The Landscape of Consumer Credit Default: Tracing Technologies of Market Attachment

Joe Deville

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Sociology, Goldsmiths, University of London

December 2010

Declaration

I, Joe Deville, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where I have drawn from other sources, this has been indicated as appropriate.

Abstract

The first global recession of the twenty-first century has been widely characterised as a crisis rooted in secured credit default. But in the UK, a different, less visible, but increasingly common tale of credit default exists, which not only predates the economic downturn, but continues to compound its effects: that of unsecured, consumer credit default. This is the object of this thesis: it focuses on tracing the changing calculative landscapes that heavily indebted and defaulting consumer credit borrowers in the UK move through, from periods of borrowing, to managing debts, to being confronted by debt collectors. It draws together the perspectives of borrowers, defaulters, collectors, industry analysts and spokespersons, as well as insights from visits to three major debt collection agencies, shedding light on a domain of socio-economic life which has been subject to little detailed empirical research. At the centre of the thesis is the concept of 'market attachment', drawing on work within the 'economization' programme within economic sociology. In so doing, the thesis argues that in existing accounts of market attachment there has been a lack of attention (a) to the variable modes through which markets seek to enact attachments between consumer and producer and (b) to those constraining market attachments from which 'detachment' is difficult. In particular, the thesis explores the relationship between 'affective' modes of social action and economic calculation. Drawing attention to how emergent, corporeal relations can become central to markets, the thesis contributes towards enriching the vocabulary and expanding the potential empirical focus of economic sociology. In so doing, the thesis explores the distributed politics of consumer credit, centring on the separation enacted between 'lender' and 'collector'. This separation, the thesis argues, is not only useful for the collections industry, it is strategically put to work and routinely re-enacted as a generative market device.

Table of Contents

List of figures

List of tables

List of abbreviations

ANT	Actor-Network Theory
BIS	Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
CAQDAS	Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software
CCCS	Consumer Credit Counselling Service
CCJ	County Court Judgement
CSA	Credit Services Association
CMRC	Credit Management Research Centre
DCA	(Contingency) Debt Collection Agency
DMP	Debt Management Plan
DTI	Department of Trade and Industry
ME	Myalgic Encephalopathy
MAT	Money Advice Trust
OFT	Office of Fair Trading
ONS	Office for National Statistics
WSBI	World Savings Bank Institute

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Economic and Social Research Council for providing the funding for this PhD thesis. It could not have been completed without their assistance.

Foremost, I would like to extend my sincerest gratitude to my supervisors, Celia Lury and Alberto Toscano. Their encouragement, support and guidance have been central to this thesis and how it has taken shape. I would also like to thank Paul Filmer, who supervised me in the early part of the research process and started me thinking about my research in ways that have stayed with me throughout.

Further thanks are also due to all those who participated in this research, without whom there would be no thesis. I would like to offer thanks to both the Consumer Credit Counselling Service and the Money Advice Trust for their assistance. I am particularly grateful to Jim Fearnley, Meg Van Rooyen and Frances Walker. Thanks also to those consumer credit borrowers who were willing to let me into their lives and homes and were so generous with their time. Thanks also to those individuals and companies working in and around the consumer collections industry, who were open enough to let me into their world. Although they must remain anonymous, I remain grateful for their trust and willingness to allow a more complicated story of consumer collections to emerge than is often told.

I would also like to thank David Stark, Monique Girard, Daniel Beunza and the Center on Organizational Innovation at Columbia University for being so welcoming over the course of my stay in New York. It was a period that marked a turning point in my research.

Many thanks also to Aurora Fredriksen, Claire Garbett and Polly Haste for your thoughtful comments on a draft of this thesis and to Noortje Marres and Martha Poon for comments on earlier chapters. It is without doubt much better as a result. Thanks also to the Goldsmiths sociology department including, in particular, Brian Alleyne, Les Back, Vikki Bell and Bridget Ward, as well as to Martin Williams at PACE and Mira Vogel at GLEU.

There are a number of people who have supported me at various points over the course this thesis, all of whom I remain indebted to. These include Simon Brasse, Allan Day, Alice Deville, Yael Gerson, Nadia Iqbal, Liz McFall, Mark Ratcliff (and all at Murmur), and Jonathan Robbins. Thanks also to Colin and Belinda Day, Donncha Marron, Megan Horvath, Lou Rispoli & Danyal Lawson and Alex Wilkie for an assortment of generous, helpful acts.

This thesis is for Aurora and my parents.

Introduction

The first global recession of the twenty-first century, commonly understood to have begun in mid-2007, has been widely characterised as a crisis rooted in secured credit default. Mediated by the flows of global finance, defaults on sub-prime mortgages in the USA quickly implicated people in many countries around the world, as the falling values of houses and pension portfolios became variously compounded by welfare cuts, growing unemployment, higher costs of living, and the difficulty of obtaining new lines of credit.

But in the UK, a different, less visible, but increasingly common tale of credit default exists, that not only predates the economic downturn, but continues to compound its effects: that of unsecured, consumer credit default. This is the object of this thesis: it focuses on tracing the changing calculative landscapes that heavily indebted and defaulting consumer credit borrowers in the UK move through, from periods of borrowing, to managing debts, to being confronted by debt collectors. It draws together the perspectives of borrowers, defaulters, collectors, industry analysts and spokespersons, as well as insights from visits to three major debt collection agencies. In so doing, it opens up domains of socio-economic life that are not only highly controversial, but also yet to be adequately understood.

At the centre of the thesis is the concept of 'market attachment', drawing on work within the 'economization' programme within economic sociology, which has challenged understandings of financial decision-making as either conventionally socially 'embedded', or driven by maximising forms of individual rationality.[1] Instead, the thesis traces how these economic judgements may be considered as an outcome of dynamic 'socio-material' interactions. Put simply, it looks at economic decisions as outcomes of the interactions between people and things.

One of the thesis' central contentions is that tracing the variable socio-economic relations between defaulter and collector highlights forms of interaction that do not fit cleanly into existing theoretical and empirical sociological schema. It argues that, within economic sociology, there has been a lack of attention to the relationship between 'affective' modes of social action and economic calculation. In particular, the case of consumer collections points to the way in which, in certain domains of socio-economic life, forms of action that are emergent, and that may not have a clear-cut relationship to human perception, understanding, or consciousness, can nonetheless become central to the pursuit of market attachment. In drawing attention to these forms of action the thesis contributes

[1] As extensively summarised by Çalışkan and Callon (2009, 2010).

towards the field of economic sociology by both enriching its vocabulary and broadening its potential empirical focus. Too often, I argue, economic sociology has bracketed the mutually articulating nature of processes of bodily and calculative enactment.

In journeying into the homes of debtors and the workplaces of the debt collection industry, much of this thesis will focus on the unseen, everyday articulations and practices of consumer credit borrowing, default, and consumer collections. In this Introduction, I will connect this journey to how these practices and articulations are translated through and debated in public. This includes focusing on how certain consumer credit controversies have become 'mediatised'. In so doing, I draw attention to what such public articulations obscure. This is thus an exploration of some of the public aspects of the empirical terrain within which this thesis sits and to which it responds.

There are, however, some key points that need to be addressed first. The first relates to the object of this thesis. Over the course of the following chapters, the thesis ranges from spaces of borrowing, to everyday experiences of default, to the strategic deployment of collections practices within the consumer collections industry. The object of the thesis is therefore consumer credit, with a particular focus on consumer credit default. 'Consumer credit' refers to those forms of lending that are not secured on a property or other assets. This is lending that is, by contrast to mortgage borrowing, designed to be short-term, tending to be used to purchase consumer goods and services, or to refinance other consumer debts (see: Calder, 1999: 5). In the UK, a quarter of outstanding consumer debt in 2009 was credit card debt, with the remainder stemming from unsecured loans, store card borrowing, and hire purchase loans.[2] Consumer credit 'default', meanwhile, can be generally described as referring to consumer credit accounts where the borrower has not met the terms of their credit agreement, usually as a result of non-payment. Specifically, most UK creditors define default as occurring when a borrower misses three consecutive payments, with 'arrears' referring to one or more missed payment (CMRC, , 2008: 27).

However, despite these technical definitions being useful, they do not capture in full the variable enactment of consumer credit and consumer credit default. This thesis sees consumer credit as a differently articulated market 'assemblage', which changes as it moves through different domains of socio-economic life. Consumer credit thus includes, but is also not limited to, borrowing and lending practices, the enactment and experience of consumer credit default, and the deployment of and responses to collections technologies.

[2] According to Office for National Statistics figures, credit card debt constituted 24% of total outstanding credit card debt in 2009 (ONS, , 2010a).

One of the aims of this thesis is thus to trace where and how these different modalities of consumer credit are made to variously connect, blur and separate.

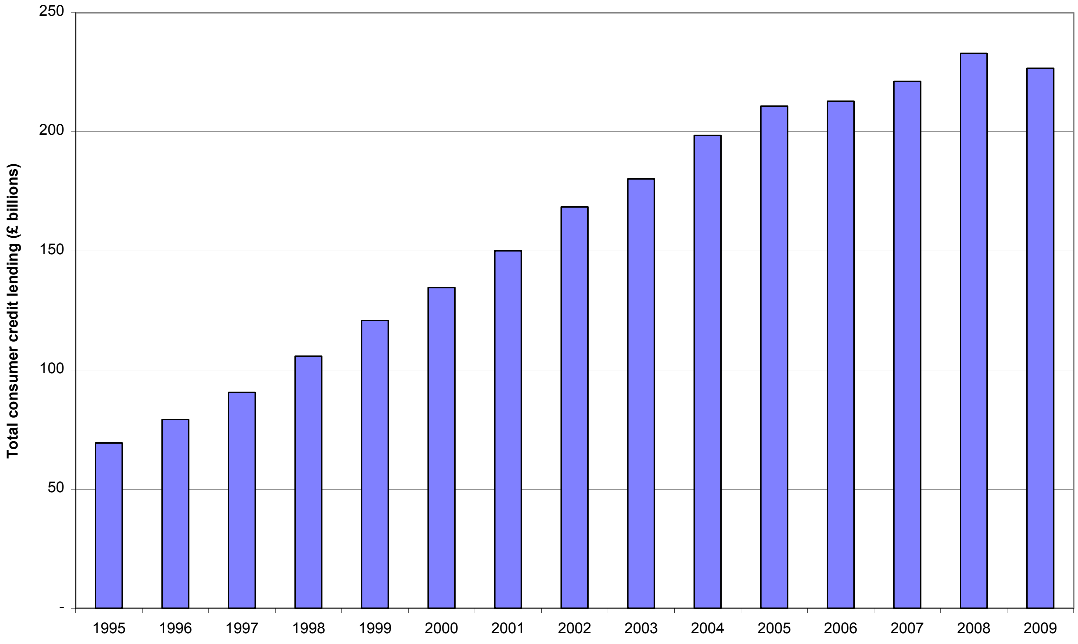
Second, it is important to provide a brief account of both the rise of UK consumer credit borrowing and to recognise that while consumer credit default may compound many of the economic downturn's effects, it is not simply *the result* of it. Figure 1 shows the total amount of UK consumer credit lending since 1994. The story it tells is of consumer credit borrowing rising year on year, beginning in 1994 at a figure of almost £70 billion and rising to a peak in 2008 of £233 billion. With the exception of a small dip in 2009, as creditors reigned in their lending as a result of the downturn, consumer credit borrowing has increased year on year. The rise was particularly marked in the early part of the twenty-first century, with amounts outstanding increasing more than three-fold between 1995 and 2004. This meant that the UK ended this period as comfortably the largest users of consumer credit in Europe (WSBI, , 2006; own calculations). The rate of increase did, however, slow from 2005 onwards. This meant that at the end of 2010, the UK sits as the second biggest consumer credit borrowing nation in Europe, eclipsed only by Germany.[3]

The second chart, figure 2, gives an insight into the changing role of debt default in the consumer credit industry. It provides an account of the 'write-off rate' for all consumer credit loans.[4] That is to say, this expresses the amount written-off by banks as a percentage of the loans outstanding. The story this chart tells is of the increasing ubiquity not only of consumer credit borrowing, but also of consumer credit default. From 1994 to 2005 write-off rates mostly ranged between 2% and 3%. This is only a fraction of the total outstanding amount of consumer credit debt outstanding. However, given the increasingly high volumes of debt this total speaks to, this can be shown to be pointing towards not only an increasing volume of outstanding consumer credit debt, but an increasing volume of debt that is routinely being written-off by banks, likely because it has fallen into default and has been deemed unrecoverable. If consumer credit lending is shown to be becoming an increasingly ubiquitous part of the consumer landscape of the UK, then so too, albeit on a smaller scale, is consumer credit default. Second, it points not only to the increasing ubiquity of default, but also to its recent rapid rise. Thus, towards the end of 2005 (Q4), the write-off rate suddenly jumps, rising from 3.3% to 4.1%. By mid-2007 (Q2), it has risen yet another percentage point. Then, after dipping briefly (perhaps as a result of creditors

[3] The most up-to-date data is only readily accessible for those countries in the Euro Area, as well as the UK. The following is based on my own calculations, drawing on data from the Bank of England (2010a) and the Deutsche Bundesbank (2010). In the Euro Area in addition to the UK, the four nations with the largest share of the €793billion consumer credit debt, up to October 2010, are the UK (20%), Germany (23%), France (19%), Spain, (11%). This uses the Sterling-Euro exchange rate from October 29th, 2010 of 0.71.

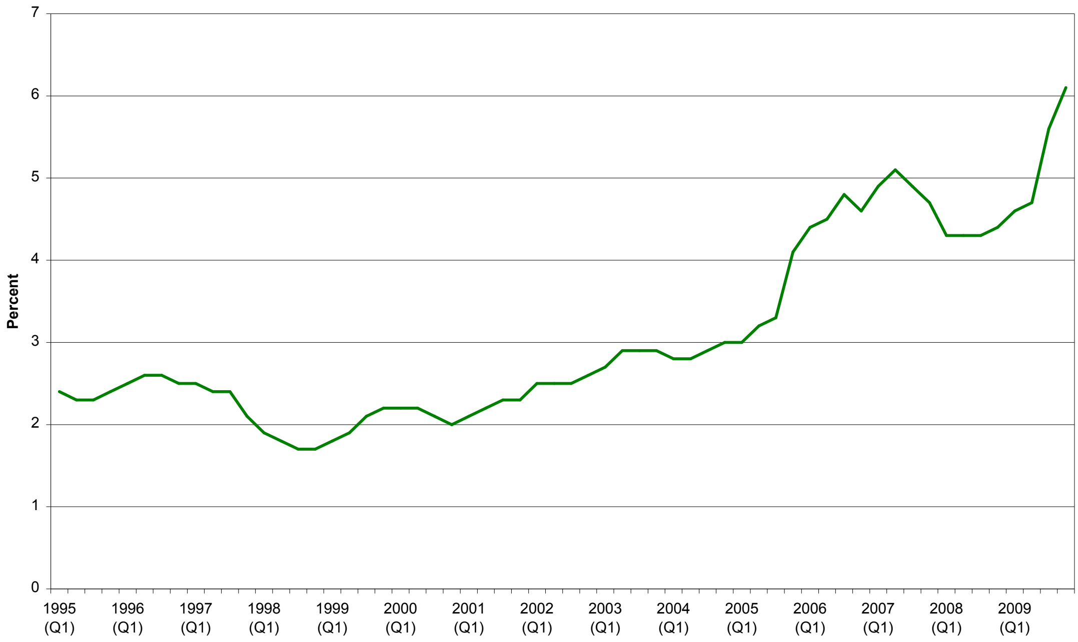
[4] 'Write-offs' here refers to loans whose value has been reduced by lenders, in a situation where a return on that loan is considered unlikely.

Figure 1. Total consumer credit lending, 1995 – 2009, by year



Source: Office for National Statistics (2010a)[5]

Figure 2. Write-off rates on consumer credit lending, 1995 – 2009, by quarter



Source: Bank of England (2010b)[6]

[5] Total consumer credit amounts outstanding, seasonally adjusted.

[6] Write-off rate on consumer lending by UK monetary financial institutions to individuals. Bank of England calculations: 'The series has been calculated as annualised quarterly write-offs divided by the corresponding loans outstanding at the end of the previous quarter, and is expressed as a four-quarter moving average. Non seasonally adjusted' (Bank of England, 2010b).

restricting their lending), it rises yet higher towards the end of 2009, peaking at just over 6%, just over *double* the very highest levels in the 1994 to 2005 period. As the Bank of England notes, whereas mortgage write-off rates have remained relatively stable since the 1990s, this reflects *a long term increase* in the amount of consumer credit debts that are going into default, an increase that began to become normalised *prior to the economic downturn* (Bank of England, 2010c: 10). Following consultations with creditors, the Bank of England puts this down to various reasons. One of these is creditors' 'relaxation of lending criteria'.[7] In other words, whether deliberate or not, in part as a result of their lending decisions, creditors have ended up having to live with a much higher level of default than they have previously. As will be documented later in this thesis (see the later 'Interlude'), it is this rise in default levels that, before the downturn, provided a considerable stimulus for the growth of an increasingly large, increasingly sophisticated debt collections industry.

However, as I will now proceed to outline, it took a while before debt default rose as a controversial issue in its own right.

The shifting contours of a controversial object

This thesis pursues an object that has, in different ways, been articulated as 'controversial' in recent years. In so doing, the thesis locates itself in relation to a body of work, across a number interconnected subdisciplines, including the philosophy of science, the sociology of science, and science and technology studies, for which the study of how controversies are made, resolved, and shaped has been a rich and productive intellectual endeavour.[8] At its core, studying controversies has been shown as a way of looking at the social world at its most provisional. These are sites where agreement about the world is in doubt, where the coming into being of new connections between people and things, as well as the threat of existing connections being cut, opens up moral, political, and practical problems, whose outcome has not yet been fully agreed upon. In the case of debt default and debt collection, as this thesis will outline, it is the formatting of the relations that compose this market 'assemblage' that is the particular provisional object at stake.

When work on this thesis began, in 2004, three years before the rise of the sub-prime crisis, consumer credit was already being talked about in certain circles as a controversial issue. However, this discussion was focused, to a large extent, on the causes and consequences of the sheer increase in credit-lending. In sociology, important work had

---

[7] In full, the Bank of England writes: 'major UK lenders have suggested a number of potential explanations for this longer-term increase, including an earlier relaxation of lending criteria, changing attitudes to bankruptcy among borrowers and changes to legislation' (2010c: 10).

[8] For example: Brante (1993); Callon (1986a, 1986b); Collins (1981); Engelhardt & Caplan (1987); Latour (1987); Marres (2007); Meyer (2009); Mol (2002: 88-116); Pinch & Bijker (1984).

Figure 3. Spend, spend Britons: Three 2004 newspaper front covers

Daily Mail
GET THE WIZARD OF OZ FOR JUST £2.60
NEWSPAPER OF THE YEAR
New drug improves survival rates by a third
Ministers to be told how father-of-two committed suicide over £70,000 debt from 19 credit cards (£50,000 of it in interest and charges)
CREDIT 'KILLS' A FAMILY MAN

DAILY EXPRESS
FULL COLOUR RACECARDS
The World's Greatest Newspaper
Cheltenham 2004
£1 FREE BET
FOR EVERY READER
YOU DON'T NEED TO SPEND A PENNY OF YOUR OWN MONEY
YOUR DAILY EXPRESS TIPPED THIS 40/1 WINNER YESTERDAY
8-PAGE GUIDE INSIDE
Race queen Zara
CREDIT CARD MADNESS
Spend, spend Britons run up 75% of Europe's entire debts on plastic
MasterCard
VISA

Daily Mail
THE INDIAN IN THE CUPBOARD FOR JUST £2.60
MUM
The truly uplifting story of the mother bringing up two autistic sons alone
Spend now, pay later binge may force interest rate rise
CREDIT CARD MELTDOWN
Gwyneth blast at working mothers
SEE PAGE 3

Sources: Poulter & Wilkes (2004); Poulter (2004); Vickers (2004)

already been undertaken by the likes of George Ritzer (1995), Juliet Schor (1998) and Robert Manning (2000), exploring the roles being played by consumer credit, and credit cards in particular, in providing some of the fuel for a consumer boom (see also: Marron, 2009: 7). Variously focusing (among many other issues) on surreptitious marketing practices, the highly differential access to and cost of consumer credit, and the generative role consumer credit was playing in stimulating consumer culture, these works exposed some of the ways in which consumer credit had managed to exert a grip on a broad cross-section of (broadly 'Western') societies.[9]

Meanwhile, the increasing dependence in the UK on consumer credit had become headline news amongst a certain section of the British press, as shown in figure 3. In these three mass-circulation papers with ostensibly tabloid, right-leaning sensibilities, an issue that might more conventionally be seen as a macroeconomic 'fact' (the UK economy's increasing reliance on consumer credit spending) becomes variously recast in sensationalist front page spreads. While lacking the nuance and detail of contemporary sociological accounts of the role of consumer credit, there were points of intersection. These included apportioning blame to both lenders (the 'greedy' banks (Poulter & Wilkes, 2004)) and consumer culture ('a "spend now, pay later" culture' (Poulter, 2004)). At the same time, however, these journalists were less willing than their sociological counterparts to hold systemic forces as accountable. Thus, the figure of the cognitively deficient borrower is also frequently framed as at least partially to blame, with articles such as the above also proclaiming the irrationality ('madness') of such high levels of consumer credit spending (often articulated in terms of a reckless 'addiction' to consumer spending).

[9] This will be explored further in Chapter One.

Contained within these stories, however, are some early hints towards the potential for default and collection to be a controversial issue in its own right, as in the case highlighted by the first headline. This concerned a case of suicide, which is blamed on the victim's high levels of consumer credit debt. Here, the borrower, Mr Lewis, accrued large debts, with nineteen creditors. It is these creditors' attempts to collect on these debts that are blamed for contributing towards his death. However, absent from the article is an account of the role of external collections agencies. The blame, instead, falls squarely on 'lenders'. Creditors are blamed for not being careful enough in their lending decisions and for 'money [being] thrown at him'; Mr Lewis was their 'ideal customer'. Here, it is thus not consumer collections that is controversial *per se*, but the lending decisions that lead to default.

The focus of the British news media shifted after 2004. Front page stories about consumer credit did not disappear, but the focus moved away from the macroeconomic dangers of credit card spending and towards more specific issues. These included the threat posed to credit card hopping consumers by the (mooted) end of credit cards offering 0% balance transfer deals (Senior, 2005), excessive credit card charges (Karen, 2006), as well as the impact the global downturn was having on credit card spending and, consequently, consumption (Barrow & Coney, 2008; Edmund, 2009).

The issue of consumer debt collection, while still not front page news, was on the rise. A survey of newspaper coverage of the issue of debt collection from the year 2000 to 2010 reveals a shift in the degree to which debt collection was being articulated as a newsworthy subject (see Appendix 1). 2008 and—in particular—2009 are high water marks in terms of the way newspapers were explicitly targeting debt collection as an autonomous issue with wide public relevance, connected to, but distinct from the issue of high levels of consumer credit indebtedness. In this period, high profile journalists including Polly Toynbee (2008) and Johann Hari (2009) wrote lengthy comment pieces on the ills of the collections industry, while *The Sunday Times* ran a highly critical piece of investigative journalism centring on Lloyds' in-house collection procedures (Insight, 2009). In the same period newspapers were running detailed advice pieces for readers on what to do if confronting collectors (for example: Beale, 2009; Thompson, 2009). Particularly high profile (and also the stimulus for some of the newspaper reporting that year (see: Hari, 2009)), in early 2009, a well publicised documentary titled 'Undercover Debt Collector' was aired on a major UK television channel, as part of the 'Dispatches' series (Channel 4, 2009; see also Chapter Two). Drawing on footage filmed by a reporter working undercover at Marlin, a major UK debt collection agency, it took as its subject what it referred to as 'one of Britain's least loved but fastest growing industries'. The documentary split its attention largely between its undercover revelations about the inner workings of the debt collections industry and the consequences, for debtors, of being subject to debt collection practices. This dual focus allowed the programme to tell a story of interconnected controversies: the controversies that surround the practices of debt collection and those that surround its effects.

It is worth dwelling a little on this documentary, to explore the particular way it narrates some of the controversial aspects of debt default and debt collection. Its account, I suggest, both opens up some of the issues that are at stake when studying this issue while also pointing towards some of the modes of analysis that the thesis hopes to avoid. The documentary focuses in on the actions of one particular collections agent, alongside whom the Dispatches reporter had worked undercover. This collections agent is shown not only to be making offensive gestures while on the phone to debtors, but also appearing to break a number of regulatory guidelines relating to the misleading use of legal threats against callers. This industry-focused controversy is broken up by a domestic focus, with two couples providing emotional accounts of their experiences of being subject to the actions of debt collectors, including both Marlin and Halifax (the collections operations of the latter is also the subject of Chapter Seven). The Halifax case enables the programme to narrate the controversial nature of everyday collections technologies—the phonecall in particular. Against repeated intercut footage zooming in on a ringing phone, the audience learn about the 'careful couple who always paid their way and hated being in debt' who were subject to 'seven hundred and sixty-two' phonecalls from Halifax, as well as about the insensitivity of one collector reminding one partner of their economic responsibilities, while her husband was in hospital with a terminal illness. The Marlin case meanwhile, serves as a vehicle for further exploring the controversial nature of the external collector: a couple who 'had been carefully budgeting to be able to meet monthly instalments on some credit cards' are hit 'out of the blue' by an old debt that Marlin had purchased. The result, we are told, is 'six months of hell'.

The over-simplifications in the binaries being established in this documentary should be obvious: between the debtor as victim, the collector as predator, the debtor as economically prudent, the collector as economically ruthless. And yet, at the same time, the documentary does highlight some of the issues that are at stake in researching debt default and debt collections. The temptation to draw such oppositions is one that has to be recognised: researching debt default and collections is an affecting experience. Speaking to debtors is to be a witness to some of the sense of confusion, distress and anger that can accompany the experience of debt default, in which the voices of the speaking debtor are sometimes laden with pathos and weariness, sometimes with aggression, irritation, and resentment.[10] And it would be hard when listening to some skilled operators speak to debtors not to be shocked by the apparently dispassionate, calculating modes of address that are being deployed against debtors, as well as the use of threats towards legal actions that may in fact be very far off.[11] As a site for the operations of the market, these interactions are deeply ambiguous strategically managed sites, in which, for defaulters, market transparency seems often absent and market detachment can seem impossible.[12] As a researcher, therefore, it is hard not to empathise with the collected over the collector, to want to pass a quick judgement on an encounter which appears so clearly set up as operating around simple oppositions: oppressor versus oppressed; aggressor versus victim; powerful versus powerless. This kind of critique is almost drawn forth from an observer. But the fact that it is precisely this mode of analysis that is adopted by the exposition of debt collections practices and technologies in sensationalist mass-media exposés, should, I suggest, give pause for thought.

The rise in the degree and intensity of press coverage has not, however, escaped the notice of the debt collections industry. A few months before the Dispatches documentary, Kurt Obermaier, the executive director of the industry's trade body, wrote an article in *The Times*, which attempted to address the 'mixed messages' he felt were surrounding collections practices. Rather than take head on the common criticisms that are frequently levelled at the collections industry, Obermaier chooses to focus on the challenges he argued the debt collections industry was facing as a result of the economic downturn; 'it is far from bonanza time' he writes, 'as the economy deteriorates, we are likely to see more challenging times in all areas of debt collection' (Obermaier, 2009). More visible and less restrained was a petition lodged with the government towards the end of 2009 by *Credit, Collections and Risk*, a debt collections industry trade journal. As with the Dispatches documentary, it is worth dwelling on this, for, similar reasons. The petition included the following assertions and demands:

- We the undersigned petition the Prime Minister to make a public statement of support for the Collections and Enforcement industry, acknowledging that it is made up of *some of the most professional and ethical companies in the whole of [the] UK economy*
- *If consumers do not pay* then—just like good drivers having to pay for bad drivers through higher insurance premiums—*everyone will suffer in higher interest rates* and charges.
- … all *consumers should also understand that they have a morale [*sic*] duty to pay back* what they owe. Consumers must understand that the morally right thing to do is to pay what is owed, in the time-frame agreed or in the quickest time that is reasonably possible.

[10] See Chapter Four.
[11] See Chapter Six.
[12] See Chapters Five and Seven.

- T*he collections industry demands and deserves genuine fairness of its own* and that does not mean the biased consumer-focused fairness so beloved of the local and national media and the government, but real fairness. Only this true fairness will allow the Collections and Enforcement industry to play an important role in the fledgling economic recovery. (The Prime Minister's Office, 2010; emphasis added)

Whereas 'Undercover Debt Collector' tells its account of the controversies of debt collection through small case studies, the petition tries to provide the 'big picture'. On the success of consumer collections, it argues, rests the interest rates that are being charged to 'everyone' at point of lending. Consumer collections, therefore, is an activity that contributes to a (unrecognised) common good. Meanwhile, it is not debt collection companies, but consumers that have a moral deficit, failing to fully understand their 'moral duty' to repay. The collections industry, by contrast, is made up of 'some of the most professional and ethical companies' in the UK. The 'true fairness' that this petitioner seeks is one that recognises the bigger economic and moral picture.[13]

Here too, then, a set of binaries are set up, albeit operating at a different scalar register. These oppose the ethical collections industry (as a whole) and the morally deficient consumer (also, as a whole) and the 'real' objective fairness provided by seeing the bigger picture, as compared to the narrow 'consumer-focused' approach adopted by both the national media and the government. This is undoubtedly a far less affecting, far less 'human' story than that provided by looking either into the homes and lives of the defaulter or the unfair practices of individual collections agents. But it is a powerful narrative nonetheless. In attempting to counter the sensationalist power of mediatised narratives, it seeks recourse to the power of situating cases in their wider socio-economic 'context'. The message is that, whilst highlighting individual cases may be a compelling way of narrating and sensationalising the relationship between collector and collected, it is neither a sufficiently representative nor dispassionate mode of analysis.

This thesis, however, seeks a route not simply around, but within and through such binaries, here provided by both the debt collections industry and forms of mass media reportage. It thus aims neither to ground its account in the authenticity of individual cases, nor to dissolve such cases within wider socio-economic forces. This is the pursuit of an explanatory mode that privileges neither 'actor' nor 'system'. Here, I follow Bruno Latour; he writes:

> The question [posed by the alternation between actor and system] is to decide whether the actor is 'in' a system or if the system is made up 'of' interacting actors. […] Usually, the strategy is to politely recognise

[13] To the magazine's disappointment, no such fulsome public endorsement was forthcoming from the government—instead it issued a cautious, ostensibly bland statement on the petition website: 'The Government recognises that the debt collection industry provides an important function to both the business and consumer sectors, where debts are being pursued in accordance with the OFT guidance' (The Prime Minister's Office, 2010).

> the problem, to declare that it is an artificial question, and then to proceed by carving up some cozy place in what is supposedly an academic debate by imagining some reasonable compromise between the two positions. But if you discover some happy medium between two non-existing positions, what makes you so sure that this third position has not even less claim to existence. Should we try to strike a compromise between actors and system, or should be go somewhere else? (Latour, 2005a: 169)

As Latour suggests, the problem with looking for a compromise between two poles is to obscure the work that goes into making both the 'big' and the 'small' relevant. The work of synthesis and compromise, seen from this perspective, obscures the variable and differential way in which a range of entities, including scale itself, are made to 'matter'. That might be, as in the examples provided here, in and through modes of public debate. But also, as in the case of technologies of debt collection and the debt collections industry, that might be in how the issue of debt default refuses to stay still as it moves through, reshapes, and is reshaped by different spaces and, indeed, times.

Latour's work, and the related 'Actor-Network Theory' project, provide a significant methodological alternative to how the issue of consumer credit borrowing, default and collections are often articulated in public, which this thesis takes much from. But I would also like to offer an ethical alternative, grounded in the possibilities for *a sociology that matters*. Here, I am drawn to Les Back's call for a sociological mode of attention characterised by care. For Back, this means avoiding an approach which is

> defined by its focus, often intrusively, on uncovering scandalous revelations, thick on occlusive detail but containing truths that have a short time span. […] [S]ociology should cast itself against the forms of *intrusive empiricism* and *moral cannibalism* widespread in the mass media. […] The challenge for sociology, like that of the alchemist, is to develop critique that captures life's light and heat. […] My concern […] is […] how the development of a sociological imagination also necessitates the art of discernment or a capacity to shift through piles of information. (Back, 2007: 20-21; original emphasis)

Back is calling for a sociology that treads lightly on its subject matter, avoiding sensation for sensation's sake. This is not a retreat into dispassionate, rootless forms of (social) scientific witnessing that Donna Haraway (1997), for example, so vividly writes against. Instead, I read Back's call as making a case *for* tracing the political dimensions of life, in all its subtle variation. In this thesis, I translate this into an attention to how a range of actors themselves both articulate the political problematics of debt and debt default and attempt to solve them. In this Introduction, therefore, this has meant not ignoring sensational headlines, television exposés, and debt collectors' petitions, but seeing them as very much part of the 'piles of information' that comprise the object that this thesis will pursue (see also: Barry, 2001).

