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Marketing Mardi Gras: Commodification, Spectacle and the Political Economy of Tourism in New Orleans

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Summary. Recent urban scholarship on the rise of the tourism industry, place marketing and the transformation of cities into entertainment destinations has been dominated by four major themes: the primacy of 'consumption' over 'production'; the eclipse of exchange-value by sign-value; the idea of autoreferential culture; and, the ascendancy of textual deconstruction and discursive analyses over political economy critiques of capitalism. This paper critically assesses the merits of these four themes using a case study of the Mardi Gras celebration in New Orleans. The analytical tools and categories of political economy are used to examine the rise and dominance of tourism in New Orleans, explore the consequences of this economic shift and identify the key actors and organised interests involved in marketing Mardi Gras. 'Marketing' is the use of sophisticated advertising techniques aimed at promoting fantasy, manipulating consumer needs, producing desirable tourist experiences and simulating images of place to attract capital and consumers. The paper points to the limitations of the 'cultural turn' and the 'linguistic turn' in urban studies and uses the concepts of commodification and spectacle as a theoretical basis for understanding the marketing of cities, the globalisation of local celebrations and the political economy of tourism.

Introduction

> The city historically constructed is no longer lived and is no longer understood practically. It is only an object of cultural consumption for tourists, for aestheticism, avid for spectacles and the picturesque (Henri Lefebvre, 1996, p. 148).

This paper examines the marketing of Mardi Gras by public actors and corporations and connects the on-going commodification of this celebration to the rise of the place marketing industry around the world. In the past two decades or so, urban boosters and élites have worked to transform place promotion from a relatively amateur and informal activity into an increasingly professionalised, highly organised and specialised industry to encourage the growth of tourism within cities (Holcomb, 1993; Hannigan, 1998; Fainstein and Judd, 1999). Indeed, in many cities, tourism has become the main strategy of urban revitalisation as local governments and the tourism industry have forged close institutional and financial ties to 'sell' the city to

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potential 'consumers' and invest in costly infrastructure to support tourism (Eisinger, 2000; Judd, 1995). Mass tourism is more than just the movement of large numbers of people. It encompasses the consumption of a complex array of tangible goods including, among others, souvenirs, food and drink, transport and physical facilities in the form of lodges, hotels and convention centres. Moreover, as one of the largest industries in the world, tourism sustains a large number of occupations, advertising campaigns, recognisable attractions and diverse forms of financial investment.[1] In addition, place marketing, the use of imagery and theming, and the selling of places have become central components of the political economy of tourism and the revitalisation strategies of cities (Gottdiener, 1997; Gold and Ward, 1994; Reichl, 1997; Zukin, 1996; Strom, 1999; Short, 1999).

A number of scholars have developed typologies of tourism and theories of tourist experience, and have examined the role of culture in marketing tourism, among other concerns. One can find conceptualisations of tourism as a sacred crusade, pilgrimage or search for authenticity (MacCannell, 1976); a form of leisure and performative identity for the post-modern consumer (Urry, 1995); a form of colonialism, conquest and imperialism (Krippendorf, 1984; Crick, 1989); a type of ethnic relation (van den Berghe, 1980); an acculturation process (Cohen, 1984); a force for historical and cultural commodification (Boyer, 1992; Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, 1998); a form of migration (Cohen, 1972); and so on. Despite much research, only recently have scholars begun to examine the effect of tourism on patterns of social inequality in cities, the economic consequences of tourism and the organisation of the industry and ease of entry to it. Around the world tourism-oriented urban regeneration remains a source of much debate and controversy. On the one hand, proponents claim that tourism improves urban aesthetic, enhances leisure facilities for residents and democratises travel. Opponents, on the other hand, maintain that tourism promotes the growth of low-wage jobs with few benefits, diverts public monies from addressing crucial local problems and is a form of mass seduction that leads to more harm than good (for overviews, see Fainstein and Judd, 1999; Kearns and Philo, 1993). Interestingly, some condemn tourism for promoting inauthentic cultural representations and distorting history (MacCannell, 1976) while others celebrate tourism as a mechanism to combat ethnocentrism and to foster an appreciation of different and diverse cultures (for an overview, see Law, 1993).

The scholarly diversity and richness of accounts of tourism show that the subject has been of intellectual concern for some time. Yet differences in theoretical orientation, methods and analytical techniques have led to alterative ways of conceptualising tourism, assessing consequences and delineating the effects of tourism on quality of life and social organisation. Many scholars have examined the effect of tourism on personal experience and modes of consumption (see, for example, MacCannell, 1976; Urry, 1995; Ritzer and Liska, 1997). Few scholars, however, have provided a theoretically sophisticated account of the diverse ways in which political and economic élites use tourism to transform space. More rarely have scholars connected their empirical work on tourism with a broader analysis of capitalism and political economy. Drawing upon the analytical categories of political economy, I examine the marketisation of local festivals and celebrations such as Mardi Gras and specify connections between tourism and its attendant cultural manifestations. The concepts of commodification and spectacle provide the theoretical basis for understanding the marketing of cities, the globalisation of local celebrations and the political economy of tourism.

Commodification and Spectacle in Urban Tourism

References to commodification and spectacle abound in recent urban studies of tourism and the marketing of places (for overviews, see Judd and Faintsein, 1999; Watson and

Kopachevsky, 1994; Britton, 1991). The concept of commodification refers to the dominance of commodity exchange-value over use-value and implies the development of a consumer society where market relations subsume and dominate social life. In the context of urban tourism, local customs, rituals, festivals and ethnic arts become tourist attractions, performed for tourist consumption and produced for market-based instrumental activities. As different tourist attractions and cities increasingly compete with each other to attract tourists, the need to present the tourist with ever more spectacular, exotic and titillating attractions increases. In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord (1973) developed the concept 'spectacle' to refer to the domination of media images and consumer society over the individual while obscuring the nature and effects of capitalism. The spectacle is a tool of pacification, depoliticisation and massification that 'distracts' and 'seduces' people using the mechanisms of leisure, consumption and entertainment as ruled by the dictates of advertising and commodified media culture. Building on these insights, diverse thinkers imply that the process of commodification and spectacle are producing widespread socio-cultural change, but they disagree over its form, impact and periodisation. I stress four themes that have been important focal points of debate and crucial contexts underlying the rise and dominance of urban tourism, and the attendant social and spatial changes.

First, the idea that 'consumption' is taking precedence over 'production', one of the most widely debated facets in urban studies and tourism analyses, maintains that the expansion and deepening of commodity markets has transferred the logic and rationality of 'production' to the sphere of 'consumption'. Several scholars describe a broad shift from production-centred capitalism, rooted in work and coercion, to consumer capitalism, based on leisure, market 'seduction', and spectacle (for overviews, see Miles and Paddison, 1998; Bauman, 1992; Ritzer, 1999; Urry, 1995). For Gottdiener (2000, 1997), the historical development of consumer society is an organised extension of production relations with the 'new means of consumption' as a crucial productive force of capital itself. Focusing on the increasing commodification of reality, other scholars argue that we have moved from society organised on the basis of an "immense accumulation of commodities", to quote Marx, to a society dominated by "an immense accumulation of spectacles", according to Debord (1973, p. 1). Framed as style, taste, travel and 'destination', the world of tourism and tourist experience is one in which image, advertising and consumerism take primacy over production *per se*. Thus, tourism has decentred and localised consumption, replacing work with entertainment and lifestyle as the pivotal facets of socio-cultural life (Lloyd and Clark, 2001; Urry, 1995; Featherstone, 1991). Stressing the emergence and centrality of new forms of consumption, thinkers draw attention to the role that tourism plays as a form of commodified pleasure, tourism-as-spectacle that defines individual travellers and tourists as consumers, and the impact of the tourism 'industry' in using advertising and marketing to constitute and then exploit consumer desires and needs for profit.

