



# RELUCTANT CAPITALISTS

Bookselling and the Culture of Consumption

Laura J. Miller

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*To all the kids —  
Noemi, Mahats, Elias, Zach, Darshana, and Sohana —  
who have given me such hope in the next generation*



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## Commercial Culture and Its Discontents

In the early 1960s, Edward Shils wrote an essay examining “the bookshop in America.” Shils praised the bookseller, a special kind of person who willingly forgoes a lucrative salary simply to be around books. The bookseller, he noted, performs an important public service, running an enterprise with a unique role in the reproduction and distribution of culture:

A good bookshop blows the breeze of contemporaneity on one; it puts one “in touch”; it permits first contacts and offers prospects of greater intensity. It is a place for intellectual conviviality, and it has the same value as conversation, not as a “civilized art” but as a necessary part of the habitat of a lively intelligence in touch with the world.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, despite the bookshop’s value for American society, Shils believed that the retail book trade was in a very sorry state, and its future looked only worse. The problem, he argued, was that Americans showed little interest in reading, and publishers often bypassed bookstores to sell directly to the public — a set of conditions that only compounded the already unprofitable character of bookselling. As a result, most bookshops specialized in bestsellers and other popular titles and few carried a satisfactory and varied selection — not a good thing, as Shils warned:

It may well be that we live in an epoch in which the bookshop is an institution suspended between “the dying old society” and the “society struggling to be born.” It has few defenders. Its protagonists are feeble fellows rubbing their eyes dreamily and perplexedly at the entrance to their caves. Those who benefit from their existence (the publishers on the one hand, and readers and potential readers on the other) are hard at work intentionally and unintentionally scuttling them. Perhaps the bookshop belongs to the good things of the bourgeois epoch, like the rule of law, representative institutions, public liberties, and the right of *habeas corpus*, things from which there is a general benefit but which have been so much taken for granted that their beneficiaries have grown careless about their well-being.<sup>2</sup>

It might be fairly easy to dismiss Shils’s ruminations as mere nostalgia on the part of a sociologist distressed by the challenges then being posed to many institutions, including an institution seen as an important source of “good” (i.e., elite) culture. But such a dismissal would be a mistake. The sentiments expressed by Shils about the bookshop echoed those heard decades earlier, and similar complaints can still be heard today. They combine reverence for this retail enterprise with alarm that the qualities that make it so valuable are endangered. The persistence of such sentiments suggests that it is worth asking whether Shils’s fears have come to pass. Has a new social order truly vanquished the conditions that kept the old-fashioned bookshop alive? And why is there such regret about the perceived loss of both the bookstore and the kind of individuals who supposedly sustained it? These questions can be clarified by looking at a more recent manifestation of the issues that Shils was engaging.

In May of 1990, Crown Books, then the third largest chain of bookstores in the United States, opened its first “Super Crown” in a strip mall in Alexandria, Virginia. The new Super Crown was distinguished by the fact that it carried 30–40,000 different titles — three or four times as many as the typical Crown store.<sup>3</sup> Similar developments could be seen in the other national bookstore chains. Earlier that year, Waldenbooks had announced that it was converting some of its outlets to a “superstore” format with a greatly expanded selection of titles.<sup>4</sup> And in September, Barnes & Noble launched its version of the superstore in Roseville, Minnesota, a suburb of St. Paul. The new store, located in a mall that housed several large discount stores, outdid its competitors in terms of size, boasting an impressive 15,000 square feet and 100,000 titles.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, huge bookshops were nothing all that new in the United States. Especially since the 1980s, several such stores had dotted the American landscape. But the move by Barnes & Noble, Crown, and Waldenbooks marked a

significant shift from the chains' previous strategy of establishing small, standardized outlets specializing in bestsellers and other quick-turnover titles, frequently in areas underserved by other bookstores. Observers were now curious to see how the chains would combine their technological sophistication, marketing savvy, and policies on discounting with the large-store format.

At first, press accounts of the superstore phenomenon were relatively enthusiastic. "They Look Like Libraries!" proclaimed an admiring editorial headline in a major magazine for librarians.<sup>6</sup> "After years of maligning the chains for stocking too few titles, book lovers cautiously salute them for broadening their mix," noted another report in a business journal.<sup>7</sup> Reporters remarked not only on the large number of titles being sold, but also on the decor of the new stores. In contrast to the bright, contemporary interiors of the chains' smaller outlets, the superstores included soft lighting, classical music, and comfortable chairs. These stores were trying to communicate the message that they were designed with the serious booklover in mind.