Outline of the thesis

This thesis traces a journey of debt default. It begins by looking at consumer credit borrowing, default, and collection, through the eyes of heavily indebted and defaulting debtors. It travels alongside them into their past, as they account for their earlier borrowing practices. It moves into their domestic spaces, as they describe the lived experience of routinely confronting the debt collector. And finally, it follows them into their attempts to shed the unwanted attachments of their consumer credit debts, as they seek recourse to outside expertise. The thesis then moves to the world of the collector, looking back at the debtor from within an industry whose inner workings are often hidden from public view. In so doing, it examines an industry whose sophistication has increased markedly in recent years, with a range of technologies and techniques being used to try to anticipate the movements and responses of debtors that are, increasingly, unable to repay their consumer credit debts.

The first chapter opens up the empirical space through which consumer credit borrowing, default and collection can be studied. It explores key empirical and theoretical deficits within existing sociological work that has taken consumer credit as its object, exploring in part the absences within sociologies of consumer credit default and collection. In particular, I argue that, with a few exceptions, there has been an absence of attention to the way in which *socio-material, corporeal* relations matter in the study of consumer credit. I thus place into dialogue insights from a strand of economic sociology that has been named the 'economization' programme (Çalışkan & Callon, 2009, 2010), with work that has focused on the embodied, 'emergent' dimensions of experience. In respect of the latter, the chapter draws in particular on insights from the philosopher Gilles Deleuze and the potential afforded by his particular account of 'assemblages'. This dialogue, I argue, is essential for tracing the deeply intimate modes of interaction debt collection technologies can operate with and through, focusing attention on areas of social life where human action exists at the limits of human consciousness. The chapter concludes by exploring the opportunities opened up by describing both corporeal and market relations in terms of relations of 'attachment'. I argue that the potential of this resonant vocabulary has not yet fully been explored.

Chapter Two builds on many of these themes, focusing on how the empirical and theoretical challenges that were opened up in the first chapter were translated into research practice. It provides an overview of how the research was conducted, as well as a defence of the methods employed in the thesis. In so doing, it focuses on the role played by the qualitative interview, arguing for its performative potential. Whilst acknowledging the inevitable partialities of interviewing practice, the chapter argues that interviews can nonetheless be seen as enabling respondents to grapple with, and to point researchers towards, their complex corporeal, socio-material entanglements with the world. The chapter also explores some of the practical and ethical issues that the research presented, including the challenges of obtaining access to areas of social life (the lives of defaulting debtors, the collections industry) that pose considerable barriers to entry.

The next three chapters centre on following the transformation that consumer credit undergoes, from a borrowing instrument, to an unwanted obligation, to an object of attempted detachment. Chapter Three explores borrowers' journey into debt, focusing in particular on some of the calculative challenges they are posed, both at their moment of borrowing, but also later, when confronting credit statements. In so doing, the chapter examines the role played by consumer credit's monetary devices in shaping economic decisions. It argues that transactional forms of consumer credit—such as credit and store cards—provide unique insights into the calculative challenges that borrowers experience as they move through spaces of consumption. Despite users often conveying a strong sense of what economic action 'should' look like, they experience engaging with consumer credit as involving a deconstruction of calculative agency not easily remedied by subsequent redisplays of value such as by, for instance, the monthly arrival of credit statements. Attachments between users and consumer credit products thus come into being because of the ability of these products to unobtrusively mediate life, without—at least for a period—overly disrupting it.

Conversely, it is precisely disruption that is the aim of the material technologies of the debt collections industry, the focus of Chapter Four. Moving into the domestic spaces of defaulting debtors, this chapter begins to examine precisely how the potentially fragile attachments between defaulting borrowers and creditors are maintained and re-established through debt collection technologies. It focuses on how mundane, socio-material technologies insert themselves deep into the everyday lives of defaulters and their families. It argues that defaulters' calculative practices emerge not simply from a collector 'getting through' to an individually maximising economic agent. Instead, the debt collector is shown to need to pose emotive challenges to the defaulter, to become (forcibly) attached to mundane routines and practices. In so doing, the thesis demonstrates the potential afforded by bringing into dialogue existing sociological accounts of the role of calculative practices that are both socio-materially composed and not conventionally maximising, what Cochoy (2002) refers to as practices of 'qualculation', with work that has focused on the emergent 'affective' dimensions of experience (for example: Clough, 2009; Massumi, 2002; Thrift, 2007).

Chapter Five explores borrowers' attempts to 'detach' themselves from their credit products, by seeking recourse to outside expertise. It focuses on two cases in particular: the debt adviser and an increasingly popular, and controversial, online resource: the *Consumer*

Action Group debt collections industry sub-forum. It explores the way in which different modes of knowing are used by debtors, as well as looking both at their transformative potentials and limits. In so doing, the chapter explores the opportunities for, and limits of, the restoration of calculative agency, through the process of calculating *with others*. Recourse to expertise, it is argued, is positively demanded by the insistent technologies of debt collection. Debt collection technologies can there be seen as prompts for 'novelty' in directing defaulting debtors almost against their will, into generating new, differently formatted connections with other people and agencies. This marks a shift in the political register through which debt collection is articulated. What is posited by collections technologies as individualised and 'private' becomes differentially articulated and practised as a 'public' issue. At the same time, however, expertise is shown to be a slippery category in the case of debt default. Not only is expertise variably enacted, enabled and deployed, but also in many cases the construction of calculative clarity in one area is quickly followed by new opacities in another. In exploring these processes, the chapter contributes towards the task of tracing the composition of not only socio-economic calculation but also non-calculation (Callon & Law, 2005).

After a brief 'Interlude', which introduces readers to the perhaps unfamiliar world of the debt collections industry, Chapters Six and Seven move the thesis away from the everyday world of debtors, into the world of the collector. As these two chapters demonstrate, this is a domain of the market where certain market norms do not apply and where conventional market terminology often strains. It is a world where 'customers' are delivered to the industry already bound by 'obligations', where their focus is more on getting 'rid' of a product than being attracted towards it, where the aim of the 'producer' is often to amplify the calculative challenges of its 'products' rather than to simplify them, and where the language of threat tends to dominate over the language of entreaty. By moving into the workplace, these chapters also bring the thesis closer to work interested in tracing how organisations seek to both maintain a hold on and shape the conduct of those they direct their attention towards. These chapters therefore sit at the intersection of currents within both economic and organisational sociology.

Chapter Six explores the sometimes strange world of consumer collections in part through the eyes of the collections call centre worker, arguing that these can be seen as one of the central human 'market devices' of those that compose the contemporary UK collections industry. Centring its initial analysis around a single collections conversation, it explores the analytical challenges of assessing a mode of interaction that, on the face of it, seems to bear little relation to the highly affective, emotionally charged landscape of default described by debtors. It concludes that, in tracing the variable modes of market attachment enacted by the collections industry, it is necessary to see linguistic interaction as only one of multiple, co-present, not necessarily successful 'modes of ordering'. In so doing, and building on the analysis of previous chapters, it thus explores the way in which debtors may be considered to be 'multiple'. At times, for example, they are addressed as agential subjects, as retaining a (latent) capability for economic self-governance. At times, however, they are addressed as disciplinary subjects, at the site of the 'obligation' that they have to repay (a form of obligation that is legal but which can also operate through a debtor's own sense of moral responsibility). The chapter proceeds to trace the central problem of 'market attachment' that the collections industry is still presented with. The challenge for the debt collector is not to attach borrowers to their credit products, as legally they already are. Instead, the challenge is to reattach *value* to the product. In order to analyse this problematic, the chapter argues for the productivity of placing into dialogue the analysis of practices of 'captation' (Cochoy, 2007a) with market relations operating around 'the capture of affect' (Massumi, 2002). In so doing, it focuses in particular on exploring the increasing deployment of experimental, econometric modes of analysis to both predict and respond to the actions of debtors. It argues that this and other organisational processes within the collections industry point to the ways in which certain market domains seek to secure the attachment of market actors by managing and shaping of their emotional landscape. In particular, the emergent, anxious states of debtors offer the collector affordances which they can attempt to connect to practices of 'affective captation'.

Chapter Seven examines some of these issues further, by focusing on creditors' own internal collections processes. In so doing, a key area it explores is the enactment of a separation between practices of 'lending' and 'collections'. By dramatising a collections trajectory, the chapter argues that this distinction itself comes to play a role in the creditor's attempt to reactivate the attachments a debtor has to their debt. More particularly, the chapter argues that the collector turns to the *market itself* as a market device. It does so through the strategic enactment of a separation between lender and collector, by the creation of fictitious external collections companies or 'trading styles'. These companies are, the chapter argues, 'anti-brands', at once drawing on and inverting many of the conventions of branding work to convince debtors that their accounts have left the safety of the lender and moved into the more threatening world of the collector. In a reflexive move, what are more conventionally seen as the 'overflows' of market making—the tendency for moral issues to be differentially articulated in different domains of market practice—are turned back on the market, in the *strategic performation* of distinct collections market actors. In analysing these processes, I argue that this is an exemplary example of the strategic, generative *unmaking* of calculation.

1. Tracing Market Attachments: The Case of Consumer Credit Default

Introduction

This thesis explores the landscape of consumer debt default in the UK. It focuses on tracing the connections between the calculative spaces of both consumer credit borrowing and default and the techniques and technologies of consumer credit collections. This chapter open ups the empirical space through which these objects will be studied, by outlining key theoretical and methodological problematics. As will be outlined, there are considerable gaps in this area of research, which this thesis contributes towards addressing. The chapter is therefore in part a review of what has been already been achieved in the sociology of consumer credit and default, including an analysis of which insights have continued relevance. At the same time, the chapter also begins to make a case for the contribution of this thesis to wider debates within, in particular, economic sociology. It argues that there is room to draw into dialogue work that has sought to examine how entities are variously 'made' economic—what I refer to as the economization programme—with work that has focused on the embodied, affective dimensions of experience. For, as will be argued later in the thesis, this is a dialogue that is demanded by the study of consumer credit default.

Further, the chapter also lays out some of the methodological issues that are at stake in the thesis, as well as from where it draws inspiration for the practical conduct of the research, to be explored further in Chapter Two. As such, the chapter begins the process of the co-elaboration of questions of theory alongside those of method, viewing methods not as a set of technical solutions to the problem of uncovering the hidden realities of the social world, but as tentative insertions alongside the multiple solutions to the world being devised by people and the objects that surround them. This is not to deny the value of either careful, ethical research, or insights derived from certain quarters in social theory. But, in respect of the latter, the claim is that such insights open up the empirical terrain upon which phenomena can be both allowed to speak and heard. This chapter is thus in part an exploration of the 'whats' of my research object: its architecture, its history within the discipline and the analytic challenges it poses. But at the same time, it is the beginnings of an exploration of its 'hows'; that is, how can this dynamic moving object be followed as it transforms and is transformed by the spaces it passes through.

Consumer credit default and collection

Despite the increasing scope of the debt collections industry, both in the UK and worldwide, the space of intersection between consumer debt default and consumer debt collection is an analytical object that has received little sociological attention. As will be explored shortly, consumer credit lending is an object that has gained increasing recognition in recent years. However, the assembly of disciplinary devices that sit in the background of consumer credit, ready to be deployed against debtors that do not meet the terms of their credit agreement, is a subject that has to a large extent escaped detailed scrutiny. Nonetheless a patchy selection of literature does exist, which I will explore in what follows. In particular, I will highlight those contributions that have continued relevance for this thesis.

I will begin with Jane Ford's work, in which she vividly documents some of the consequences of being subject to consumer debt recovery in the UK in the 1980s. On the one hand, much of Ford's analysis is focused more on credit (in general) as a social institution, and debt default as an undesired consequence, rather than examining in depth the specific mechanisms of consumer credit lending, or consumer credit collection. However, she does point to some of the visceral nature of the experience of debt default; as she puts it, defaulters' lives 'encompass a substantial catalogue of personal anxiety, material deprivation, social isolation, limited resources, and stigmatisation, in addition to unemployment, relationship breakdown, and ill health' (1988: 182). In this respect, as will emerge over the course of this thesis, much has not changed.

An article by Jay Bass (1983) also deserves attention, not least because it seems to have largely slipped the notice of even those who have worked in and around debt collection.[14] Bass' work is not only methodologically unique in the academic study of debt collection—he bases his findings on an ethnography of collections processes where he worked as a collector—he also puts his finger on the early importance of the circulation of material devices to the collections industry (even if he does not frame it as such), a theme that will be expanded on in due course. Alongside documenting some of the strategy behind US collections letters in the early 1980s, as well as how collections companies organised themselves, aspects of both of which remain unchanged, he details the centrality of the material mobilisation of information about defaulters to the collections process, which at least echoes some of Martha Poon's (2007) later archaeology of the credit score. He thus points to the way in which everyday life in the collections agency revolved around the circulating manila folders, each of which represented the total information held by an

[14] *Web of Science* lists two citations of the article; *Google Scholar* lists six (search conducted 22.11.10).

individual collections agency about a particular debtor—as he notes, 'everything the collectors do is centred around the folders' (Bass, 1983: 60)). The folders have now been replaced by a range of sociotechnical devices, including the credit score, a creditor's own data, and that which a collector enters into their own databases via the ubiquitous account management screen.

Further key contributions include Dawn Burton's thorough overview of the contemporary relationship between collection and default, as well as detailing the changing makeup of the debt collection market (Burton, 2008: 109-127). Roland Hill's (1994) phenomenological study is also noteworthy, partly for being unusual in bringing aspects of a Granovetterian economic sociology to bear on the relationship between collectors and defaulters.[15] Further, there have also been important studies written from social policy and management perspectives, which provide valuable contextual information on the contemporary landscape of 'over-indebtedness', credit default and debt collection (CMRC, , 2008; Disney, Bridges, & Gathergood, 2008; Dominy & Kempson, 2003; Finney, Collard, & Kempson, 2007; Kempson, 2002; Orton, 2008).[16]

However, the most in-depth and still most significant sociological treatment of consumer debt collection is Paul Rock's *Making People Pay*, published in 1973. This study offers a systematic overview of the UK landscape of credit default and collection in the late 1960s and early 1970s, ranging from an examination of some of the causes of debt default, to collection by both creditors and external collectors, to the involvement of the legal system and finally, to the role of imprisonment as a sanction for persistent non-paying debtors. On the one hand, the text is of its time: not only was imprisonment abolished as a sanction for defaulters in 1971, shortly towards the end of Rock's empirical research (1973: 261), many debt collection practices have changed markedly. The industry that occupied Rock's attention was one that was very loosely regulated, heavily reliant on a combination of face-to-face visits and the local knowledge of individual companies. For instance, one collector notes the importance of the milkman as a vital source of knowledge about the activities of his targets (1973: 100), while Rock's interview material also shows that explicitly racist views still had a place in collections strategies (1973: 90). But on the other hand, contained within this important historical document, there are observations that retain much of their relevance. Rock, for instance, charts the increasing importance of technologies of mass

[15] For a more detailed discussion of the so-called 'new' economic sociology, see page 67.

[16] There is also a separate literature on consumer bankruptcy and secured lending default and foreclosure (much of which is related to the US sub-prime mortgage crisis), which has some tangential intersections, but which, for sake of brevity, will not be examined here (for example: Aalbers, 2008; Burton, 2008: 118-121; Immergluck, 2008, 2009; Langley, 2009; Rugh & Massey, 2010; Sullivan, Warren, & Westbrook, 1999; Sullivan, Warren, & Westbrook, 2000).

contact to the industry, detailing its use of sequential collections lettering, aimed at gradually ratcheting up the pressure on non-paying debtors (1973: 70-75), the contemporary versions of which will be examined in Chapter 7. He also opens up how the industry sought to render unknown market encounters more predictable, via the gradual acquisition and strategic deployment of knowledge about the debtor (1973: 267); in its more sophisticated contemporary forms this can manifest itself, for instance, in the econometric analysis of debt portfolios by debt purchasers (see p. 155).

Finally, Rock touches on the relative invisibility of debt collection as an object of public interest, in turn drawing a connection to the lack of attention to debt collection as an object of sociological interest. In this respect, his argument is worth drawing out in greater length, for it resonates with recent currents in work emanating from science and technology studies. For Rock, debt collection is an analytical object that contains a number of features which prevent its recognition, by both the public and sociologists, as a topic of interest. As he puts it, debt collection 'is so organised that it contains very few of the mechanisms that can attract and hold the attention of people towards a social problem' (1973: 4-5). Rock argues that default, as a civil dispute between individuals, lacks rituals of public censure, or 'dramatized enforcement processes' associated with criminal proceedings (1973: 7). Meanwhile, he argues, defaulters do not band together as a group, or possess easily identifiable shared attributes that might lead them to do so. Debt default thus comes to be seen as the result of individual economic incompetence, rather than an issue with broader social or public relevance (1973: 15). Rock's attention to a politics of publicity is important, I suggest. It points to the particular formatting of certain domains of apparent market 'failure' as a private concern, rather than a public 'issue' (see: Marres, 2007), around which I will argue much of the politics of consumer credit debt and debt default operate.

This question will be returned to later in the thesis. Here, however, I want to complement this existing work on consumer debt collection by examining some of the sociological work that has focused on consumer credit more broadly, as a (highly successful) contemporary financial product. This is designed not only to locate this thesis in relation to contemporary sociological debates that surround consumer credit, but also to highlight important theoretical and methodological pointers that are relevant to the study of the calculative spaces that surround consumer credit borrowing, default and debt collection.

Consumer credit and consumption

Consumer credit is an analytical object that, until recently, has been focused on within sociological writing more as a device *through* which to examine social and economic issues, rather than an object that has itself been subject to detailed analysis. This is a particular tendency in earlier work on consumerism and the (postmodern) 'consumer society', in which consumer credit is often breezed through, somewhat uncritically, as more or less directly linked to consumption practices. Jean Baudrillard was one of the early sociological writers to draw the comparison, noting the correspondences between the Parisian 'Drugstores'—which he identified as his contemporary temples of consumption—and the introduction of 'the most modern style of payment: the 'credit card''. He writes: 'we are here at the heart of consumption […] as total organization of everyday life, total homogenization, where everything is taken over and superseded in the ease and translucidity of an abstract 'happiness', defined by the resolution of tensions' (1998 [1970]: 29). Credit cards, from this perspective, are part of the systemic lubrication that enables and encourages the effortless passage of the consumer through consumer spaces. Baudrillard can be forgiven for subjecting consumer credit, or more precisely credit cards, to only a cursory analysis, given its relatively recent arrival at his time of writing. However, this is a style that other analysts of consumer society have to an extent mirrored; Zygmunt Bauman, for instance, in his book *Consuming Life* (2007), writes about the transformation of young (Western) citizens into 'serious consumers' as being mediated by their ability to obtain credit before they start working; yet here, as often, credit is analysed in terms of its place as a mediator. It remains an object that is seen as an important component of consumerism, part of its indispensable fuel, and as such an analytical passage point that needs to be passed through, but without being necessarily interesting enough itself to dwell too long on.

Until recently, it was only a small group of sociological writers who had subjected consumer credit to a sustained analysis, as an object in its own right. Possibly the most prominent of these is George Ritzer. However, perhaps unsurprising given his self acknowledged debt to Baudrillard, in his work too, it is clear that consumer credit is used as a vehicle—in particular, as a way of discussing broader processes of capitalist rationalisation or 'disenchantment' (drawing also in part on some of Max Weber's conceptual apparatus). For Ritzer,

> [t]he idea is to keep people at the business of consumption. This is nowhere clearer than in the case of credit cards, which lure people into consumption by easy credit and then entice them into still further consumption by offers of "payment holidays," new cards, and increased credit limits. The beauty of all this, at least from the point of view of those who profit from the existing system, is that people are kept in the workplace and on the job by the need to pay the minimum monthly payments on their credit card accounts and, more generally, to support their consumption habits. (Ritzer, 2005: 26; see also: Ritzer, 1995)

Ritzer's is a view in which systemic forces are stacked against borrowers, who become pawns in a larger game of capitalist rationalisation. Individuals may 'resist and rebel' (2005:

221) against these processes, but this has little impact on the broader domination of the capitalist social forces that drive consumers' use of consumer credit. Robert Manning also deserves recognition for his early attention to consumer credit as a sociological object of analysis in its own right, as expressed primarily in *Credit Card Nation* (2000). There are fairly major differences between Manning and Ritzer: Manning focuses for instance to a greater extent on the role played by 'cultural' transformations in driving credit take-up, centred on a purported move from a society of 'thrift' to 'debt' (a thesis critiqued most notably by Calder (1999)), as well as the causative role of consumption-led status and identity anxiety, with little of Ritzer's attention to the momentum lent to these processes by capitalism. However, despite such differences, both paint a similar picture of consumer credit use being a product of more or less conventionally conceived social categories. For Ritzer and Manning, despite consumer credit being apparently at the centre of their work, it *itself*, is an object worthy of little analysis in its own right, instead choosing to focus on the 'larger social forces' (Manning, 2000: 292) that shape its emergence and use, as well as the social consequences that result.

These studies, or indeed less well known work that comes to similar conclusions (for example: Klein (1999); Shaoul (1997)) should not, however, be taken as representing the full scope of the contemporary sociological study of consumer credit. For it is an object that, even prior to the ongoing economic downturn, has been gaining increasing attention within the discipline, as well as having been subject to more varied modes of inquiry. This includes an increasing level of interest in the precise mechanisms and technologies that compose consumer credit and its ability to become enmeshed in the everyday lives of borrowers.

One such approach clusters around a post-Foucauldian analysis of consumer credit as an object through which citizens are the subject of forms of social and economic governance. The most detailed analysis in this regard has been undertaken by Donncha Marron (2009). Marron is explicit both about both his Foucauldian heritage whilst at the same time aiming to eschew any universalist analytical framework, hoping to demonstrate 'in the messy reality of consumer credit provision the changing ways in which consumers are governed within consumer credit transactions' (Marron, 2009: 9). His is a principally historical approach, building on analogous earlier work by Calder (1999), with his analysis spanning over a hundred years of consumer credit lending in the USA, coupled with the detailed analysis of a single object: the FICO credit scoring system. Rather than seeing consumer credit as simply stimulating a desire to consume, Marron unpicks the contemporary injunctions that consumer credit and its associated technologies make upon the borrower to self-regulate, to demonstrate their abilities as able financial citizens, in a situation where their very desire to be free and autonomous becomes a site for governance (2009: 208-209). Although not focusing exclusively on consumer credit, Paul Langley (2008a) also picks up some of these themes in his work. For Langley, consumer credit is important as an instance of the everyday implication of consumers in the flows of global finance. Consumer credit is read as a potent actualisation of the apparent so-called 'democratization of finance', which promises to remake individuals in the image of the financial markets, where they are recast as entrepreneurs of themselves, whether through their savings, borrowing, or investment practices. In respect to consumer credit, and in a similar way to Marron, Langley's approach is to examine the ways in which borrowers are 'summoned up' both by the technologies that underpin consumer credit as a financial instrument, and in how they are represented as borrowers, in both the UK and the USA. This is achieved via the analysis of the way in which borrowers are written about and talked about, whether in newspaper columns, policy circles, or in marketing campaigns. But also, in a shift of emphasis from Marron's work, Langley examines both the possibility of borrower dissent (2008a: 208-229) and some of the contradictions that are inherent in the manifold attempted production of these 'subject positions' (2008a: 184-207). In respect of the latter, Langley focuses principally on the impossibility of individuals themselves performing as the idealised, responsible borrowers they are meant to be, whether because of their sheer lack of income, or their over-reliance on the chimera of ever-increasing house prices as a counterweight to rising levels of household debt.

Materiality matters

These accounts are important for adding considerable nuance and empirical richness to the understanding of the contemporary relationship between consumer credit and its users. Also, in Paul Langley's attention to the everyday interventions that consumer credit makes in the lives of its users, there are methodological resonances with the present study. And both Marron and Langley succeed in drawing attention to the deeply normative dimensions of credit scoring technologies, which they both connect to neo-liberal modalities of governance. However, approaching consumer credit, and indeed consumer credit default, through a Foucault-tinged study of the governance of defaulters and its users, may have the effect of missing out some of the messy 'corporeal materialities' of both borrowing and default (see: Mcfall, 2009a: 53). I will come on to discuss Michel Foucault in more detail shortly; but first I want to focus on what may be gained by paying attention to the materialities of consumer credit. For, while both Marron and Langley focus in some detail on some of the sociotechnical material infrastructure that are indispensable components of contemporary forms of consumer credit, neither engages in depth with recent attempts to rethink the place that socio-material relations have in shaping economies and economic action. I refer here to the study of what Koray Çalışkan and Michel Callon (2009, 2010) have named processes of 'economization'.

As is implied by the term, this work places an emphasis on the *making* of things (behaviours, organizations, institutions, objects (Çalışkan & Callon, 2009: 370)) as 'economic'. It is an approach rooted in Actor-Network Theory [ANT] (Latour, 1987; Callon, 1986a, 1986b),[17] one of whose most central contributions is the move towards tracing social life in and through not only humans, but a broad range of both human and non-human entities and processes.[18] In light of this heritage, the study of processes of economization differs in part from other economic sociologies, because of what it understands an actor to be (Hardie & MacKenzie, 2007). As Çalışkan & Callon argue, drawing on Latour (forthcoming):

> The issue is no longer to distinguish, demarcate and to contrast regimes such as reciprocity, redistribution or market transactions. Instead, the goal is to understand how complex and hybrid social configurations are perpetually being constructed through the conjoined contributions of circulating material entities, as well as competent agents engaged in valuation practices. (Çalışkan & Callon, 2009: 390)

It is certainly true that both Marron and Langley, as well as a number of other writers on consumer credit, have indeed traced, and contributed towards our understanding of some of the complexities of the composition of as consumer credit as an economic object.[19] What has received less focus, however, is its status as a hybrid, *socio-material* economic object. Paul Langley has made forays into this area: he draws in particular on Callon's attention to the role of calculative tools in formatting economic action, as well as on ANT, in his attempt to trace the diverse spaces into which global finance is being inserted (2008a: 22-27; 233-239). However here, these ANT-type approaches are employed more to provide a steer towards *where* to trace the empirics of consumer credit (and finance more generally), rather than engaging in depth with perhaps the core challenge of the economization programme, which is to demonstrate '*why the materialities of things matter*' (Çalışkan & Callon, 2009: 389; emphasis added).

However, in Martha Poon's work, more than in any other discussed here, the focus is explicitly on consumer credit as a socio-material construction (although it is also important to recognise the earlier contributions of Leyshon & Thrift (1999) in this regard). She traces

---

[17] Bruno Latour is well known both for his discomfort with the term 'Actor-Network Theory', but also for his pragmatic (in all senses of the word) acceptance of it (Latour, 1999a, 2005a).

[18] Although, that being said, it is clear that ANT's particular mode of attention to material process has a long intellectual heritage, with Alfred North Whitehead's philosophy having been a clear influence on Latour in particular (Latour, 1996, 1997; see also Halewood & Michael, 2008).

[19] Also including Burton (2008), Calder (1999), Klein (1999), Manning (2000), Montgomerie (2006, 2007), and Ritzer (1995, 2005).

the 'details of constructing scoring algorithms, their implementation into practice or the specific effects of their multiple materializations through time' (2007: 287), examining the (messy, uneven, arduous) development (or 'assembly') of the FICO score. In her account of the socio-economic space occupied by consumer credit, the contributions of things matter as much as those of persons. In her work on the emergence of the sub-prime crisis (Poon, 2009), for example, Poon traces how the move that the FICO score made from the world of unsecured to secured credit—a move that was never certain, nor made cleanly—*itself* reshaped the very conditions of possibility for mortgage lending. After their insertion into the mortgage market, it was the FICO scores that 'bubbled with generative capacities'; it was *they* who reshaped the calculative space of mortgage lending (2009: 671). Her provocative conclusion is that the explosion of subprime lending in the US 'was not caused by a sheer increase in lending volume stemming from irrational, fraudulent, or extragovernmental activity, but *by the super-coordination of market actors' decision-making around stabilized frames of risk* provided by third party commercial consumer analytics companies' (2009: 672; emphasis added).

In the context of this thesis, Poon's work is important for highlighting what can be achieved by unpacking the socio-material assembly of consumer credit. Hers is an account where materiality really does matter: the credit score, via its movement from consumer credit to secured credit lending, is held to account as having played a key causative role in the global economic downturn, perhaps even trumping the (in)actions of the potentially 'irrational, fraudulent, or extragovernmental' human actors that surround it. But her work also stands for the potential afforded by bringing more than just ANT's attention to materiality to the study of markets, via the economization programme. For hers is also an approach rooted in its methodological principles. By paying attention to the minutiae of some of consumer credit's calculative objects, and following them to wherever they lead, while observing the transformations they undergo and translations they engender, she mirrors not only work that has variously sought to trace the operations of markets in and through its tools or 'market devices', but also one of the core tenets of ANT: that, is to 'follow the actors' (whether human or not).[20] As Latour puts its, that means 'try[ing] to catch up with [actors'] often wild innovations in order to learn from them what the collective existence has become in their hands, which methods they have elaborated to make it fit together, which accounts could best define the new associations that they have been forced to establish' (2005a: 12).

[20] Some examples using empirically ground case studies include Beunza & Stark (2004), MacKenzie (2006), Muniesa (2008), Mcfall (2009a); see also, more generally: Callon & Muniesa (2005), Muniesa et al. (2007), McFall (2009b).

This thesis takes much from such approaches. It traces some of the uneven contours of consumer credit default by exploring how some of its actors fit together in and through technologies of debt collection. However, in so doing, the thesis explores an elision in this work. That is, it also pays attention to some of the human, embodied dimensions of consumer credit and consumer credit default—to come back to McFall's term—, to their corporeal materialities. For, to return to Poon, in focusing on credit scores, her focus remains resolutely behind the scenes of consumer credit. In part, this mirrors a tendency within the sociology of consumer credit.[21] But, as noted by Franck Cochoy (2007a), it also mirrors a tendency for what he calls 'sociologists of objects' to bracket the analysis of how people come to react to the material prompts they are confronted with in marketised encounters. Cochoy's empirical objects include the spaces of mass retail and the interaction between producers (tending to be retailers) and their 'public' (tending to be customers) (Cochoy, 2007a, 2007b, 2008, 2009). It is the analysis of these diverse market encounters, which he names the study of public 'captation' (Cochoy, 2007a), that pulls Cochoy towards the need to bring a more sophisticated understanding of the place of persons to the sociology of markets. More particularly, he argues that what emerges in such spaces is the need to study practices mediated in and through material devices ('dispositifs'), *alongside* the way they come to be articulated in and through particular modes of engagement. These have tended to be understood within the discipline as 'socially' mediated practices, but that Cochoy, via Bourdieu, refers to as 'dispositions'. He writes:

> as soon as one is interested in actions that aim to seduce/displace (*capter*) a public, one notices that these actions usually find support in ad hoc dispositifs, the main characteristic of which is to bring into play the dispositions that one connects (which one assumes or which one attributes) to the targeted public. (Cochoy, 2007a: 207; amended emphasis)

The key point is that the analysis of dispositions alongside dispositifs/material devices, is an analytical move that is *demanded* by Cochoy's research object. In the study of material processes of captation one is led by the object to the study of a range of embodied human states. These states, ranging from habit, to curiosity, to weariness, to temptation, are mobilised by market actors themselves. These are, as Cochoy argues, 'spontaneous sociologies', theories of social action developed by actors themselves, which not only circulate in marketplaces, but are routinely put to work in performing them. This is thus an account that complements Callon's (1998) account of the performative power of economic theory in the making of markets, by pointing to the performative power of everyday theories of social action. As we will see, this insight is particularly important in the study of debt collection, in which dispositional theories are clearly mobilised, sometimes

[21] See also: Burton et al. (2004); Jeacle & Walsh (2002); Guseva & Rona-Tas (2001); Langley (2008b); Leyshon & Thrift (1999); Marron (2007, 2009); Wainwright (2009).

strategically, in a host of spaces by market actors, ranging from defaulting debtors, to the organisation of debt collection teams.

Drawing together the way in which knowledge practices, persons, and sociotechnical devices combine in and through some of the component parts of consumer credit is to begin to consider it as a hybrid sociotechnical '*agencement*' or, to use the imperfect English translation, 'assemblage' (Lury, 2009; Mcfall, 2009a). As the following section will explore, this vocabulary affords a number of useful starting points for opening up the empirical space that this thesis will occupy, one of which is by providing some insights into embodied, emergent forms of action.

Assemblages, affect, and attachments

When discussing *agencements* and assemblages a writer is drawn to making a decision about language. Principally in order to keep the thesis as readable as possible, from this point forward I will be employing the English translation (where possible): assemblage. However, the thesis takes much from the Deleuzian heritage implied by the French alternative.