A second theme—the eclipse of exchange-value by sign-value—maintains that commodification has reached a stage where images have become commodities themselves and operate according to their own autonomous logic within a chain of free-floating signifiers. In Jean Baudrillard's work, the commodity radiates with sign value in which the value of images, objects and practices is organised into a hierarchy of prestige, coded differences and associative chains and symbols that "bears no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum" (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 11). For MacCannell (1976, pp. 19–23), contemporary tourism is a manufactured signifier that is an expression of the "semiotics of capitalist production". According to Watson and Kopachevsky, the idea of sign-value takes researchers

> closer to the reality of the current period, where modern men and women seem far

> more fascinated by, and interested in, the 'spectacle'—the chaotic flow of signs and simulated images so carefully purveyed by the mass media, than by any supposed use-value of commodities (Watson and Kopachevsky, 1994, p. 647).

Reflecting the increasing interest in sign-value, many scholars argue that what diverse tourist spaces such as Disneyland, Las Vegas, Times Square in New York City, heritage sites, downtown 'festival' marketplaces and 'theme parks' share is a decontextualisation/recontextualisation of place that blurs the distinction between signifier and signified, copy and original, and past and present (Gladstone, 1998; Soja, 2000). This scholarly focus mirrors a broader interest in the transformation of public spaces into privatised 'consumption' spaces and the latest attempts by tourism entrepreneurs and other economic élites to provide a package of shopping, dining and entertainment within a themed and controlled environment—a development that scholars have called the 'Disneyification' of urban space (Eeckhout, 2001; Reichl, 1999; Sorkin, 1992). In the process, tourism interests and advertising agencies thematise local traditions, famous buildings, landmarks and other heritage sights to the point that they become 'hyper-real', by which people lose the ability to distinguish between the 'real' and 'illusion'.

A closely related theme, autoreferential culture, holds that culture operates according its own autonomous logic free from the material referents or the constraints of social structure (for a paradigmatic statement, see Harrison and Huntington, 2000). Proponents of the 'cultural turn' in urban studies, for example, maintain that cultural imagery, symbols and motifs are the fundamental organising principles of society rather than class or capitalism (for an overview, see Storper, 2001). As a complex of signs and signification (including language), 'culture' meshes into codes of transmission of social values and meanings that have a 'material effect' on urban growth and decline (see, for example, Zukin *et al.*, 1998; Zukin, 1996, 1997; King, 1996). For example, several scholars have identified several 'cultural' strategies of tourist-oriented urban revitalisation, including the development of convention centres, art shows and galleries, opera halls, museums, festivals, symphony halls, professional sports stadiums and casino gambling. Other cultural analyses have focused on how cities are emphasising the aesthetic or historical value of their architecture, redeveloping their river and canal waterfronts, designating areas of the city as artistic quarters and preserving or reconverting old buildings and archaic technology (Bassett, 1993; Boyer, 1992; Reichl, 1997, 1999; Strom, 1999; Kearns and Philo, 1993; Short 1999). What unites these otherwise diverse studies is that they imply that the rise of tourism and the creation of spaces of 'consumption' within cities have emerged from widespread cultural and aesthetic changes including the emergence of style as identity, the proliferation of visual images and electronic media, and development of sophisticated marketing schemes. Yet critics have charged that proponents of the cultural turn have failed to define 'culture' systematically and have left unclear the 'causal' connections between culture and political economy (for example, see Gottdiener, 2000; Scott, 1997, 2000, pp. 204–215). Few cultural accounts have explored the role of capitalist profit-making in the production of tourist spaces or examined how spaces of tourist consumption connect to the production of space (see Imrie *et al.*, 1996, p. 1259).

A final theme stresses textual deconstruction and semiotic analyses over political economy critiques of capitalism. Problematising the relationship between the 'objective' and the 'discursive', proponents of textualism, deconstruction and semiotics proclaim an end to 'grand narratives' and 'totalisations' that attempt to explain the world in terms of patterned relationships. These concerns are highlighted in the urban scholarship of Liggett (1994), King (1996), Zukin *et al.* (1998), Watson and Gibson (1995) and others who emphasise 'texts', 'images', and 'stories' as units of analysis.

More recently, a number of contributions to *Urban Studies* have attempted to develop a 'linguistic turn' that supersedes the 'cultural turn' and focuses on the role of language use in determining meaning in the process of urban change (see especially, Hastings, 1999; Collins, 2000). In his review of the literature, Collins (2000) contends that early linguistic accounts tended to eschew Marxian critiques, dismissing political economy analyses as 'reductionistic' accounts that suppress important differences between cities. More recent accounts, however, have attempted to focus on substantive concerns and empirical questions about inequality and power relations (see Hastings, 1999, p. 7). Yet despite an emphasis on critical analysis and the importance of contextualising language within broader social relations, critics remain sceptical of linguistic approaches in urban studies (see Collins, 2000, p. 2028). Empirically, critics charge that linguistic perspectives fail to clarify concepts, interrogate evidence systematically and address disconfirming evidence forthrightly. Theoretically, critics contend that linguistic perspectives fall prey to cultural determinism, semiological idealism and lame storytelling that gives license to undisciplined, whimsical and partisan points of view (for example, see Sayer, 1994; Imrie *et al.*, 1996).

Despite much heterogeneity, most scholars who privilege culturalist and linguistic approaches lack a sophisticated theory or set of concepts to illuminate the deep-level connections between tourism's cultural manifestations and impact on urban form. I use the analytical tools and categories of political economy to examine how key actors, organised interests and powerful groups construct images of the city and strategically deploy discourse and language to legitimise certain interpretations of reality and transform the social and built environment.[2] According to Babcock (1996) and Sayer (1994), urban studies under the cultural and linguistic turn has shifted towards understanding the city as a space of performance, theatre, and signification, rather than as a site of conflict and inequality. In this paper, I follow Collins' (2000) recent call for urban scholarship "to link an engagement with language-use to a form of political economy" which, according to Imrie *et al.* (1996, p. 1258), "maintains a critical focus on issues connected to poverty, inequality and systemic structure conditions of people's existence". I approach the significance of cultural symbols, signs and imagery by focusing first on the socio-spatial practices underlying the production of meaning and everyday life (see Mele, 2000). I root my examination of the marketing of Mardi Gras, the dominance of tourism in New Orleans and the production of imagery, spectacle and other signifying processes as an extension of the commodification of social life under capitalism. Whereas early culturalist and linguistic perspectives insisted on the causal primacy of semiotic over material exchange, I trace the images back to their sources, to the reality of commodification and the social forces behind it. Rather than viewing the city as space constituted by language and discourse, I view the city as a site of inequality and struggle, and connect the cultural manifestations of tourism and the marketing of Mardi Gras to larger spatial and political-economic trends.

Political Economy of Tourism in New Orleans

The practice of constructing images of towns or cities to make them attractive to capitalist enterprises, travellers, tourists and residents has a long history in the US and elsewhere (Benjamin, 1978; Eisinger, 2000; Holcomb, 1994). During the 19th century, cities in the western frontier marketed themselves as sites of land development opportunities associated with the coming of railroads. In the South, cities attempted to court northern investors with advertising campaigns that portrayed their cities as place of profitable investment and suitable destination points for hardworking immigrants and entrepreneurs. In 1867, New Orleans city council members commissioned a local photographer to create a photographic survey of the city to present to French emperor Napoleon III and for display

at the Paris Exposition of 1867. The purpose of the systematic study of 150 photos was to present New Orleans as a city of investment and growth and to encourage, as the display read, "the capitalist, the artist, the artisan and the mechanic and laborer" to move to the city. As the city struggled to revive its economy in the aftermath of Reconstruction, city leaders undertook promotional efforts to increase commercial and agricultural investment in the area and promote population growth. By the early 1900s, river-based commerce, cotton trade and a growing market for leisure and amusement dominated the New Orleans economy. During this time, sections of New Orleans became oriented towards leisure and entertainment: public parks, sports grounds, theatres, art galleries, shopping and so on. The city's 'red light' district and jazz culture left an indelible image in the minds of travellers and served for decades as a magnet to draw people to experience the 'sin' industry. The discovery of oil in the 1930s spearheaded a tremendous growth of the chemical and petroleum industry and, by the Second World War, the city had established itself as a hub for military shipbuilding and manufacturing. Throughout the decades, political and economic élites promoted images of New Orleans as a charming city with beautiful and historical architecture, outstanding cuisine and excellent music. By the 1960s, the economy had a tripartite base made up of the chemical and petroleum industry, the port industry and the tourism industry (Lauria *et al.*, 1995; Whelan and Young, 1991).