However, within a year, journalists were acknowledging that not everyone in the book world applauded these developments. Antagonists raised many of the same concerns identified by Shils three decades earlier. But the context in which these issues were discussed had changed in the intervening years. The debate that accompanied the building of the superstores marked the latest battle in an ongoing war between independent booksellers and the national chain bookstores. Although the roots of this conflict go back over a century to disagreements over the bookselling practices of department stores, the controversy took on its present tone with the development of the modern chain bookstore in the early 1960s. After a period of escalation, there appeared to be a lull in the hostilities during the late 1980s, as the chains and the independent bookstores claimed different public images and often appealed to different audiences. But the rise of the superstores ended any talk of rapprochement in the book wars. Questions were now being raised as to whether this new kind of chain posed a lethal threat to independent booksellers, and what that threat might mean for books and readers in the United States.

Independent booksellers accused the chains of harboring monopolist designs, and of engaging in unfair competition to achieve those goals. Pointing to the chains' corporate owners, critics claimed that the superstores' actions were guided more by profit-and-loss statements than by literary considerations. While supporters continued to marvel over the superstores' breadth of selection, detractors insisted that book buyers were simply being treated to more of the same safe, standardized fare found in the smaller chain outlets. And while some congratulated the chains for building the kind of store

that could make book buying almost as popular as renting a video, others scoffed that the superstores were better at promoting coffee drinking than an interest in ideas and the intellect. These debates over their impact grew more heated as the superstores began to account for an increasing proportion of the nation's book sales, and as greater numbers of independents succumbed to their competition.

The hostility to the superstores, as well as to their smaller, mall-based predecessors, struck some observers as rather curious considering that the chains were in many ways answering criticisms that had been leveled at booksellers for years. For most of the previous century, book professionals had despaired over the archaic and inefficient systems in place for joining a book with the individual who might want to read it. Many bemoaned the small number of outlets for the purchase of books, the lengthy delays in the delivery of books from publisher to retailer, lackadaisical attitudes on the part of booksellers, ignorance of the book-buying market, and the inability of stores to stock the books customers wanted when they wanted them. Consistently, there were calls for the entire book distribution system to get itself more in step with contemporary business practices.

In the last four decades of the twentieth century, economic, technological, and cultural changes finally pushed the book trade to become more rationalized, that is, to calculate the most efficient means to sell books and then develop the organizational forms and procedures necessary to that task. The growth of the chain bookstore was certainly an important development along these lines, as the chains opened outlets in towns that never before had bookstores, as they invested in sophisticated computer systems that carefully tracked the market for books, and as they worked with wholesalers and publishers to move books more rapidly to where they were needed. However, as the debate over the superstores illustrates, such trends have not been welcomed as absolute progress by everyone in the book world. What Shils called bewilderment felt by those peering at the world beyond their "caves" might be better seen as a wide-eyed yet stubborn refusal to accept the techniques and philosophies that characterize the distribution of other consumer goods. In bookselling, one hears repeatedly, there are grave consequences to a single-minded devotion to efficiency and the bottom line.

The debate over the future of the bookstore is certainly not an isolated event in the history of the U.S. book industry. It is reminiscent of other controversies that have counterpoised dedication to the dissemination of books against crass commercialism. The tension it speaks to was also apparent in the outcries over the tide of publisher mergers and acquisitions in the 1970s and '80s, in criticisms of the new book clubs of the 1920s, and in

turn-of-the-twentieth-century protests over the use of agents to negotiate authors' contracts. With each of these issues, some members of the book industry charged that hucksterism, greed, ruthless competition, and obsequence to the "mass" market should simply not be associated with something as valuable to society as are books. As the potential for profit making in bookselling has expanded, it is therefore not surprising that this sector has become a focal point for debates about commercialism.

However, conflict over the style and techniques of the book chains goes well beyond concerns about literary culture. It also points to a certain degree of distress over the very familiar process of rationalization in the sphere of commerce more generally. Ever since the end of the Civil War, there have been periodic outbreaks of opposition to large commercial organizations, including large retailers, which have played an ever more prominent role in American society. Beginning in the 1860s with the Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Company (A&P), chain stores achieved popularity and profitability by pursuing economies of scale, by emphasizing self-service, and by offering their goods at reduced prices.<sup>8</sup> But some condemned these stores for destroying the independent, owner-operated shop, thus threatening monopoly and removing retail business from personalized, community control. Antichain sentiment has waxed and waned over time, with relatively little organized antichain activity taking place since the 1930s. However, with the growth of the so-called big-box retailers, such as the book superstore, opposition to chains has been reinvigorated. This movement not only revives older concerns about the undue power of giant retailers, but also condemns such stores for depersonalizing relations between seller and customer and standardizing the landscape of the nation's (and increasingly, the world's) communities.