So, what does it mean to consider consumer credit as an (hybrid, sociotechnical, monetary) assemblage, whilst keeping Deleuze's work at least partly in view? This question has been implicitly touched on already in the previous discussion of market devices and *dispositifs*: as Muniesa, Millo and Callon (2007: 2) suggest, Deleuze and Guattari's concept of assemblage emerges from a discussion of the enactment of subjectivity in and through (Foucauldian) devices/*dispositifs*. In the work on market devices, this heritage has been employed principally to demonstrate the distributed nature of agency in and through particular ostensibly mundane socio-economic material objects, whether, for example, shopping carts (Cochoy, 2009), credit scores (Poon, 2007, 2009), equations (MacKenzie, 2006, 2007), or trading screens (Beunza & Stark, 2004). True to their ANT heritage, the tendency has been to home in on particular, highly focused case studies, following social processes in and through particular objects, rather than starting with predetermined social scientific concepts. This approach, which this thesis certainly draws on, employs in effect a microsociology of objects, with the aim of maintaining precision of analysis by avoiding unwarranted abstraction and/or generalisation. This does not mean remaining at either micro or macro 'levels' of analysis, but tracing the production of social life at all scales of analysis in and through very particular empirical objects.

However, even if agreeing with the aim of resisting unwarranted abstraction, such an approach needs to be able, I suggest, to deal with the abstractions that inevitably encircle these highly contingent objects. It is here that a Deleuzian tinged theory of assemblage may be of use, in particular for its ability to deal with the linguistic abstractions that surround devices. This is an argument made explicit by Liz McFall, drawing on Callon:

> If *agencements* are to be understood as arrangements endowed with the capacity of acting in different ways depending upon how they are configured, this points not only to the sovereignty of the material form of such arrangements, but crucially to the relationship between description and action, between what Callon (2007) terms the relationship between statements and their worlds. *Agencements* include the statements which point to them such that they act in accordance with each other in the way that operating instructions help make a device work. (Mcfall, 2009a: 52)

In other words, a sociology of market devices not only needs to take account of the way these objects translate and distribute human agency in and through their process and relations, but it also needs to take account of what is being said about these objects. This could include statements that seem apparently unconnected to the particular ways the social researcher witnesses these devices as functioning. This is because what is being said about these objects, may, as in McFall's case—industrial branch life assurance—come to be deeply connected to the particular ways in which the socio-material elements of a particular marketplace come to be arranged. These are, to return to the terms outlined earlier, the spontaneous sociologies (Cochoy, 2007a) that, even if having highly variable performative power, cannot be disconnected from the way the circulation of mundane market devices are sociologically understood.

There is one further domain of abstraction that has received little attention in work within the economization school, even as it was central to Deleuze and Guattari's work: those that both encircle and perform the human body. There is a sense that approaches rooted in ANT have been, like other approaches in the discipline, guilty of drawing on what might be seen as a Deleuzian method (however loosely interpreted) while ignoring one of its core objects. For, as Michael Halewood argues, there has been a tendency in the discipline to draw on Deleuze when 'tracing flows, flights, and deterritorialization, and revelling in fluidity', while ignoring his attention to the mutually reinforcing composition of the body and subjectivity (2005: 75). As Halewood continues, drawing on both Deleuze and the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead:

> [I]ndividual subjectivity must be regarded as a twisting of a social, physical environment. The physicality in question does not limit the body to its own immediacy—its genes, molecules, cells, and so on—but opens it up, through the reconceptualization of the physical; that is to say, the conceptual is to be seen as an integral element of the physical (Halewood, 2005: 76)

In other words, to return to some of the terms outlined above, theories of action, what Halewood refers to as 'the conceptual'—whether sociological, economic, scientific, or otherwise—become *part* of the physical, where the body is seen as open to processes beyond those that are immediate to it. Halewood uses the example of forms of classification that are variously used to discriminate between tourists, refugees, or asylum seekers, arguing that '[t]hese are not just labels or categories: they are the *hard, physical, manifestation in individualized bodies*' (Halewood, 2005; emphasis added).

To begin to situate such an argument in relation to existing currents within economic sociology, it is worth beginning by looking at a particular case. This is an instance where a key economization theorist—Michel Callon—does draw connections to some potentially relevant work on embodied action in his defence of his version of performativity (Callon, 2007). The work he draws on is a debate between Annemarie Mol and Judith Butler. However, as I will argue, ultimately his own analysis of this debate can be seen as engaging in acts of framing in which the body ends up being shifted from the stage of marketised processes. Callon draws on Mol's critique of Butler as follows:

> It is because the notion of performativity has been linked to that of performance, which tends to ignore the sociotechnical and especially the corporeal elements composing *agencements*, that Mol, wanting to avoid the Butlerian-type culturalist excesses, proposes a notion of enactment[…]. Criticizing the use—by sociology or by cultural (gender) studies—of the notion of performativity when it is equated to that of performance, Mol notes (1) the (sociological or anthropological) analysis of the shaping of entities and of the expression of their identity must take into account so-called natural entities, the body, for example, and, more broadly, all the materialities composing what I call sociotechnical *agencements*; and (2) the identity of each entity, human or nonhuman (including the vagina), is never set for once and for all, definitively constructed, it is a flow (Callon, 2007: 329).

Callon then proceeds from Mol's example, towards the paradigmatic exemplar of economic performativity: the Black and Scholes stock option pricing formula, the socio-material device that Donald MacKenzie suggests acts as not merely a descriptive tool, but an 'engine' for Chicago derivatives trades (MacKenzie, 2006). Callon's argument can be summarised as follows: (1) Butler-type theses are culturalist (guilty of 'excesses' no less), meaning that (2) they (tend to) ignore the role of materialities; (3) Mol's work provides an important counterpoint to Butler, in demonstrating the agential role played by corporeal materialities; (4) this example provides the justification for moving, 'more broadly', beyond Butler-type analyses and demonstrating the implication of material entities of all sorts, including mathematical formulas, in the construction of markets.

Callon does not mischaracterise Mol's analysis of Butler (even if the slippage to 'Butler-type' reduces the specificity of this engagement): Mol does, as Callon suggests, point to an important tension in Butler's work: Butler's lack of emphasis on the agential power of material forms 'themselves' (Mol, 2002: 39).[22] However, I want to suggest that Callon's summary of Butler enacts processes of framing and exclusion similar to those he identifies in his own objects of study (Callon, 1998). Performativity is, like all academic concepts, an assemblage. In the above, it is Mol and MacKenzie that are enrolled to the cause. Mol, in particular proves useful: her careful analysis of Butler, from within a theoretical framework

[22] This is a tension that has been also been noted by explorations of the concept of performativity within feminist theory (for example: Barad, 2003; Bell, 2007; Kirby, 1997).

with which Callon is sympathetic, enables him to manage Butler's potentially disruptive overflows; to push her analysis of the politics of the body beyond the frame, shoring up performativity, enabling it to travel more lightly through academic terrain. More particularly, Mol allows Callon to vault from the intimacy of human bodies, to the 'more broad' hustle and bustle of the Chicago trading room—rendering the two spaces if not equivalent, then in a relationship of equivalence. It is also noteworthy, that in Callon's more recent dialogue with Butler (Callon, 2010), his focus is exclusively on her account of *politics*—and hence only indirectly on her work on the socially performed body.[23]

This recasting of Callon's account using his own terms is a little playful—one of Callon's arguments is that acts of framing are routine across a range of social spaces; it is in some ways unsurprising to find it in his own work. However, I want to suggest that the supposed 'excesses' of Butler could, productively, overflow the frame that Callon has reperformed. And moreover, as ANT has been so successful in arguing, there is a sense in Callon's account of a willingness to leap too quickly from the 'micro' (the body) to the 'macro' (a trading room), while rendering them in a sketched relation of equivalence. This risks obscuring the translations that make the former matter to the latter—and vice versa.

So, what lessons for an economization-type approach might there therefore be in Butler and, particularly, Mol's reading of Butler? I read Mol's work not as making a case for the implication of corporeal materialities in sociotechnical practices that can be easily generalised, but an explication of how bodies come to 'matter'—and are 'mattered'—in accordance with a very specific set of discourses and practices. As Stengers puts it, 'we do not construct in general. A construction is an answer to a challenging situation, which produces both its felt necessity and its meaning' (2008: 97). Or, as Mol writes, in a discussion of medical forms of abstraction,: '[t]here is *a certain economy* in isolating objects from the practices in which they are enacted. When the *intricacies of its enactment* are bracketed, the body becomes established as an independent entity. A reality all by itself. Alone and self-sufficient' (2002: 36; emphasis added). Feminist theorists have explored how there is a long history of bracketing the (private) gendered, sexualised body from (public) theories and practices of economic action (Pateman, 1988; see also: Adkins, 1995; Adkins, 2005; Adkins & Lury, 1999). Lisa Adkins suggests that this has, to a certain extent, continued in social scientific accounts of the materialities of the 'new' digital economy: 'most analyses […] tend to stop short of considering how this reworking of materiality works out in regard to people […]. Specifically, when people are discussed, they are

[23] Although, in Callon's defence, this is not a subject Butler herself engages with in depth in her response to Callon (Butler, 2010).

assumed to be largely in control of and indeed to own their own identities and bodies' (2005: 112). In this light, whilst Mol may disagree with Butler's theory of materiality, I suspect that she takes Butler's political injunction, her attention to the *intricacies* of the assembly of bodies, of identities, of 'interiority', very seriously, even if not adopting, wholesale, her theoretical schema. It is this injunction that needs to be listened to in the study of the how economic action, of all sorts, is formatted. As Vikki Bell puts it, with reference to *The Body Multiple* (2002), 'Mol constitutes a wonderful example of how attending to the materiality and organic processes of the body *does not remove* but complicates the need for questions in relation to the constitution of interiority by social processes and technologies' (2007: 112-113; original emphasis).

There is, however, an addition that needs to be made to Bell's assessment: Mol has begun to complicate sociotechnical processes of bodily constitution that are not only social, but also economic. In this direction, her recent work with diabetes patients (2008) is instructive, in which she repeatedly traces the intersections and dissonances between calculative and lived medical assemblies of bodies and technologies. In juxtaposing two competing 'logics' (akin, if not identical to 'discourses', or to 'modes of ordering' (2008: 8)): one of 'choice' the other of 'care', she describes the incommensurability of two ways of managing the 'goods' and 'bads' of a disease. In the former, these are to be cut, closed, fixed, and ordered to promote patient 'choice'. In the latter they are, as summarised by John Law, 'multiple, substantially contexted, in more or less tension, iterative, only partially discursively available, and their assessment is a matter of temporary and collaborative judgement' (2008: 643n).

However, Mol's work has only taken brief forays into the relationship between the body and processes of economization, an intersection that this thesis intends to build on. And there is little evidence that Mol is interested in the opportunities afforded by engaging in a Deleuzian understanding of embodied action. Yet, as later chapters will begin to examine in detail, there is much that can be gained by considering the intersection between processes of economization and the generation and management of 'affect', a core Deleuzian category (see: Deleuze & Guattari, 1988). To draw on this conceptual heritage is to account for the ontological openness of the body in relation to its environment. That is to say, it speaks to the way in which people are composed socially, materially, and in an ongoing dynamic relation to their bodies; human action, seen from this perspective, may often not have a clear-cut relationship to human perception, understanding, or consciousness. In so doing, the thesis builds on work within the discipline examining the role played by the management, capture, and shaping of emergent, or excessive relations between market actors (Clough, Goldberg, Schiff, Weeks, & Willse, 2007; Lury, 2004, 2009; Massumi, 2002; Thrift, 2007).

It is also important to note, that in so doing, the thesis sits in dialogue with a more long standing interest in the discipline on the intersection between forms of bodily and economic control, as articulated in particular by Michel Foucault. Via his widely known exploration of the seventeenth century disciplinary governance of subjects via the sovereign control over their body, Michel Foucault (1975) opens up the micropolitics of the body, in which the body is argued, at a particular historical and political juncture, to have been a core site in and through which forms of socio-economic control were translated.[24] In looking at the practices of the debt collection industry, in particular its ability to successfully manage and extract profit from vast databases of debtors, there are also clear resonances with Foucault's later analysis of biopolitics as the object of neoliberal forms of governmentality (1981, 1997a, 1997b). In this very different mode of governance, Foucault argues, there is a shift away from an attention to the body as a site of individualised discipline and towards the larger scale biopolitical management of the populace. Following Deleuze, this is the difference between administering and controlling 'a particular body and a particular population' (1999 [1988]: 61).

Despite the undoubted importance of this body of work, a Foucauldian framework has its limitations for the way in which this thesis will pursue debt default. As Mol (2002: 61-71; drawing on: Law, 1994) argues, what Foucault's work obscures, are the *intricacies* of bodily enactment, those messy 'corporeal materialities' referred to earlier. In tracing the epistemic microphysics of social control, Foucault's analysis is not designed to trace the multiple ways in which human and non-human entities are articulated as they move through—and are transformed in relation to—different social spaces. Her proposal is to approach the world more modestly. That means being open to the fragility or partiality of the connections that bind the social world together. This includes a move away from the hunt for the instantiation of either an 'order' or multiple 'orders'; in its stead, Mol's proposal is to trace the multiple, processual, not necessarily compatible, and not necessarily successful 'modes of ordering' through which entities are enacted. This is thus both a renewed focus on the particular quality and composition of the connections between entities (see also: Latour & Stark, 1999), and on being open to the multiple ways such entities are enacted. This is thus not a repudiation of Foucault; but it is an attempt, to which this thesis is sympathetic, to render some of his terms less totalising.

[24] In the case of the seventeenth century, by the attempt to both format the body as both 'docile' and to increase its economic utility (Foucault, 1975: 138).

However, the desire to trace the highly intricate, intimate spaces of the intersection between affective processes and markets poses a number of methodological challenges, especially when situated in relation to ANT-type approaches, which tend to lean towards a pragmatist empirics. For, to examine the affective is, by definition, to examine the limits of the phenomenal (Clough, 2009: 51). It speaks to a conceptual framework pushes hard against approaches that have tended to avoid direct engagements with realms which exist beyond the sensible (Harman, 2009). A Latourian pragmatics, for instance, seems to be keen to trace its empirical space in the observable disturbances between actors; as Latour writes: 'there is no other way to define an actor but through its action, and there is no other way to define an action but by asking what actors are modified, transformed, perturbed, or created by the character that is the focus of attention' (1999b: 122; see: Harman, 2009: 81).[25] That being said, there is nothing in the analysis of affect that should be inherently contrary to approaches that seek to follow objects wheresoever they may lead. In his work on taste (for certain wine, music and so forth) Antoine Hennion is led to the body as a key empirical site, whilst drawing on a pragmatic empirics. He examines the ways in which bodies are placed by those that inhabit them into situations in ways which *reveal themselves* (Hennion, 2007; see also: Gomart & Hennion, 1999). He uses the example of the relationship between the climber and the rockface s/he is climbing up. Part of the pleasure of this activity comes, Hennion argues, from the body being made *to appear to itself* as it has to repeatedly adjust to the rockface—that itself is being made to emerge in the climb. The climber is, for Hennion, someone who has carefully prepared, conditioned and combined themselves with a range of technologies, so as to enable the pleasure that comes from embodied, extra-linguistic knowledge being allowed to be their guide (2007: 99-101).

Yet at the same time, Hennion does not doubt the ability of language to be a vehicle through which the people he is studying can say something meaningful about relationships that exist at the very limits of language. How 'meaningfulness' is understood, however, requires some reconfiguring, away from more conventional sociological terms. Rather than seeing people's accounts of their actions as a way of being able to 'uncover' the truth sitting behind them—the 'social' determinants of taste, for instance—Hennion trusts in people's own ability to themselves account for their determinations. Hennion's respondents are (and here he echoes Cochoy's attention to 'spontaneous sociologies') sociologists of themselves, echoing his argument in previous work with Emile Gomart (Gomart & Hennion, 1999). In understanding the relationship between themselves and their own tastes, and the relationship between this and the days/weeks/years of training, embodied conditioning,

[25] See page 90 for a more detailed discussion of Latour's position.

and learning that formats their relationship to and understanding of their tastes (*their* methods), the researcher seeking to uncover the 'essence' of these tastes is at a perpetual disadvantage. In this context, respondents' linguistic accounts are inevitably incomplete guides for modestly tracing the connections between things. As an example, Hennion uses an interview extract that appeared to be a communicative failure: despite the questioner's repeated prompts, the interviewee avoids pinning down her musical tastes; 'it depends' she repeats evasively. But, Hennion argues, in this evasion was captured the complex socio-material coming together of his respondent's embodied practice, including a ritualistic processes of orienting her body and her musical environment, partly via a range of technological apparatuses, so as to be as able as possible to enable their joint co-emergence.

Even if he does not frame it as such, Hennion's work, and his earlier work with Gomart (Gomart & Hennion, 1999) does, I suggest, provide an important methodological and theoretical bridge between a pragmatist, ANT-type approach and work that places affect centre stage. In his accounts, actors routinely themselves develop what might be called an everyday, experimental metaphysics of action (see: Latour, 1999a) to account for that which pushes at the limits of linguistic description. His respondents' accounts do not exist in a one to one relationship between their internalised cognitive processes and an external state of affairs. Instead, their language acts as one pointer for the connections between things, a guide to some of the reflexive, experimental metaphysical work that actors are often *doing* on themselves, rather than proclaiming.[26] This has direct parallels to a Deleuzian account of language. For Deleuze, language is above all an expression of the relatedness of things. Indeed, as Halewood argues, a Deleuzian account of language is not limited to human forms of expression: instead, for Deleuze, the verb, with its ability to express the relationship between terms, inherits a deeper interaction between entities of all sorts, including those that are non-organic (Halewood, 2003: 235).[27] From this perspective, as for the climber, or the music aficionado, language is a part—but only a part—of the processes by which they become actualised as individuals (Halewood, 2003: 236).

There is a final component to Hennion's (2007) analysis that is relevant here. Hennion describes the relatedness between bodies and individuals, and between these and the potentially infinite entities to which connections can be traced, as 'attachments'. As in the earlier work with Gomart, and echoing Latour's (Latour & Stark, 1999) assertion of the

---

[26] I making this argument, I draw on Marres' parallel account of much more public forms of experimental metaphysics (2009: 119). See also: Latour (2004a).

[27] Or, more precisely, between 'events'; I have not used the use of this term here to avoid a lengthy theoretical detour, which would not be directly pertinent. Halewood (2003), however, provides an excellent interrogation of the concept (in both Whitehead and Deleuze), as well as its opportunities and limitations (see also Fraser, 2006b, 2010).

possibilities the language of attachments affords, this choice of vocabulary is designed to emphasise both the relatedness of things to one another, the distributed nature of agency that results, as well as—and this meaning is not rendered as explicit—the potential 'stickiness' of relations to, or more precisely the mutual implication of relations *within* one another. One way of understanding this is as ANT translation of the Deleuzian account of the mutual infolding of entities into one another (Deleuze, 2001). This is also broadly how the term is increasingly being used within the economization school, in which there has been an increasing tendency to talk in terms of attachments, as comprehensively mapped by McFall (2009b; see also: Callon, Méadel, & Rabeharisoa, 2002).

One way of exploring the vocabulary of attachments that is of particular relevance to this thesis is to see how transactional monetary objects themselves may be seen as 'attachment devices', via the work of Viviana Zelizer. Rather than providing a quasi-universalist account of money's ontological status (see: Ingham, 2001, 2006; Lapavitsas, 2003), Zelizer traces its empirical fragmentation, in so doing, drawing inspiration from economic anthropology. There is no need here to replay an assessment of the anthropology of money in its entirety, as this has been comprehensively summarised elsewhere (notably by Gregory (1997), Guyer (1995, 2004), Hart (1986, 2000), Maurer (2006) and Strathern (1988, 1999)). However, what she takes from this work is its continued and consistent interest in the variety of objects that social groupings constitute as money. Drawing in particular on studies that have demonstrated the heterogeneous differentiation of 'multiple' monies, Zelizer charts the progression from work that has associated subjectively determined monetary forms with primitivism, in contrast to 'modern' culturally neutral monetary forms, to early incomplete insights from Mary Douglas (1967), to more sophisticated work by, in particular, Parry and Bloch (1989), Shipton (1989) and Lave (1988), who have 'begun to cast off the fallacy of culturally neutral modern currency' (1997: 23). It is in anthropology that Zelizer finds evidence to support what she asserts to be a sociological thesis: 'Multiple monies in the modern world may not be as visibly identifiable as the shells, coins, brass rods or stones of primitive communities, but their invisible boundaries work just as well' (1997: 24). In her book *The Social Meaning of Money* (1997), Zelizer focuses on American life in the late 19th and early 20th century. Of particular relevance to this study is her elaboration of the concept of 'earmarking', which she uses to describe the highly differentiated social meanings that are attached to, what she identifies as, a variety of different monies. Zelizer's key conclusion is that these are not simply related to its possession or its absence; as she argues:

> people constantly deploy a social lexicon of monies, creating phrases, sentences, paragraphs, whole books as they manipulate their currencies. [...] Of course, quantity makes a difference; people care about how much money is involved in their transactions. But *what kind* of money and *whose* money also matter greatly. (Zelizer, 1997: 200; emphasis added)

For Zelizer, money is unavoidably imbued with social meanings and, as a corollary, is deeply implicated in generating social consequences, in terms of, for example, where money is stored, how it is distributed, and how these differential markings shape power relations within households. For Zelizer, form matters, function matters and, more importantly, the processes by which form and function come to be meaningful matter.

For now I want to draw attention to her method: Zelizer is interested in the everyday empirics of money. That is in how a range of highly contingent interactions between people and monetary objects come to matter, shaping the path of both these objects and those that use them. Even if her work lacks a direct engagement with recent work on agential potency of material forms, it nonetheless provides insights into how money as an object can become woven into the fabric of people's lives. As Fabian Muniesa has argued, Zelizer's perspective can be seen as presenting monies as 'vehicles for attachment', or 'attachment devices' (2009a: 125-126). That is, by virtue of their ability to be involved in the binding together, or separation of, people, places, and times, monies are routinely involved in attachments and detachments between a range of socio-material entities. Zelizer's is a methodological shift that is vital, I suggest, if wanting to understand the circulation of consumer credit's transactional monetary objects (see Chapter Three).

However, the language of attachments is one whose potential has been not fully explored. Talking of attachments may be particularly appropriate for studying the mutual implication of both economic and affective processes. Noortje Marres argues, drawing on Gomart and Hennion's work, that the notion of attachment as they employ it is useful as it speaks to the ways in which actors 'may be implicated in issues through ontological associations' (2007: 774). This is true—but this can be extended, I suggest, to speaking to how actors may be *affectively* implicated in issues.[28] This is partly because of the term's heritage as a way of talking about emotional connections; most obviously, it is commonly used to describe an emotional bond between individuals, a usage that was drawn on highly successfully outside of sociology, via John Bowlby's (1969, 1973) psychoanalytic 'attachment theory'. This work addresses the continuing consequences in an individual's life of the nature of an originary emotional bond that was forged between them and their primary carers. Even if Bowlby's work is potentially problematic (see: Gabb, 2008), this heritage should at least be allowed to sit in the background, as pointing towards a usage that speaks to the implication of actors in embodied, emotive relationships—a usage that

[28] Whether in 'public' or 'private'. See page 102.

speaks to at least some understandings of what affect is and does.[29] It is also this understanding of attachments that has informed some accounts of the intersection between people and markets, whether in Karin Knorr Cetina and Urs Bruegger's (2000) account of the market as an 'object of attachment', in their account of the emotive spaces of financial trading, or in Lauren Berlant's (2006) analysis of the attachment of persons to compromised conditions of (economic) possibility, drawing in part on psychoanalytic theory. Talking about attachments in this way steers the use of the term more towards the visceral encounters that can characterise market operations. A consequence of at least recognising that these overtones may inform an account of market attachments, is to avoid accounts of market involvement that err towards the technocratic. There is therefore a politics to recognising the importance of this heritage, informed by a desire not to exclude the sometimes messy, affective implication of embodied actors in markets. In drawing on this richer vocabulary of attachments, this thesis contributes towards furthering the sociological understanding of both the implication of (human and non-human) actors in markets and the everyday implication of bodies in technosocial life (Michael, 2006: 41-62).

Conclusion: Towards an empirics of consumer credit default and collections

This chapter has sought to lay out some of the key issues at stake in this thesis. In part, the aim has been to situate the thesis in its academic context. One conclusion is quite simple: there is a continued absence of detailed empirical, sociological work on consumer debt default and, in particular, consumer debt collection. In addition to this, I have also suggested that while the rise of the economization programme has offered a range of valuable insights, there has been a lack of attention to the role played by embodied forms of action in the making of markets. This thesis contributes towards addressing such lacunae. However, in the analysis of existing work on default, collection, and on consumer credit more generally, the chapter has also provided some key pointers to what an empirics of consumer credit default and collection might look like. A key desire has been to open up the empirical space upon which this thesis traces some of these processes, by bringing into dialogue bodies of work that have largely remained distinct. In particular, the chapter has argued that there are significant opportunities to be had in connecting the study of consumer credit borrowing, default and collections, to insights from a number of key areas of research. These include the analysis of (a) the circulation of monetary media, (b) the socio-material composition of economic processes, and (c) embodied, affective dimensions

[29] This is not meant to suggest that the slippage between emotion and affect is necessarily warranted. The differences between affect and emotion, as well as their relationship, are outlined by Massumi (2002: 27-28, 260n).

of experience. As this thesis will demonstrate, it is in the empirical space between these areas that the landscape of consumer credit default may be productively traced.

The analysis presented in this chapter has also opened up some core methodological issues. These include the value that is afforded by drawing on ANT's attention to the making of the social world in and through both human and non-human entities, as well as in its call to follow objects as they are in the process of are being made and remade. This thesis draws on both insights throughout. It thus traces the socio-material composition of the spaces of both consumer credit borrowing and collections. It also follows the transformation that consumer credit undergoes from a circulating monetary entity, to the object around which the consumer debt collections industry clusters. In so doing, the thesis ranges from spaces of borrowing, to domestic spaces of collection, to the collections call centre. Despite their quite different composition, it suggests that there are significant opportunities in tracing their co-relation.

Finally, the chapter has also focused on the place that forms of linguistic expression might occupy in the analysis of affective, embodied experience. It has argued that while language cannot be seen as a window to understanding that which pushes at the limits of linguistic expression, there is a place for seeing language as providing pointers towards the connections that compose socio-material assemblages. This includes economized processes as much as any others. As has been argued, the aim is thus to follow the metaphysical frameworks developed by actors themselves, in their own analysis of their actions and the relationships that compose them, their experiences, and their relationship to others. With these insights in mind, the thesis will proceed by giving a brief overview of precisely how the research was conducted. This is primarily designed to provide readers with an account of the challenges of conducting research into consumer credit default and how these practicalities of the research were managed.

2. Following Consumer Credit Default

This chapter sets out in greater detail key components of the research's methodological practice, responding to some of the methodological questions that were raised in Chapter One. That it to say, it describes how the thesis' research practice took seriously the task of exploring socio-economic relations that have been posited as operating in and through both human and non-human entities. This includes developing a mode of research engagement capable of opening up—at least partially—some of the (affective) dimensions of embodied experience that may push at the limits of linguistic expression.

In tracking consumer credit borrowing, default, and collections, this research has drawn on a diverse range of methodological approaches. This includes periods of observation in three major UK debt collection agencies, as well as interviews with a range of parties. This includes interviews with twenty heavily indebted and defaulting borrowers, with regulators, those working in government, spokespersons in credit references agencies, a director of a debt management company, and a debt collections industry trainer. The thesis also explores conversations in an online forum populated by defaulting debtors, as well as analysing collections letters they posted online, while also drawing critically on a large body of industry literature. In so doing, it has sought, where possible, to develop approaches befitting the particular way in which this changing, not wholly coherent market assemblage is variously articulated, understood, and deployed through a range of social spaces.

This chapter will not, however, provide a detailed exploration of the nuanced challenges of each of these. Here, instead, I will present a more focused account of just some of the core empirical materials that this thesis draws on, as well as the methods used to explore them. Above all, the aim is to give an insight into some principles that have informed this research, principles that have (wherever possible) been carried with me into and adapted to the range of methodological and ethical challenges this research has posed. In so doing, I see research methods, just like the methods of those that are being followed, as inevitably improvised solutions to our problems of being in the world.

I divide my attention between the two key research 'sites' (broadly conceived) where this research was conducted: the lives of heavily indebted and defaulting debtors and the debt collection industry. In addition, the chapter focuses on the role played by one of the research's key methodological tools: the qualitative interview. It also discusses a number of issues that arose over the course of the research, some of which might be of relevance to researchers working around these areas, including the ethical challenges that arose, as well as the significant challenges of gaining entry into areas of socio-economic life that, for various reasons, are not readily accessible.

An emerging methodology

Given some of the questions raised in the previous chapter, this project began with a desire to explore how heavily indebted and defaulting consumer credit debtors dealt with the situation of being in debt, managed their finances, as well as seeking to explore the impact of debt default on both the debtor and others with whom they might live. Drawing inspiration from the work of both Viviana Zelizer (1997, 2001) and Michel Callon (1998), it sought to explore the intersections between a particular monetary form (consumer credit) and the everyday lives of heavily indebted and defaulting borrowers. In particular, it aimed to examine how the agency of the heavily indebted borrower might be articulated in and through some of consumer credit's socio-material devices, ranging from credit cards, to the technologies that facilitated exchange, to credit statements, to collection technologies. The process of tracking this research object began by seeking to explore how debtors themselves were accounting for their actions. I settled on a tried and tested sociological method: the qualitative interview, to be conducted, if possible, in debtors' own homes.

The intention of conducting research in debtors' homes was partially informed by both a desire, following Zelizer, to examine the intersection between markets and domestic spaces. Given my interest in examining the ways in which some of consumer credit's material devices might be handled, marked, and moved around domestic space, it seemed appropriate to move the research to the site of these socio-material engagements. Also, more practically, this decision was informed by a desire to conduct a conversation at a site where it was hoped respondents would feel comfortable (see: Finch, 1984; Martin, 2004). As will be explored further below, discussing personal finances and, in particular, debt is for many a highly personal, sometimes distressing experience. This latter concern also informed a second decision: to only conduct a single interview with each participant. While these interviews would be open ended, drawing on a loosely structured series of questions, the potentially personal, emotive nature of the research object appeared to only justify one intrusion into a participant's life.

Given some of the questions raised in the previous chapter, the development of a methodology that, for this part of the research at least, is centred on interviewing practice may, for some, require justification. For, within much of the Actor-Network Theory inspired work upon which this thesis draws, there is a tendency to speak of following objects ethnographically and/or anthropologically—whether that relates, for example, to law (Latour, 2010), scientific practice (Latour & Woolgar, 1979; Latour, 1993), disease

(Mol, 2002), consumption (Cochoy, 2008), or markets (Beunza & Stark, 2004; Çalışkan, 2007; Callon, 1998; Poon, 2009). That is to say, within this body of work there has been an emphasis on living (in a broad sense) alongside the objects in question and understanding them in their own terms. Drawing on some of the language employed in the previous chapter, this may be considered as a desire to trace the metaphysical orderings that occur in the interactions and relationships between people, objects, bodies, and concepts. In many of these analyses, this involves rich, intimate accounts of the objects being studied, with a clear sense that many of the researcher's conclusions emerge from lengthy periods of copresence with those persons and/or objects that are being studied. An interview, and particularly a one-off interview, appears to offer little of this.

Yet I would like in what follows to offer a defence of how interviews are employed in this thesis—in particular those relating to the experiences of defaulting debtors. This latter distinction is made to draw attention to the fact that the material from interviews conducted with debt collection industry spokespersons, tends (with some exceptions) to perform a different role in this thesis. Most frequently, extracts from these interviews are used as a way of explaining to the reader some of the practices and peculiarities of an industry that are not widely understood. It is not that the arguments that follow here do not apply to these interviews. It is rather, that the central object in this research are the attachments that surround the defaulting debtor, not the collections industry spokesperson. For reasons of brevity and clarity, therefore, it is the former's accounts that are subject to particularly detailed scrutiny.

A defence of the qualitative interview

First, and most obviously, it is to be recognised that there is no sense in which work emanating out of ANT has ever suggested that interviews are a methodological tool that should be excluded from the ethnographic repertoire. Many of the examples cited above draw on interview data and other semiotic material as part of their journey alongside the objects they variously study. Moreover, as noted at the beginning of this chapter, in the present study, interviews are just one tool used among others; as Cochoy (2009: 18) argues, there is little mileage in determining *a priori* which method or methods are best suited for a journey alongside a particular object. In that sense, the choice to use interviews was in part dictated by the practical demands of the object: periods observing defaulting debtors, in their homes, would be both practically and ethically problematic. Further, whilst to assert that these singular interviews were 'ethnographic' might be an overclaim, it is certainly true that, where interviews were successfully conducted in interviewee's homes (which was not always the case), the importance of the space of the interview, and the ability of respondents to interact with it (to show me around, to point me towards the ringing phonecalls from debt collections agencies, to show me their folders overflowing with collections letters), meant that interview conversations were being constantly shaped by the arrival of what might be called 'data' from an unpredictable range of domestic sources.[30]

However, that being said, a sense persists within work of this genre, that interviews are associated with sociological practices tied to forms of semiotic analysis in which either meaning is unearthed via language, or subjects are held as constructed in and through language (see: Latour & Stark, 1999). In particular, there appears to be little in interviewing practice that provides a steer towards the socio-*material* construction of the world. It is in this context that I nonetheless want to suggest that there is room to explore in more depth the ways in which linguistic practice may offer a guide (even if inevitably partial, messy, and compromised) to the relations between both human and non-human entities, even as interviews push at the limits of an account that interviewer and interviewee are attempting to jointly produce. The previous chapter gave some pointers in this direction, via Hennion's example the potential afforded by an apparently failed interview. This can be complemented by a parallel example, provided by Mike Michael, in what he characterises as 'the disastrous interview episode' (2004: 7).