While tourism has always been considered as a major sector of the New Orleans economy, over the past three decades it has become the dominant sector, replacing the chemical and petroleum industry and the port industry as the major source of jobs for people in the metropolitan area. Table 1 shows total full-time and part-time employees by major industry in Orleans Parish in 1969, 1979, 1989 and 1998. As this table shows, from 1969 to 1998, the numbers of workers employed in construction, manufacturing, transport and public utilities, wholesale trade, retail trade, and finance, insurance and real estate jobs have declined, some substantially. In contrast, the table shows a tremendous growth in the number of service jobs, many of them in the tourism sector.

Table 2 shows the impact of economic clusters and sectors in the metropolitan area in 1999. As this table shows, in 1999, when measured in terms of basic employment (the number of jobs supported by the export of goods and services), the tourism sector led with 28.5 per cent of all basic employment followed by the oil/gas sector with 20.2 per cent and then by maritime and related industries with 9.2 per cent. However, despite the growth in the number of tourism jobs, many of these jobs are in low-paying positions with high turnover rates. Moreover, hiring and lay-offs within the tourism industry are cyclical, with fall and spring being peak times, and summer and winter down times. Many of these service-sector jobs require minimal skills and education that make staff reductions and lay-offs common throughout the year. Although the number of jobs in the tourism industry is increasing, they do not counterbalance the loss of jobs in other sectors, especially higher-paying and more secure jobs (many with benefits) in other industries. Unlike most jobs in the port industry, jobs in the tourism industry are non-union jobs.

Throughout the past few decades, city leaders in New Orleans have interpreted this shift from a manufacturing- and port-dominated economy to tourism as both a vehicle and a symbol of 'progress' for the city and its residents. Yet the shift towards tourism has coincided with losses in population, increasing poverty and an intensification of other social problems, including fiscal crises in education and city finances. From 1960 to 2000, the central city of New Orleans lost almost 143 000 residents, or 22 per cent of its total population. While the suburban areas grew in population, the population of Orleans Parish dropped from a high of 627 525 in 1960 to an all-time low of 484 674 in 2000. The city lost more than 34 000 residents during the 1960s, more

Table 1. Total full-time and part-time employees, by major industry for Orleans Parish, 1969, 1979, 1989, 1998

Employment	1969	1979	1989	1998
By place of work				
Total employment	338 476	366 162	324 561	321 868
By type				
Wage and salary	313 872	338 742	298 896	289 917
Proprietors	24 604	27 420	25 665	31 951
Farm	0	0	0	0
Non-farm[a]	26 604	27 420	25 420	31 951
By industry				
Farm	0	0	0	0
Non-farm	338 474	366 162	324 561	321 868
Private	284 469	308 482	264 859	257 891
Agricultural services, forestry, fishing, other[b]	781	701	745	1 742
Mining	9 151	13 848	13 176	9 118
Construction	17 784	15 987	7 880	9 173
Manufacturing	32 696	26 293	16 799	13 613
Transport and public utilities	38 785	38 318	26 502	21 867
Wholesale trade	25 923	26 950	15 895	11 758
Retail trade	48 568	55 342	46 969	46 119
Finance, insurance and real estate	25 664	33 303	25 906	20 734
Services	85 117	97 740	110 987	123 767
Government and government enterprises				
Federal, civilian	12 462	13 631	13 431	13 082
Military	4 982	5 494	7 425	6 081
State and local	36 563	38 555	38 846	44 814

[a] Excludes limited partners.

[b] 'Other' consist of the number of jobs held by US residents employed by international organisations and foreign assemblies and consulates in the US.

Sources: Data for 1969, 1979 and 1989 obtained from Center for Business and Economic Research (1993). Data for 1998 obtained from US Bureau of Economic Analysis. Regional Accounts Data. Local Area Personal Income, Table CA25, Orleans, Louisiana.

than 35 000 during the 1970s and more than 60 000 during the 1980s. Recently, local newspapers and politicians have suggested that the residential base of the Orleans parish population has stabilised after years of erosion (*New Orleans Times–Picayune*, 3 March 2001). Nevertheless, Census Bureau population figures for the 1990s show that the parish lost an average of more than 1000 people each year while the suburban population grew. Moreover, since 1960, the racial composition of the city has reversed itself. In 1960, Whites made up 62.6 per cent of the city's population and Blacks were 37.2 per cent. As of the 2000 census, Blacks made up 67.3 per cent of the city's population and Whites were 28.1 per cent.

Local public officials, journalists and scholars have acknowledged the deleterious effects of the persistent poverty, racial segregation in housing and schools, urban disinvestment and job loss, and increasing blight while downtown redevelopment and suburban growth have been taking place. Since the 1970s, the poverty rate for the city and metropolitan area has remained stagnant and the city has had to deal with chronic revenue shortages. In 1969, the poverty rate for the metropolitan area was 20.1 per cent, 26.4 per cent in the city and

Table 2. Impact of economic clusters and sectors, New Orleans metropolitan area, 1999

Cluster/Sector	'Basic' employment[a]	Percentage of total MSA 'basic' employment	Total 'basic' earnings[a]($)	Percentage of total 'basic' earnings by sector
Tourism and related industries	31 970	28.5	366 580 836	10.55
Oil/gas and related industries	22 052	20.2	1 049 745 601	30.21
Maritime and related industries	10 050	9.2	385 817 691	11.10
Ship/boat building and repair	9 397	8.6	249 006 900	7.17
Federal civilian and military	9 091	8.3	283 691 820	8.16
Education service	8 448	7.7	342 842 482	9.87
Legal, business, and professional services	7 330	6.7	358 228 437	10.31
Aerospace Manufacturing	2 520	2.3	149 227 860	4.29
State government	2 423	2.2	80 242 844	2.31
Other manufacturing	6 833	6.3	209 278 395	6.02
Fabricated plate work	1 111	1.0	32 023 453	0.92
Commercial laundry equipment	772	0.7	28 290 922	0.81
Coffee roasting and packaging	745	0.7	26 027 100	0.75
Conveyors/conveying equipment	594	0.5	20 805 967	0.60
Cane sugar refining	556	0.5	20 578 084	0.59
Oil/gas field machinery	564	0.5	19 754 530	0.57
Specialty food preparations	757	0.7	15 924 020	0.46
Bottled/canned soft drinks	571	0.5	15 113 751	0.43
Turbines and turbine generators	396	0.4	13 677 468	0.40
Electronic capacitors	145	0.1	5 326 195	0.15
Men's/boys' furnishings	344	0.3	5 230 349	0.15
Gypsum products	156	0.1	3 307 513	0.10
Steel foundries	122	0.1	3 019 043	0.09
Totals	109 204	100.0	3 474 662 866	100.00

[a] 'Basic' defined as the employment and earnings of industries that exceed the amount that would be present in the area as determined by the location quotient—i.e. the amount based on the proportion of the national population living in the area.

Source: Metrovision.