The current controversy over bookselling is thus notable in that it combines abiding ambivalence toward business values in the world of books with ambivalence toward rationalization in the sphere of retailing. My purpose in this book is to explore that double ambivalence in order to address the following questions: Why do efforts to rationalize book retailing promote large amounts of controversy? And what is the significance of efforts to check the power of large retailers such as the book chains? Through these questions, I intend to examine a broader set of issues having to do with the extension of the market and processes of rationalization, the meaning of retailing and consumption in American culture, and the place of books in American society.

While these considerations will entail some examination of bookselling in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as of some parallel developments in the wholesaling sector, the primary focus here will be on



the development of the contemporary book chains and the resulting conflict with independent booksellers. This conflict not only includes a struggle for market share, but also an attempt to win a moral judgment on the appropriate organizational form for booksellers, and the appropriate conduct of booksellers and consumers alike. The competition between chains and independents gets played out, for example, in retailers' approaches to selecting the books for a store's displays and in the various methods used to market both individual books and the bookstore itself. But beyond these merchandising maneuvers, the conflict described here has also become explicitly politicized, with independent booksellers getting on their soapboxes and taking their cause to the courts, to legislative bodies, and to the public. The bookstore wars demonstrate that retailing is more than just a competitive field in which the economically powerful and agile survive, it is also the site of conflicting visions of how both individual and collective life benefit from the circulation of material goods.

### **The Culture of Commerce**

Both within academic analysis and the popular imagination, there exists an assumption that the economy is in some way at odds with culture. This is reflected in popular images of the business world as a place where cultural niceties fall before Darwinian instincts, and in scholarly debates about whether structure or culture has the greatest social impact. Yet the business of books presents one of the best cases for seeing the importance of joining together an economic and cultural analysis.

Sociological or social historical work that examines book publishing in the twentieth century has been relatively sparse, with an even greater lack of empirical research on bookselling.<sup>9</sup> Many of the available accounts of the contemporary book industry come in the form of memoirs, admiring biographies of editors or publishers, and practical reports aimed at professionals; consequently, this body of work tends to lack a critical edge. But whether historians, sociologists, practitioners, or journalists, almost all those writing about the book world have acknowledged the persistence of debates over commercialization. Such debates have most commonly been understood in terms of a tension between the pressures of the market and a commitment to "good" books. This tension is frequently expressed as an opposition between culture and commerce.<sup>10</sup> As Coser, Kadushin, and Powell describe it,

The industry remains perilously poised between the requirements and restraints of commerce and the responsibilities and obligations that it must bear

as a prime guardian of the symbolic culture of the nation. Although the tensions between the claims of commerce and culture seem to us always to have been with book publishing, they have become more acute and salient in the last twenty years.<sup>11</sup>

For Coser and his colleagues (as for others who have adopted the culture/commerce dichotomy), this tension describes the “quest for profit and the demands of excellence [that] have all too often refused to go hand in hand.”<sup>12</sup> While Coser, Kadushin, and Powell help to refute any conclusion that this tension is new to American society, they leave unexamined various assumptions about the transparency of those demands of excellence. The distinction between the meritorious and the unworthy, between serious and trashy books, is simply taken as a given.<sup>13</sup>

Much scholarship on popular culture in recent years has taught us that such a notion of literary merit needs to be made more problematic; one cannot assume that literary merit is both transparent and commercially unprofitable. Rather, the process by which a book gets defined as “serious” is a social and political one.<sup>14</sup> This is not to say that the culture-commerce tension is not salient. But instead of conceiving of culture as a shorthand for high culture, it is more useful, following Raymond Williams, to think about how intellectual and artistic life are related to a wide range of existing cultural meanings and practices.<sup>15</sup> This can help us see how the very notion of artistic creativity has come to be in part defined by a sense of standing outside the logic of commerce.