This example is used to stress, as Michael puts it, 'the complex interweavings of the material and the semiotic' in conversation (2004: 7). It explores how Michael's attempt to talk to an interviewee about ionizing radiation is disrupted by the intrusion both of her pets (including a cat intent on dragging away his tape recorder by its strap) and her apparent desire to move the subject towards her new job at Burger King. As well as illustrating the causative role of non-humans in shaping communication—whether that be pets disrupting the flow of conversation, or the dependence of researchers on the technology of the recorder, exposed by a cat's desire to play with string-like objects—Michael also points to the way in which the interview contributes, even if in small, apparently mundane ways, to processes of ongoing social reassembly. For, even if not relating to his research object, over the course of the interview, a range of entities, including both the material and the semiotic, are embroiled in the ordering of social life, whether that be in the (re)production of local hybrids—such as the person-pet assemblage—or those more distant—such as Burger King.

As Michael points out the degree of disruption that he encountered made his task of unravelling the role of some of the non-human entities involved in this particular instance of social reproduction somewhat easier than it might otherwise have been. As he writes, 'the real task we face is unravelling these dynamics in encounters which proceed smoothly'

[30] See Heyl (2001) for an extensive overview of the principles and varied aims ethnographic interviewing.

(Michael, 2004: 19). Without wanting to claim that all the interviews in the present study proceeded smoothly (they did not), it is nonetheless hoped that some of the analysis this thesis presents can contribute towards this task. For, despite some challenges, most of my participants performed themselves extremely well as interviewees. This brings me onto a second reason to defend the interview as an appropriate method for at least parts of this study: its performative potential.

Paul Atkinson and David Silverman (1997) memorably argued that we live in an 'interview society'. They suggest that there is a convergence between the use of the interview as a method in a range of cultural products—for example in newspaper articles, sports programming, and chat shows—and in social scientific researchers' practices. In both, they argue, there is a Romantic impulse at play, in 'the elevation of the experiential as the authentic' (1997: 305). The interview is a method that, in its ability to induce biographic revelations, is understood as almost uniquely able to penetrate into the inner core of individuals. When it comes to successfully accessing the 'self' of an other, the interview has come to be seen as the method *par excellence*. However, they argue, the apparent success of the interview is rooted in a fiction, one which both interviewer and interviewee participate in reproducing: that of 'a common and unitary construction of the self' (1997: 314). It is a fiction that Atkinson and Silverman argue persuasively should be challenged: researchers have a responsibility, they assert, to look more carefully at what the interview is—and what it does. In particular, they warn that '[w]e take at face value the image of the self-revealing speaking subject at our peril' (1997: 322).

Aspects of this account chime with some of the themes raised above, particularly Michael's attention to the work that goes into formatting the interview as a space for social research. Both he and Atkinson and Silverman point to the fiction of the interview as a privileged space through which information passes smoothly from one person (the interviewee) to an interested other (the interviewer), while also drawing attention to the coproduction of narrative by the parties involved in the interview. A key difference between the two, is Michael's far greater attention to the contributions made by objects/non-humans in this coproduction (or disruption).

However, in Atkinson and Silverman's account, there is also to be unearthed—even if it is not specified in these terms—an account, and a critique, of the interview as akin to an 'immutable mobile', to draw on Latour's terminology (1987; see also Law & Mol, 2001). In Atkinson and Silverman's paper, the interview is presented as a black-boxed methodological technology: it is a tool that, when employed by an interviewer in the copresence of an interviewee, promises to draw forth performances of the self. What

Atkinson and Silverman are particularly uncomfortable with, is the ability of this tool to travel, more or less unscathed, between different, incompatible realms: from the world of mass cultural production, to that of the social scientific researcher. For the latter, they argue, there is a responsibility not only to render visible both the 'translations' (again, my choice of language not theirs) that the interview effects and the realities it (re)makes, but also to ensure that the interview is transformed—that it is made mutable—when it moves from the (naïve) world of mass cultural production, to the (critical) world of scholarship. What they seek is, as they put it, 'a vantage point' from which to be able to question mass culture's modes of representation—rather than to be complicit in reproducing them (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997: 322)

On the one hand, there is much to welcome in Atkinson and Silverman's account: in a comparable way to both Michael and Hennion, they expose some of the contingencies and partialities of interviewing practice; and their call for researchers to take greater responsibility for the methods they employ is one that should be heard. However, in their attempts to impose a division between the use of the interview inside and outside the walls of academia and to prevent a blurring of the boundary between the two, there are echoes of the apocryphal tale of King Canute attempting to halt a rising tide, even as it flowed around his feet. This does not mean that careful scholarship should be abandoned; however, it is worth recognising that the public circulation of knowledge of what interviews are meant to do and be about presents not only dangers, but also opportunities for the researcher. Rather than seeking a vantage point outside of the conventions of interviewing, this potential can be realised by following how all parties in an interview draw on a range of conventions, genres, and modes of embodied attention, which are inevitably attached to and are always minutely reshaping what interviews were, are and will become.

This has certain echoes of a similar claim made by Norman Denzin, who sees interviews as emerging from 'performance events', in which the focus is on the reflexive transformation of information into 'shared experience' (2001: 24). However, in a similar way to Atkinson and Silverman, for Denzin this leads to a self-acknowledged utopian quest for 'a new form of the interview' (2001: 24). Again, there is a desire for a new mode of enquiry that can somehow get closer to a version of truthfulness: even if Denzin is not seeking *the* truth, there is an aspiration to use a different interview form to seek a different truthfulness, what he refers to as 'the truth of life's fictions, the spirit of truth that resides in life experiences' (2001: 33). Instead, I refer to the interview as performative more in line with Callon's (1998, 2007) work on the performativity of economic methods and tools. This recognises that the economy is, at least in part, being remade by tools designed to study it. It seems perverse for sociologists not to recognise similar processes occurring in the routine (re)construction of the social worlds that they study: that tools that were perhaps considered the rightful property of social researchers are now routinely involved in the reproduction of social life, in a range of ways and spaces.[31]

Thus, while holding in mind some of the dangers that Atkinson and Silverman point to—including that of researchers failing to recognise their complicity in the reproduction of a naïve understanding of social reality (a danger also implicitly pointed towards in Hennion and Michael's accounts)—I want to now sketch some of the opportunities that interviews offer when seen as performative tools, focusing in particular on their relevance for the present research. Some of these relate to the practical benefits of both interviewer and interviewee living in the so-called 'interview society'. Most obviously, while being told they are being observed may in some situations make individuals feel uncomfortable, and the function of focus groups may, for some, need explaining, the interview is a technology that is ubiquitous and well understood (in many parts of the world). Thus, at least in the case of the present research, many interviewees were, with little prompting, able to engage in and shape to their own ends some of the interview's particular modes of self-representation, with little apparent difficulty. This is not to deny the politics of interview practice, including the potential for complex power relationships to exist between researcher and researched, as explored extensively in feminist scholarship (for example: Acker, Barry, & Esseveld, 1996; Cotterill, 1992; M. Maynard & Purvis, 1994; Oakley, 1981; Puwar, 1997). Such considerations informed the ethical considerations detailed in this chapter. Further, it also informed the choice of a relatively open interview structure, in which interviewees were given room to direct the flow of the interview along lines they felt comfortable with and away from any issues they had difficulty addressing. However, the public circulation of what it means to be both interviewer and interviewee, may, I suggest, provide a starting point for a mode of interaction whose 'rules' are at likely familiar to both parties.

More particularly, in the present research, in many of the interviews, there was a tendency for interviewees to become confessional—a few interviewees explicitly noted the 'therapeutic' overtones of the interview, or how they in one way or another, felt 'unburdened' at the end of our conversation. This was, then, a reflexive acknowledgement by these interviewees of parts of our conversation moving away from an information gathering exercise of benefit solely to my research, and towards an opportunity for

[31] This bears comparison to Anthony Giddens' argument that social sciences are characterised by a 'double hermeneutic'. He writes: 'the concepts and theories developed [in the social sciences] apply to a world constituted of conceptualizing and theorizing agents. The social scientist does not have to interpret the meanings of the social world to actors within it. To the contrary, the technical concepts of social science are, and must be, parasitical upon lay concepts' (1987: 70)

reshaping their own (embodied) relationships towards themselves. I do not want to overstate this: for some, this may not have been the case at all. And for those that did feel this way, this opportunity was perhaps fleeting and inconsequential. However, nonetheless, they recognised in such instances not only the existence of a relationship between the semiotic space of an interview conversation and the socio-material space of their embodied self-identity, but also they were able to attach this relationship to a form of interview interaction within which they felt comfortable. This confessional, therapeutic mode of articulation is one which Atkinson and Silverman are particularly suspicious of, in that it is 'thoroughly characteristic of the interview society' (1997: 313), where eliciting the moment of confession becomes of greater importance than its content; on the other hand, they also point to the fact that such accounts do 'work'—for them, relating to the (re)invention of the self in speech acts (1997: 318)). My suggestion is that researchers should be attentive to the complex mix of all of this in an interview. Interviews may be used by respondents to themselves grapple, even if in an inevitably incomplete way, with their corporeal, socio-material entanglements with the world—in the present case, with credit default and debt collection—but also in so doing, drawing on and individually reshaping and deploying a publicly circulating genre of two-way interaction designed precisely to do so. The challenge for the researcher is therefore not to take such accounts as representing experiential authenticity, or to stand outside of the public circulation of interviewing as a methodological tool, but to be attentive to the way that interview-derived speech can be used to point to, as well as recreate, the relations between people and things. This reshaping might include the relationship between interviewee and their own body, as well as what any particular interview is doing, and who it is for.

In particular given the highly personal, emotional, and embodied experience of being subject to credit default and technologies of debt collection the interview thus remains a powerful, if partial, way for the interviewer and interviewee to jointly grapple towards the inevitably impossible task of conveying that which escapes language, through language, a task that this thesis will also attempt. These examples give only the briefest of insights into the performative potential of interviews. However, building on the contributions of Hennion and Michael, what this is aimed at demonstrating, is the way in which interviews can sit within a research strategy that is attentive to the socio-material, affectively oriented, corporeal attachments that compose some parts of the social world. In the following section, I will provide a more detailed account of precisely how these interviews were conducted—and how interviews with heavily indebted and defaulting debtors led me to follow the defaulting debtor into the interior of the UK collections industry.

Researching the everyday lives of defaulting debtors: Questions of ethics and access

As already noted, the empirical component of this research was broadly divided into two parts. The first focused on exploring, via interviews, the everyday experiences of heavily indebted and defaulting debtors. The second focused on the debt collection industry, including visits to three major UK collections agencies.

The interviews with debtors and defaulters were conducted in 2008, with recruitment of participants starting in January and the final interview taking place on the 23rd December. The first point to note is the symmetry between this period and the unfolding economic downturn and accompanying credit crisis, which was starting to take hold from late 2007. The initial three interviews, for instance, were conducted in February 2008, at a time when Northern Rock—a major UK retail bank—was in the process of being nationalised by the British government. A number of respondents noted the resonances between the global spread of credit default and their own situations. Some suggested, for instance, that the increasing visibility of credit default as a public issue had made them feel less self-critical about their status as economic citizens. If banks could not manage their borrowing, they suggested, perhaps they should not feel quite so responsible for their own inability to be unable to manage their own debts. That being said, as was explored in the Introduction, there was nonetheless a recent history of consumer credit default being blamed on individuals, with consumer credit depicted as a vehicle for irresponsible financial citizens to engage in reckless consumption practices, even if in the background of such accounts there were nods to (or amongst sociologists more explicit critiques of (for example: Manning, 2000; Ritzer, 1995, 2005)) these being either culturally determined or related to alleged predatory lending practices. In one sense this was nothing new: as Marron argues, consumer credit has long been associated with what might be called a 'myth of lost economic virtue', in which at various historical junctures consumer credit borrowing has been used as a vehicle with which to (implicitly or explicitly) oppose a financially irresponsible present to a financially prudent past (2009: 4-8). However, this meant that I anticipated that finding defaulting debtors who would be willing to speak to an inquisitive social researcher would be challenging. As would later be revealed in some of the interviews, many debtors—although not all—felt a degree of shame or embarrassment about their situation.

The response to some of these problems was to adopt a recruitment strategy that combined the assistance of third parties and an extended network of personal contacts. I will not repeat the entire process in detail, for the reader's sake. However, after much emailing, and some negotiation, I was able to enlist the assistance of two organisations: the Consumer Credit Counselling Service [CCCS] and the Money Advice Trust [MAT], the latter of which runs National Debtline. At the time when I was being assisted by them, these two not-for-profit organisations provided a number of related advice services to a broad range of debtors, including individually tailored debt advice over the telephone. The CCCS also offered a selection of more complete 'debt management' solutions. These included not-for-profit 'Debt Management Plans', in which they would, with the debtor's permission, take over the management of their debts and negotiate with creditors on the debtor's behalf. These will be explored further in Chapter Five.

Both the MAT and the CCCS agreed to put me in contact with clients of theirs who had previously agreed to be contacted for research purposes. The CCCS did this by themselves contacting a number of their clients, briefly explaining what the research would entail, and asking for their permission for me to contact them. In the case of the MAT, I was given access to their database where, working from their offices, in Birmingham, I was able to compile a list of names to contact. It was agreed that this would be done by letter. Further, one result of my negotiation with both organisations was the decision to allow interviews to be conducted over the telephone, if respondents preferred. Whilst this was a compromise, this in fact resulted in some extremely rich conversations with defaulting debtors, enabling me to get access to individuals who were unwilling to speak about their situation with a researcher face-to-face. Further interviewees were also recruited via an extended network of personal contacts; this included one friend, and three people who responded to an email that I distributed. Also, throughout, I sought to recruit those that were specifically having (or had had) difficulties with *consumer credit* debts. There was therefore a conscious decision at an early part of the research to not make a major focus those who were experiencing difficulties with, for instance, secured loans (notably, mortgage borrowing). This decision was informed by a desire to keep the research as focused as possible. Further, while the predominant focus of the research was on those who had defaulted on their debts (or had at least, been forced to renegotiate their debts with the creditor), I also included a small number of people who self-classified as having 'struggled' with their consumer credit debts, whether currently or in their recent past. This was because one of the facets of default I sought to explore was the journey into debt, which I hoped these borrowers might give me some insight into. This small group were all from those that I recruited through personal contacts. It should be added that no financial incentives were offered to any of the participants. This was not simply because of a lack of funds—principally, it was felt that this might have the potential to induce an uncomfortable, inequitable relationship between myself and my participants.

One hundred and fifty letters sent to National Debtline clients resulted in a total of eight interviews—as expected, a low success rate. A further eight interviews were confirmed with CCCS clients, with an additional four from personal contacts. Of these twenty interviews, twelve were conducted in the interviewee's home, with five phone interviews, and three interviews in an alternate location suggested by the participant (either for practical or privacy reasons). For the sake of practicality, I sought to keep as many interviews as possible to the area in and around London, where I was working at the time. However, for various reasons, this was not always possible. This therefore led to a relatively wide geographical spread: of the twenty participants, twelve lived in London, with the remaining eight spread across the UK, with interviews including defaulting debtors living in North Wales, Blackpool, Peterborough, and Liverpool. I also did not put any limits on the age of participants, beyond seeking those more or less of working age. This resulted in a fairly even spread of ages, ranging from the youngest at twenty-five, to the oldest at sixty-five. There was also a broadly even gender mix, with an eleven to nine male to female split. Seventeen of the twenty had either defaulted on their consumer credit debts or renegotiated their debts with creditors.

Interviewees' levels of consumer credit debt are hard to summarise, for the reason that debtors were at varying stages of their debt, with some having negotiated lower repayment amounts with creditors, or had succeeded in repaying back part of their debts. However, at their peak, most respondents had had unsecured debts of between £10,000 and £20,000, excluding student loans; for some, this figure rose as high as £43,000. If there was a major commonality amongst the group beyond their shared difficulty with their debts, this was to be found in their levels of income. Few had a household income over £30,000, while for many this was under £15,000 a year (including benefits). By way of an approximate comparison, this placed all respondents in the bottom 60% of household income as measured by the Office for National Statistics [ONS] in a comparable period (2008-2009), with many in the bottom 20% (ONS, , 2010b). This is, however, unsurprising. Again, to compare, in 2008, only just over one in ten of CCCS's clients had an annual household income over £30,000; for the majority this figure was under £20,000 (CCCS, , 2009: 10). Therefore, despite not seeking to recruit a group of heavily indebted or defaulting debtors that was representative according to any particular criteria, this snapshot of UK consumer credit indebtedness in 2008, captures a flavour of experiences and situations that were likely being shared by many at the time.

Conducting these interviews also raised a number of ethical questions. Heavily indebted and defaulting debtors may be 'vulnerable' due to undergoing major financial turmoil (or constructed as such—see: Russell (1999); see also: Martin (2004) and Liamputtong (2007)). Further, as noted above, the discussion of private, financial data is an uncomfortable topic for some. Interviewees might also seek guidance that the researcher is not trained to provide. Finally, breaches of confidentiality are likely to be distressing and could lead to personal or professional repercussions. Some of these issues were attended to by recruiting interviewees via the MAT and the CCCS, meaning that they had all received professional advice from a debt counsellor prior to the research commencing. This was not, however, the case with those recruited through personal contacts. Hence, in their case, it was ensured that they were directed to the full range of professional advice services available, if appropriate. Further protective measures included anonymising any relevant identifying details, both in this thesis, and in any transcriptions made, as well as encrypting and storing digital recordings and fieldnotes securely on separate media. All debtor interviewees were sent detailed information on the research before we met, which was also discussed in detail prior to the interviewee, before obtaining written consent. Amongst other topics, this addressed the right to withdraw at any time and the likely content of the interview, including the discussion of personal financial information.

The interviews themselves were conducted with reference to an interview schedule that aimed to allow interviewees to talk through their journey into debt, moments of borrowing, as well as focusing on household relationships, and the technological apparatus of consumer credit and credit collections. In practice, this schedule was used as an organising guide, rather than providing set questions that respondents should answer. Therefore, rather than sticking to this guide fastidiously, most of the interviews tended to range freely, with the guide being used if either I felt prompts became appropriate, or broad subject areas had not been covered. Interviews ranged in length from 45 minutes to over two hours. As anticipated, these conversations were often emotionally charged. However, in many interviews, participants explicitly expressed a desire to tell their story—often coupled with the wish that their experience could be of benefit to others.

At the end of this process, I was left with a rich body of recorded interview data, as well as notes that I made after interviews had been completed. This was duly transcribed, coded and grouped into themes using computer assisted qualitative data analysis software [CAQDAS]. Once again, for the sake of brevity, I will not cover this process in detail. Suffice it to say that this work was undertaken with a full awareness of the critiques that have been levelled at such approaches, including concerns surrounding the potential homogenisation of qualitative data analysis (for example: Coffey, Holbrook, & Atkinson, 1996). However, I tend to agree with those who argue that such critiques overlook the fact that CAQDAS is primarily a tool for reducing and managing large volumes of data (Lee & Fielding, 1996; Fielding & Lee, 1998), a process that must be undertaken whichever tools are employed. As such, for sociology, it is just one (socio-material) translation tool, amongst many.

It was in the process of analysing this material, however, that my research object began to shift. I had begun this project with a desire to track the deployment of the tools and technologies of consumer credit in and through the lives of heavily indebted and defaulting debtors. But, in listening to the data, and presenting the results of this component of the research to others, it became clear that the research needed to move, to follow the object that respondents themselves tended to repeatedly place centre stage in their accounts: the repeated material incursions of the technologies being deployed by creditors and debt collectors in their attempts to recoup their debts.[32] This required entry into an area of socio-economic life with considerable barriers to entry for a curious researcher: the consumer debt collections industry.

Researching the UK consumer collections industry

I will begin the account of this second part of my empirical research somewhere in the middle of the process: the night before I was finally due to visit my first collections agency. This was in late July 2009, after months trying to gain access. I had travelled a number of hours from London by train to stay with a friend's family who had kindly agreed to put me up, as they happened to live close to where this particular collections agency is based. The plan was to stay overnight on Monday and arrive at the collections agency first thing on Tuesday morning. By coincidence, I had heard that, on the Monday night, there was a programme due to be aired on Channel 4—a major UK television channel—focused on debt collection. As I would be travelling during the time that it was showing, the family I was staying with were helpful enough to have offered to record it. After an enjoyable dinner, I duly sat down in front of the television, notebook in hand. Titled 'Undercover Debt Collector' (2009), the programme was, as explored in the Introduction, an exposé of the practices of a collections company called Marlin. Drawing on secretly recorded footage filmed by an undercover journalist, the programme centred on Marlin's training, operations, and in particular the apparently duplicitous practices being employed by one of its most successful collections agents. As I argued in the Introduction, this thesis seeks to avoid many of the binaries and forms of sensationalist analysis that this and other such

---

[32] I would in particular like to thank David Stark, Monique Girard, Daniel Beunza and all those who took part in the CODES seminar David Stark and Monique Girard hosted in New York on March 3rd 2009, for helping me reach some of these insights. This was during a period as a visitor at the Center on Organizational Innovation at Columbia University.

accounts tend to draw on. This was, however, far from my mind as I watched the programme on Monday night. My main concern at the time was the potential impact this might have on my hard-won attempts to gain access to the collections industry.

In the months leading up to this point, it had been confirmed to me that many in the collections industry are highly suspicious of outside observers. As explored in the Introduction, many in the industry feel that their work is frequently misrepresented in the public domain. In particular, the debt collection industry is one that has a small but growing history of being attractive to the genre of journalistic undercover exposé. Three months prior to my visit, again drawing on material provided by a journalist working undercover, *The Times* focused critical attention on Lloyds' internal debt collections practices (Insight, 2009). Two years prior, the weekly tabloid, the *Sunday Mirror* (Owens, 2007), ran a similar undercover story, focusing on face-to-face collections operations—what are often incorrectly understood as bailiffs (the latter instead tending to be court appointed collectors). Meanwhile, in the USA, a book has recently been published that is part exposé, part self-help guide, based on an eleven week stint by its author working as a collector (Williams, 2010). The Channel 4 documentary thus stands as one of a growing number of such exposés. However, as I sat watching it, its timing, the night before my visit, as well as its likely high public profile, made me nervous. I worried that, if it had been noticed, those that had provisionally granted me access might reconsider.

The documentary was noticed. And no one changed their mind. It transpired, however, that it was a close run thing. As emerged during my initial conversation with the agency director, after watching the programme, she had immediately gone back through our emails, as well as hunting for my name online. She had, she said, become worried and wanted both to verify the commitments that I had made and to confirm that I was not, in fact, a journalist. The director was eventually satisfied, however, over the course of the week, across two agencies, the subject of the documentary reappeared frequently. Often this was in the form of lightly barbed teasing from collections workers, along the lines of 'you're not an undercover reporter, are you?'.

Being a researcher in the debt collections industry is therefore likely to mean never being far from suspicion. This is thus one of those areas of social life where problems of access are manifold (see: Puwar, 1997). I got a sense of this at the beginning of the process, from my attempts to contact debt collection companies directly. I had initially chosen eight of the most high profile collections companies in the UK, focusing on those where I was able to find a personal contact for one or more of their directors. Yet my efforts were a failure—none granted me access, with the majority not replying to my emails. My eventual route into the industry was to avoid unsolicited approaches and gain entry via personal recommendations. In order to maintain the anonymity of the people involved, I will not describe this in detail. However, both by using existing contacts in the consumer credit industry and by seeking out new contacts with those working on the periphery of the collections industry, I was eventually able to gain the permission of three agencies to conduct fieldwork at their offices. These will be referred to in this thesis as 'Alpha', 'Beta' and 'Delta'. This fieldwork would be brief—two days in two of the agencies, one in the third—but this was enough to gain a rich insight into the internal operations of an industry that is largely hidden from public view. Over my time in these agencies I was able to observe a number of facets of their operations, including many hours sitting alongside collectors, as well as observing their quality control and complaints departments, those departments that deal with financial hardship cases (where these existed), as well as undertaking interviews with staff at all levels of their business. Further details of this will be presented in later chapters.

I also want to comment on some of the particular ethical issues that this part of the research raises and how these have been managed. Despite written consent documents having been deemed impractical in my dealings with these agencies, the purpose and aims of the research, and likely outputs were explained to relevant parties, in addition to outlining the strong ethical principles that informed the research. One agency suggested that I would be able to use their company name, however they would have wanted to see, and potentially censor, any written material prior to publication, which was for self-evident reasons not desirable. Despite this thesis being critical of some consumer collections practices, I maintain a strong commitment not to expose the identity of any of the companies that allowed me to witness their operations. This matches my written assurances, as well as my desire to protect the range of people who have provided me with assistance during this phase of the research.

I should also acknowledge that the three companies that granted me entry did so, quite clearly, because of their confidence in their procedures and that they considered them to be highly 'compliant' with the regulatory guidelines. In addition, those cases where I was sitting alongside a collections agent, listening in on their conversations, in a situation in which they were quite clear about my role as a researcher, in their mind perhaps with an eye for the sensational moment of exposure, are quite far from capturing collections 'in the wild', even if such a thing were possible. For example, it was made quite explicit to me while visiting Alpha, that I was initially sat with Juliet, because she was 'the best you can get in terms of compliance'. In other words, Alpha considered her a safe pair of hands to sit a curious researcher next to. However, despite these challenges, I nonetheless want to argue that listening in to collectors, when they are aware of your presence, in a company confident of its procedures, does nonetheless reveal some important features of the terms upon which many collections conversations are played out. In part, this claim is informed by the fact that the three agencies I visited included some of the most successful collections operations in the UK. Thus, even if their collections conversations were more compliant with regulatory guidelines than others, this alone did not seem to be a major barrier to profitability. In addition, I was able to compare these conversations to pre-recorded conversations in two of the agencies I visited, chosen at random, which provided some less obviously mediated insight into collection techniques. I was also able to sit and listen to a number of different collectors, with varying levels of experience, and sometimes different approaches, in the companies I visited, as well as being able to get a sense of the tone of the full range of conversations surrounding me. These caveats are not meant to bolster any claim towards the universality of the following conclusions. Instead, they are highlighted in order to set out some of the specific context which informs these conclusions.

It is also important to be explicit about the fact that there is an aspect of this research where obtaining consent to participate was not possible. I refer here not to those working in the industry, but to those defaulters whose phonecalls to collectors I was able to listen in to. From the perspective of the collections agencies, this was not a problem: I was undertaking an activity that is commonplace in the industry: a range of third parties routinely listen in to collections calls, either as they are being conducted, or via recordings. These include team managers or quality control personnel, who want to check their staff are being effective (i.e. successful) collectors and/or that they are meeting regulatory requirements; clients—usually the original creditors—may also sometimes listen in to calls on site visits, to get an insight into the particular approach that an agency is using. From the collection agency's point of view, these activities are covered by the collector telling the caller that calls 'may be recorded for training purposes'. However, this does not cover my status as an external researcher. I can therefore not claim the formal consent of those that listened in to my doing so. I will, however, offer the following partial defence—and I draw here in part on Crow et al.'s (2006) rich exploration of both the opportunities for and limits of informed consent: to have attempted to seek the caller's consent to me listening in to the calls would have made my participation as a witness to collection practices practically impossible. Not only would I have been uncomfortable with the ability of a caller to consent in any meaningful way, had they for instance been given a brief verbal account of my project and my role as a researcher, but also this would have likely interfered with the conduct of a particular collector to such an extent as to make my presence untenable, as well as having potentially affected the content of the call irrecoverably. This may not satisfactorily address all the ethical issues that this research situation implies, however it is hoped that the benefit of being able to understand and represent to others an often hidden domain of socio-economic life at least partially addresses this. Further, it should be noted that I draw directly on the content of these calls only very infrequently in this thesis, using fieldnotes made at the time. In those instances where I have done so, I have been careful to ensure that no trace of a person's identity remains.

I would like to conclude by acknowledging that the material presented in this thesis is inevitably partial. There has been a large amount of selection and exclusion, in presenting just one account of the many that were possible. This chapter has provided an account of some of my methods, the rest of which lie in the way this journey is written. My hope from this point forward is that I am able to, following John Law (2004: 116), 'amplify' the realities of consumer debt default, as well as to provide the grounds for these realities to emerge as the thesis is, collaboratively, read (Filmer, 1975).[33]

[33] I refer here to Paul Filmer's analysis of his own practice of writing, addressing a different topic in a different sociological moment: social stratification. He writes: '...attempting to address such a sociological topic analytically has been, for me, unavoidably, to alternate between practices of collaboratively (re-)creating, with anticipated readers, on the one hand lived and felt experiences of concrete stratifying practices […], and on the other, analytical (sociological) grounds for understanding them. Analytic sociologies, of whatever sociological topics, are thus proposed, as uneasy authorial hoverings between such practices; as tenuous, momentary and, in retrospect, perhaps surprising prisings of ourselves out of concrete worlds and back into spheres of analytic intending. Analysis, otherwise intended and practiced, threatens to kill the life of being social, the more effectively—and disastrously for thought—to dissect it as a way of finally 'understanding' it' (1975: 148).

3. 'I Shouldn't Be Allowed Around These Things': Becoming Attached to Consumer Credit

Introduction

Monies do not, as Viviana Zelizer (1997) argues, simply transmit social relations, but can become intimately involved in shaping their course, as they pass through the everyday lives of their users. As described in Chapter One, this insight has been used to consider the ways in which forms of money may be considered as 'attachment devices'. That is to say, by virtue of their ability to be involved in the binding together, or separation of, people, places, and times, monies are routinely involved in attachments and detachments between a range of socio-material actors. Such insights point to the relations that both constitute and stem from the coming together of people and things in and around the transactions that compose market assemblages.

One of the key aims of this chapter is to draw on some of these insights in exploring forms of consumer credit that circulate as transactional, monetary objects. This begins the process of travelling alongside the journey of consumer credit default. As this chapter will argue, it is by sitting alongside the users of consumer credit and listening to their accounts of how they interact with the material devices of consumer credit that provides some pointers towards the calculative challenges that it poses. This is in part an account of how some consumer credit users began to become so attached to their consumer credit products. In looking at these processes, I will not propose any overarching conclusions as to the cause of consumer credit indebtedness and default. One of the effects of the (increasing) visibility of consumer credit indebtedness as an issue of public controversy (as explored in the Introduction), is that, in many ways, 'cause' has become over-determined. Instead, what I hope this chapter achieves, is a more modest loosening of the complex causal knot that leads some users of consumer credit, but not all, to become so ensnared in their credit products that disentanglement and detachment can seem impossible. It begins this process by exploring how economic calculation has already been accounted for sociologically, before moving on to chart the calculative spaces surrounding the everyday use of consumer credit as a monetary form.

As has already been outlined in the Introduction, consumer credit is an umbrella term for the range of borrowing instruments, whose principal shared feature is that they are loans that are not secured on (real estate) property. This incorporates a range of borrowing instruments that are non-transactional, in that they play no part in routine, repeated transactions between the user and a seller, including unsecured personal loans, bank overdrafts, and hire-purchase contracts. However, the most visible and controversial consumer credit borrowing instruments are those in which debts are potentially accrued over time, via the insertion of a consumer credit borrowing within individual transactions, most notably by the user of credit cards (and, to a lesser extent, store cards). It is in and through these sociotechnical devices that consumer credit approaches the practical, everyday functioning of other routine transactional monetary forms, including cash, cheques and debit cards.[34] Further, as this chapter will argue, it is consumer credit's transactional devices and the monthly credit statements that accompany them, which potentially pose unique calculative challenges to borrowers (see also: Nayak and Beckett (2008)). As such, particular attention will be paid to two points in the borrowing process: the moment of transaction and the moment at which acts of borrowing are 'redisplayed' in statements.

Accounting for consumer credit calculations

As Koray Çalışkan and Michel Callon (2009) have argued, the long history of social scientific accounts of what economic decision making 'is' and how it is driven has been characterised by an agreement that is peculiar given the more widely recognised antipathy that has existed between, on the face of it, opposing positions.[35] On the face of it, formalist neo-classical economists and Polanyi-inspired substantivists can be characterised as sharing little. In the case of the former, the transcendent analytical category is to be found at the level of the individual; it is their instrumental rationality, their utility maximising decisions, made in conditions where means are finite, from which a potentially infinite range of economies stem. Whilst the 'ends' to which these means-end decisions are directed may be cultural, and hence vary from place to place and across time, this core human characteristic transcends their particular contingent manifestations. Substantivism challenges this core assumption head-on, making a case for the contingency of instrumental rationality itself, suggesting that it needs to be weighed against other forms of rationality, such as those connected to reciprocal or redistributive principles, for example. What defines this variation are the ways in which societies organise their resources and, in particular, the variation in the social institutions that shape modes of resource allocation. In contrast to the formalist account, the substantivist analyst's attention is therefore directed away from

[34] In practice, however, debts accrued with these forms of consumer credit are also often linked to others, with many heavily indebted borrowers in the present research reporting using unsecured personal loans to consolidate existing credit and store card debts, then using the latter to enabling a further borrowing cycle to commence.
[35] The following is a much curtailed summary of their excellent and detailed account, which should be referred to, should greater depth be required.

the individual and towards social structures that shape the character of individual decision making (2009: 374-376). However, argue Çalışkan and Callon, '[t]heir disagreement pertains not to the distinction between individuals and structures. Rather, where they deviate is on the definition of each of these terms, or on the description of how agency is distributed between the individual and the structure' (2009: 377).