13.3 per cent in the suburbs. Despite fluctuations in the national and regional economies, these rates have hardly changed through the decades. Today, as in the past, the poverty rate for the city of New Orleans is roughly double that of the surrounding suburban area. As of 1995, more than half the children living in New Orleans, 51.6 per cent, were living below the federal poverty level. Interestingly, the rate of poverty for Black families in the city has remained at roughly 38 per cent from 1970 through 1990, while the poverty rate for White families has declined from 9.5 per cent to 6.1 per cent during the same period. In a recent survey of 216 counties and parishes in the US with at least 250 000 residents, the Census Bureau found that the Orleans Parish was one of the poorest, ranking fourth, with 25 per cent of its working population living in poverty. Only 5 other counties in the nation had a poverty rate of 25 per cent or greater in 2000. In a study of median household incomes in those 216 counties and parishes, Orleans Parish again ranked among the poorest, third from the bottom at 213, with $27 111 (*New Orleans Times–Picayune*, 20 November 2001). Interestingly, the intensity and seeming intractability of social problems in the city have prompted the local circulation of facetious slogans such as "New Orleans: the city that care forgot" and bumper stickers

that proclaim "New Orleans: Third World and Proud of It".

In sum, the transition to a tourism-dominated economy has parallelled population decline, white flight to the suburbs, racial segregation, poverty and other a host of other social problems including crime, fiscal austerity, poor schools and decaying infrastructure. In 1994, New Orleans had the nation's highest murder rate of large cities—425 murders for the year. Although murder and crime rates have dropped since this time, the image of New Orleans as an unsafe city remains ingrained in the minds of local residents (*New Orleans Times–Picayune*, 10 March 2000). These negative urban conditions make it difficult for urban boosters, cultural representers and tourism entrepreneurs to project an image of New Orleans as a place of leisure, entertainment and play. The typical method of neutralising the threat of negativity is to impart an unthreatening and unproblematic representation using themes such as romanticism, nostalgia and other flattering images. Indeed, the purpose of marketing cities is to accentuate the positive elements of the city and, perhaps deliberately, to overlook the problems. Brochures and tourist guides convey a stylised cityscape composed of neighbourhoods with famous and architecturally significant mansions, public landmarks, museums and so on, with a tableau of scenic parks—images that bear little relevance to the realities of social deprivation and poverty concentrated in the city's peripheral neighbourhoods. Harvey (1989) and Holcomb (1993, 1999) suggest that place promotion is no longer concerned with informing or promoting in the ordinary sense (such as selling to get the consumer to buy what you have) but "is increasingly geared to manipulating desires and tastes through images that may or may not have anything to do with the product to be sold" (Harvey, 1989, p. 287). The implication of this shift from 'selling' to 'marketing' cities and spaces is that tourism entrepreneurs and urban imagineers are not necessarily engaged in promoting and advertising what the city has to offer.[3] They are involved in adapting, reshaping and manipulating (i.e. simulating) images of the place to be desirable to the targeted consumer.

Marketing Mardi Gras: Commodification and Spectacle in New Orleans

The celebration of Mardi Gras originated in France and came to the US during the 1700s. In the late 1700s, residents held pre-Lenten balls but later Spanish governors banned these celebrations in an attempt to eradicate the French influence in the city. By the early 1800s, Mardi Gras returned to the city with the celebration beginning 47 days before Easter, and Fat Tuesday falling on the day before Ash Wednesday. During this time, celebrations consisted of maskers, the formation of secret carnival societies (Krewes) that chose mythological names and the advent of themed parades with floats and tableau balls at the conclusion of parades. The first 'official' parade took to the streets in 1857 and, despite a hiatus during the Civil War, by the end of century several krewes had organised and were holding wildy extravagant parades and balls. The first half of the 20th century witnessed the establishment of the first women's and Black parading krewes, an increase in the number of city and suburban parades, and greater national and international publicity. In the 1960s, the newly formed Bacchus Krewe stunned the local establishment by presenting the largest floats in carnival history, having a celebrity ride as its king (Danny Kaye) and broke tradition by offering a supper dance that both locals and visitors could attend. The establishment of the super-krewe of Endymion in 1974 and Orpheus in 1998 copied the innovations of Bacchus and opened their memberships to non-residents. In the 1980s, the 'baring breasts for beads' spectacle became popular and camera crews from Japan, Europe and Latin American broadcasted the celebration around the world. In 1992, the city council enacted an anti-discrimination ordinance that required parading krewes to open their private membership. Several of the oldest White-dominated krewes that had been

parading since the 19th century cancelled their parades rather than open membership to Blacks. The decade also witnessed a tremendous increase in the number of parades in the newer suburbs, the decline of parades in the older suburbs, expanded media coverage and sophisticated marketing of the celebration by corporations.

While the Mardi Gras celebration has been occurring annually since 1857 in New Orleans, the reasons for holding it have changed. In the past, Mardi Gras developed as a relatively indigenous celebration for local residents that existed outside the logic of market exchange and capital circulation. Today, tourism entrepreneurs and urban boosters aggressively market Mardi Gras as part of a larger tourism-oriented strategy to encourage people to visit and spend money in the city—a tendency some local residents believe will result in the devaluation of the celebration for the city. An array of public and private groups have emerged in recent decades to 'market' Mardi Gras using sophisticated advertising techniques aimed at promoting desire and fantasy, manipulation of consumer needs, art and design directed to the production of desirable tourist experiences, and other highly refined techniques of image production and distribution. Interestingly, publishers have produced more books about Mardi Gras in the past 20 years than in the previous 150 years. Corporations and trade organisations now regularly use Mardi Gras as a reason to hold conventions in New Orleans and international media attention is lavished on the city with camera crews from the BBC, Japan, the Travel channel and other countries showcasing the festivities to a world-wide audience. The Discovery and Learning channels now produce documentaries on the subject. Entertainment Tonight, MTV and the Playboy Channel telecast live reports from New Orleans every year and the Internet now serves as a major source of 'infotainment'.

Three decades ago, Guy Debord and the French Situationists drew attention to the tendency within capitalism for symbols, imagery and motifs to become severed completely from their original cultural and religious roots. Following Marx's (1867/1978) famous discussion of the 'mystical character' of commodities in Volume I of *Capital*, the Situationists described how the spread of commodification turned relations and experiences into 'things' to be bought and sold (exchanged for profit). As a result of this fetishisation of reality, 'abstractions' can mask the underlying social relations governing commodity production. Debord (1973, pp. 59, 187) held that the direction of capitalism was towards the commodification of previously non-colonised areas of social life—especially culture, religion and leisure—and their corresponding 'banalisation', 'decomposition' and 'formal annihilation' under the "shimmering diversions of the spectacle". Parallelling the Frankfurt School's critique of the culture industry, the Situationists described the propensity for cultural and religious symbols and images to be reconfigured as a lever for expanding consumerism, thereby reconstituting desires, stimulating demand and creating new needs. "When culture becomes nothing more than a commodity", lamented Debord (1973, p. 193), "it must also become the star commodity of the spectacular society". Walter Benjamin (1978) noted that this 'commodity-phantasmagoria' of the spectacle began in the 19th century in the Paris Arcades, which displayed all the radiant commodities of the era. In the case of Mardi Gras, the celebration has shifted from a celebration of rich symbolism (i.e. Catholicism and Lent) to the current stage of spectacle divorced from deep-level religious symbols.

The annual number of parades and carnival organisations (krewes), the number of visitors that attend Mardi Gras in New Orleans and the money generated through the annual celebration have increased dramatically over the past three decades. Table 3 shows the number of parades in the metropolitan area from the mid 19th century through to year 2000. As Table 3 shows, from 1857 to the late 1930s, there were approximately 4–6 parades per Mardi Gras season. The number of parades doubled from 5

Table 3. Number of float parades in New Orleans metropolitan area, 1857–2000

Year	Parades
1857	1
1870	1
1900	4
1930	5
1935	6
1940	10
1950	10
1955	17
1960	20
1965	25
1970	23
1975	50
1980	51
1985	54
1990	51
1995	48
2000	47

Note: No parades were held during the first World War (1917 and 1918) and the Second World War (1942–45).