A more critical perspective on the culture-commerce tension has explored how commercialization affects the status and power of cultural authorities. For instance, Elizabeth Long argues that longstanding fears of commercialization in publishing are based in changes to the cultural hierarchy that threaten an elite’s cultural authority. Especially when the reading public expands, along with the institutions that cater to them, a cultural elite fears that its literary values (i.e., high culture) are in danger of being degraded by the unrefined tastes of the new readers.<sup>16</sup>

A similar argument is contained in Janice Radway’s research on the Book-of-the-Month Club.<sup>17</sup> Radway discusses one of the more vociferous debates in the history of the American book trade, one with many parallels to today’s controversy over the chains. When the Book-of-the-Month Club formed in the 1920s, bookstores not only feared the new competition, but detractors warned that this innovation would result in literary standardization as consumers allowed the club to dictate their choice of reading material. Similar to the chain stores of today, the Book-of-the-Month Club and its imitators were

feared because of their price-cutting practices, because of the preferential treatment they received from publishers, and because of their national reach and, thus, the cultural power they might wield. But Radway argues that there was actually a deeper meaning to the controversies surrounding the book clubs. Like other critics of mass culture theory, she argues that the specter of standardization was primarily a cover for the discomfort of cultural elites who saw their authority challenged by upstart entrepreneurs.<sup>18</sup> These rival cultural authorities appeared especially menacing as they were attempting to lead a huge new mass audience that threatened to overwhelm the Brahmins of the literary world. Such fears were played out in accusations that the Book-of-the-Month Club was a centralized, institutional authority that shamelessly mixed high with low culture, and the purity of culture with the profanity of commerce.<sup>19</sup>

Radway's analysis of the book club disputes is helpful for understanding the current bookstore wars, as well as more general concerns about the commercialization of books. After all, the phenomenal success of the mall-based chain bookstores was in part due to their ability to attract people who found the old-fashioned bookstore elitist and intimidating. And fear that centralized organizations oriented to the mass market will preclude the independent judgment of the free individual remains a component of the contemporary distrust of commercialization. But, as I will argue, ideas about cultural authority have changed considerably in recent decades. A perspective that casts critics of the chains as defenders of elite prerogatives cannot account for the fact that at present both independents and chains are struggling to claim the mantle of populism.

Furthermore, the culture-commerce framework, as it has been elaborated by scholars, is inadequate for explaining the bookstore wars because of the way in which the "commerce" part of the equation has been ignored. We need to recognize that the sphere of commerce is more complex than it first appears to be. Of course, certain aspects of commerce under capitalism can be taken for granted. The market is governed by the imperative that participants compete with one another for relative advantage. Producers against consumers, employers against workers, capitalists against capitalists — each group has material interests that are opposed to those of the other. For this reason, the entrepreneur must continuously innovate; he must find new ways to increase productivity or find new markets, or else his competitors will put him out of business.<sup>20</sup> The constraints placed on members of the book industry by virtue of their being involved in a capitalist enterprise are therefore very real, and people are often compelled to act in ways they find distasteful or that undermine the reasons they entered the book business in the first

place. As even the most idealistic bookseller soon discovers, the overall logic of the capitalist system is mainly about making a profit in a competitive environment.

Nevertheless, none of this negates an argument that commerce is culturally marked: the way it is understood and practiced depends on specific historical and cultural contexts. In the first place, as Polanyi has shown, the market economy has a history; humans have not always paid homage to the motive of achieving maximum material gain.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, even within capitalist economies, commercial activity is not reducible to the quest to secure material advantage efficiently. The new economic sociology that has developed since the 1980s has challenged neoclassical economic thought regarding the predictability of individual and organizational behavior in situations of exchange, along with assumptions about the autonomy of the economy from the state and other institutions. Abstract models predicated on a vision of atomized individuals single-mindedly seeking to optimize material interests have been shown not to hold up very well when applied to actual cases in the real world. The alternative approaches to understanding economic behavior that have developed provide an important corrective to assertions that the triumph of enterprises such as the chains is inevitable, or that consumers who favor the lower prices of the chains are simply following human nature.