Of course, as the authors make clear, the entire history of accounts of economic calculation cannot be captured by the debate between formalists and substantivists. Economic theory has expanded its scope, largely unproblematically incorporating some key tenets of substantivism, attaching considerable importance to the role of the 'institution' (even if defined differently), but not employing it as an analytical *a priori*, but a market response: the social is hence (re)conceptualised as 'formally endogenous to the economy' (2009: 379). Meanwhile, so-called 'new' economic sociology has gained considerable momentum, by redeploying and developing Polanyi's underworked notion of 'embeddedness', in particular as reconfigured in the work of Mark Granovetter (1985). As Richard Swedburg puts it, '[w]hereas Karl Polanyi had introduced the notion of embeddedness to emphasize that the economy was an organic part of society in pre-capitalist times, Granovetter's point was nearly the opposite, namely to show that *economic actions are truly social actions* in capitalist society' (1997: 165; emphasis added). To bring out this contrast a little further, Polanyi aimed to argue that, whilst the modern market economy was still (in 'reality') embedded in society, it had succeeded, at least in part, in becoming an institutionally separated, semi-autonomous, self-regulating system, 'disembedded' from many of the social forces that gave rise to it. In contrast, Granovetter wants to make the case for the *extensive and ongoing* role of social interactions in shaping economies. In a counter to economics' attempt at the absorption of the social within the economy, the economic is held to be an ongoing social (re)creation.

For Çalışkan and Callon, however, whilst these and other modifications have been important in providing a counter to economics' disciplinary imperialism, in some ways little has changed. Explanations for economic action are still resolutely grounded in social interaction, missing the *work* of markets:

> In trying to show that markets can be deconstructed and analysed like any other social reality, the new sociology of economy has missed the progressive construction—celebrated and challenged everywhere—of the particular force known as economic markets. Do we explain something by dissolving the object to be explained in another general and controversial frame society? (Çalışkan & Callon, 2009: 283)

The problem with new economic sociology in its various manifestations, they suggest, is first, the turn to the (sociological) social as an ultimate catch-all for explanations of economic processes and, second, the reliance on an understanding of social interaction, or 'the social', as emanating from discursive interaction between human actors. The sociology of economic calculation has therefore tended (a) to displace the question of the constitution of the analytical object in hand and (b) failed to attend sufficiently to the socio-material work that makes calculation possible.

As touched on in Chapter One, their proposal, rooted in many of the principles of ANT, is to undertake an anthropology of markets and, by extension, calculation, which follows the composition of processes of (e)valuation in and through their socio-material, and in particular socio-*technical* formatting. This 'object centred' approach includes, as Cochoy puts it, a sociology of 'market things', which rather than looking 'back stage' for explanations of the choices market actors make, is committed to examining how 'markets may *also* be traced at the immediate ground level of ordinary transactions' (Cochoy, 2007b: 110). Most importantly, a focus on the latter can be seen as providing an account of some of the precise socio-material mechanisms that effect the 'attachment' of particular consumers to particular products. This process has been extensively described elsewhere (also via the complementary language of 'entanglement' and 'disentanglement') (Callon, 1998; Callon et al., 2002; Callon & Muniesa, 2005; Mcfall, 2009b; Muniesa et al., 2007; Muniesa, 2009a). Put simply, thinking of markets in terms of movements of attachment—and detachment—draws attention to how the socio-material assembly of calculative spaces via 'market devices', involves multiple and ongoing processes of association and dissociation between market actors. It is the calibration of these devices that 'affect the ways in which persons and things are translated into calculative and calculable beings' (Muniesa et al., 2007: 5). In order for marketised objects to be able to be attached to purchasers and in order to be (in theory) calculable, they have to be detached, or 'disentangled' from the range of associations that might threaten the stability of the transaction. In an ideal typical transaction, buyer and seller must end the exchange 'quits', so that the object being purchased is sufficiently alienated or singularised so as to be able to pass securely from one party to the other. The role of market devices in this context is to provide the socio-material framework upon which these processes occur.

This chapter brings these insights into the everyday, transactional spaces of consumer credit borrowing, focusing on some of the calculative challenges these processes of attachment might poses. It focuses on how consumers interact with consumer credit's monetary as well as its non-monetary devices and how these interactions shape their calculative practices. This is introduced by an initial consideration of how electronic payment cards shape the calculative space of the transaction itself, before moving on to consider what happens after the moment of purchase, centring on a discussion of the credit statement.

Opening up the credit card transaction: Engendering decalculation

Electronic payment devices—credit and store cards as much as debit cards—offer spatial and temporal affordances that are very different from cash. They may, for instance, be more lightweight and portable and may in some exchange situations be quicker. As will be argued, the rise of electronic payment devices thus has the potential to change the configuration of the moment of transaction. More particularly, the moment of transaction is opened up as involving not simply the transmission of value by universally circulating monetary objects, but the transmission of value by monetary products. In an ideal typical purchase scenario, purchaser (credit card user) and seller (credit card acceptor) make use of a set of market devices in order to achieve a reciprocal transfer of value (from buyer to seller) and property rights (from seller to buyer). The symbolic and legally binding summation of these capacities is represented through the moment at which a requested transaction is authorized by the credit card issuer and the buyer is issued with a receipt. Buyer and seller can then leave each other fully 'detached'. But of course, a credit or store card mediated transaction engages the buyer in a two way purchase: of the particular good in hand, but also the purchase of credit from the lender (or the temporary use of credit at no cost if the full balance is repaid at the end of the month).

One consequence of the rise of monetary products has been to see various marketing technologies seeking to insert themselves into this reconfigured exchange moment. The transaction has become, from their perspective, a space into which distinctions can be introduced between different monetary media. As an example, Felix Stalder (2001) shows how (unsuccessful) attempts to introduce 'Mondex', a form of electronic cash, in a series of Canadian trials, operated around demonstrating the supposed temporal and spatial 'inefficiencies' and cumbersome qualities of cash. A similar tactic was used in 2008 in campaigns run by Maestro—a debit card—and Barclaycard OnePulse—a type of cashless payment device incorporating a public transport swipecard (the Oyster card). In both campaigns, cash figures as a weighty, cumbersome device, taking up both unnecessary space and time (see figures 4a to 4e below): this might be communicated by demonstrating cash's tendencies towards wasteful accumulation (figures 4a, 4b), or, as the fictitious 'Professor' Danny Chiba reveals to us, of the dangers of cash falling—or here flying—out of your purse (figures 4c, 4d).

Figures 4a, 4b, 4c, 4d, 4e. Maestro and Barclaycard OnePulse.[36]

[36] Figures 4a & 4e: writer's own photographs, London Victoria station, May 2008. The full text on the note in figure 4b reads: 'Dear Cash, It's over. Everybody warned me about you, but I never listened. Now I see you for who you really are. Loud, brash...a real attention seeker. You never cared about me. You always let me down. Like that time in the pub when you ended up rolling around under the table. Well, I'm not picking you up any more. As I write this I feel a weight's been lifted. I used to think I couldn't live without you. You were so flash and sexy. Now I just think you're sad. So long, Gwen.'. Barclaycard OnePulse images (4c and 4d) taken from: http://www.barclaycard-onepulse.co.uk/index.html. Accessed 14.12.10. 'Dear Cash' advertisement published in *The Metro* in May 2008 (precise date not available).

One way of describing this is along conventionally culturalist lines. As discussed in Chapter One, Viviana Zelizer's concept of 'earmarking', which describes the ways in which forms of currency become 'marked' does speak to the various marketing campaigns sketched previously. In the case of Mondex, Maestro, and Barclaycard, it is possible to see how—even if not emanating from the users of these objects—marketing technologies are being employed to attempt to convince users *to* earmark contemporary monetary devices: to introduce, or reinforce, a sense that making choices about what to buy should also include choices about *how* to buy. There is, however, a richer story to be told here. In particular, I suggest that the ways that electronic payment devices connect together people, objects, spatialities, and temporalities, can, in ways similar to those described by the above marketing campaigns, have very particular impacts on the calculative spaces in which they are used. Part of this transformation is an effect of some of the very qualities to which the campaigns speak. In the case of both credit and debit cards, the need to hand over a single device, with perhaps only a receipt in return simplifies the transaction: gone is the need to ensure the correct amount of cash is in hand, or to deal with change. In its place, is a single, highly portable device that transfers value from one space to another, via a reliable, easy to use technological infrastructure.

This marks a subtle change in the makeup of the calculative space in which monetary object and monetary user coincide. Actions of withdrawing, counting, and recounting are transformed into the simple handing-over of a device, with the only visible reference to value possibly being the display on the till or, later, receipt. More particularly, this marks a shift in the embodied experience of making payments, a feature that, while being drawn on in all the advertisements above, is done so particularly effectively in the last figure above (1e). Here, travellers at a busy central London hub, at the very moment of passing through its ticket barriers, are presented with the 'Coins. Expect Delays' Maestro advert.

It is perhaps a feature of contemporary life that the phenomenon of 'wasted' time is so frequently drawn upon as a problem in need of solution. In particular, for the regular commuter, one of the most frustrating experiences of wasted time is the indeterminate temporal scale of delay that can accompany the regular use of public transportation. It is in delay that the passage of time and existence in space become sensory, as those who have been crowded outside similar barriers to those above in the morning will attest. Frustration derives from the separation of time and space, building as time passes for often unknown reasons and from having to remain spatially fixed and dependent on the work of others, for networks to be realigned, for signals that need fixing, packages that need inspecting, or leafy pulp that needs scraping from autumn railway lines. As in Bruno Latour's (1997) 'paradox of the twin travellers', the air-conditioned TGV traveller, used to being whisked effortlessly across the country, only begins to be frustrated by time when forced off the smooth materially aligned TGV network by an unexpected incident, suddenly finding time and space becoming separated as fixity and delay intrude as he sits trackside, waiting for some form of resolution. It is such past experiences that Maestro draws on, by connecting them to the apparent frustrations of, as Maestro themselves put it, 'having to fiddle for change' (Maestro, 2007). This campaign hence attempts to translate embodied memories of travel into the domain of everyday monetary transactions. The intention is clear: to attempt to introduce into the calculative space of the transaction, an assessment of the merits of not only its *object*, but also its *mode*. Like many of the calculative practices that this thesis will explore, this is a form of calculation in which there is a deep interrelation between modes of quantitative assessment and modes of qualitative assessment. These are calculations that can also be referred to as, following Franck Cochoy (2002), practices of 'qualculation'.[37]

With debit cards, however, the changes that these devices may engender in the calculative spaces in which they are inserted only go so far: as the Maestro and Barclaycard campaigns makes clear—there is still a certain analogy with cash: even if the process is unseen, value is transferred from the user to the seller almost immediately. In the case of consumer credit's transactional devices—principally the credit card (but also the less ubiquitous store card)—such analogies are, however, not sustainable. These are material payment devices that enable a quite different shift in the formatting of calculative space: from the borrower's perspective what might otherwise be a discrete transaction becomes subject to forms of temporal, and spatial elongation.

Writing from a behavioural economics perspective, Oren Bar-Gill describes the credit card as a 'complex, multi-attribute product': it is 'a bundle of different products and services. The credit card bundles together transacting and borrowing services. It also implements intertemporal bundling, where borrowing now is bundled with borrowing later' (2006: 48-49). Credit cards thus not only offer the user a digital transacting service—the primary 'service' offered by debit cards—they combine this with a complex mesh of borrowing services, including present borrowing, the possibility of future borrowing and—to extend Bar-Gill's description a little—the easy management of potentially large past debts, as long as minimum payments are made on time. Thus, while forms of cash and, to a lesser extent debit cards, are formatted as objects that bundle together relations around a single moment, credit cards extend this moment out, affording—whether the user wants it

[37] This thesis will not used the term 'qualculation' to describe each such instance of qualitative/quantitative practice, but will seek to draw on this language when a discussion of the assessment of quality becomes particularly pertinent.

or not—a multiplicity of potential connections the future. Recent research, for instance, showed that, in 2008, almost a third (31%) of UK credit card users did not pay off their full balance every month (BIS,, 2009: 28). For these users, a single moment of purchase folds into a potentially indeterminate range of future space and times. The complexity of these interactions across different spaces and times increases yet further for those users—making up almost half (45%) of this group—who make only the minimum payment on their balances every month (BIS,, 2009: 28). As the minimum payment is typically a tiny proportion of the total balance (around 2-3%), this sizeable section of UK credit card user only barely covered the interest on their debts in 2008. For these users, each single charge to a credit card is therefore likely to be so hugely fractured across time, that the charges for the subsidiary purchase—the debt—in the form of interest accrued, frequently almost balance the cost of the item itself. None of these attachments are, however, visible at the point of use.

To begin to open up the calculative challenges this may engender for users, I want to turn to one of my respondents, Peter, and a parallel he implies between two quite different material objects: first, the credit card and second, the shopping cart. Peter, at this point in the interview was discussing the way his shopping practices had changed since being forced to live a cash-only existence, by the removal of his credit card (Peter had renegotiated his debts with his creditors via the CCCS). First Peter discusses how he would now make sure to take cash out before going shopping, explaining how this not only saved him the embarrassment of having his debit card declined when he went to the till, it also allowed him to budget better, as it forced him to look at consider his present balance, something he would previously ignore. But he then proceeds, immediately following this, to draw this into comparison with his changed shopping habits:

> Joe: does it … bring it home to you more, what you're spending, when you're spending with cash?
>
> Peter: yes, because, again, what we do now, rather than take a big basket round and fill it up, we now take one of the smallest trolleys round and fill it up, which is half the size. Last time we went shopping we didn't even do that. I had two of the hand baskets and the wife had one. So once they were full, that was it. And instead of our bill being the average what it used to be, [£]150, I think it was about [£]70. You know, sometimes the size of the basket you take around straightaway will limit you to what you can carry, so rather than have one of those big <u>deep</u>, you know, trolleys, you get one of those half sized ones, which [means that] again, you're gonna [*sic*] reduce what you can put in there, which in turn is going to reduce what you spend. So of course when you go down to having hand baskets it reduces it even further, so once they're full, that's it.

Rather than directly answering my question about the possible experiential differences between using different monetary media, Peter shifts attention to his shopping practice. In particular, this extract can be read as drawing attention to how the materiality of the shopping device matters to his calculative processes: as a consequence of now being presented with an inflexible limit Peter deliberately attempts to avoid the expensive consequences of using shopping carts, by exchanging it for either smaller versions, or baskets. In this respect, Peter's account resonates with a similar one provided by Franck Cochoy. His study reveals how, despite intervening *after* the shopper 'chooses' a particular good from a supermarket shelf, the shopping cart offers a space for at least temporary *de*-calculation. It transforms the calculative moment, shifting it—at least partially—from a budgetary constraint into a volumetric one (2008: 21), creating what Cochoy refers to as 'a short moment of abundance and a pause in calculation' before the user reaches the till (2008: 20; drawing also on Pia Pozzato, 2001). It not that calculation stops, but that the *mode* of calculation is temporarily shifted away from quantitative judgement and towards calculation defined more in terms of the movement of the shopper through the store and the relationship between themselves, the chart, and the accumulating goods they seek to arrange therein.

Peter's account, however, points to an additional decalculative device that regular supermarket shoppers might engage with: the credit card. For, the implication in Peter's account is that when he was using his credit card, he *could* use any sized shopping device he wanted, with the decalculation effects of both devices reinforcing each other. Shopping with a credit card meant that the decalculating effects of the shopping cart could remain unchallenged. As with the shopping cart, transactional forms of consumer credit construct temporary abundance. The key difference is that, in the case of consumer credit, the pause in calculation begins at the till and may be postponed more or less indefinitely. In other words, whereas in Cochoy's account, the calculative end point is the moment of exchange, the introduction of a consumer credit device into a transaction potentially further complicates the space of consumption. Both devices may engender decalculation, but, in using a device such as a credit card to make a purchase, the user engages—in effect—with a double purchase, in the acquisition of further credit from the provider. However, whereas a shopping cart can be *seen* filling up, and cash can be *felt* running out, a credit card does not display its variance: whether £1 or £1000 away from its limit, the credit card remains apparently inviolate—a passive device sitting alongside the many other similar devices in the user's wallet or purse.

The calculative effects that using consumer credit can generate emerged time and again as a theme amongst my respondents. Julie echoes many, for whom these moments of decalculation are framed as in some way 'not thinking'; she comments:

> [Y]ou almost don't think about it, you just hand your card over, it almost becomes your debit card, because you know in the back of your mind you don't have this money available, but there is no other way you can afford to pay for it. But then again you don't see it […]. What you should do is say, well I can't afford it so we are going to have to cut back on something, like the shopping or something like that, but […] you don't.

In the moment of the transaction itself, Julie cannot completely distance herself from that part of her that knows she is spending money she does not have, but at the same time she manages to effect a transformation in the status of the monetary media she is using, with the credit card becoming—almost—a debit card in her eyes. In Julie's case, the material similarity of the two monetary objects, coupled with the invisibility of the accumulated debt ('you don't see it) offer affordances that provide some comfort; she can almost convince herself that she is not borrowing at all.

Similarly, for Angela and Gary, the embodied practice of using consumer credit is so pronounced that the language of 'borrowing' seems to jar entirely:

> Gary: you see it's funny, you use the term borrowing and you don't think of it like that […] Do you know what I mean? […] borrowing to me is, […] these friends of mine that have lent me say 200 [pounds] […] I call that borrowing. And yet with that lot I don't call it that. Although obviously that is what it is.
>
> Joe: […] what do you think the difference is?
>
> Gary: I don't know. Because you're, it's almost like you're charging it. […] but it's funny […] you've used the word borrow a couple of times […] and […], you don't see it as that […] I don't know, because you […] slap something on the counter […] and then they give you a bill.

> Angela: I don't know why I did it, it felt really bad at the time, […] but, I think I did see it as borrowing money, […] when you spend money on a credit card it doesn't really feel like it, I mean, everyone always says that, spending money on Visa cards, you know, you should just have cash, because then you can see it …

It is tempting, listening to Gary, to return to Zelizer's concept of earmarking: Gary clearly draws boundaries between money from friends and money from institutions. He also clearly demonstrates how the greater sense of social connection towards the former renders his practice as 'borrowing' in contrast to the more nebulous act of 'charging it' when using consumer credit. A conventional sociological analysis might suggest that this could be an effect, for instance, of a variation in the extent and quality of the social ties connecting these two parties.

I will return to this analysis and to Gary momentarily. However I also want to draw attention to Angela's analysis of her practice. It is less interesting that she does not, like Gary, make a linguistic distinction between the borrowing enacted via transactional forms of consumer credit and from personal contacts—she, like Gary, discusses elsewhere in the interview the significant differences between the two. Of greater interest, is her assertion that one of the embodied states that consumer credit devices produce, is the *feeling* of being disconnected from what she also recognizes as the ostensibly 'real' activity that the use of consumer credit engenders—being lent money. In this respect, she shares much with Gary, to engage with the transactional devices of consumer credit is to engage with material devices that allow a corporeal disconnect: they can be 'slapped' on the counter without too much thought. Again, unlike cash, the credit or store card is not formatted in such a way as to *require* calculation activities. However, her focus on the varying corporeal intensities that different monetary media produce should, I suggest, give pause for thought.

What might by Zelizer be described as the earmarking of different monetary forms, can, I argue, be better considered as the interaction between a device that is formatted in such a way as to allow a correspondence between the use of the device and an actor's lack of energy, desire, or inclination to attempt to direct their calculation activities at both the *object* of purchase and the *monetary* purchase. One way to approach this is as the interaction between, to return to the terms outlined in Chapter One, 'dipositifs' and 'dispositions': that is, the study the way in which the activities of markets articulate in and through a range of material devices *and* a range of ad hoc embodied human states—habit as much as weariness, or curiosity, for example (Cochoy, 2007a; see also Mcfall, 2009b: 272). With this in view, a credit card is not, to return to Bar-Gill, simply a bundle of attributes. Thinking of the credit card as a bundle is useful—but I suggest that this bundle needs to be thought along the lines of an *assemblage*. That is, not only a sum of individualised *attributes*, but of spaces, people, objects and a variety of corporeal (and, as later chapters will explore 'affective') engagements. Such an analysis is not, however, meant to 'uncover' the operations of unseen social forces driving a borrower's actions or choices. As Angela goes on to say, 'everyone always says' that spending on credit cards precisely mitigates *against* acts of calculation. In other words, the recognition that the use of different transactional devices engenders a range of calculative states has become a trope, an everyday attempt to understand the calculative asymmetries that consumer credit can engender. This may be seen, to continue in dialogue with Cochoy, as well as Bruno Latour, as the articulation of one of the many and varied 'spontaneous sociologies' that actors deploy as they move through the terrain of socio-economic life. These are attempts to 'restore the logic of action endogenous to the social world' (Cochoy, 2007a: 212). In other words, the different calculative states that these devices engender demand recognition not only by those that study their use, but also by users themselves.

Reading credit statements: Enacting transparency?

Looking at the moment of transaction offers only a partial view on the calculative spaces surrounding the use consumer credit. For the second calculative pole of transactional consumer credit spending is the credit statement.[38] The statement is the device designed to enable calculation for all the various forms of consumer credit, whether those employing transactional devices such as credit cards, or borrowing effected via loans or hire purchase. However, this device assumes a far greater importance in relation to transactional forms of

[38] Which can also be considered a collections device. See Chapter Seven.

credit borrowing, given the potential variability of how the lending facility is used. As such, it is worth pausing to consider what transactional credit statements are, and what they do, or at least are seemingly *intended* to do.

Transactional consumer credit statements are, like the electronic payment cards, sociotechnical market devices, at the centre of the which, as the name suggests, is the creditor's official statement of the borrower's account position. It is therefore the user around which the statement centres; more particularly, the user as narrated through his or her statement of account. It is here that the user contributes towards constructing each statement as a unique, individualised record of his or her past purchases. This record re-presents the user with a retrospective record of the precise moments at which exchanges from creditor to borrower were authorised. It is the decontextualised, linearly formatted, echo of these past moments in the present, through which the user is supposed to assess his or her past actions and their relationship to the credit product as a whole.

Before going on to assess their function as calculative frameworks, it is worth noting some of the other functions these documents perform. Some of these are instrumental, including providing the user with information such as how to pay and changes that may have been made to terms and conditions. In addition, the document on which the statement is printed and the promotional literature with which they are packaged also provide opportunities for creditors to engage in marketing activities, whether to promote the use of the credit product itself, often via foregrounding 'reward' schemes of some kind (for example cashback, points, discounts with selected partners, automatic entry into prize draws if the card is used in specified ways), or to sell subsidiary products, for example identity theft insurance.[39] Much of this content inevitably varies between creditors, however, mirroring global trends in the regulation of consumer credit, in the UK, some elements (including key wording), have become fixed, having to conform to either statutory requirements or best practice standards adopted across the industry.[40] Most notably these include a 'summary box', detailing key product features, information on whom customers should contact should they have a dispute with their creditor, an indicative amount of interest that would be paid on the following month if only the minimum payment was

[39] It is interesting to note a formal distinction drawn in *The Lending Code* (2009: 7) when discussing a consumer's right to opt out of marketing: 'advising a customer that they have free annual travel insurance with their credit card' is considered 'not a marketing approach', while 'promoting an enhanced credit card to a standard credit cardholder' is.

[40] Statutory requirements are now laid out in the revised Consumer Credit Act, as detailed by the Office of Fair Trading (2008). Industry standards were formerly covered by *The Banking Code* (British Bankers' Association, 2008), which has now been replaced by *The Lending Code* (British Bankers' Association et al., 2009).

made, as well as a 'health warning', detailing the consequences of making only minimum payments.

From the perspective of those who have the 'transparency' of consumer credit as a stated aim (in a UK context, notably the Department for Business Information & Skills [BIS]),[41] the credit statement is idealised as a device that, through a series of processes of disentanglement, the user should be able to 'see through': the statement should act as a lens that allows past, present and future to be deployed, disentangled and acted upon. As with many other financial products, the aim is to somehow manage and contain the inherent uncertainty and opacity of the unknowable future. [42] In other words, consumer credit has to contain mechanisms that in some way render the future a little less opaque for the user, even if achieving complete transparency is, by definition, impossible (as will be explored further shortly).[43] For the creditors, however, it is also a means through which they can attempt to qualify their product offering in relation to the competition, as well as attempt to deepen the relationship between product and consumer. As such, to return to the language used previously, the statement is one of a number of devices that seek to stimulate the borrower into becoming more attached to the credit product. Others include—most obviously—the charging of interest on unpaid balances (which the statements try to partially render visible),[44] as well as the somewhat controversial practice of creditors increasing users' credit limits without being asked to—a practice that, in submissions to a UK consultation run by BIS, creditors freely admit is aimed at stimulating greater borrowing (BIS, , 2010: 31).[45]

---

[41] The language surrounding the governance of consumer credit is thick with references to transparency. In a UK context, 'Establishing a Transparent Market' was positioned as a key aim for the precursor to BIS, The Department of Trade and Industry [DTI] (for example: DTI, , 2003: 29-42), as well being central to BIS' recent consultations (notably BIS, , 2009).

[42] For more on transparency as a regulatory ideal, see, for example: Brown and Michael (2002); Muniesa, Grossman and Luque (2008).

[43] At the same time, however, it is important to recognise that regulatory practice is not wholly consumer-focused—whilst it is not possible to do a full assessment of the regulatory decision-making process here, the extent to which deciding on which elements should and should not be included in the statement, and more widely relating to how the credit product operates, is a highly contested process, with industry tending to lobby hard against many of the changes proposed by consumer advocates (see for example the industry responses to the recent *Credit and Store Card Review* (BIS, , 2010)).

[44] The way interest is calculated on credit balances is itself an object of some controversy. For instance, the consumer advocacy group, Which?, launched a 'supercomplaint' to the OFT (2007) in which they took issue with the lack of standardisation of interest calculations across the industry, including such questions as precisely when interest is charged and chargeable, and whether and how interest is charged on interest already accrued, and how statements themselves display this information. The OFT it seems, was not convinced, citing in part a desire not to restrict the 'commercial freedom' of card issuers afforded by the variance in these calculations, opting not for the imposition of any standardisation, but for a negotiated approach seeking to engage card issuers in a 'voluntary initiative to increase transparency surrounding the cost of credit arising from the use of credit cards' (Office of Fair Trading, 2007).

[45] This draws from evidence submitted by the industry to the aforementioned *Credit and Store Card Review*, which, in full, summarises the evidence as follows: '[Industry] evidence showed that balances do rise in the

A credit card statement is therefore a hybrid text, centred on the user. It contains a mediated, decontexualised account of the user's past, surrounded by elements seeking to both attach the user more to the particular credit product and detach the economic calculations the user is being asked to make. In so doing, it is inevitably able to capture only a reductive picture of the full complexity of the calculative machinations to which the user is or will be subjected to by the lender (Will the limit increase? Will the interest rate change? Will the minimum payment change? How is interest being calculated? On what? When? And so forth).

Reading a statement in this way reveals much about its aims and ideals. However, it tells little about how user's engage with it on a daily basis. In particular, why, in the case of my heavily indebted and defaulting borrowers, did the statement not intervene in their lives at an earlier stage and prevent them from reaching a situation where their debts became unmanageable? To begin to answer this, I want to return to Angela, and her response to a question I asked her, about her credit statements:

> Joe: What about credit statements […] looking back a bit further, when you were using the credit cards […] how would you interact with those?
>
> Angela: I hate them, boring, just not really look at them at all. I hate them, oh god just thinking about it now just horrible.
>
> Joe: Sorry.
>
> Angela: No, no, no it's alright ... just thinking of the evil horrible people that put them together that would care enough to like ... it's so awful of me, what's wrong with me I feel really bad, but I don't know ... […] it's good that you know what you spent your money on I suppose and how much they're charging you and all of that. *I think I shouldn't be allowed around these things*. I think I need… [trails off, upset]

This section represents the point in the interview at which Angela becomes most visibly upset—the emotive trigger seemingly her own sense of failure at being unable to interact with consumer credit devices as she should have. The extract can be summarized as follows: first, Angela is asked to give an account of how she interacts with her credit statements; she responds by suggesting that she did not, in the main, do so, at which point she begins to get upset, at the same time expressing her vehement dislike for them. She then proceeds to imply that she has, to some extent, been subject to the actions of the 'evil, horrible people' that put the statements together and, by extension, the full range of consumer credit devices that she has had to engage with (including collections technologies). After implying that she has been, at least to an extent, manipulated, her

---

months following a credit limit increase by around 10-15% compared to similar accounts that did not receive an increase. This, in industry's view, is perfectly legitimate: seeking to increase the profitability of their customers is the fundamental motivation of any business. Moreover, their evidence suggested that consumers do generally limit their own spending. Customers receiving a limit increase were likely to spend more in the month following the increase, but thereafter would spend less than they had been doing previously. This suggests that consumers use a higher limit to bring forward future spending, but do not sustain these higher spending levels' (BIS, , 2010: 31-32).

attention switches back onto herself, wondering whether she has some form of innate pathology. Then, her attention shifts back to the statements: here she recognizes their importance as records and thus as calculative spaces, but ultimately concludes that, whatever the benefits of consumer credit devices, these are *things* that she should not be allowed to interact with. Her conclusion is ambiguous: she feels she 'needs' something, but tails off.

I read this, however, as Angela grappling for some form of calculative prosthesis: some solution to her self-perceived inability to act as she feels she should: as a rationally calculating *homo economicus*. Angela therefore recognizes the ideal of the rational calculating economic agent, able to interact with these devices—and in particular credit statements—as they suggest they *should* be interacted with. However, her response suggests that she is both overwhelmed by the degree of decalculation they engender and the degree of calculative agency necessary to interact with them as she should. At the same time as wondering as to her own perhaps pathological lack of calculative ability, she ascribes a high degree of calculative agency to creditors: they are represented, in this instance, as highly strategic operators, whose assembly of calculative spaces such as credit statements while 'good' in principle is part of a broader game, in which she has become a victim. In light of the conflict between these two parties, with such a large degree of calculative asymmetry between the two, her conclusion is simple: for whatever the reason, forms of consumer credit are 'things' with too much agency for her. Angela thus reproduces, even if in an undertheorised way, an account of the agency of objects.

That does not mean, however, that we should leap too quickly to see Angela's insight as definitive. As argued in Chapter Two, the insights that these interviews provide are inevitably partial and provisional assessments of the complex realities of technosocial life. Later, she still seems troubled by being confronted by her own inability to engage with the displays of value contained within credit statements as she felt she should. She continues:

> Angela: … so I think it's good to have a record of stuff and so you need to know the numbers of what you spent and how much you owe them now today I suppose.
>
> Joe: Do you ever kind of look…
>
> Angela: So it's good just to have it as a just in case kind of thing as a backup in case you ever need to look at it, but I bet 90% of the time, no one ever does.

For Angela, if consumer credit devices do have an agential quality, it is not in driving human action, but in permitting themselves to recede into the background of routine, everyday experiences to such an extent that they fold easily into the fabric of everyday life. In other words, it is less that Angela cannot live without them, but that they make it easy to live *with* them. Whereas, with cash, displays of value are attached to activities of counting and sorting, the displays of value that credit statements enact are so passive, so disconnected from embodied forms of calculation that they perform less as evidence of a present state of indebtedness, but as potential future witnesses or 'backups', to be employed only if and when calculation is externally prompted. From this perspective, it is, therefore, as a result of their routine performance of invisibility, that, from the user's point of view, they take on some of the autopoietic, agential qualities that Angela is grappling towards understanding.

The point here is not to suggest that this way of interacting with credit statements is a universal, inevitable, or even a general tendency. Instead, what Angela speaks to, are some of the ways that credit statements can *afford* a lack of engagement, and how they intersect with certain debtor dispositions to create situations where calculative engagements are pushed to one side. This is particularly because they do not necessarily compel a user's engagement. For most of my participants this therefore means an intensely ambiguous relationship with credit statements. Many do, like Angela, regularly fail to open letters from creditors. However, this does not mean a complete lack of engagement: some will open them intermittently, seemingly on a whim; some will leave them to pile up before opening them all at once; some will simply use credit statements to occasionally check how much credit they still had available so they could plan their future expenditure. For some, credit statements also become objects around which contested household relations become focused: Julie, for instance, who is in the process of going through a divorce, confesses that she used to hide statements from her husband, to avoid him being able to see what she had been buying, while at the same time being fairly fastidious in keeping track of the family expenditure.