Source: Hardy (1998, p. 22; 2000, p. 120).

in 1930 to 10 in 1940. This number increased to 17 annual parades in late 1940s, declined during the Korean War, reached 20 by 1960 and 23 by 1970. As the table shows, there was a tremendous increase in the number of parades during the 1970s and 1980s, reaching a peak of 55 in 1986. Since this time, the number of parades has remained between 45 and 52 per year.

Table 4 shows revenues and spending from Mardi Gras from 1986 to 2000. The table shows the amount of city government revenues from parades, estimated spending by area residents, overall spending resulting from Mardi Gras and the percentage change in overall spending from the preceding year. As Table 4 shows, the estimated economic impact on New Orleans from Mardi Gras has increased steadily since 1986 and hit the $1 billion mark for the first time in 2000. Estimated Mardi Gras spending in the metropolitan area increased almost 300 per cent from 1986 and 2000. The 14-year growth in inflation-adjusted spending was more than 200 per cent while national price level rose 45 per cent. The table shows an overall trend in increased tax revenues and total spending. An increased emphasis by public and private groups to promote New Orleans as a tourist destination explains the tremendous growth in Mardi Gras, as measured in estimated spending. Another reason for the growth in the size of Mardi Gras is the increased number of hotel rooms that hotel chains have built in the city and metro area in the past two decades to accommodate tourists. In 2001, the local newspaper, the *New Orleans Times–Picayune,* estimated that there were more than 30 000 hotel rooms in the metropolitan area compared with 28 000 in 1996, 19 000 in 1989, and 11 000 in 1977 (*New Orleans Times–Picayune*, 4 March 2000).

Three sets of actors market Mardi Gras: local and national businesses that produce and sell Mardi Gras souvenirs and paraphernalia; multinational companies who use Mardi Gras imagery and themes to sell their products; and, public–private organisations (tourism marketing corporations and task forces) who promote Mardi Gras to support inward investment and economic growth. In the later case, public and private sectors overlap and place marketers and tourism boosters increasingly emphasise 'synergistic' opportunities, otherwise known as 'tie-ins', as a key business strategy for creating commercial value. Moreover, public and private agencies co-operate in the production of tourism infrastructure and the creation of spaces of consumption in the city. Each of these groups is involved in heavy promotional efforts including the use of theming, the production of spectacle and sophisticated advertising.

Marketing Mardi Gras Souvenirs and Paraphernalia

The production and selling of Mardi Gras souvenirs and paraphernalia by local and extra-local businesses has a long history. Since the 19th century, local businesses have sold an array of different products that display

Table 4. Government revenues and area spending resulting from Mardi Gras, 1986–2000 ($ millions)

Year	City of New Orleans government revenues from parades	Spending by New Orleans area residents	Overall spending resulting from Mardi Gras	Percentage change from preceding year
1986	4.3	29.9	239.2	—
1987	4.8	35.3	275.3	15.1
1988	5.6	35.7	309.6	12.5
1989	5.6	45.2	330.6	6.7
1990	8.3	50.0	487.9	47.7
1991	8.9	52.9	499.1	2.3
1992	10.9	48.4	579.9	16.2
1993	10.6	49.0	567.7	− 2.1
1994	12.7	46.5	660.0	16.3
1995	18.2	43.9	929.1	40.8
1996	15.8	45.9	810.6	− 13.2
1997	15.3	39.8	800.8	− 1.2
1998	17.1	47.3	840.7	5.0
1999	19.1	49.2	957.0	13.8
2000	21.6	54.9	1 056.0	10.3

Notes: Total expenditures include an aggregation of all official krewe spending (for example, annual expenditures by organisations from dues and fund raising), float rider spending on parade material (beads, costumes, food and drink), ball and dinner dance spending and parade viewer spending. Total direct spending is then multiplied by 2.1 to reflect circulation of spending through the local economy.

Source: Annual Mardi Gras Economic Impact Study conducted by James McClain (Louisiana Business Survey, Spring 2000).

'Mardi Gras', 'Fat Tuesday' or similar imagery. However, what has changed in recent decades is the intensity and sophistication of marketing and producing Mardi Gras memorabilia. Today, businesses that specialise in Mardi Gras souvenirs are open year round and they design, package and sell their commodities for mass consumption, primarily to tourists and non-residents. In the 1990s, local auction houses, art galleries and museums began to showcase Mardi Gras memorabilia and the Internet has opened a burgeoning market for buying and selling souvenirs. As of March 2000, more than 100 Internet sites sold Mardi Gras products including posters, cakes, clothes and T-shirts, videos, music, flags, furniture, beads, coffee and beer mugs, plastic cups, decorations and dolls—anything to entice the consumer not just to buy Mardi Gras but other New Orleans paraphernalia, commemorative souvenirs and various trinkets. In particular, the business of producing 'throws' (beads) has greatly expanded in the 1990s with at least six major supply houses and countless smaller operations profiting from the multimillion dollar business. In February 1997, bidding at New Orleans Auction Galleries totalled $33 680 for 103 lots of Mardi Gras memorabilia. The industry has also begun to produce 'PartyGras' packages that contain information for consumers to plan Mardi Gras children/classroom parties, teenage/prom parties or adult-only parties. In short, the production of Mardi Gras products, souvenirs and memorabilia is no longer the province of local craft skills geared towards local consumption; it has been appropriated, reimagined and retooled for mass production.

In the *Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord (1973, p. 18) refers to the spectacle as "a tendency to make one see the world by means of specialised mediations" through the use of marketing and advertising. Yet "the spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images" (p. 4). The concept of the spectacle refers to a consumer-dominated society organised around the production and consump-

tion of images and commodities that, in turn, seduce individuals to believe happiness and fulfillment can be found through the purchase of ever more commodities. With Mardi Gras, advertisers and businesses attempt to persuade tourists that by purchasing a souvenir they are buying a sign of social prestige. The purchase of a Mardi Gras souvenir is a means to an end: a statement and presentation of taste, a demonstration of the possession of 'cultural and symbolic capital', and a signifier of status. More important, it is the *appearance* of the Mardi Gras commodity that is more decisive than its actual use value and the symbolic packaging of otherwise diverse commodities—clothes, food and so on—generates a Mardi Gras image industry and commodity aesthetics.

In his book, the *Theming of America* (1997), Mark Gottdiener draws attention to the centrality of profit-making in the emergence of new strategies of advertising, including the proliferation of motifs, symbolic representations and commodity fantasy themes during the 20th century. More specifically, according to Gottiiener, the period after the 1960s represents a new phase where simulation and theming become 'singular aspects' of an expanding media-driven environment geared towards promoting mass consumption. In the case of Mardi Gras, through a threefold dialectic of use, exchange and sign value, Mardi Gras themes act in concert with other aspects of political economy, especially production, in the ongoing effort of commercial interests to accumulate profit, on the one hand, and with cognitive and emotional elements, on the other, in a quest for identity and self-expression. For example, advertisers and businesses that produce Mardi Gras souvenirs package unfamiliar and unconventional signs, sights and objects within a commodified system that attempts to construct and then satisfy demand for Mardi Gras experiences. It also encourages the collection of other signifiers of these experiences and the social status they convey. As part of the tourist industry, businesses not only attempt to sell Mardi Gras 'objects' but also 'experiences' which are the anticipated outcomes of what Urry calls the 'tourist gaze' where

> places are chosen to be gazed upon because there is anticipation, especially through day-dreaming and fantasy, of intense pleasures, either on a different scale or involving different sense from those customarily encountered (Urry, 1995, p. 132).