One highly influential contribution to economic sociology comes from Mark Granovetter, who has elaborated the concept of embeddedness, the idea that economic behavior and economic institutions are embedded in networks of social relations. Differing with rational actor theorists as well as with those who assume that embeddedness does not apply to market societies, Granovetter claims that the pursuit of economic goals in modern society is accompanied by other considerations, such as the quest for sociability, reputation, or power, that arise from individuals and firms being part of social networks. These social networks make orderly economic exchange possible, by providing the foundation for trust, for example, but they also can lead to behavior that is not strictly rational from the economist's perspective.<sup>22</sup>

A number of sociologists have built on the notion of embeddedness to provide an account of economic action that is more attuned to cultural influences. Sharon Zukin and Paul DiMaggio have extended Granovetter's argument to claim multiple kinds of embeddedness that constrain economic action. Among these they include cultural embeddedness, which they define as "the role of shared collective understandings in shaping economic strategies and goals." According to their definition, "culture has a dual effect on economic institutions. On the one hand, it constitutes the structures in

which economic self-interest is played out; on the other, it constrains the free play of market forces.”<sup>23</sup>

In practice, at least within the United States, it is the constraining rather than the constitutive role of culture that has been most studied. Here culture is examined as a variable factor that influences economic action, and in some circumstances, modifies the extent to which a rational calculation of gains and losses becomes the basis for action. Patricia Thornton, for instance, describes how culture affects decision making in higher education publishing firms. She uses the concept of institutional logic to explain a historical shift in the types of problems and solutions that receive the attention of decision makers. As higher education publishing went from an “editorial” to a “market” logic, she argues, publishers became less intent on gaining prestige for a house and more intent on securing their firms’ competitive positions, more likely to engage in acquisitions rather than promote the organic growth of their companies, and more inclined to see the marketing of titles instead of the nurturing of authors and editors as the path to success.<sup>24</sup>

Part of Thornton’s aim is to “tease apart the influence of culture from those of social and economic structures.”<sup>25</sup> However, this assumes a firmer division between culture and economics than may be warranted. As Don Slater says, “economic and cultural categories are logically and practically interdependent: neither can be reduced to or separated from the other.” As he notes, this is a stronger claim than the idea of embeddedness.<sup>26</sup> It is not that economic action is modified by culture; rather, it is in part constituted by culture. And in turn, the organization of the economy affects the development of cultural ideas that extend well beyond the economic sphere to influence all realms of society.

The stress on how culture constitutes economic relations, more typical of European than American sociologists, is a perspective to which I am sympathetic.<sup>27</sup> It is possible that the American theorizing that has taken place has been colored by the fact that we live in an era when the ruthlessness and reach of the capitalist market appears overwhelming. Thus, capitalist relations become the usual starting point for thinking about the economy. But the production, circulation, and consumption of goods can be organized in many ways, and even in the modern world, noncapitalist forms exist, sometimes temporarily, sometimes as a pale memory of earlier organizational types, but nonetheless, not that difficult to find. An approach that examines how culture and commerce are mutually constitutive reminds us that economic activity should not be conflated with capitalism. Similarly, it leads us to question how the ends of economic behavior (including consumer behavior) get determined. In part because so many studies describe seemingly self-

contained worlds of the firm or the industry, the goals of economic activity appear self-evident. Yet these economic institutions are in actuality not neatly cut off from the rest of society. As a result, some of the same considerations and concerns that affect how people carry out their roles as family members, as citizens, and as devotees of leisure pursuits such as reading shape the style and substance of the economic activities of work, trade, and consumption.

In this study, I address the question of how book professionals position themselves in relation to some general principles of capitalism, including competition, profitability, growth, efficiency, and impersonality. And though I do pay attention to the day-to-day routines of booksellers, I am less interested in specifying the mechanisms that shape how their decisions about carrying out their work get made than in showing how such decisions help to shape the ways in which consumers relate to those same capitalist principles. My aim is to describe not simply a belated event in the historical accommodation to capitalism, but an ongoing process whereby different cultural models of retailing and consumption continue to compete with one another, even during periods of advanced, seemingly seamless capitalism.

In the following chapters, I intend to explore the culture of commerce, and more specifically, the culture of retailing and consumption. I argue that the debate over bookselling is not a trivial or isolated event, but reflects the centrality of retailing in communal life, and a common belief that shopping plays a central role in individual fulfillment. In this way, the chain controversy can be understood as reflecting certain dissatisfactions with individual and communal well-being. American commerce has seen numerous changes that are associated with greater profitability in retailing, but that have also altered how retail work and consumption are experienced. These changes include the growth of large organizations with the capacity to wield unmitigated power, the spread of impersonal social relations, the standardization of commercial shopping districts, and at least potentially, the tendency for a more homogenous assortment of commodities to be purchased. The critique of the chains, and the moral superiority claimed by independents, represent resentment of how these developments appear to banish idiosyncrasy and sentiment from retail work. This sense of loss is especially acute in bookselling because the consumer goods at issue are items that have long been treated with special respect and even reverence.

