain moments as well as emphasising the reworking and re-formation of branding mechanisms. Throughout the book, Pike emphasises the need to “theoris[e] brands and branding as integral to meaning and value construction *throughout the spatial circuits of cognitive-cultural capitalism*” (p. 53, emphasis added).

The book draws upon a wide-ranging set of brand examples throughout, but illustrates key arguments by working through detailed case studies in its central chapters. Three brands are presented in a scalar fashion: the book unpacks notions of the ‘local’ in Newcastle Brown Ale; the ‘national’ in Burberry; and the ‘global’ in Apple. This structure functions well and is underpinned by a depth of analysis across each case. For example, Pike carefully teases out the ways in which ostensibly ‘global’ referents in the Apple brand at one level (modern, ‘universal’ design) also can be seen to cohere around distinctively ‘Californian’ associations (e.g. the fluid and smooth surfaces of Apple-designed objects as well as light and ‘airy’ retail spaces).

A number of very productive points emerge from *Origination*. One is its attention to the historical geographies of branding and particularly its emphasis upon the ways in which, as craft production developed, there emerged a need to denote and convey “a particular design, identity

and/or image” (p. 4) and to convey meanings about quality, provenance and geographical origin (p. 24). Thus the idea of the brand is not free-floating in either space or time—branding did not simply appear fully formed in (for example) the Nike logo of the late twentieth century.

A second important emphasis is upon dimensions of inequality: the book argues for an explicit recognition of how “brands and branding actors generate and profit from unequal differentiation and segmentation” (p. 36). The idea of origination seeks to emphasise “how social and spatial inequalities are reproduced over time and space as actors seek to create, fix and manage geographical associations in brands and branding in geographically uneven ways” (p. 21). Put simply, Pike wishes to address the question “what kinds of brands and branding, and for whom?” (p. 22).

At one level foregrounding the geopolitics of brands and branding is presented as a critical examination of intersections between brands and territorial development, but also it is clearly understood as an opportunity to open up discussion about the roles of places within national and international space-economies, including future or potential roles. Pike argues that there may be opportunities for reconfigured spatial circuits of production, circulation, consumption and regulation to open up alternative, even ‘better’ roles for particular places. For example, it is suggested that the political pursuit of ‘knowledge intensive’ and ‘higher value-added’ economic activities needn’t entail a sharp polarisation between these and “low level occupations” but rather lives and livelihoods of workers might be enhanced by considering possibilities for developing “some rounding and progression ladders through the creation of medium-level semi-skilled and intermediate jobs.” (p. 205).

Third, the book very helpfully draws out explicit connections between the brand and the object, drawing in part upon discussions of commodity biographies. Both within Chapter 2 (“Origination”) as well as within the case study chapters of Newcastle Brown Ale, Burberry and Apple, Pike seeks to foreground brand materialities, moving far beyond marketing literatures which tend to interpret brands as more ephemeral phenomena, detached from the material.

There are several aspects of the book which suggest a need for ongoing discussion of geographies of brands and branding. The first relates to the critique of 'Country of Origin' narratives (p. 63, emphasis in original). Pike wishes to move on "...from the narrow and simplistic interpretations of brands [in] the *limited geographies of the national* frame of 'Country of Origin', primarily developed by marketing academics (p. 17, emphasis added). However there is somewhat of a paradox in this critique. Despite the fact that commodity networks clearly stretch and are reshaped in complex ways across national spaces (p. 65), despite the fact that 'country of origin' is rendered more complicated by service economies (p. 66), and despite the fact that actors often seek to rework and replay national identifiers as "dominant marker[s] of brand provenance" (p. 67), there also remain extremely strong discursive constructions of 'the nation' as a way of marking the place of brands. For example, following the Volkswagen "emissions scandal" in which the car manufacturer was found to have installed sophisticated software to cheat emissions tests, a dominant set of accounts in the media has rested upon the potential damage to Volkswagen as an emblematic *German* brand (e.g. Löhr 2015) and by extension to the reputation of *German* engineering capability.

Thus whilst it is clearly important to develop conceptual frameworks which are able to think flexibly about the multi-scalar geographies of brands and branding, it is also crucial to pay more detailed attention to the strength of discursive constructions of 'national imaginaries' (Reimer and Leslie 2008). Distinctively national identities are still attributed to products, services and designs; and such national imaginaries have considerable power. How do we understand the "durability of perceptions about national hierarchies and of narratives surrounding the growth trajectories of nations" (Reimer and Leslie 2008, 164)—such as the superiority of "German engineering" that coheres around the brand of Volkswagen, for example?

A second question raised by *Origination* relates to how far we might be able to hear voices of consumers through our narratives of brands and branding? Methodologically, the book draws upon an analysis of secondary sources as well as semi-structured interviews with "key research

subjects” (p. 85). One of the most memorable consumer insights is provided within Chapter 6 (on Apple) as a quotation from Chinese interviewee who speculated that “middle class Chinese consumers [...] would ‘prefer to buy brands made outside China as they think they would be better quality”” (pp. 161-162). Fascinating understandings such as this suggest that we need to think further about how consumer perspectives might be more fully assembled and more strongly represented.

References

- Löhr, Julia 2015 Has 'made in Germany' badge been harmed by the Volkswagen scandal? *Guardian*, 2/11/15 Available at: http://www.theguardian.com/business/2015/nov/02/made-in-germany-harmed-volkswagen-scandal?CMP=Share_A?CMP=Share_A Accessed 2 November 2015.
- Reimer, Suzanne and Deborah Leslie 2008 Design, national imaginaries, and the home furnishings commodity chain. *Growth and Change*, 39: 144-171.

Suzanne Reimer, 6 November 2015