A variety of non-tourist practices, such as film, newspapers, TV, magazines, records and videos construct the 'tourist gaze' and the consumer's anticipation for Mardi Gras experiences. These non-tourist practices provide the signs by which consumers understand the Mardi Gras experience. What consumers see and how they interpret it is filtered through these pre-given categories. The purchase of a souvenir is a signifier, an indicator than one has achieved (purchased) the Mardi Gras experience, and intimates the celebation as a commodity. Each time a buyer wears a T-shirt proclaiming 'New Orleans' or admires a painting or photograph of a Mardi Gras parade, they can relive the experience. As Fainstein and Judd put it

> even when the commodity is a dress or a scarf that does not proclaim the place it was acquired, it retains its original associations in the memory of the wearer. If given as gift, the object becomes the vehicle for sharing the pleasure of travel, the assurance that the recipient, though out of sight, was not out of mind. From the point of view of city government, local retailers and product manufactures, this form of objectification is far more valuable than a thousand photographs of their beloved city, for unlike a paper image, it offers that much vaunted economic multiplier that is the raison d'etre of city marketing (Fainstein and Judd, 1999, p. 14).

In short, city marketing is a production industry organised to create and circulate themes, motifs and cultural symbols that potential consumers must easily recognise for the advertising to be effective. To paraphrase

Gottdiener (1997), Mardi Gras *sign values* combine with the political economy aspects of *exchange value* and the everyday reality of *use value* in the satisfaction of needs to structure a spectacular environment for consumption. This environment remains tied to the world of commodity production and is intended for the realisation of profit.

The Role of Multinational Corporations

A second major force involved in marketing Mardi Gras includes multinational corporations who link Mardi Gras imagery, symbols and motifs to their products to stimulate consumption. Since the 19th century, US corporations have used Mardi Gras themes in their advertisements for cigarettes, motor oil, skin lotion, alcohol, cola and so on. In the late 1890s, major railroad companies referred to the Mardi Gras celebration in their promotional booklets about New Orleans. In 1949, the US Rubber Company advertised its new fall line of Keds tennis shoes with one bearing the name 'Mardi Gras'. During the late 1940s, a brewery in Reading, Pennsylvania brewed and marketed a beer bearing the name 'Mardi Gras'. Lucky Strike cigarettes used a New Orleans carnival theme in its 1951 advertisements applauding the virtues of smoking. These and other examples suggest that, decades ago, major corporations were seeking unique ways to promote their products using Mardi Gras.

Until the 1970s, corporate use of Mardi Gras themes and imagery in advertising tended to be *ad hoc* and unco-ordinated, and lacked sophistication compared with the present. Not only was the socioeconomic context different from today, but the intensity and scale of advertising and the organisation of aesthetic production were vastly different. Today, the marketing of Mardi Gras by corporations involves technologies of simulation, manipulation of signs and the thrill of the spectacle. Many Orleans Parish parades follow long-standing traditions that discourage commercialism. However, companies such as Coca-Cola, Popeyes, Verizon and Zapps potato chips now sponsor floats in suburban Jefferson Parish and several suburban parades now amount to commercial billboards for corporate America. The Argus parade that rolls in Jefferson Parish is the most is blatantly commercial, proclaiming on its website that businesses can sponsor a float to promote their business in "front of the crowds on the street, and the millions of TV viewers in New Orleans and nationwide" (www.acadiacom.net/fpi/). Figure 1 shows an Argus float advertising Coca-Cola, while Figure 2 shows a float advertising Popeye's chicken.

Major corporations such as Bacardi rum, Southern Comfort, Coors beer, Kool cigarettes and other companies that specialise in 'sin' products—beer, alcohol and cigarettes—pitch their advertisements to a built-in audience of consumers. More important, these corporations are increasingly viewing their New Orleans and Mardi Gras-themed advertising campaigns as key devices to shape their brands' images, both regionally and nationally. According to Mark Mayer of Peter Mayer Advertising Inc., a local advertising firm

> People have a clear sense of what Mardi Gras is about. It's about fun, losing your inhibitions, and celebrating life … These companies are interested in appending those characteristics through their products to Mardi Gras (*New Orleans Times–Picayune*, 25 February 2001, p. F-1).

While there is considerable diversity in the type and style of themed packaging, what is common is that corporations recognise the profit potential that comes from connecting their products to Mardi Gras, an event known throughout the world and rich with easily identifiable images. Coors Light and Heineken now produce Mardi Gras commemorative beer cans and T-shirts that they distribute nationally. Playboy.com has now established a regular presence in New Orleans during Mardi Gras beaming images of elaborate parties and playmates tossing beads and flirting with tourists. In 2001, Captain Morgan Spiced Rum sponsored its 'Bombshells from the Bayou' while Stuff magazine

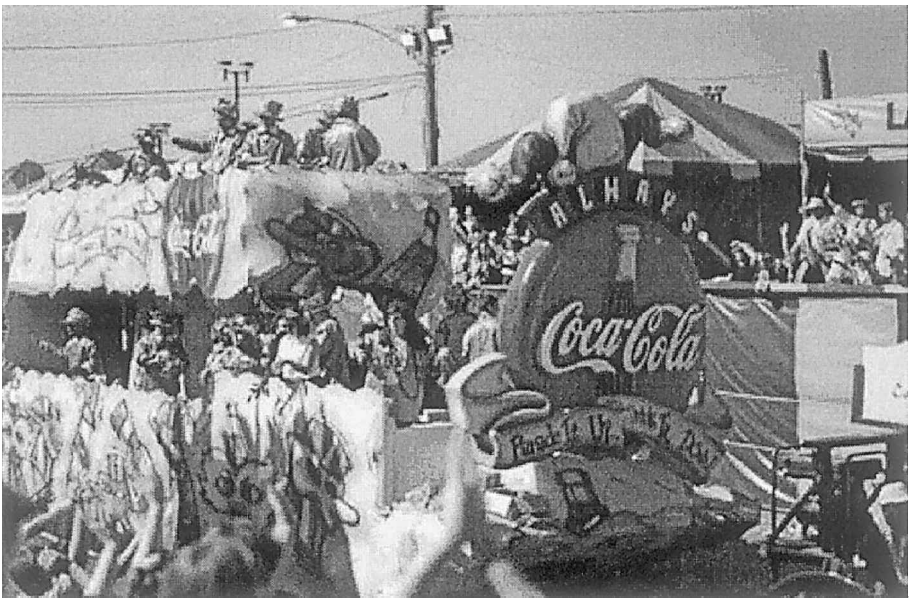

Figure 1. An Argus float advertising Coca-Cola.

presented its 'Stuff Girls' entourage on Bourbon Street in the French Quarter. Yet Mardi Gras advertising is more than packing fun and pleasure to sell commodities (for example, realise exchange value). In Bacardi's case, the company hopes that its recent promotional campaign in New Orleans will transform its brand image (for example, enhance sign value). In 2001, the company sponsored a float in a suburban parish, lined up celebrity riders for other parades and distributed promotional material throughout the French Quarter. According to John Gomez, group marketing director at Bacardi USA in Miami

> Mardi Gras is really a cornerstone event for us. We've always had a presence there. Obviously New Orleans is a great market. If you think about the type of drinks that consumers drink there, the Hurricane is a big rum drink. But we really wanted to take it up a notch (*New Orleans Times–Picayune*, 25 February 2001, p. F-2).