At the same time, other historical and cultural developments have shaped the ways in which booksellers understand and respond to the changes affecting their industry. Among the most important was a decline, during the post-World War II era, in booksellers' former identification with a genteel

culture and a social elite. This led, on the one hand, to a greater willingness by independents to shrug off conservative respectability and engage in politicized actions to defend the model of retailing they esteem. In their attempts to enlist public support for this activism, they have asked consumers to recognize a collective interest in opposing the usual workings of the free market. But on the other hand, the decline of cultural elitism also contributed to a valorization of consumer sovereignty, and the sense that consumers will and should pursue their individual interests in the marketplace. When defined in stark economic terms, these interests are indeed opposed to those of the independents. Thus, the case of the bookstore wars highlights competing cultural frameworks used to define consumer motivation and consumer responsibility.

### **Rationalized Retailing**

According to Weber, the modern world is characterized by the triumph of instrumental rationality, a way of orienting oneself to one's environment and other people whereby they become means to reach a given end. Rational action has no place for emotion or tradition; rather, individuals or organizations consistently, systematically, and efficiently adjust available means to reach their ends. The economic sphere exemplifies this kind of rationality. The surest way to profit is to refrain from making deals based on personal attachments, or showing mercy for the personal plight of others, or allowing sentiment or sympathy to influence decisions; after all, another's loss may well be one's own gain. These various tendencies are reinforced by the dominance of formal rationality in modern life, the application of calculation in order to achieve predictable outcomes. As Weber's examples of the bureaucracy and the scientific method show so well, calculable procedures and rules applied to all situations and all persons will produce consistent results. Yet despite the technical superiority of rational action, Weber saw the ultimate consequences of rationalization as extremely grim. The vanquishing of irrationality — of emotion and mystery — results in a deadening routinization of everyday life, and the inability of people to find overall meaning in their existence.<sup>28</sup>

While the work of independent booksellers has also been affected by these processes, the chains have rationalized bookselling most deliberately and most thoroughly. The bureaucratic structure of the chains makes it possible for a multitude of far-flung outlets to be administered from a central headquarters. Bureaucratic organization also encourages specialization of tasks, resulting in a more efficient division of labor, and making it easier to



train workers and deploy personnel where needed. As uniform procedures produce consistent, predictable results, the chains have favored standardized methods and a standardized style across all outlets. This allows distant managers to be assured that each outlet is offering a relatively uniform bookstore experience, one that is in keeping with the image the company is trying to project. Furthermore, the chains are able to achieve significant economies of scale by centralizing and standardizing many key activities. From selection, ordering, and advertising, to decisions about pricing, store decor, and the placement of sections and displays — to one degree or another, these functions are performed in a central office. New technology has contributed greatly to the rationalization process, especially the application of computerized systems for calculating future sales. Decisions about what titles to stock, recommend, or return to a publisher are now based on rational techniques of analyzing past sales. Certainly, these various initiatives have helped to bring a level of profitability to bookselling unimaginable just a few decades ago.<sup>29</sup> Yet there are other consequences to rationalization about which there is less agreement.

Many scholars have sought to show how the processes of rationalization, and its unintended consequences, are concretely realized in contemporary society. Indeed, what has occurred in bookselling bears some resemblance to aspects of what George Ritzer has called the McDonaldization of society.<sup>30</sup> For instance, his analysis of the negative effects of increasing rationalization within the service sector includes the homogenization of experience and the dehumanization of employees and customers alike, as interactions between them are minimized and those that remain are governed by uniform scripts.<sup>31</sup> However, while Ritzer assumes that the gratifications consumers get from “McDonaldized” retailers are largely illusory, and that consumers’ and workers’ essential humanity is being violated, an explanation of the conflicting responses to the effects of rationalization in retailing needs to be more thoroughly grounded in both history and culture.

Criticisms of rationalization in bookselling have focused on the perceived ill effects of impersonality, standardization, and bigness. Independent booksellers hold themselves up as guardians of local solidarity, local character, and local interests, while the large, corporate, standardized chain bookstore is seen as fostering impersonal social relations, effacing the distinctiveness of local communities, and using its clout to crush its competitors.

The critique of impersonality reflects the loneliness that some feel as a result of spending so much of their time in large, anonymous organizations.<sup>32</sup> But beyond this, many in the industry are also mourning a way of life that has had a great deal of meaning for those who have pursued it.



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