Like the collections technologies that will be tracked in the rest of this thesis, consumer credit statements are therefore objects that inevitably intersect with the habits and households of debtors in varying ways, generating a range of different calculative situations. What is clear, however, is that in the case of those that go on to struggle with their debts, these market devices often fail to generate the change in their borrowing behaviour that might prevent their debts becoming unmanageable. Yet, this is not the fault of the statement alone. Despite attempts to render consumer credit, and the consumer credit statement 'transparent', it cannot escape its dependency on the incalculable, on the irreducible uncertainty pointed towards by Frank Knight (1921) (as opposed the calculable 'risk'). In particular, for those users who do not have the financial means to make full payment or, as many do, make only the minimum payment, looking forward and abstracting the future is likely to be far harder than looking back at an already abstracted list of past purchases. Of course devices exist to disentangle or 'detach' as yet unknown future actions that could jeopardise the stability of the consumer credit-user interaction, including contractual obligations, credit referencing agencies, arbitration services, and late payment fees. However, from users' point of view, it is perhaps only by cutting up their credit cards that the future, as represented in the credit card statement, becomes quantitatively calculable.

It is not therefore the future that is the object of attempted disentanglement, but the very impossibility of doing so. This can be seen as an example of the joint socio-material construction of both calculation and non-calculation, examples of which are provided by Callon and Law (2005). Non-calculation is both enacted in the credit card statement, whilst attempts are made to being framed and managed this uncertainty by the wider processes of risk management that format the consumer credit market. Furthermore, many of the alternate framing devices that exist for the consumer credit industry to be able to manage the individual user's unknowable future are disciplinary—most notably centring on the debt collection technologies to be explored later in this thesis. These represent what the statement largely obscures, which is the extent of the power, in this case largely punitive power, that has been mobilized in order to format the consumer credit market.

Conclusion

This chapter has described the interactions between borrowers and just two of the multiple 'attachment devices' that enable the consumer credit market to cohere. These can be described as market devices that provide some of the sociotechnical infrastructure to connect market participants and enable this market assemblage to function and reindividuate as a more or less stable entity. The particular focus has been on the calculative spaces in which these devices are routinely involved and in which they play a role in shaping. A key argument has been that there is room to consider the way in which electronically mediated consumer credit transactions do have a place in shaping the calculative space of the moment of purchase, even if by stepping back from the transaction itself, engendering, in the case of transactional forms of consumer credit, instances of 'decalculation'. Similar processes can also be observed in the interaction between heavily indebted consumer credit users and credit statements, as a result of the fact that the latter may, for some, not prompt the active, calculative engagements that would ideally (at least from the regulators perspective) enable them to assess their personal financial position in the round. The point is not to suggest that the interaction between such devices and users accounts for anything like the entirety of the complex casual assembly that leads one particular borrower into difficulties with their debts. Such an argument would ignore many of the reasons that are, sometimes rightly, held as contributing to heavy levels of indebtedness. On the part of lenders these might include the intensive marketing of forms of consumer credit, as well as possible 'irresponsible' lending practices, involving lending, or increasing lending, to borrowers who could have realistically been predicted to be unable to repay. On the part of the borrowers these could include a potentially complex mixture of an assortment of factors that might include poverty, ill health, loss of employment, a lack of calculative know-how/desire, or a sheer over-optimistic assessment of future earnings prospects.[46] However, a fully engaged sociology of consumer credit should attend to some of these factors alongside an analysis of the socio-material assembly of the spaces of consumer credit calculation.

Seen in light of the terms raised at the beginning of this chapter, both credit card and the credit statement can be seen as devices that play their role in processes of detachment between buyers and sellers, hence enabling this particular monetary product to function. In the case of the credit card, this is performed at the point of exchange, when it acts as a transactional form of money. The statement meanwhile, is its indispensable Other: it is the principal detachment device that consumer credit needs to function, potentially bringing a sequence of transactions into one space so as to render consumer credit itself calculable, singularised, and hence effective as a monetary device.

But, both credit cards and statements can also be seen as multiplying the attachments that surround their users. At the moment of exchange, in the very act of enabling detachment between a buyer and a seller, the buyer is immediately attached to a future version of themselves, who will ideally recalculate the worth of their past purchase when confronted with the credit statement. Meanwhile the statement itself, and a range of market devices that sit behind it, seek to further strengthen the associations between the borrower and the creditor's particular credit product. This is, as Çalışkan and Callon describe it, part of the 'dual process' of market making (2009: 389).

For the defaulting debtors, these repeated moments of borrowing using consumer credit also all mark the gradual entry into a marketplace to which they subsequently become so attached, that detachment becomes extremely difficult. These are the cumulative entry points that will, as interest gets loaded onto their original purchases, become reshaped as a debt with a life of its own. As the next chapter will document, the case of the debtor that cannot pay back their debts in full also begins to highlight some tensions in the description

[46] For sake of brevity, I leave aside an engagement with some of the more problematically formulated reasons that are sometimes given for, in particular, consumer credit debt, centring on either excessively Machiavellian forms of manipulation by lenders or a broader culture of consumption, excess, indulgence, irresponsibility and so forth (see also Introduction).

of market involvement implied by the language of attachment and detachment as used by Callon and others writing in and around the economization programme. In particular, the case of the heavily indebted and defaulting borrower poses the question: what does it mean to be attached to a market to a degree where detachment, even if desired, appears extremely difficult?

This is a question that subsequent chapters will address in more depth. For now it is worth suggesting that while the language of attachment and detachment may have productive potential in its own right, if it is to be retained it does, I suggest, have to move away from a tendency to trace market attachment principally around calculations about whether or not to become involved. Callon and Muniesa argue, for example, that in the face of calculative asymmetries, '[t]he struggle for more autonomy or recognition often involves efforts to acquire calculative equipment' (2005: 1238). This is certainly true in some cases. As will be documented in Chapter Five, outside expertise, for example, can have a transformative effect on the ability of (some) defaulting debtors to manage some of the calculative challenges of being in debt. However, at times, the struggles that debtors confront include those of simply stopping the embodied incursions of processes of attempted attachment that stem from creditors and collectors. This is a struggle, in other words, to prevent their bodies, their lives, and their household relations, becoming affordances for processes of market attachment. It is this struggle that the next chapter begins to document.

4. The Emergence of Affect: Attaching the Defaulting Debtor

Introduction

This thesis began by outlining the particular problems that consumer credit lenders started to face well before the point at which the economic downturn was widely recognised as a global phenomenon. As has already been outlined, whilst the beginning of the downturn is usually traced to 2007, in the UK, a point sometime towards the end of 2005 can be seen as the moment at which consumer credit borrowers started to default on their debts in unprecedented numbers. Whereas previously, defaulting consumer debt had been a somewhat peripheral concern for creditors, from around this point, it became increasingly treated as a significant potential profit centre. Securing and reinforcing the attachments between defaulting consumer credit debtor and their debts became a challenge that creditors started paying closer attention to, with the need to keep him or her 'enrolled' or 'attached', becoming ever more important.[47]

The assembly of workers, strategies, technologies and legal instruments that make up the consumer credit industry includes multiple approaches that creditors use to make sure they are dealing with (from their point of view) the 'right' borrowers in the 'right' way. Many of these strategies are pre-emptive, including restricting the range of borrowers that are offered credit, or who will be granted credit, or increasing the cost of borrowing for less reliable borrowers, as well as lowering or failing to increase an existing borrower's credit limits. However, it is consumer debt collection that is the principal safety net that underpins much of this activity, acting as the most forceful means of attempting to secure, or restore, the attachments between the creditor and the borrower once a borrower begins to miss regular repayments on their debts. It is these processes that will be attended to in what follows.

This chapter starts the process of exploring the precise mechanisms and modalities of attachment employed by the consumer debt collection industry. Later chapters will explore these by looking out at the defaulting debtor from within the debt collection industry. In this chapter, however, I explore how they are deployed in and through a more intimate space: the debtor's home.

[47] That is not to say that the economic downturn did not change the problematic of debt collection: as will be explored in the 'Interlude' before Chapter Six.

More particularly, the chapter traces the ways in which the collector attempts to make itself 'matter' to the defaulting debtor who cannot pay off his/her whole balance.[48] To 'matter' here is understood not simply as to have 'meaning', but—and here I follow Stengers—to act as a prompt for questions such as "'how does it matter?'" and "'how did it come to matter?'" (Stengers, 2005: 54)[49]. This means exploring empirically how the modes of implication of debtors' involvements in the consumer credit market become charged, via the insertion of technologies of debt collection into their everyday lives.

In so doing, one of the aims is to respond to the question raised at the end of Chapter Three: what does it mean to be attached to a market to a degree where detachment, even if desired, appears extremely difficult? As the present chapter will elucidate, this question can be broken down further, along the following lines: what does attachment mean for debtors and their relations to themselves and others (both human and non-human)? And what do these relations mean for our understanding of market attachment? These questions and their potential answers are, I will suggest, connected.

Just how 'threatened' are attachments?

The previous chapter focused in particular on the moment of attachment, those transactional instants where a consumer becomes attached to a product, or perhaps reconsiders it later via a credit statement. This chapter, however, focuses more explicitly on the particular character of attachments that characterise a user's ongoing engagement with a (consumer credit) product. In order to do so, I want to draw out some important insights from and problematics within the economization programme, that will be relevant throughout this thesis. Callon et al. write:

> *All attachment is constantly threatened. This mechanism is central in the question under consideration here.* Competition between firms occurs precisely around this dialectic of attachment and detachment. Capturing, 'attaching' consumers by 'detaching' them from the networks built by rivals is the mainspring of competition.
>
> How does this form of detachment occur? Answer: by getting consumers to requalify the different products offered to them, that is, by repositioning a product in such a way that it becomes visible to consumers, so that they are prompted to embark on a new effort at evaluation. One can speak of a calculative supply. But calculations do not simply concern prices and profits. *They are mainly about products and their qualities.* (Callon et al., 2002: 205; emphasis added)

From this perspective, competition is framed as the battle between producers to secure attachments with customers—potentially by detaching them from their rivals. The above

[48] By 'collector' I refer to a range of different potential parties, including creditors' own internal collections operations, 'contingency' debt collection agencies and debt purchasers. See the 'Interlude' before Chapter Six for a discussion of the difference between these.

[49] It should be noted that Stengers also demands that we ask questions such as "does it really matter?" "what if I accepted that it does not matter?". These go to the heart of the entanglement of matters of value with matters of fact (see Fraser, 2010) and therefore speak to the need to trace the politics that is implicit in processes of "factualising". These are questions which I address in the thesis, in particular in the Conclusion, but, for the purpose of this chapter, will largely leave to one side.

account centres on the moment of transaction and what might be termed the 'mediation' that occurs between producer and consumer, via their qualification of the products with which the latter are confronted. I want to draw particular attention to the way in which the market is here described as a dynamic space in which competition clusters around consumers and the quality of products, who are depicted as somewhat restless 'attachment seekers'. For there is a sense in which such an account might be read as at least mirroring the tone of more normative accounts of market activity. This is certainly the suggestion in Daniel Miller's critique of Callon's work as ignoring how markets are, following Polanyi and Granovetter, 'embedded' in wider social forces (and ideologies) (2002: 227). Part of his suggestion is that what Callon's account misses are the 'upstream' processes that lead consumer and producer to meet in the first place, as well as format their particular mode of engagement.

However, while agreeing with Callon that a return to Polanyi has the effect of only telling 'half of the story' (2005: 6), in pulling attention away from the very specific, highly local processes by which people and things are disentangled, or detached, it is worth noting that there has been a shift in Callon's work, perhaps in response to such critiques. Increasingly, Callon and those he writes with are taking into account the full span of the socio-material processes of adjustment between consumer and producer that cannot be deduced by focusing on the moment of transaction (for example: Çalışkan & Callon, 2010; Callon, 2005; Callon & Muniesa, 2005). These might be particularly associated with the work of marketing and branding—as well as the management of any continued attachments between buyer and seller after a sale is complete, whether relating to a continued claim to intellectual property rights over a product, or any social bonds that might shape a buyer's continued engagement with a particular purchase (Muniesa, 2009a: 129). This ongoing process has been nicely captured by Liz McFall, who brings out a parenthetic comment from Callon and Muniesa: 'through objectification, the object becomes a thing, and through singularization, it becomes 'a thing whose properties are adjusted to the buyer's world, *if necessary by transforming that world*' (2009b: 171; her emphasis; citing Callon & Muniesa, 2005: 1234).

It is this potential for world-transformation that I want to draw particular attention to in this chapter, and the thesis as a whole. For, paying greater emphasis to the way in which markets genuinely can enact world-transformations, at a potentially highly intimate scale, has the potential, I suggest, to move the economization programme away from echoing some of the tropes of more normative accounts of economic action. For, even with its renewed attention to processes both 'upstream' and 'downstream', there is still a sense that in focusing on the formatting of the interaction between people and the devices, such accounts may miss some of the visceral, transformative nature of market attachments, and the way in which in their ongoing redefinition, they may come to cohabit with and alongside those that become attached. More particularly, I suggest that there is a politics to the degree and mode of mobility in and out of markets, in relation to which speaking of detachment as 'constantly threatened' jars. These are attachments which are (or are felt to be) "constraining' or inescapable' (Marres, 2009: 125). As will become clear, it is such a focus on attachments that *bind* that will become very relevant in this chapter and beyond. However, in order to understand the particular modalities through these constraining attachments operate in the case of consumer credit default, it is necessary, to open up the body as an everyday site of market making.

Locating the economised body within economic sociology

The relationship between the operations of the market and the everyday lives of economic citizens is a subject of long-standing interest to sociology. Within the discipline, the purported existence of not only a qualitative, but also a structural distinction between these two realms is captured perhaps most centrally by Ferdinand Tönnies' distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. These twin concepts are used to account for ideal-typical competing, differentiated principles of social life with which people come into contact as they move through social space. At their most simple, Tönnies' concepts respectively speak to a distinction between forms of social order based on close, interpersonal relationships and forms grounded in instrumental rationality.[50] This is an opposition that has been documented in detail by Viviana Zelizer (2001, 2002a, 2002b), in particular in relation to what she refers to as oscillations between 'hostile worlds' and 'nothing but' theses. The former and the most longstanding of the two, to which Tönnies' work approximates, sees the insertion of market relations into personal worlds as a decidedly corrupting, corrosive influence. At the same time, the insertion of personal relationships into the world of the economy is also seen as disruptive, with the potential to induce 'inefficiency, favouritism, cronyism and other forms of corruption' (Zelizer, 2002b: 276). For Zelizer, the latter—the 'nothing but' thesis—incorporates those approaches that bring the personal and the economic together under one transcendent principle. She points in particular to explanatory frameworks that argue that social processes of all kinds,

[50] A more sophisticated analysis of Tönnies' distinction is provided by David Inglis (2009). Here, however, I only want to use Tönnies to provide pointers towards some of the thematic oppositions that have characterised the discipline. This is not the same as saying that Tönnies saw these distinctions as in any way absolute.

whether personal or institutional, are seen as 'nothing but' an expression of underlying forms of economic rationality.

It is in the rise of so-called 'new' economic sociology that Zelizer sees some pointers to a way out of this opposition. This approach includes those economic sociologies that account for the ways in which economic forms are variously 'embedded' within society, which can trace their lineage back to Mark Granovetter's seminal (1985) reinterpretation of Polanyi's thesis. As she put its, these offer a route out of this opposition, by 'treating economic processes and behavioural assumptions […] as products of underlying social processes' (Zelizer, 2001: 44).

Given the recent challenges from the economization programme, this particular aspect of Zelizer's argument falls victim to some of the terms of its own analysis. Seeing economic processes as ultimately social can be seen as a variant of a 'nothing but' argument, in which economic processes come to be understood as 'nothing but' social ones (see: Koray Çalışkan and Michel Callon (2009: 281)). Yet Zelizer's case is more nuanced: for even within the new economic sociology to which she is drawn, Zelizer traces the perpetuation of a 'hostile worlds' thesis, in particular in their choice of empirical objects. As she argues, '[t]he field repeatedly focuses on firms and corporations—allegedly "true markets"—while relegating other forms of economic activity (such as gift transfers, informal economies, households, and consumption) to a nonmarket world' (2001: 44). In regard to this partial engagement of the economic, I would suggest that the economization programme (or, for some, the 'new' new economic sociology) is as complicit as 'new' economic sociology. With some exceptions, works drawing on the intellectual architecture of ANT in the analysis of economic processes, have similarly headed straight to those sites that appear to represent instances of 'true' markets. By way of some examples, this includes a focus on trading rooms and the world of high finance,[51] but also includes an attention to organizational behaviour more generally,[52] as well as the development and formatting of (credit) risk management technologies.[53] This is not to critique such studies *per se*. However, I echo similar conclusions by Paul Langley (2008a: 7) and Franck Cochoy (2008: 15-16), in arguing that a look at the choice of subject matter of the economization programme reveals a field less than comfortable with some of the more intimate spaces of socio-economic life (Langley) and the spaces of consumption (Cochoy).

[51] For example: Beunza & Garud (2007); Beunza & Stark (2004); Çalışkan (2007); Hardie & MacKenzie (2007); Lépinay (2007a, 2007b); MacKenzie (2006); Millo (2007); Muniesa (2008).
[52] For example: Callon (2002); Cooren (2004; , 2008); (Stark, 2009).
[53] For example: MacKenzine (2006); Poon (2007, 2009).

Operating within and around the economization programme, there are studies that have sought to fill this gap, that have followed the consumer in and through his or her engagement with socio-material artefacts. These include, for example, Elizabeth Shove's analysis of inconspicuous, materially oriented, domestic practices of consumption (Shove, 2003; Hand & Shove, 2007), Franck Cochoy's exploration of the semi-private practices of consumption, with a focus on the socio-material formatting of supermarket shopping (Cochoy, 2007b, 2008), and Liz McFall's attention to the making of industrial branch life insurance in and through the local, door-to-door collections agent (Mcfall, 2010).

However, as I have argued in previous chapters, there may be room to expand the empirical spaces through which such processes are traced. Here it is Zelizer herself that offers some pointers. Her particular focus in is on 'intimacy'. Into this category she places a range of particularized knowledge practices, including 'shared secrets, interpersonal rituals, bodily information, awareness of personal vulnerability, and shared memory of embarrassing situations' (2001: 14). As we will see, being subject to consumer debt collection involves many of these elements.

I suggest, however, that what Zelizer still misses, and what is also absent from the other studies mentioned previously, is the *potential* that the empirical spaces of everyday life hold. For, there is a sense in all of the examples above, that the everyday is understood as more or less equivalent to the mundane and the ordinary. Everyday life is sometimes ordinary. But, as Mike Michael notes, 'it also has at its heart a strangeness' (2006: 22). Some of what Michael is referring to is captured in Zelizer's definition of intimacy: shared secrets, bodily information, personal vulnerability: all of these speak to complex, highly personal areas of life of which social scientists can only capture fleeting glimpses. However, there is room to explore their productive potential yet further. For Michael Gardiner, this potential is partly to be found in the challenges the everyday makes to academic modes of knowing: the conduct of everyday life, he argues, can challenge the tendency in academic accounts to cleanse from the scene the more visceral, messy, corporeal, dimensions of experience. But more than that, this apparently ordinary world can also be considered as potentially *extra*ordinary, in its ability to bear witness to what he calls 'the embodied, affective and experiential qualities of profane social life' (Gardiner, 2000: 208).

But also, I argue that this can be complemented by accounts of the making of the *body-in-everyday-life*. As Mike Michael (2006) has documented, the everyday body can be considered as an entity in a deep, ongoing entanglement with its environment, routinely and sometimes almost invisibly being enacted by a complex mixture of cultural and material prostheses. Annemarie Mol's work is particularly instructive in this respect. Mol (2002, 2008) has made the intimate space of the human body her object, focusing in particular on how its diseases are lived and made through practices of medicine and care. However, rather than seeing the experience of the body as in any way the foundation for knowledge, or disease as even necessarily located 'within' the body, Mol distributes both across socio-material terrain. In common with ANT, this promises 'a way out of the dichotomy between the knowing subject and the objects-that-are-known: to spread the activity of knowing widely' (Mol, 2002: 50). Instead of finding the body in either experiential or scientific knowledges, it can therefore be found in practice, in the precise intricacies of the way the body and disease are routinely made, unmade, and reshaped through medical practices.

Does Mol's account get close to the 'extraordinary' qualities of everyday life? Not *always*, I suggest. For there is little suggestion that Mol has departed from what Vikki Bell calls ANT's 'Nietzschean impulse to bring things to earth, to foray long and hard but only into the worldly origin of things' (2007: 92). In this respect, Bell draws on Mariam Fraser's (2006a) engagement with Latour and Fraser's argument that he—and by extension ANT—does not take full account of the possibilities opened up by, in particular, Whitehead and Deleuze. Latour's (2005a) recent account of the productive role of unseen, generative 'plasma', as well as his broader expression of admiration for Whitehead (2004b, 2005b), suggests that this question remains at least open with regards to the specifics of Latour's work. However, with respect to ANT and so-called 'post-ANT' work (the latter of which might include Mol's), it is less so. Fraser and Bell argue that what is being overlooked is that domain of life that approximates to what Deleuze refers to as the 'virtual', or the 'creativity', 'emergence', and 'potentiality' that Alfred North Whitehead sees suffusing all existence (Halewood & Michael, 2008: 48). In part this speaks to that which is beyond the limits of expression; as Nigel Thrift puts it, those 'multiple registers of sensation operating beyond the reading techniques on which the social sciences are founded' (2007: 12). But in part, this also speaks to the causal relations between things as not only mutually constitutive but also exceeding their interrelation. This is to draw on those aspects of the Deleuzian canon in which, as Alberto Toscano argues, there is a shift in emphasis away from an invocation of an ideal virtual realm sitting 'behind' processes of actualisation, a sufficient cause for empirically realisable phenomena, and towards virtual production operating 'beside' individuated entities (2005: 176-178).

There is not space here to undertake a full philosophical exegesis. However, at its most simple, I want to suggest that in tracing relations of attachment, it is also worth paying attention to the way in which relations may be reaching out to each other. In the present context, this means examining how the coming together of a constantly adapting and changing defaulter and variably deployed collection technologies may in their mutual, emergent articulation, together co-produce novel realities. Bringing this back to the body, this is therefore, following Michael, to see the body-in-everyday-life 'as *emergent*, *relational, distributed* [and] riven by contrasting comportments and models' (2006: 44; emphasis added). The body, from this perspective, is ontologically open and sitting in a dynamic relation to the world around it. One way this dynamism can be described is as centring around the elicitation of 'affect', a concept which is at the centre of Brian Massumi's (2002) work, stemming from Deleuze and Guattari (1988). The concept replaces the conventional 'subject' of social scientific accounts with a more dynamic vision of the relationships between humans and the world. From this perspective, affect is that which pushes out from the combined body and mind towards the world, only to be fully realised when 'captured' by processes of abstraction. These processes of abstraction could variously be their coalescence into emotions (which Massumi describes as 'the most intense expression of that capture' (Massumi, 2002: 35)), ideas, or the potentially infinite coherent socio-material combinations of mind/body and world. The concept of affect captures the dynamism that result from people, bodies, thought, emotion and technologies becoming connected together, while focusing on the capacity for both people and things to affect and be affected.

Focusing on the body-in-everyday-life in this way, in dialogue with the methodological insights of the economization programme, provides a way of opening up the empirical spaces through which markets can be studied. For, as I will now proceed to argue, to follow consumer credit default is to witness a market assemblage which has the defaulting body at its core.

Living with consumer debt collection technologies

Technologies of debt collection are, in the case of unsecured credit, ostensibly everyday. That is, they operate in and through the everyday understood as the realms of the mundane and ordinary, relying on modes of contact that are part and parcel of the daily routines of many modern citizens: the letter and the telephone. For, in a UK context at least, and despite popular beliefs to the contrary, it is unlikely that defaulting on unsecured loans will quickly result in home visits from collectors, or indeed bailiffs. In the vast majority of cases, creditors seeking forced repayment of at least part of an unsecured debt have to first go through the court process to seek a "County Court Judgement" [CCJ]. More often than not, creditors try to obtain some form of agreement with the debtor before resorting to this relatively expensive process.[54] As a result, it is the far cheaper letter and phonecall that are the principal avenues through which a collector will attempt to secure repayment.

To take the letter first: whereas for the occasional defaulter a simple automatically generated letter may be enough of a disciplinary prompt to encourage them into returning to an 'acceptable' pattern of repayment behaviour, the more serious debtor can expect to face a regular, persistent barrage of reminders, threats and solicitations to enter the house, either as a mid-morning interruption through the letter box or to be discovered upon returning home from work. Amongst my participants, the metronomic insistence of the letters' arrival and their intersection with reminder and collections letters from other sources (utilities, council tax bills, phone bills) prompts a range of reactions, with practices varying between those like Eve, who would open letters immediately, or, at the other extreme, Peter's self-confessed 'ostrich' behaviour, refusing to open them up and instead leaving them for his partner Sarah to deal with.

Phonecalls, meanwhile, have a different rhythm. Rather than, like letters, lying in wait, phonecalls demand to be heard. Although collection companies are prevented from 'harassing' debtors by attempting to phone them constantly,[55] given the fact that it is common for many defaulting debtors to have multiple debts (see p. 139), the combination of many collectors each trying to contact the debtor means that defaulting debtors will often experience a high volume of calls throughout the day, even if each collector only calls once. These calls can begin early in the morning and not stop until the late evening. This led many of my participants to look to either minor technological counterstrikes—employing the caller ID function on their phones to screen out at least some of the calls—or to unplug the phone altogether. [56] Some even went as far as to change their phone number (although, for practical reasons, this was not possible for some).

As described by my participants, collections letters and phonecalls generate of a range of embodied states. The most generic of these is a long-term state of what might be termed

[54] This assertion is based on conversations with both debt counsellors and those in the debt collections industry.
[55] The regulator, the OFT does not prescribe the amount of phonecalls that are considered 'unreasonable'; this is left for collectors to decide and to be prepared to justify (OFT, , 2006).
[56] Caller ID works by displaying the phone number of the incoming call. Although debtors may not recognise the number of a particular call centre, they would screen out any numbers with a generic prefix (for example 0870, 0845), or any numbers that were 'withheld'.

‘anxious anticipation’. As Adams et al. write, anticipation is an affective state, that is characterised by ‘predictable uncertainty’ (2009: 247). Debtors know they will be subject to ever continuing prompts from the collectors; but they do not quite know when these will come, or how. This is a state, Adams et al. continue, that is

> an excited forward looking subjective condition characterized as much by nervous anxiety as a continual refreshing of yearning, of ‘needing to know.’ Anticipation is the palpable effect of the speculative future on the present. The anticipatory excitement of the cliff hanger as a narrative mode is as familiar as terror-inducing apocalyptic visions. *As an affective state, anticipation is not just a reaction, but a way of actively orienting oneself temporally.* Anticipation is a regime of being in time, in which one inhabits time out of place as the future. (Adams et al., 2009: 247; original emphasis)

Drawing these insights into the routine experience of debt default and collection reveals how, to be subject to the routine incursions of the collector, is to be encouraged to orient oneself towards the future. The indeterminacy of the arrival of collection technologies, as well as of the precise content of collectors’ threats (see Chapter Seven), attempt to move the body of the debtor to live aspects of their (likely) future in and through their present. This is an ongoing orientation, where the routine, predictably unpredictable incursion of debt collections letters and phonecalls begin to become wearing. As Ruth puts it, with respect to collections letters, ‘while it's not overtly threatening...when you're getting those everyday...you know, every time you go and pick the post up its just A.N.other [*sic*] letter’; for Peter and Sarah, the effect of letters’ arrival is to generate a state of what she calls ‘stress’ (‘every time something comes through the door, it's, what now?’). As many of my participants put it, using various terms, debt was a genuinely physical ‘burden’.

But at the same time, this more long term state of anxiousness is punctuated by the ‘peaks’ of the letters’ arrival and the ringing phone. These are, to draw on Deleuzian vocabulary, the moments of affective ‘intensity’: this is the movement of actualisation, where entities and potentialities are pulled together, folded into one another, abstracted and qualified, even as this abstraction ‘exceeds’ its own becoming. In this case, these are the moments where anxious, future-oriented anticipatory worries becomes actualised as very real, problematisation of the present, or a ‘matter of concern’ (Latour, 2004b).

I want to focus on these ‘intensive’ moments, as they open up for closer examination the particular *modes* of market attachment that are being deployed here, via technologies of debt collection. I will do so in relation to two household sites: first, the relations between the debtor and other household members; and second, the relations between the debtor and him or herself. For many, through the rhythm of their daily arrival and the insistence of their content, collections letters can become deeply meshed with the fabric of the home; as a consequence for some, including Eve, letters become an actor in household relations:

> When you come back, oh my god, is [there] any letter waiting for me, any bills? So sometime [*sic*] when I come home, Jenny says to me, mummy is that a bill? ...You know, they start worrying at their age you

know, mummy is that a bill...every time I come in I was just like, maybe they sensed I'm worried about the bill, so they say, is that a bill? Is that [a] bill?

Eve is a single mother of three young girls, living in a council flat in North London who is, to a large extent, dependent on welfare support. She has built up large debts, having used credit cards at least in part to pay for her day to day expenses and to supplement the income she receives from low paid irregular work, or to tide her over in periods of unemployment. In her instance, the rhythm of daily family life becomes punctuated by the interruptions effected by the frequent intrusion of a technology of debt collection into the house. For the children, the moment of interruption is a point of affective bifurcation: the shape of the immediate future needs to be translated through the letters on the doormat. If it is a bill (of which those relating to consumer credit constitute a major portion), they will have to deal with the unfolding stress of their mother, as she is invited by the letter to immediately confront her debt position. If not, then they can expect a moment of relief, with the implications of the outstanding debts being allowed to resume their place in the 'background' of Eve's life.

As this example begins to show, part of the dynamic that technologies of collection enact is to punctuate the regular rhythm of the household and construct a distinctive 'moment' around which attention is focused (I will return to this). But also, the insertion into the home of technologies of debt collection places the defaulting debtor centre stage as a household actor. The debtor and the letter reach out to each other, with the debtor's family knowing that the quality of the soon-to-be-realised emotional landscape of the house depends on the precise way that the debtor and their body will react to the letter's contents. The debtor, their bodily reactions, the letter on the mat, and other household members, are in this instance therefore bound together in an indivisible assemblage, with the collections letter becoming enacted as unavoidable passage points in the formatting of household relations.

It is this capacity for collections technologies to enact defaulting bodies as a potential 'problem' for household relations that may also be held to account for some of the reasons why debtors often describe living with debt as linked to practices of concealment. James, for example, explains how his wife, Georgina, used to try to regulate the moment of revelation that collections letters portend:

James: […] there is a drawer over there where she used to hide them. But she would reveal them eventually. She wouldn't keep them forever, but she would try and deal with it her own way—get on the phone to them [...]

Joe: Why do you think she was, do you think she was hiding them from you or from herself?

James: I think she was trying to control it.

Joe: trying to keep on top of it?

James: Keep on top of it yeah.

Joe: So is it something that would be revealed at one moment?

James: Oh yeah she'd reveal it eventually. And *I get the vibes from it anyway*.

Georgina can be seen as imposing control over collections letters, in trying to prevent them from becoming a household problem. By physically moving letters to a space that is out of sight and dealing with them herself when out of earshot, she limits the regularity of their intersection in the relationship between her and her husband. It is a way of limiting the bodily irruption of stress, worry, and guilt, as well as the centrality of the debt in their lives. But the letter has the capacity to spread beyond the drawer, at times leeching into Georgina. Her knowledge of the letter's existence is translated in and through Georgina via the 'vibes' that James detects. Georgina and the letters are, therefore, a debtor-letter hybrid, in which the technologies of debt collection have already succeeded in folding into Georgina's everyday comportment.

The infolding of the technologies of debt, debtor and mind/body is not surprising bearing in mind the degree to which debtors are reminded about their debts. As Eve and her children clearly articulate, the repeated insistence of letters may play a significant part in attuning them to a daily cycle of worry and then either worry, or relief. However this relatively predictable rhythm becomes more complex, and thus more intensive, with the addition of the unpredictable staccato of the ringing phone, as described here by Ruth:

Joe: so when the phone rings do you still, is it, do you suddenly get the feeling, you know, oh god it's going to be them?

Ruth: yeah. All the time. Which is why we got the... the call minder...if it's an unavailable number or something you don't answer, but you see, then if you do the ring back and see if there is a message, they don't leave messages of course, so there's no, so I, so then I know it must have definitely been someone wanting money as otherwise, I know people, some people do have un-wotsit [withheld] numbers, but they generally leave a message or, or whatever...

Joe: so that must interrupt your, it must be quite hard to relax in a way?

Ruth: it is because they also do it at the times they expect somebody to be in, which of course you are, which is Sunday lunchtime evenings, up to, the latest was about eleven [pm], and seven in the morning.

Joe: so when they think, before you go to work, when you're not really awake anyway.

Ruth: yeah, they try and get you at all the sort of optimum times, so... so I got a bit savvy about not answering and the thing is, the reason I don't answer it is because I don't know what to say any more.

Ruth describes her debt as intimately connected to traumatic events in her recent past; she is now divorced and living with a new partner, but previously had been married to a controlling husband, who, while providing them both with a comfortable lifestyle (as she put it, 'I was living in this bubble where you know, yes we'll go get his and hers cars, yes we get...matching numberplates and all this jazz..., you know, oh we'll have...a huge extension done'), had also used his income as a way of exerting control over her. When they separated, she describes how she had used credit to survive, and also continue at least some aspects of her previous lifestyle, although, she now reproaches herself bitterly for what she sees as her previous financial naivety.