Corporations are increasingly using Mardi Gras advertising to target a nationwide audience on a year-round basis, rather than just during the carnival season. In 2001, Southern Comfort employed a staff of 'brand ambassadors' and hired three stars of MTV's Real World New Orleans to market the beverage. The company also dispatched members of its marketing team to Buffalo, San Diego and St Louis to show consumers how they can use Southern Comfort to make Hurricanes and celebrate Fat Tuesday. Southern Comfort has also attempted to market itself as an 'authentic' New Orleans tradition by emphasising that the Southern Comfort secret formula was developed on Bourbon Street. As other parts of the country begin to celebrate Mardi Gras, corporations have learned that people associate the celebration with fun, hedonism and entertainment. Mardi Gras becomes a 'floating signifier' that corporations attach to their products to stimulate further consumption. This marketing technique leads them incessantly to redefine and repackage advertisements that they believe resonate with present trends, audience desires and fantasies, and thus will be attractive to specific audiences and, as far as possible, mass audiences. In 2000, Bacardi realised the profit potential of marketing Mardi Gras year-round when it sent 'Bacardi Gras' kits of hats, beads and Hurricane recipes to bars around the nation

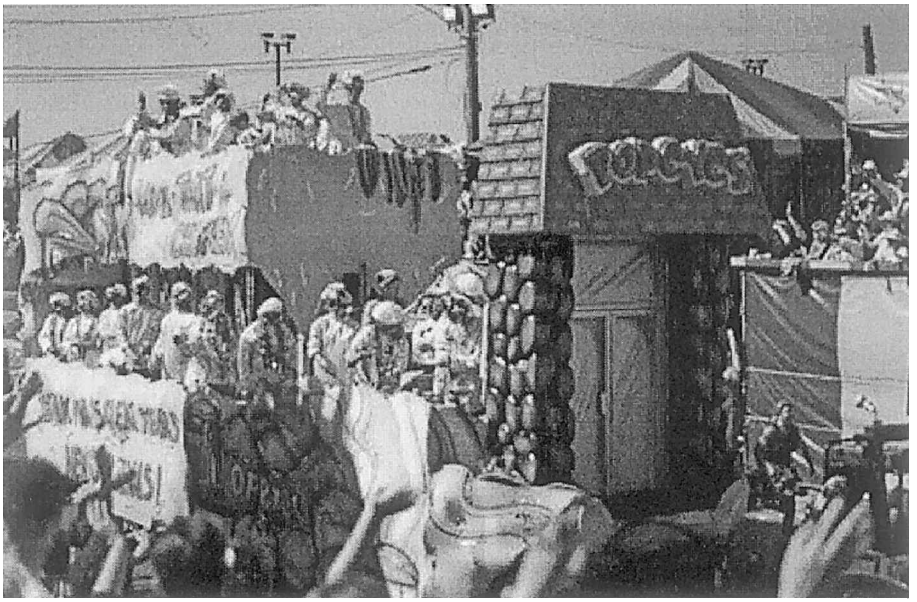

Figure 2. An Argus float advertising Popeye's chicken.

and realised that they were still selling long after the carnival season. As John Gomez, group marketing director at Bacardi USA in Miami, put it

> 'Bacardi Gras' ended up being one of the most successful promotions we've ever developed. What we found was that even though it was intended to be used over Fat Tuesday, people were actually doing Bacardi Gras promotions in July. That's when we started realising that there's a real connection (*New Orleans Time–-Picayune*, 25 February 2001, p. F-1).

The potential for using Mardi Gras for 'brand-alignment' and 'brand-extension' has not been lost on large corporations. Unlike the names 'Super Bowl', 'Sugar Bowl', or other corporate-sponsored activities, no one has trade-marked the words 'Mardi Gras' which means that companies do not have to pay money to use the term. While the city and metropolitan area do not earn revenue from the name, the term offers free exposure and publicity through corporate advertising. As Mark Mayer of Peter Mayer Advertising Inc., a local advertising firm, put it, "Because nobody can sponsor Mardi Gras, it becomes almost a free-for-all to see who can link their brands to Mardi Gras imagery". According to Packard Phillips, a local trademark attorney and former advertising professional

> My theory is that anything you get for free, all that publicity or promotional tie-ins, are probably good for the city. Let's face it, New Orleans' industry is tourism. If I can get my city's name and event on Heineken Beer or Kool cigarettes, that's got to be good for my city (*New Orleans Times–Picayune*, 25 February 2001, p. F-1).

As far as possible, major corporations seek to liquidate referentials, creating a condition where they can recombine and code self-referential signs, generating further codes and ultimately a simulacrum, which Baudrillard (1983) identifies as an identical copy for which no original ever existed. Baudrillard decontextualises the analysis of simulacra, fails to go beyond cultural texts and thus obscures the imperatives of profit and accumulation that drive the production of imagery. Indeed, behind the veil of simulacra lies the profiteering interests of corporate capital who attempt to build, combine and

then exploit the potential of Mardi Gras themes, imagery and related symbols. Advertising in general, and the marketing of Mardi Gras in particular, are attempts to produce and expand the commodity sign and commodity form. The practitioners and agents at work within this system of advertising and marketing are well aware of the necessity for profit and the rules of capital accumulation. The production of spectacle and simulation represent very strategic, calculated and methodical campaigns that corporations design to expand markets and reduce circulation time between production and the realisation of a commodity sale. Marketing Mardi Gras becomes another technique used by corporate capital to seduce consumers into seeking fun and entertainment through the consumption of spectacles. As an integral part of modern culture, advertising's main role is to persuade people that only in consumption can they find not only satisfaction, but social status.

The Role of Public and Private Actors

A third major set of actors involved in marketing Mardi Gras comprises an array of public/private groups who use Mardi Gras imagery, themes and motifs to promote economic growth, encourage investment in the city and produce spaces of consumption. The major interests involved include local and regional chambers of commerce, local and metropolitan planning councils, economic development agencies, tourism bureaus, planning departments, newspapers, cultural affairs and mayor's offices. Some groups render services to stimulate economic development in the city of New Orleans. Others provide funding to various groups that market New Orleans as a desirable visitor destination. Still other groups develop programmes to improve marketing strategies and co-ordinate the tourism marketing efforts of New Orleans with those of other cities and the State of Louisiana. Thus, various public and private actors, especially city governments in the metropolitan area, have increasingly assumed a co-ordinating role in fostering marketing schemes that use Mardi Gras themes to raise the profile and visibility of the city and thereby attract conventions, tourists and other businesses. Funding comes from general tax revenues, governmental financial contributions and other sources such as hotel or guest room taxes, commissions from conference or booking services and sales from tourist information centres.

The promotion of place and the implementation of policies designed to attract new industry and travellers to New Orleans has been a mainstay of local economic development for decades. Nevertheless, several features distinguish current city promotion efforts from previous practice. First, urban boosters and advertisers market Mardi Gras for several reasons (rather than with single overriding objective, as is true for capital accumulation) including raising the competitive position of the city, attracting inward investment and improving New Orleans' national and international image. Secondly, recent decades have witnessed a transformation in 'how' the promotion of place is expressed. Specifically, New Orleans and other cities have adopted targeted forms of advertising to bolster directly the process of image construction. Cultural entrepreneurs, urban imagineers and tourism boosters simulate New Orleans and Mardi Gras using general and specific themes, and fabricating and manipulating symbols and motifs to entice people to visit and spend money in New Orleans. In turn, city leaders and other élites attempt to refashion New Orleans generally and redevelop specific areas of the city as the fantasy images prescribe. In marketing and place promotion, leaders and élites try to enhance the product for tourist consumption, which may or may not be in the interests of city residents.

Several scholars have examined the linkages between commodification, tourism and the marketing of places (for overviews, see Fainstein and Judd, 1999; Gottdiener, 1997, 2000). Clearly, cities and their festivals have become commodities that tourism agencies advertise, market and sell like any other commodity (Featherstone, 1991; Kearns and Philo, 1993; Urry, 1995; Zukin, 1996, 1997;

Strom, 1999). However, what scholars do not usually emphasise is the degree to which local festivals, celebrations and other tourist attractions can become a means to sell other commodities. A trip to New Orleans for Mardi Gras, for example, is a desirable goal as far as the city government is concerned, but perhaps more important it is a means for selling other Mardi Gras souvenirs and corporate products that use Mardi Gras imagery. Visits to New Orleans help to fuel interest in Mardi Gras souvenirs and, more important, New Orleans products, food, movies, books, music, art, architecture, and so on. According to Britton (1991, p. 465), "tourists are the 'armies of semiotics' for whom the identification and collection of signs are 'proof' that experiences have been realised". In this respect, the marketing of Mardi Gras "experiences" becomes an overt and intentional avenue of capitalist accumulation with tie-ins with the buying and selling of other New Orleans products. The various actors and organised interests that market Mardi Gras and New Orleans give people a choice of goods and services to consume. Yet what they seek to limit, if not eliminate, to quote Ritzer and Liska (1997, p. 143), "is our ability *not* to consume" (emphasis in original).

The marketing of Mardi Gras goes hand-in-hand with the standardisation, homogenisation and subsequent globalisation of this annual celebration. Today, Mardi Gras celebrations occur in many US cities and most areas of the world and it is becoming more difficult to distinguish these celebrations from one another. As a fundamental component of New Orleans tourist-dominated economy and as a globalised festival that people celebrate around the globe, Mardi Gras taps into a growing global market for 'experiences' which would otherwise be unattainable by virtue of time, space or cost. In 1989, New Orleans float-builder Blaine Kern opened Mardi Gras World, which allows people to view costumes, shop for gifts, dress up in carnival costumes and "experience Mardi Gras year round". During Mardi Gras 2000, more than a dozen Internet cameras were set up throughout the city to beam images of Mardi Gras (and advertisements for companies) to viewers around the world (*New Orleans Times–Picayune*. 24 August 2000). Across the country, people now use Mardi Gras as a theme for proms, parties and meetings. Several Las Vegas casinos feature a Mardi Gras motif and Disney World and Universal Studies regularly schedule New Orleans-style parades. As more cities adopt Mardi Gras celebrations, they become more alike in the adoption of similar marketing strategies, contrived promotion events and the sponsorship of exhibits and other money-making extravaganzas (Hannigan, 1998; Fainstein and Judd, 1999).

Conclusion

In his book, on the theory of capitalist urbanisation, David Harvey points out that

> capitalism builds a physical and social landscape in its own image, appropriate to its own condition at a particular moment in time, only to have to revolutionise that landscape, usually in the course of creative destruction at a subsequent point in time (Harvey, 1985, p. 150).

New Orleans represents a prime example of this "creative destruction" as urban leaders and economic élites have attempted to strategically deploy Mardi Gras imagery and advertising to refashion the city into a themed landscape of entertainment and tourism over the past few decades. The building and 'revolutionising' of this urban landscape involve a dialectical relationship between socioeconomic, political and cultural forces and signify a new and distinctive phase in the development of cultural production and marketing on a global scale. Today, Mardi Gras is a linchpin of the regional tourism industry and a major marketing device used by private and public groups to attract consumption-oriented investment, build tourism-oriented spaces of consumption and adopt promotional mechanisms to facilitate tourism development. Moreover, major developers and real estate interests now regularly rely on Mardi Gras imagery

and motifs to create commercial spaces including arts districts, historical areas, museums, casinos and gaming facilities, and shopping areas. In this way, Mardi Gras connects with the production of spectacular environments and involves the circulation of people to specific locations that are consumed as spaces—spaces of leisure, recreation, history and amusement. As Henri Lefebvre (1991) recognised, what is novel and significant about tourism is that it involves people travelling to locations that are consumed as spaces of consumption, instead of the circulation of commodities among people. In short, Mardi Gras is an overarching motif that is deployed through advertising and marketing, urban design and planning, and urban redevelopment schemes in the service of selling an experience and producing spaces for tourist consumption.

In recent years, much debate has focused on the relative merits of textual deconstruction, discursive analysis and other forms of representation and 'reading' to describe the increasing salience of culture and the transformation of cities into tourists centres, entertainment hubs and so on. In much of the urban literature on the rise of the 'fantasy city' (Hannigan, 1998), consumption eclipses production as the centre of urban life; models, codes and sign-value replace the use- and exchange-value of commodities; and culture and lifestyle override the imperatives of production, class struggles or conflicts in shaping the fortunes of cities. Yet these claims are spurious. Outside every 'text' there continues to be an objective yet contested world of exploitative production relations, however remote geographically. Specific socio-historical arrangements of production, technological abilities, relations of labour, property ownership and distribution shape the consumption of goods and services. Moreover, as many critical scholars have long pointed out, the objects of consumption are commodities, and money and market relations structure our ability to carry on everyday life. As a social process, capital brings together and exploits labour and resources to create commodities—no matter if commodities are images, culture or motifs. Indeed, as Gottdiener has recently argued, the history of capitalism

> is a history of the role of signification and meaning systems in the economic life of society. This role is not confined merely to the marketing of commodities. Rather, the entire process of capital accumulation is shot through with mechanisms that depend on symbolic processes for their proper functioning (Gottdiener, 1997, p. 48).

Rather than viewing 'signs', 'symbols', 'imagery', 'meaning systems' and other forms of signification as products of technology, media and consumer culture, it makes more sense to probe deeper, into social relations of capitalism and the increased range of commodification and production of spectacle.

In writing in this vein, I have attempted to identify and analyse the specific economic, political and social forces that are entangled with cultural images and discursive practices. What such analysis does is point out the theoretical limitations of cultural- and linguistic-based analysis of tourism; it also emphasises the need to study the specific social conditions, power dynamics and relations of domination and subordination that make tourism-oriented consumption, theming and advertising possible in the first place. Indeed, scholars who embrace textual deconstruction and discursive analyses typically lack the resources to develop compelling explanations of the transformation of US cities from spaces of production to spaces of consumption, and the links between place promotion and marketing. Such extreme linguistic explanations are limited not because of the focus on consumer culture or 'readings' of cultural texts. They are limited because of the refusal to probe critically the social relations underlying the production of the text, to identify the key actors and organised interests involved in manufacturing cultural signifiers and to interrogate and explain the consequences of the actions of powerful groups. Today, in the 'tourist bubbles' (Judd, 1999) and leisure spaces of the changing city, paying sub-standard wages to

an urban service proletariat helps to subsidise the production of spectacle and simulations. Linking political economy with issues of language and discourse helps to focus attention on the role of simulations and imagery in urban tourism without missing or downplaying the exploitation and inequality that make possible the spaces of consumption devoted to glorifying, and reproducing, commodity sign-values.

Notes

1. In the past decade or so, tourism has emerged as the dominant sector within the contemporary service economy in the US and around the world. According to US Tourism Industries, tourism's export contributions grew nearly 250 per cent between 1986 through 1996, from $26 billion to $90 billion. In that time, travel and tourism have been consistently ranked as the number one services export, producing a trade surplus every year since 1989 (http://tinet.ita.doc.gov/; for overviews, see Law, 1993; Fainstein and Judd, 1999).
2. The 'critical political-economy' or 'sociospatial approach' emphasises several major dimensions of cities: the importance of class and racial domination (and, more recently, gender) in shaping urban development; the primary role of powerful economic actors, especially those in the real estate industry, in building and redeveloping cities; the role of growth-assisted government actors in city development; the importance of symbols, meanings and culture to the shaping of cities; attention to the global context of urban development (for overviews, see Feagin, 1998; Gotham, 2001; Gottdiener and Feagin, 1988; Hutchison, 2000). Gottdiener (1994) and Hutchison (2000) prefer the term 'socio-spatial' perspective to describe the critical political economy paradigm, a term that accents the society–space synergy and emphasises that cities are multifaceted expressions of local actions and macrostructural processes. They also use the term to distance themselves from older Marxist approaches of Gordon (1984), Dear and Scott (1981) and Storper and Walker (1983) and highlight the diversity of theory and method within the broad paradigm.
3. On the distinction between 'selling' and 'marketing' cities, see for example, Holcomb, 1993, 1999.

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