It is into this complicated experiential knot of everyday life that the ringing phone becomes entangled, as much as 'six, seven times a day', with the unasked questions of the unanswered phone nonetheless echoing silently through the house, for which silence is the only reasonable response, because, in Ruth's case, 'I don't know what to say any more'. There is also a suggestion in Ruth's account that technologies of debt collection are connecting to the affordances offered by the temporal rhythms of household living, as in the above example of those operating around the daily work cycle. For debt collection technologies, the notional division between the working day and 'free' time is not simply effaced, but instead offers an opportunity to connect to a body they hope will not only be present, but also that will potentially be less ready to raise its defences against the incursions of a collector.

However, collections technologies do not only pose problematics for relationships between people. They also pose more existential problematics for the relations between individuals and themselves—or, more precisely, for the particular shape of ongoing processes of *(re)individualisation*. 'Individuals' just as 'markets' and 'societies' are inevitably shifting assemblages, being constituted in dynamic relationship to the socio-material relations with which they intersect, but also in relation to their own past and their own future. Collections are domestic technologies that problematise both these internally and externally oriented relations (see also: Marres, 2009). It is here that we move into the even more intimate space of the relationship between debt, debtor and body. This can be first illustrated by an account provided by Julie, who describes some of the consequences of this ongoing interaction with her debt:

> [Y]ou dip into different, ... *your thoughts about the debt changes depending on your mood*, what you need to get, what you need to buy, how you are feeling at that time, it's, *it's not a surface level thing*, it's not like or I'm going to ignore it now from now on. It's, it's very, very reliant on how you're feeling at that moment in time. So there's a lot of subconscious*, you sort of think of debt subconsciously all the time*. It's there in the back of your mind all the time, but *you consciously choose to ignore it* at the times when you want to, because there was, there was many a time when I thought to myself look, I'm healthy, I've got two lovely children, I've got a house, I'm, *I'm just not going to worry about it, because I'm going to make myself feel ill* if I carry on like this. And so I would consciously stop myself from thinking about it.

Julie traces how she and her debt are shaped through an ongoing process of the debt being first unearthed, reformed, then reburied. She draws on the language of psychoanalysis to try to describe this rhythm of burial and rediscovery, as a conflict between the ever-presence of debt as a subconscious worry and a paradoxically conscious attempt to wish it away, despite her earlier recognition of the impossibility of so doing. At the same time she recognises the inability of wholly psychologistic models to describe the corporeal processes that comprise this processes of reindividuation, with her worries threatening to make her ill, as she actually *feels* the blurring of distinctions between 'body' and 'mind'. Moreover, on top of the prompts invited by the technologies of collection, her debt undergoes a constant process of re-abstraction emerging through such contrasting embodied entities as 'need' and 'mood'. Thus, moving her account away a little from the language of psychoanalysis, her mind/body—her ongoing individualisation—can be rethought as having infolded those moments where she is explicitly asked to confront her outstanding debt through, for example, letters, to the extent that her everyday existence is now characterised by a repeated unfolding and re-embodiment of her debt.

Such visceral, intimate remembered emotions also emerge in dynamic relation to moments of economic calculation, as Eve describes:

> [A]s soon as it comes I have to open it...at least it's for me to know what is there in [*sic*], *I start preparing my mind or whatever towards it.* The first thing, as soon as I open the door [and] I see any letter, the first thing, before I even take off my coat anytime [*sic*], I just open the letter and see what it's all about. *If it's one I have to panic [about], I start panicking.* If it's one I just have to put away... If it's one I have to make a phone call, immediately I just make a phone call.

Eve points to multiple potential ways in which a letter can intersect with her everyday life. Taking this extract at face value, Eve describes a complex intersection of body *and* calculation. In Eve's account, she describes beginning by 'preparing' her mind *towards* the letter, to get her combined mind/body in a necessary state of calculative and emotional readiness for her to be able to deal with whatever actions she feels the letters demand. The most mundane, least problematic outcome is if the letter is purely informational; if so, it is read, then put away. But Eve describes two further potential outcomes, relating to letters whose prompts are understood as demanding an immediate response: the first is panic, the second is a cognitive engagement. This particular technology of collection thus it invites an intensive, affective response, which then becomes respectively individuated as emotion and calculation. This is thus a process of separation: her body needs to be ready to begin the highly affective process of panic; but also, her mind needs to be ready to act, to engage in rationally determined, 'qualculative' action (Cochoy, 2002). Here, the latter this might be putting the letter away or making a phone call.

Panic and clearly defined, 'calculative' action, body and mind, need, according to Eve's account, to become separate entities, even if they can coexist in the same body. However, crucially, this is not as a *result* of the precise contents of the particular letter in hand, but in *anticipation* of a yet to be unveiled future, with both states briefly coexisting in a state of unrealised existence, each ready to unfold and become fully realised as required once the letter is opened. On the one hand, here we apparently see the socio-material construction of calculation as variously described by the economization programme: a debtor's cognitive capacities are variously equipped and translated through the socio-material device of the collections letter. But what such accounts miss out on, I suggest, is that the moment that Eve picks up this letter is the moment at which, from the point of view of the collector, affect has been successfully 'captured' (see also Chapter Six). An emergent, affective state of anxious anticipation, generated by the predictable uncertainty of being subject to the repeated insertion of technologies of debt collection into Eve's life, are—in and through an equally emergent letter—grasped in a process of unfolding abstraction.

This process of capture that collections technologies generate, sometimes peaking into momentary panic and calculation, before becoming reabsorbed as a more diffuse state of anxiousness or worry, are, however, not simply the inevitable result of being subject to this particular technology of debt collection. Instead, these feelings are activated and stimulated out of ongoing interactions, out of the fact that these collection technologies resonate with the particularities of people's lives and knowledges. This includes the ability to know how to deal with collectors. Many debtors in this study have received advice from professional debt advisors, who have succeeded in balancing some of the calculative asymmetry between defaulter and collector. As will be documented in the next chapter, the addition of expert knowledge to the debtor's world often allows them to 'see through' some of the threats and prompts that emanate from collection technologies. However, without this, their inability to answer some of the questions that debt collection technologies pose, leaves debtors struggling to fill the gap. In Angela's case, for instance, looking back she sees how prior to receiving advice, the monetary questions that sit behind the prompts from the collector could not, at the time, be answered: 'if I could pay it I would just pay it back. But I can't'. The threats that are coupled with the monetary demands will, it seems, only allow an answer if framed in financial terms. They are read by Angela as posed in a binary, individualising fashion: can *you* pay, or can't *you*? The latter being the case, Angela feels any response framed by her in these terms will be unsatisfactory and will not be counted as legitimate.

Elsewhere in the interview Angela is asked to describe this corporeal state, to which she responds: 'Well it just, just, it just feels like … fear. Feels like just a bit of fear. Like fear like someone's out to get you, or somebody can harm you, or you're in danger. I can't really explain it'. Angela struggles to translate into words the sensation of being subject to these collection technologies. However, in the attempt to do so, rather than focus on the financial implications of her indebtedness she moves straight towards a description of a deeply rooted, embodied state, in which fear is mixed with the sensation of being confronted by physical danger. The bounded integrity of and control over Angela's own body is being subject to compromise. Along the lines explored by Massumi (2002), this could be read as a description of the unwanted infolding of entities into Angela's life everyday, embodied, experience.

She returns to the topic at a different point in the interview, first reflecting how 'it's made me more of a sad person in some ways', before later adding, '[y]eah it does, it becomes part of your life, part of your personality… it's like you've no option, you're like yeah, I'm in debt, I'm this, I'm that, I'm a woman, I live in London [laughs], I don't know it's like almost part of who you, what you are'. The processes of being confronted on such a regular basis, over a variety of times and places, means that her debt become enmeshed with who she believes is. Angela thus reads these threats as speaking directly to her. They resonate with her own worries to such an extent that she reads them as intensely personal, as communicating deeply to *her* and the particularities of *her* life. A conventional sociological analysis might suggest that her *identity* is being shaped by her indebtedness. However, building on the analysis above, I argue that this represents the way in which the *indebted, individuating body* of the defaulter can be considered as (part of) an assemblage, which comes, in part, to enfold the material technologies of debt and debt collection.

Jane

I will bring this chapter to a close by focusing in on one case—Jane. Jane's case is particularly useful for working through some of the ways in which technologies of debt collection intersect with the everyday defaulting body. In particular, I draw on Jane to speak towards what it means to live with a body, and a disposition, unsuited for the task of debt default.

Jane is in her early 60s, living in a rented house in a small town in the West of England. In the mid-1990s (Jane couldn't remember exactly) she and her husband David decided to start their own cleaning business, after seeing an advert in the local paper advertising a franchise. Jane describes how the business had ticked over for the first few years, even if not making large profits. However, in the late 1990s, the costs of the business started to rise, due in part to the introduction of the minimum wage. It was at this point that the couple started to borrow, with some of the debts being taken out jointly and some solely in Jane's name. Thereafter, according to Jane, a number of further issues started to affect the business, including most notably being defrauded by the franchise owner to the sum of approximately £10,000. The couple were, however, unable to pursue this money, because—being a business—they were unable to obtain legal aid. As well as costing them a large amount of money, this event also marked the end of the franchise. The result was that, having used both business and personal bank overdrafts, a personal loan, and some hire purchase borrowing, including on her husband's car, Jane and David had borrowed in excess of £35,000 across nine credit accounts (three of which were owned by the same creditor). Despite much of this being used directly to support the business, these debts were, thus, still personal, consumer credit debts. As sole traders, Jane and her husband were liable for these debts to the same extent as if they had borrowed them for non-business uses. More generally, however, the line between business and personal debts had blurred, with the couple borrowing to keep not only the business going, but also their everyday lives.

For a while the couple had dealt with these consequences together, with David trying to get a new IT business started from home. However, a year prior to our interview David was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer—possibly contracted from inhaling asbestos as a cadet in the merchant navy in the 1950s—which finally led to his death in December that year. Meanwhile Jane has long been struggling with her own health issues, after having been diagnosed with ME (Myalgic Encephalopathy, also known as Chronic Fatigue Syndrome or Post Viral Fatigue Syndrome) in the early 1990s, which had meant she had to leave her job as the manager of a sheltered housing scheme. This means that Jane is not only living alone, but is also largely alone in dealing with both her illness and the debts that she is still liable for—now standing at around £24,000—with her only income coming from her state pension. She does have some support from National Debtline, who are giving her ongoing telephone advice on how to deal with her creditors. This means that, with this advice and their letter templates, she has managed to successfully come to agreements with all but one creditor, meaning they have stopped charging her additional interest and have agreed, as a holding measure, for her to pay them each a £1 'token payment' every month. (This is a payment demanded by the creditor, effectively as a repeated legal acknowledgement of the ownership of the debt). She is also getting some support from a grief counsellor and a local grief support group, with whom she meets up regularly. Jane has a large family, including seventeen grandchildren, however she tends to see these rarely, with most living outside the local area.

Jane's indebtedness is, therefore, one of a number of challenges she is dealing with at the same time. It is unsurprising then, that in discussing her debt, there is a tendency for her problems to bleed into one other. Yet in these moments of unexpected—from my point of view at least—connectivity, are contained valuable insights into the affective, anxious space of long term debt default. In a similar way to many respondents highlighted in this chapter, Jane's life has at times been punctuated by moments of fear and panic. However the situation has been going on for so long that these punctual affective states are now rarer and have become replaced by a more 'wearying', latent version of the state of ongoing anticipatory anxiety described by many debtors.

The first point of unexpected connectivity, which draws together two apparently different states of emotional anxiety, is a moment in our conversation when Jane draws together living with both severe indebtedness and grief. In the case of both, she tells me, others can *empathise* but they cannot *understand*, unless they have lived with a similar experience. As Jane continues: 'I mean the bereavement is completely different to what I was expecting, even though I was expecting it…. There's so much more to it. And I suppose the same with [the debt]…there's so much more to it than just getting those letters'.

Judith Butler writes that

> [w]hat grief displays…is the thrall in which our relations with others holds us, in ways that we cannot always recount or explain, in ways that often interrupt the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide, in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control. I might try to tell a story here, about what I am feeling, but it would have to be a story in which the very "I" who seeks to tell the story is stopped in the midst of the telling; the very "I" is called into question by its relation to the Other, a relation that does not precisely reduce me to speechlessness, but does nevertheless clutter my speech with signs of its undoing. I tell a story about the relations I choose, only to expose, somewhere along the way, the way I am gripped and undone by these very relations. My narrative falters, as it must. (2003: 13)

What Butler captures, is the way that grief reflexively *displays* relationality (see also: Bell, 2007: 22-23) and does so in a way that escapes the possibility of externalised expression. Our often unacknowledged dependence on attachments to others is exposed when, in the case of death, the bonds between two living bodies, each of whose presence is so familiar as to be deeply woven into the life of the other, are sundered. Left are the embodied memories of the survivor, themselves in the process of being reshaped by the absence of their object. This complex corporeal mesh—of presence and sudden absence, of lived with familiarity, now gone—disrupts any easy attempt to express it to others.

In the case of debt, however, it is not a *forever absent* Other that displays relationality to a debtor, but an *ever-present* Other, in the form of the attachments enacted by collections technologies. As with many debtors, Jane's home is being filled by an ever increasing accumulation of the material paraphernalia of technologies of debt collection. The burden of living with debt comes from having to live nearly daily with relations—in the form of material debt collection technologies—that attempt to make sensible the attachments a person should feel to his/her debt.

This can, I suggest, be seen as the routine work of 'demonstration' enacted by debt collection technologies. Michel Callon, drawing on the work of Andrew Barry, describes how a demonstration, both in its political and scientific senses, 'makes visible for an audience, constructed contemporaneously with the demonstration, an object about which a discourse is articulated' (Callon, 2004: 123; see also: Barry, 2001). That is to say, demonstrations put on display an object, whether an experimental idea or new technoscientific assemblage. In so doing, they also *remake* that object, while also organising and drawing people, in public, around that object. Callon and Barry's account of the role of demonstrations can, I suggest, be made to speak to the particular mode of 'demonstration' occurring not only in Jane's life, but also in the lives of the other debtors presented in this chapter.

What debt collection technologies do, is similarly combine processes of socio-material ordering and display. They render attachments visible and, in the process of so doing, they reorder those attachments. However, the key difference is that this process happens in (space that is formatted as) *private*. Rather than attempting to reorder public space (although, as will be described in the next chapter, collections technologies themselves can be connected to acts of public demonstration), debt collection technologies seek to reorder the relations that compose domestic, intimate spaces. Part of this process of reordering is to problematise the relationship between the debtor and their own body. In so doing, they enact this process of reordering as a 'private' matter. These are, therefore, technologies of *private demonstration*. By making this claim, I do not mean to essentialise the domestic *as* a private space, but instead to draw attention to the differentiated politics of witnessing that are enacted by formatting certain issues as public and others as private.

The extent to which this is both understood by Jane as a 'private' matter, between her and her own body, is encapsulated in the following extract:

> I think it holds me back in a lot of ways, and I feel I can't sort of move forward and I feel trapped, very trapped and it's funny isn't it. You sort of can go out and socialize and, it's sort of like putting a face on, but there's this other thing going on. It's hard to put into words really. I suppose if you spoke to someone else that was going through the same thing… And it's gone on for so long it's just embedded now, you know, just I suppose even if I cleared it, it would still take a while to get rid of the …. It's just been around, I mean it's going to be what nine, coming on nine years, that's a long time.

Again she reasserts the difficulty of being able to articulate her experience of being in debt to those that have not been through 'the same thing' (it being 'hard to put into words'). It is, as she puts it (echoing the language of post-Polanyian strands of economic sociology) 'embedded', to the extent that even if she does clear it (our previous conversation had turned to the option of bankruptcy), 'it would still take a while to get rid of the…'. She tails off, but the absence she leaves is tempting to fill—perhaps by drawing on her next sentence: rid of the feeling, perhaps, of it just 'being around'? Either way, it is clear from this extract that Jane and her debt have become so deeply bound together, that she struggles to even imagine life without it.

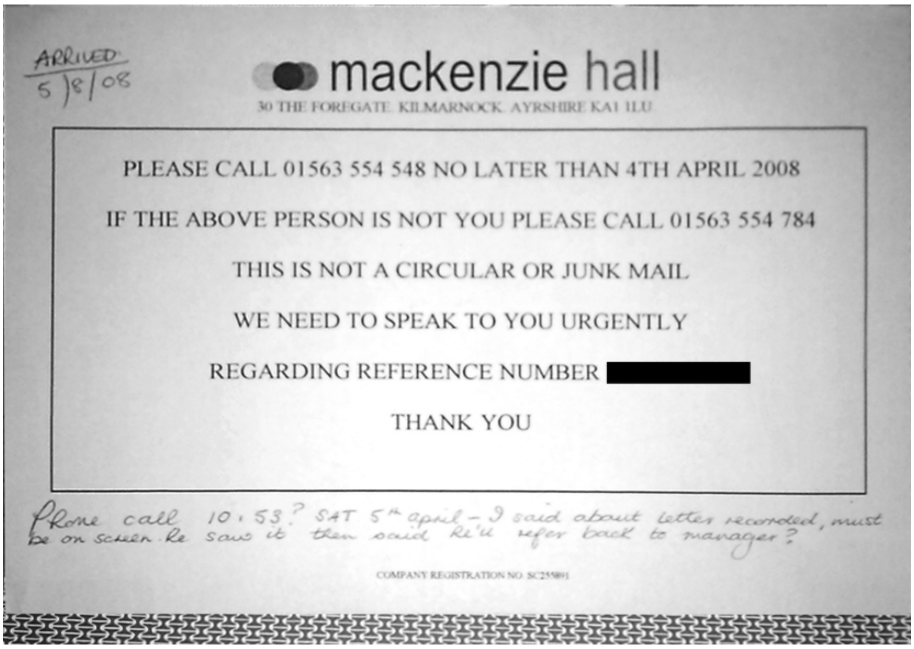
A consequence of this is to have the issue of default individualised. To 'socialize' Jane has to go out with 'a face on'. In other words, she has to try to prevent the issue of default leaking out in and through her engagement with others. Because she feels that *experience* of debt and debt collection is a precondition for both conversation with and understanding from others, Jane is left trying to deal with her debt largely alone (with occasional assistance from a debt adviser). There is thus a (micro)politics to these acts of private demonstration. Jane is circumscribing her movement into public spaces and the modes of articulation she is permitting herself while in those spaces.[57] Others may not realise it, but she carries her debt with her, which continues to resonate into and shape her everyday social interactions. For Jane, it becomes both physically and emotionally impossible to institute boundaries between this particular market assemblage and her movement through the course of her everyday life. Bringing together grief and debt default provide important analytical insights, in beginning to point to some of the 'un-articulable', micropolitics of debt default. This is, following Mol, an 'ontological politics'. That is to say, 'a politics that has to do with the way in which problems are framed, bodies are shaped, and lives are pushed and pulled into one shape or another' (Mol, 2002: viii).

In Jane's case, however, the routine bodily problematisations of debt default were compounded by her ME. ME is a condition that, despite gaining increasing recognition, is still contested in some medical circles (partly a because of the lack of identification of any clear causal agent and partly because there is some suggestion that it may be a label that is used to capture a heterogeneous range of conditions (Cairns & Hotopf, 2005; Ranjith, 2005)). Its most visible and agreed upon symptom is a feeling of extreme fatigue, often after periods of either physical or mental activity. A range of other physical symptoms are reported as being connected to ME (The ME Association, 2010) (although on these, the medical profession does not always agree). Like many other ME sufferers, and on top of her feelings of fatigue, Jane variously attributes to the condition frequent acute headaches (which, in distinguishing it from migraines, she referred to as 'the ME headache'), joint pains, problems with concentration, and depression.

On top of her debt, ME provides a further set of unwanted relations in Jane's life, which disrupts Jane's control over her own body. Her account of how this is affecting her interaction with practices of debt collection does, however, reveal their dependence on the very kinds of bodily authority that Jane feels managing debts require. For Jane, what causes her particular difficulty is the endless stream of paperwork that she is required to complete.

[57] As contrasted to the (re)configuration of 'private' practice as enacting or rearticulating a 'public' issue, as explored by Marres (2008, 2009). See also Michael (2006: 64-86) for a detailed exploration of the micropolitics of everyday life.

Figure 5. Annotated Mackenzie Hall collections 'postcard'


ARRIVED 5/8/08

mackenzie hall

30 THE FOREGATE KILMARNOCK AYRSHIRE KA1 1LU

PLEASE CALL 01563 554 548 NO LATER THAN 4TH APRIL 2008

IF THE ABOVE PERSON IS NOT YOU PLEASE CALL 01563 554 784

THIS IS NOT A CIRCULAR OR JUNK MAIL

WE NEED TO SPEAK TO YOU URGENTLY

REGARDING REFERENCE NUMBER [redacted]

THANK YOU

Phone call 10.53? SAT 5th april – I said about letter recorded, must be on screen he saw it then said he'll refer back to manager?

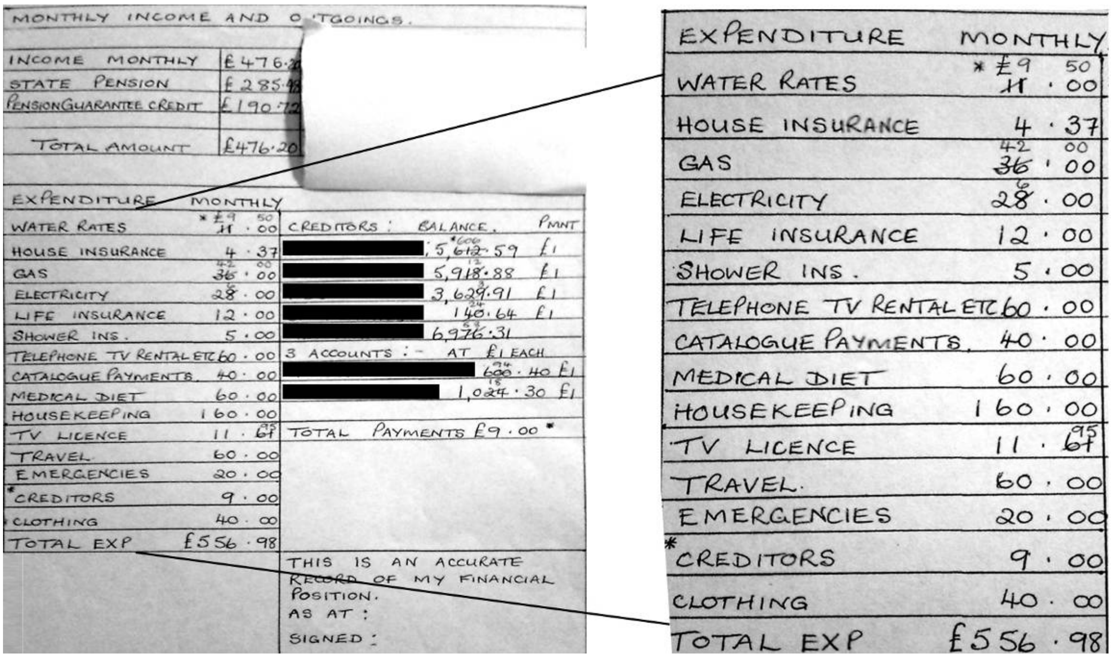
COMPANY REGISTRATION NO

Handwritten text reads: '<u>Arrived:</u> 5/8/08'; 'Phone call 10.53? SAT 5th April—I said about letter recorded, must be on screen. he saw it then said he'll refer back to manager?'

Even before being in debt, her ME had meant that completing paperwork had been a physical challenge for Jane. She cites it as the primary reason for having to leave her previous job. But because of her long term defaulting debts, she is now having to bear a new administrative burden. In part, this involves the domestic management of the high volume of correspondence she is routinely receiving. For her protection, she keeps and files any significant letter she receives, to the extent that there are archived boxes of papers in her loft, newly arrived documents in a cupboard in the living room, and filed papers in folders upstairs ('I keep everything. Just anything'). She also sometimes adds her own notes onto these documents, including recording the details of relevant conversations she has had over the phone. As an example, Jane shows me, and permits me to photograph, one of the ambiguous collection 'postcards' she had received and annotated, in this case from Mackenzie Hall (figure 5), a debt collection agency.

These annotations provide some insights into both the movement and (lack of) efficacy of some of Jane's paperwork, as well as some of the calculative challenges such collections letters pose. Populated by annotations and question marks, the deliberately brief letter poses Jane far more questions that it answers. The indeterminacy of this collections device is clearly seeking to elicit a response (see Chapter Seven)— which Jane duly provides, as displayed in her note of the time and date of her subsequent phone call and a summary of the content of their conversation.

Figure 6. Income and expenditure form



MONTHLY INCOME AND OUTGOINGS.

INCOME MONTHLY	£476.2
STATE PENSION	£285.4
PENSION GUARANTEE CREDIT	£190.7
TOTAL AMOUNT	£476.20

EXPENDITURE	MONTHLY
WATER RATES	*£9 50 ~~11~~ · 00
HOUSE INSURANCE	4 · 37
GAS	42 00 ~~36~~ · 00
ELECTRICITY	28 · 00
LIFE INSURANCE	12 · 00
SHOWER INS.	5 · 00
TELEPHONE TV RENTAL ETC	60 · 00
CATALOGUE PAYMENTS.	40 · 00
MEDICAL DIET	60 · 00
HOUSEKEEPING	160 · 00
TV LICENCE	11 · 95 ~~67~~
TRAVEL.	60 · 00
EMERGENCIES	20 · 00
*CREDITORS	9 · 00
CLOTHING	40 · 00
TOTAL EXP	£556 · 98

CREDITORS :	BALANCE.	PMNT
[redacted]	5,612.59	£1
[redacted]	5,918.88	£1
[redacted]	3,629.91	£1
[redacted]	140.64	£1
[redacted]	6,976.31	
3 ACCOUNTS :-	AT £1 EACH	
[redacted]	600.40	£1
[redacted]	1,024.30	£1
TOTAL PAYMENTS £9.00*		

THIS IS AN ACCURATE ~~RECORD~~ OF MY FINANCIAL POSITION.
AS AT :
SIGNED :

It is this summary that also points to exactly the type of material work that she finds so difficult: the letter she has sent through the post by recorded delivery would have been an income and expenditure form, on which Jane has to justify her continued inability to repay. It is this, even more than dealing with collections letters such as that above, which she finds a burden. This is a process that involves filling in details of all her incomings and outgoings. Sometimes this is directly demanded by creditors, at other times she sends the details in unprompted, in order to pre-empt future requests. An edited reproduction of one that she was about to send off, is shown in figure 6, with a section enlarged. This detailed document reveals in more detail some of the physical labour Jane is putting into filling in these forms. The form has been meticulously reconstructed by hand, most likely from an existing template. Each cost is carefully worked out, appearing to document both minute decreases in costs (for example a £1.50 decrease in Jane's water bills) as well as tiny increases (for example 34p rise in her TV licence). (These emendations may also be corrections to errors).[58] The consequence of having to fill in these forms is a nervous, embodied, cumulative exhaustion, a feeling she feels increasingly unable to live with:

> What I'm finding at the moment is getting all these letters every six months from every company that I owe money to. Asking me to sort of pay more and having to do all these finance forms with them all. You know, it's not like doing one off. I mean, I just got another one this week. And I'm getting tired, you know, I'm finding it really tiring. I'm getting to the stage I feel I just, I'm not going to be able to do this much more. So it would be easy for me to be bankrupt and clear of it because it's the stress of all this coming through and I need to deal with it all. I mean it's every couple of weeks I'm getting a, having another one to do, you know.

[58] It also documents the fact that, according to her current estimates, and despite only making £1 a month payments against each of the nine credit accounts, she appears to still be living above her means—her £556.98 stated monthly expenditure exceeding the stated income by £80.78.

The principal worries that Jane has are not about her debts, but about the administrative burden that accompanies the management of her debts, compounded by having to correspond with multiple creditors (six, owning nine different accounts). In addition, there is always the possibility that even where a stable arrangement has been agreed, the debt can be sold on, or the creditor can pass the account to a different collector, in which case the cycle will begin again.

For Jane, the cumulative result of a process that had been going on for nigh on a decade, and compounded by her ME, means that she felt exhausted. As she put it, a significant contributor to what she called the 'stress and strain' of her situation comes from 'the pressure of trying to keep up with everything'. Meanwhile, her ME means that it often felt like 'your body is sort of wanting you to switch off … [but] that's not always possible, because sometimes you have to keep going'. For Jane, the anxieties that accompany her debt are not simply a result of *being* a long-term defaulting debtor; rather they stem from having to manage the *process* of long-term debt default, with a body that is not equipped to do so. It is the cumulative toll of this lengthy 'living-with' the administration of debt that leaves her considering bankruptcy—an option that is on the face of it, by far the most sensible. Yet, even here, Jane feels her body is unprepared. Going bankrupt would mean having to close her bank account and opening another. Yet there is only one bank branch in her village. She cannot drive, so to pay her bills means long bus trips into the city, something she dreads.

The case of Jane demonstrates the way in which technologies of debt collection can problematise the body along very particular lines. As in Mol's work, Jane's chronic illness is not limited to her body, but can be seen in her accounts being distributed in and *amplified* through the everyday technologies of debt collection. Her ME, in other words, is not simply contained within, but is opened up as an even more acute problem by the socio-material prompts of collection with which she is being confronted on a routine basis. Meanwhile, the sheer persistence of debt collection also problematises her body as a separate entity from her debt. In imagining the potential continuing persistence of the internalised relations of debt, even if it is resolved, she speaks to a modality of market attachment that is so deep and so entrenched as to give the lie to any accounts of attachment which imply their easy substitutability.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to provide an account of the construction of market attachment that puts bodies and affect back into the frame. Attaching defaulting consumer credit users to their credit products involves the attempt to enact deep ontological entanglements between debtor and debt, as effected in and through technologies of debt collection. These can be seen as seeking to enact routine, demonstrations of debtors' dependencies on the attachments between them, their bodies, and other household members, as a way of trying to secure the attachment that the creditor wants: the (re)attachment of the debtor to their debt. In the quest amongst different creditors to ensure repayment to them, in as fast a time as possible, they variously attempt, through the technologies described above, to ensure that debtors' calculative and corporeal processes are as attuned as possible—that they comes to 'resonate'—with one particular collector over others. This is not simply the construction of economic choice at the level of intersubjective discourse, or in the interaction between fully actualised socio-material entities. This is also the construction of market attachment in and through the capture of affect: at the intersection of the mutual emergence between debtors' anxious, anticipating bodies and technologies of debt collection.

In trying to ensure that the borrower becomes more attuned to the collector, it is necessary for such devices to do far more than simply 'get through' to a calculatively ready debtor. Instead, relations between household members and between defaulters and their own bodies are targeted and problematised. It is by intersecting with mundane routines and corporeal responses, while attempting to permanently orient debtors towards the future incursions of collections technologies, that they succeed in playing their role as one of the many market devices that compose the consumer credit market assemblage. The greater the degree to which debt thus becomes not simply a past series of exchanges, but instead a 'real' actor in the debtors everyday, corporeal life, the greater chance that they will achieve repayment (or at least, this is the logic implied in their debt collection strategies). Collectors thus seek to make themselves 'matter' to borrowers by both attempting to generate intensive, calculative, emotive 'peaks', as well as offering the chance of a (brief) period of mental and bodily respite, for the phone calls and letters to abate, in exchange for a payment, or a commitment towards future payments.

In so doing, both letters and phonecalls are filled with agency by household members, while at the same time these technologies move into and ring though their domestic space. Both letter and phonecall can therefore be seen as Whiteheadian 'lures for feeling' (Whitehead, 1978: 88), a concept drawn out by Isabelle Stengers (2008; see also: Fraser, 2009; Halewood, 2003). That is to say, the collections letter and phonecall become *vital abstractions*: in collaboration with debtors, household members, and the particular arrangement of their domestic spaces, these collection technologies are sociotechnical devices that, responding to the particular problems of market attachment that the collector confronts (see Chapters Four and Five), are resonant entities that draw debtors towards them and towards a particular mode of engagement.

However, as the case of Jane shows, not only is resolution not achievable by all, but the problematisation of bodies enacted through collections technologies matters more to some debtors than others. This is part of the micropolitics of default. Jane, more than any of the other debtors presented in this chapter, has her life radically constrained by being in debt. Both being subject to the routine prompts of the collector, but also having to undertake routine, seemingly endless administrative tasks, places debt at the centre of her life. At the same time, the inarticulability of this burden, leaves her confronting a debt that is so deeply rooted that even after the imagined departure of these unwanted socio-economic relations, she suggests that her embodied attachments may remain.

5. Calculation Restored? The Possibilities for Consumer Credit Detachment

Introduction

As Franck Cochoy argues, one of the ironies of the economization programme (see Chapter One) is that, while it has successfully pointed towards the practices, technologies, and devices that variously 'equip' and distribute calculative agency, it has not paid enough attention to how the consumer him/herself becomes socio-materially equipped (Cochoy, 2008: 16). The preceding two chapters have sought, in part, to respond to this absence, first by exploring the calculative challenges that surround moments of consumption themselves, and second, by beginning to explore the intimate modes through which a particular market form attempts to maintain a hold on those whom it has successfully 'attached'.

What has not yet been fully explored, however, is the fact that the everyday experience of debt default is not simply defined by the relationship between collector and debtor. Nor should the debtor be understood to be uniformly acted 'upon' by the debt collector. In a debtor's life, the effects of technologies of debt collection need to remain measured against the varied ways in which debtors respond to them, with a range of dispositions, experiences and expertise that they can bring to bear. In the case of the debtors presented in this study, one of the key forms of external expertise they have to routinely confront is that assembled in and through technologies of debt collection. However, in debtors' responses to the incursions of collectors, it is important to be attentive to the role played by a range of other forms of expertise. This includes the informal advice of friends and family, information available online, more formalised information provided by debt advice services, and the more complete debt management solutions offered by both private companies or not-for-profit organisations.

This chapter explores the role played by two forms of expertise in particular: the debt adviser and the online, debtor-run discussion forum. Building on a wider interest of the Social Studies of Science in the relationship between 'expert' and 'lay' knowledges (see below), the chapter traces how and where such knowledges are being used by debtors, their relationship to public and private modes of articulation, as well as looking at both their transformative potentials and their limits. In so doing, it explores the opportunities for, and limits of, the restoration of the defaulter's calculative agency, through the process of calculating *with others* (Cochoy, 2008). This is thus an exploration of the potential that expertise can afford for debtor 'detachment'. That is to say, it examines some of the variable modes of—and possibilities *for*—detachment, used by debtors to try to separate themselves and their families from their debts.

It is important to provide a note on how 'expertise' is understood in this context. Without wanting to rehearse a long discussion that has been central to the development of the Social Studies of Science (including, recently: Collins & Evans, 2002; Irwin & Michael, 2003; Jasanoff, 2003; Wynne, 2003), I take from such debates a number of key conclusions. First, I take 'lay' knowledge to refer to those modes of knowing made in and through the spaces of everyday life, in contrast to the more formalised modes of 'expert' knowing specifically designed to be able to deal with the complexities of technosocial life (Michael, 2006).

Second, I refer to 'lay' and 'expert' knowledges not to valorise or critique either form of knowledge in particular, but to focus on the constitutive role of knowledge practices that develop in relation to analytically distinct but intimately connected domains of social life. In this respect, rather than seeking to determine the efficacy of one mode of knowing over another, in this chapter I will examine how different knowledges interact, separate, and variously shape the calculative spaces of debtors, within this particular 'ethno-epistemic assemblage' (Irwin & Michael, 2003). This will be connected to an exploration of the work of 'public-isation' that the forum undertakes (Marres, 2007).

Third, and unlike much of the work on expertise that has tended to focus on the roles and understandings of scientific knowledge, in this chapter I explore the particular forms of expertise that are oriented towards the consumer. As Lisa Adkins argues, one of the features of contemporary economic life is that questions of 'ability' and 'capacity' can no longer be considered as referring to the internal accumulation of skills and techniques; instead, they are (at least in part) 'organized externally' (2005: 125). That is to say, to be a contemporary economic citizen means existing in relation with a range of external actors (both human and non-human), which variably shape one's ability to pass through the economic terrain. Thus, although consumer practices and knowledges may be considered as enacting 'lay' modes of knowing, these are routinely and sometimes inseparably bound up with a range of sociotechnical expertise designed to 'equip' consumer spaces (see Chapter One).

The debt adviser and the Debt Management Plan

This section focuses on one of the debt advice services which many of my debtors had passed through: the Consumer Credit Counselling Service [CCCS], who also assisted with the recruitment for this research. More particularly, it focuses on CCCS's ability to offer a combination of both formalised, expert debt 'advice' alongside a popular 'solution' for consumer credit debtors, called the 'Debt Management Plan' [DMP]. To understand the role played by both the CCCS and the DMP, it is worth providing an overview of the CCCS's role, as well as comparing the service it offers to another major UK not-for-profit debt advice service: National Debtline, which is run by the Money Advice Trust [MAT] (see Chapter Two).

At the time when these interviews were conducted, in 2009, National Debtline and the CCCS provided related, but ultimately different services. Both gave individualised, free, confidential advice to debtors of all sorts, largely over the phone, coupled with more general advice via their websites. As will be explored further below, one of the benefits of using debt advisory services according to many debtors, is that it enabled them to respond to collection prompts. Both National Debtline and the CCCS thus provided assistance around a range of issues, including exploring the legal options available to debtors (such as, for example, bankruptcy), as well as providing advice as to the likelihood of legal action, or the possibility of negotiating with a creditor to have interest charges stopped, or to agree a lower total repayment amount.

Thus, both the CCCS and National Debtline served as a way for debtors to get to grips with the often bewildering array of letters and phonecalls they were getting with the assistance of outside expertise. However, for those taking up a DMP with the CCCS, their involvement provided an additional benefit. National Debtline specialised in offering self-help solutions to its callers, including a range of information packs and letter templates that debtors could use to negotiate directly with creditors. However, in addition to its own similar packs, CCCS also offered a selection of services where they, rather than the debtor, would take the responsibility for negotiating with creditors and, if the negotiation was successful, would collect the agreed repayments from the debtor. This money would then be distributed to creditors in proportion to the outstanding debt. Further, in the early stages of CCCS involvement, before negotiations had been concluded and the debt collection activities had largely subsided, letters could be forwarded on for processing to the CCCS and phone calls could be deflected by invoking the organisation's name and a reference number. This meant that not only the calculative burden was taken over by the CCCS, but that some of the administrative burden was too.

As will be explored below, however, taking up a DMP may generate its own opacities. Further, although the CCCS will provide free telephone advice to all, the restrictions on income levels mean that DMPs are not available to a majority of debtors. Although the precise threshold is not released publicly, CCCS's data reveals that, in 2009, less than 25 percent of telephone clients met the income threshold, with over 30 percent being told that there was 'no immediate solution to their debt problem […]. Their recommended option was to try to increase their income' (2010: 11). In 2009 there was steep rise in counsellors providing this recommendation, a result in part, as the CCCS put it, of 'the external factors […] [including] increases in unemployment and underemployment and virtually no increases in pay' (2010: 11). This points to some of the real difficulties that many debtors were increasingly having in detaching themselves from the consumer credit market.

Angela

Before exploring the opacities created by the DMP, however, I want to begin by unpicking the role of the debt advisor (who, in this case, also suggests a DMP). To do so, I focus on the case of Angela, a defaulter who has been mentioned briefly in the preceding two chapters. Angela is in her late 20s and is trying to make her way as a freelance product designer, as well as working part-time in another job. Despite having had some successful commissions, Angela has accrued—excluding her student loan—over £16,000 worth of consumer credit debt, including debts from a career development loan, two credit cards and a store card. She also owes money to friends. Despite her debts, the flat that Angela shares with one other person is ostensibly upscale. As the interview continues for the next hour and a half, with afternoon sunlight streaming into the airy living room of her London flat, it is hard to fully reconcile the extent of her financial difficulties with a home that projects Angela as successfully living the upwardly mobile life sought by many young graduates.

Although looking back Angela finds it hard to pinpoint exactly where the money she has borrowed had gone—a common theme amongst my participants—the debt appears to largely consist of money spent on allowing her to make it through periods between paid work, funding her studies (including undergraduate and masters degrees from British universities) and on equipment related to her career. With their rising interest and her irregular income, her debts have, however, become increasingly unmanageable. This means that in the past she had often missed payments on one or more of her debts and had resorted to taking out high interest payday loans on a number of occasions. She had even (as she tells me with some trepidation and embarrassment) made an unsuccessful attempt to ask a stranger in the street for the money to pay her fare to work.

Angela is, then, an up and coming, talented young professional with the potential to earn a relatively high income, but has reached a stage where her finances are out of her control. She is not only finding dealing with her debts highly stressful, she is also hiding the full extent of her debts from friends and family, as well as from her boyfriend and flatmate. As is not uncommon for those living with financial difficulty, Angela's experience of indebtedness is tied to routine practices of concealment.

At the same time, Angela has some grounds for optimism, in the form of the assistance she is getting from a CCCS debt adviser. She has not yet entered into a Debt Management Plan, but she expects to do so shortly—although she has still not entirely ruled out bankruptcy. Even so, as she makes clear, her situation is considerably better than it had been at several points in the past. In order to unpick the relationship between her life, debt collection technologies, and the debt adviser, I want to present a longer extract from our conversation, which centres around how many letters she was getting at the peak of her problems and the role played by the debt adviser in helping her deal with her debts. It begins after I ask Angela how many letters she would get on a typical week:

> Angela: Oh God, about three or four a week.
>
> Joe: Right.
>
> Angela: Probably five a week, I don't even know. Do you know, if I counted it might even be more, I don't know. Probably most days [laughs] I'd get letters. At least [one] every week from each [creditor]. And there's about six of those.
>
> Joe: … okay so…where do they go in the house...what happens to them?
>
> Angela: I have got them all. Um, it's so good that ... I can't even think about those letters without mentioning the CCCS now because … they're so amazing. Because if I was just getting all these letters and I wasn't dealing with CCCS I'd be having a nervous breakdown. Honestly I really would. [The letters are] just so scary and… horrible and they're just, … they really worry you. It's like they ask you for money by threatening you. And you're like well, if I could pay it I would just pay it back. But I can't, …I can't do anything about it, [so] you just feel really out of control. That's the first thing. And secondly … they keep sending you the letters …and…it is worrying and it panics you…. [A]nd you're on the way to work or something, and you've got this letter, it's like "oh great" you know. And it's really scary. And I'm so like, I feel almost lucky. Honestly anyone that's getting these letters should so speak to the CCCS because they totally tell you like, "don't worry about it, it's not a big deal, ignore it". ... It's like, "well it's automatically generated", but also things like "well, if they issue this, then you know it's fine, don't worry"…. I've got a few default notices now and things like that, which I would have totally had a panic attack about, I would probably have had a heart attack, I would have just honestly freaked out so much, if I didn't know that it wasn't that bad. It sounds really bad, and obviously it's scary but…you realize it's kind of not that scary and not that bad and they can't do anything about it and there will be no judges that would ever say you have to pay that debt when you can't even afford to live.

This extract demonstrates the extent to which Angela's ability to both deal with her debts and interact with debt collectors has been reshaped by her interaction with a debt advisor. This leads her to frequently draw a clear line between what may be termed her pre- and post-'enlightenment' experience of debt default (I use the distinction advisedly). This clear division is marked most clearly not simply by Angela's worries about her debt being resolved, but by her newfound ability, with the assistance of the adviser, to 'see through' the letters she was receiving. This marks a significant curtailing of the potential for these collection technologies to generate the kind of anxious anticipation described in the previous chapter.

To explore this a little deeper, it is possible to see how 'pre-enlightenment', as with many of the debtors introduced in the previous chapter, collections technologies are effecting deep, ontological entanglements between Angela and her debts. She variously describes worries about being seen as a 'disaster of a person' and of others judging her as 'foolish'. She recounts her sense of greatest despair—and indeed 'panic'—as when she was not only simply in debt, but both struggling with her debts and unable to get work. As she puts it, 'I kind of was thinking, am I ever really going to do anything? What am I going to do? Just like panic really'. In other words, being in debt has (at times) shaken the vision she has of her life and the trajectory it could potentially travel along.

'Post-enlightenment', however, Angela's situation is somewhat transformed, to the extent that she feels 'almost lucky'. In particular, debt advice has had a marked effect on how she understands collections technologies: now, she cannot 'even think' of the letters that she had been receiving during that period without considering the transformative role that the debt adviser has played. Letters that Angela previously would have imagined as being addressed specifically to her, are reframed as just 'automatically generated'. The threats they likely contained—which Angela had read as referring to tangible consequences, that were likely to happen and that related directly to her particular account and her particular situation—are now understood as an effect of a particular mass-mailing technology. The threats, she can see, are not the 'big deal' they purport to be. Meanwhile the opacities of the legal system are also transformed, becoming less a disciplinary appendage of the collections industry, more an equitable forum, willing to take into account Angela's particular situation ('there will be no judges that would ever say you have to pay that debt when you can't even afford to live'). Finally, the impact of the form of expertise offered by the debt adviser is also to transform how Angela perceives herself as an economic citizen. Previously, she had, like many debtors, ignored (certain) letters. However, this inaction is now reframed: formerly experienced as the conduct of an irresponsible economic citizen, it is now felt as both a morally legitimate and economically rational (non-)response.

As the case of Angela illustrates then, one of the functions that debt advice plays for *some* debtors, is to provide them with one route through which to navigate some of the calculative complexities of default (see: Orton, 2008). In the case of another respondent, Peter, this means that letters previously experienced as unanswerable prompts, left unopened for his wife to deal with, are transformed into documents he is keen to open and display. At the end of our conversation he takes me into the kitchen and spots an unopened letter, which he unfolds, realising it was a statement from one of the creditors.

With some levity he points out a series of payments spread equally over the preceding few months, all from the CCCS. His life, he suggests, is back in some form of calculative order.

For such debtors, the adviser brings some form of commensurability to the imbalance of expert knowledge between debtor and collector. By connecting their expert knowledges to a debt that previously presented itself as an object that escaped the possibility of calculation, this debt is now reborn with, to recall Dewey, 'traits and potentialities which did not previously belong to [it]' (Dewey, 1958: 381; cited in Latour, 2008: 83). In these cases, debt advice acts as a market device that enables the 'reframing' not only of the debt, but also of how collections technologies should be understood (see: Callon, 1998).

But what form of calculation is being 'restored' here, by the debt adviser? Angela is on the verge of signing up to a DMP and Peter already has done so. Yet, as the director of one commercial debt management service suggests, in leaving behind the calculative opacities of the collections business and signing up to a DMP, debtors may unwittingly be entering a world with its own opacities. He disputes the CCCS's claim to offer a 'free' DMP, asserting that some users of commercial organisations—which are explicit about taking a fee for their service—can ultimately end up paying less than they would with a not-for-profit DMP. This claim is based on the differing ways in which not-for-profit debt management organisations like the CCCS derive their income as compared to commercial organisations.[59] CCCS receives a voluntary 'fair share' contribution from creditors for every account on which they negotiate a revised repayment schedule.[60] Commercial organisations, on the other hand, tend to charge a monthly fee. The director's assertion, then, is that commercial organisations are able to take a harder line with creditors, as they are not as 'entangled' with them.

It is neither possible, nor the aim, to conclude either way as to the validity of this critique. However, what his claim points to is the way in which variable modes of calculation are being entangled and disentangled here. In particular, none of my respondents have engaged in the type of calculation that he points to: which service is going to get the debtor the best financial outcome? Defaulters' concern, prompted by the routine, insistent prompts of debt collection technologies, is above all to enable their life to settle down to a routine that was less filled with everyday anxiousness. Their mode of calculation is certainly, then, 'qualculative': theirs are judgements that are highly rational, but grounded in forms of rationality based not on an assessment of price but of *quality*

---

[59] In the UK, the CCCS sits alongside Payplan as the two largest not-for-profit debt management organisations.
[60] The percentage share the CCCS requests from creditors is not released publicly and thus cannot be reproduced here.

(Cochoy, 2008). More particularly, the object to which assessment of quality is directed is, above all, control over the routine course of their everyday lives. As Callon and Law argue, here, as with many other areas of socio-economic life, 'qualculation discovers its limits' (Callon & Law, 2005: 731). Here, that limit is price.

The most resonant promise the debt adviser offering the DMP can offer is not, therefore, at the level of quantifiable value. Instead, the adviser promises to mobilise expertise beyond the understanding of the casual user of consumer credit, in order to separate economic decision-making from the state of anxiety created by the intrusions of technologies of debt collection. As such, they also offer a promise: to re-separate some of the categories that become blurred over the course of defaulting debts. They promise the user not only eventual detachment from their credit products (at the end of the repayment plan), they also promise to separate mind and body, rationality and emotion, debtor and debt, and, in the process, to put their everyday life back into order.

Meanwhile it is to be noted that the debtor that signs up to a DMP is not free of their obligations to the creditor. For, in managing to negotiate at least a partial repayment to each of the creditors, the debt counsellor also goes some way towards giving the creditors what they want: the promise of a borrower that will repay—even if only in part. Thus while the DMP has many undoubted benefits for the stressed defaulting debtor, it should be held in view that a creditor's decision to agree to a reduced settlement from the defaulter is a decision itself suffused with its own, precise calculative potency.

Being part of a crowd: The rise of debtor publics

Writing on debt default in the early 1970s, Paul Rock makes the following short observation: 'Debtors can be manipulated because they are kept apart and without significant support. In London at least [where the study was based], there does not appear to be a viable subculture of default' (1973: 8).

As demonstrated in the previous section, debtors now have access to a far greater number of options for support than they did when Rock was writing. However, his comment points to one key form of knowledge that is absent for many debtors: the shared experience of others. Debt default, as many of my respondents assert, is a particularly isolating experience. It still carries a significant degree of shame, often being seen as a failure of economic responsibility, commonly connected to routine practices of concealment, including hiding debts from friends and family. Moreover, despite the fact that some collections practices push at the limits of what are commonly understood to be 'fair' and 'equitable' (see Chapters Six and Seven), in their amplification of the opacities of market interactions, there is little sense that debtors themselves are banding together to call for action against collectors. It might be assumed, therefore, that the chance of an organic 'issue public' (Marres, 2007) springing up around debt default and the actions of the collectors is slim.

And yet, in the UK at least, one such public has emerged.[61] In 2006 an online forum titled the *Consumer Action Group* was founded. This forum was originally aimed at providing support to those looking to challenge banks that, it was believed, were levying their customers with unfair charges (Davis, 2009). Since then, it has gone on to be a major source of information for consumers in the UK seeking both advice and moral support in relation to a range of consumer rights issues. In particular, since an initial post in August 2006, its 'debt collection industry' sub-forum has become a highly active space where debtors routinely exchange stories and advice about each other's debts and dealing with debt collectors. [62] Debtors on this forum also post up a range of documents, including their credit agreements (which are subject to detailed scrutiny by forum members) and letters they have received from collectors (some of which are drawn upon in Chapter Seven). The site has also compiled a number of static resources including an 'A to Z of debt terminology', and information about how to record phone calls. Particularly common are discussions about debtors' own letters, where users post up drafts to get feedback from others, or alternately post up templates for others to use. The latter tend to be used variously to write to creditors, collectors, or to lodge complaints with regulators (notably, the Office of Fair Trading and the Financial Ombudsman). This is therefore a site where consumers are routinely engaged in the activity of 'talking back' (Lury, 2004: 114).

One rough indication of its success and scope can be demonstrated by the fact that upon entering the name of almost any major UK debt collection agency into a search engine, followed by a term such as 'debt collection', the search will bring up a link to a *Consumer Action Group* forum post as one of its top 5 links.[63] Another measure is to look at the debt collection industry sub-forum itself, which shows that, in a period running from August 2006 to June 2010, over 25,000 separate posts were made, almost all of which received multiple replies, with a considerable number receiving over 50 replies. Meanwhile the two most active posts, both 'stickies' on the front page, and both giving guidance on the

---

[61] This is an issue public that is not tied to any one website. *Consumer Action Group* appears to be the most active, but there are others sites where similar issues are discussed, most notably *MoneySavingExpert*.
[62] Which can be found at: http://www.consumeractiongroup.co.uk/forum/debt-collection-industry/ [Accessed 17.06.10]
[63] Tested via *Google UK*, using key company names, 13th June 2010.

enforceability of credit agreements, have, together, registered nearly 250,000 views.[64] Despite the architecture and aesthetic of the site being rudimentary, these figures provide some evidence of an apparently actively engaged issue public.

The combination on the site of repeated attacks on collection practices and its mobilisation of an increasing store of 'lay' knowledge, has meant that the site has itself become an object of controversy within the debt collection industry. In a number of interviews, industry figures complained about the site, with some calling for government regulation of the site or even going as far as to call for its outright ban. This worry has been revealed in public, in the form of an internal powerpoint presentation that was leaked to *The Guardian* newspaper (Jones, 2009). One key objection voiced in these complaints is that the site is being used by some debtors less as a means of getting support and more for finding out how to get out of paying back debts altogether. In interviews, this first criticism tends to be coupled to a second: that the website is hosting information that is often factually incorrect or misleading and, moreover, that debtors are often being given advice that is not in their best interest. On the one hand, this is a critique which suggests unease at the public circulation of forms of expertise which might threaten the integrity of the attachments between borrowers and their credit products. On the other, this expertise itself is argued to be flawed and involved in generating new calculative opacities for unsuspecting debtors. This is, therefore, a critique that points to concerns about the agential power of 'lay' expertise and its potential to disrupt the course of certain markets, whilst also trying to manage this disruption by drawing a boundary around those knowledges that might count as legitimate.

Holding this industry critique in mind, in the following section I want to explore the way in which expertise is understood on the *Consumer Action Group*, as well as some of the ways in which debtors are using the site. The aim is not to provide a detailed analysis of the many and varied modes of engagement that are being employed on the site. This is not, for example, a holistic assessment of whether or not the forms of knowledge being deployed on the site are in debtors' best interests, nor an assessment of which modes of engagement are most frequent or popular. Instead, I offer an exploratory analysis centring on just two posts, as a foray into exploring some of the issues that cluster around being part of a 'debtor public'.

The first of these posts, from user 'OnMyWayOut', responds to the assertion made by one forum member that the debt collection industry was monitoring the forum. This post

[64] 'Stickies' are high profile forum topics that the forum moderators leave displayed on the front page, tending to be useful resources or frequently accessed conversations.

is particularly useful in encapsulating some of the implicit and explicit attacks made against the debt collection industry throughout the forum into one, manifesto-like statement:

> The reason most of us are here is because we have been harassed, lied to, intimidated, threatened, coerced and treated like dirt by companies who assume that because we aren't paying them it's because we won't pay. Our personal situations mean nothing to them, in fact our human rights mean nothing to them. If they had made a reasonable approach and taken circumstances into account they probably wouldn't have ended up with such a fight on their hands.
>
> Many people have found their way here because of their illegal, immoral and underhand tactics. Many people who were already in payment arrangements found this site when OCs [Original Creditors] and DCAs [Debt Collection Agencies] started to demand increases in payments that the person could not meet. It is their own greedy fault that the worm has turned.
>
> Debt-purchasing DCAs in particular have done nothing to earn the money they are demanding from us - it is merely speculation, hoping to make a quick buck out of people's unfortunate situations to maximise their profits.
>
> If and when they learn to treat people with debt problems as people, not rogues, delinquents or cash cows and they also learn to keep 100% within the laws of the land, not to pick and choose which bits they want to comply with, then they might get a better response from us. (Consumer Action Group, 2008)

This post captures many of the justifications frequently made elsewhere on the forum, both for its adversarial tone (although not, as discussed below, a tone shared by all) and for its very existence. Put simply, debt collectors do not deserve to be repaid because of the way they treat debtors and—contentiously—because of allegedly illegal practices. In particular, the above post reframes what debt collectors are and the obligations that are entailed in a relationship to a creditor.

OnMyWayOut levels a series of accusations at collectors, perhaps in the belief that they will be reading his post.[65] These include profiteering, illegal practices, lack of attention to individual circumstance, and intimidation. Any obligations that may be held by the debtor to the creditor have, according to this perspective, been rendered void by the actions of collectors. Replete with political, even revolutionary overtones ('the worm has turned'), the collector, from this perspective, has forfeited the right to (economic) governance. Mirroring the tone of more radical consumer movements (Lury, 2004: 116; N. Klein, 2000), the debtor public is, according to this, in a state of revolt.

Against what, however, is this post being directed? While it addresses the specific practices of the debt collections industry, I suggest that it is also aimed at the format of markets more generally. This may therefore be considered an instance of what Callon et al., drawing on Charles Smith (2000), argue is the constant, ongoing, reflexive work of market actors questioning the organization of markets 'based on an analysis of their functioning, [trying] to conceive and establish new rules for the game' (2002: 194). In particular, the market (as it is currently organised) is seen as something that cannot be relied on to be both a self-regulating economic *and* moral mode of organization.

---

[65] A subject which was being debated by contributors to the discussion topic from which this post is drawn.

This is captured in the critique of the debt purchasing industry. Debt purchasers come in for particular criticism because they are seen as *purely* profit seeking. Not being the agency originally involved in lending the customer funds, they 'have done nothing to earn the money' that becomes legally owed to them after the purchase. Here, then, is an implicit recognition of the validity of some residual moral obligation to the creditor (albeit one that is, increasingly, being invalidated by the creditor's actions), but also of the illiquid nature of those obligations. The legal transfer of a debtor's account to an external agency does not, from this perspective, involve the transfer of moral obligations. The value of a debt on the open market, the writer effectively argues, does not and cannot express the 'values' that have become attached to that product over time (here including basic human rights, moral obligations, and fairness). OnMyWayOut's post in effect posits the idea that markets are 'embedded' in social relations. Echoing themes that have a long sociological tradition (see: Fourcade and Healy (2007)), the author of this post is unwilling to see a markets' ability to generate agreed prices (here: the price of a defaulting debt) as, in itself, a justification for the way that market is organized.[66] In the case of a defaulting consumer credit debt, not only is price socially embedded, but the market is not an adequate mechanism for managing and 'disentangling' this embeddedness (see: Callon, 1998).

However, while useful for pointing to the politics of some participants on the forum, this post is not a particularly good reflection of how the site is routinely *used*. To begin to get an insight into these more mundane practices, a second post, a response by 'Keefyboy' to a question posed by 'Tally_69', proves a useful starting point:

> *You are in good hands* here on this site, we are all, either in dispute with not only banks and building societies and other finacial [*sic*] companies, about money agreements, and *together we will help you out* along the road to finding out if they do have an enforceablge [*sic*] agreement with you or not. Most of us are in various stages of dealing with these companies. […]
>
> *As for losing sleep, we have all been there too*, and I know it is easy for us to say to you don't worry, but try not to... *we have people on here that KNOW the laws* and guide us on dealing with these scumbag companies, and if they decide to take you to court, (and thats [*sic*] a last resort for them and most bail out before going into the court), there are legal people on here that will buddy you, *so take note of what we tell you,*
>
> But *you are in good hands*, don't be afraid to ask questions*, soon you will gain a lot of knowledge and you will be adding to other peoples [sic] threads and feel a real part of this group*. So keep your head up and *do what we advise you* and you are on a safe journey. (Consumer Action Group, 2010; emphasis added)

In this extract, like many posts replying to newer, less experienced members of the site, the tone is both supportive and reassuring. There is, as in the first post, a suggestion that the *Consumer Action Group* has a politics, echoing the frequent tendency to refer to debt collection companies in pejorative tones (here: 'scumbag companies'). However, what the writer realises is that this is not the particular mode of engagement that the new member is

[66] See also Koray Çalışkan's examination of the limits of price setting as a summary of market activity (2007: 257).

looking for. Like many on the site, defaulting debtors frequently use the *Consumer Action Group* as a place for both practical and emotional support. As shown in the italicized sections, it is the capacity of the site to act as a source of shared, communal experiences that is being foregrounded. The tone is therapeutic and empathetic; the message is that being a defaulting debtor implies a particular mode of existence, which those who have lived it understand.

At the same time, there is an explicit attempt to legitimate the expertise being offered. The writer highlights the wealth of information on the site, grounded in its varied and distributed forms of knowledge. Twice the 'newbie' is told that they 'are in good hands', there are, the poster writes, forum members available who 'KNOW' the laws. Further, this is a form of expertise that stems, in part, from experience: 'we have', Tally_69 is told, 'all been there too'. This is thus recommending the delegation of calculative agency to the forum, based on the authority provided by both formally acquired and experiential knowledge. This is therefore a mode of expertise that, at the same time as presenting itself as authoritative, blurs the boundaries between 'expert' and 'lay' knowledge (Irwin & Michael, 2003; Michael, 2006). Personal experience is posited as a key component of what 'makes' expertise in this domain, to the extent that Tally_69 is encouraged to aspire to make the move to expert status ('soon you will gain a lot of knowledge and you will be adding to other peoples [*sic*] threads'). This post therefore sketches an idealised trajectory that participants will go through, from the seeking of information ('lay'), to becoming its provider ('expert').

But follow this particular conversation to its conclusion and it is clear that the primary mode of interaction that Tally_69 is most looking for, is that which will help her find a route through what is to her a bewildering array of calculative opacities. Tally_69's posts in this thread thus include the following:

- [What's] a CCA [Consumer Credit Agreement] and a SAR [Subject Access Request]? Can they just turn up at my door or is there some law to stop them ?
- Do i ring them offering minimum payment of about £20 month as my [partner] [doesn't] work or do i ignore the letters and wait till i've spoke to Citizens Advice again ? :idea: '
- WHAT NEXT [PEOPLE] PLEASE: Do i just sit and ride the waves [until] i hear from [the Citizen's Advice Bureau] and [the] Financial Ombudsman and ignore whatever Robbers way [Robinson Way] throw at me [?] YEAH :grin:
- I'm so pleased i've found this site.. Thanks [a lot].. [I've] printed the CCA off with details filled in. Do i need to put my full name [on it] or just my [first name?].. Also i have printed the doorstep letter and if they turn up i will hand it to them [as well] or shall i send both off at once [?]
- Pity i only have access to computer [at] [w]ork .. I've got no luck if something happens [at] night or weekend.. […] My [head's] in pieces confused and mixed up . Causing bad temper tantrums and sleepless nights once again ..

Tally_69 presents the forum with a series of calculative problems, coupled with hints (via 'emoticons') as to—or more explicit descriptions of—her fraught emotional state. Over the course of this conversation, the group replies to each query in calm, supportive, reassuring tones, frequently expressing solidarity, while providing simple to follow practical advice. In her own responses, Tally_69 also mirrors the tendency on the site to often refer to collectors pejoratively: Robinson Way, a major UK debt collections agency, here becomes 'Robbers Way'. However, this should not be read, I suggest, as Tally_69 wanting to be drawn into a discussion as to the politics of debt collection. Instead, she has quickly learnt in her interactions with others on the site to draw on certain tropes the site has developed, oriented towards a binary of debtor as victim versus collector as aggressor. As such, she clearly also takes some satisfaction (in her 'YEAH :grin:') from venting her frustration, in public, at an organisation against which she had previously felt powerless.

The problematics that *Consumer Action Group* debt collection industry forum seeks to engage with can, I suggest, be seen as doing some intensely sociological work. In this assertion, I follow Noortje Marres in looking to certain forms of public involvement as posing sociological problems that 'are not only solved in theory, but are also articulated in practice' (2009: 129). Here we have seen this being done via multiple, not necessarily compatible modes of engagement by defaulters with the problematic of debt default. Part of this sociological work includes undertaking a user-led 'decomposition' of technologies of debt collection. By providing a dynamic, responsive means for users to have questions answered, as well as to post up some of the material technologies of debt collection for critical scrutiny (notably letters), some of the indeterminacies of being a defaulter are managed and resolved.

Further, in so doing, part of the strategy that sits behind and is deployed through collections technologies is opened for scrutiny, in public. One way of looking at this is as a process of collective calculation, or what Franck Cochoy (2008) refers to as practices of 'calqulation'. This term, rooted in the French verb '*calquer*', speaks to the mutual adjustment between human actors and sociotechnical prostheses, moving together towards modes of 'qualculation' (see Chapter Three). Those that take part in the *Consumer Action Group* rely on just such a mode of *collective* engagement to stimulate and shape their actions. These actions are at once eminently quantitative: the forum will (attempt) to provide advice on the option that will lead to the best economic outcome for a debtor. But at the same time, the calculation is also eminently qualitative: should the newer, 'non-expert' who comes to the forum, willing to submit themselves to the instructions of others? Should they willingly and calculatively delegate the work of calculation away from themselves and to the forum? It is the particular way that the forms of knowledge are presented in the forum—as in Keefyboy's initial response above—that qualifies this aspect of the calculative process: 'so take note of what we tell you'. Should the new member do so, this marks, drawing on Michel Callon and John Law (2005), the *calculated submission to non-calculation*.

Like the Debt Management Plan, this therefore generates new opacities. However, that is only to tell one side of the story. As has already been outlined, one of the functions of being subject to routine, iterative technologies of debt collection is *precisely* to move calculative questions beyond conventional understandings of social action. Given that these technologies pose not only cognitive challenges, but also corporeal challenges, what a site like the *Consumer Action Group* offers is a way of addressing aspects of both. It is thus not simply that the contributors have found a solution to some of the calculative problems of debt collection, but that they have found people who understand the problematics of debt default. This includes not just empathising with but (purportedly) *understanding* those intimate, experiential dimensions of debt default that can push at the boundaries of linguistic expression, as described in the previous chapter (see the case of Jane). It also includes understanding the very real repeated, bureaucratic challenges posed by collections technologies, to which the forum responds through a mode of engagement characterised by fast responses to questions, providing easy-to-follow, simple-to-enact calculative prostheses.

If the mode of engagement Tally_69 is seeking can be seen as in part a microsociological opening up of the blackbox of debt collection technologies and part a form of communal solidarity, then OnMyWayOut's manifesto can be seen as a mode of engagement that aims at a target operating in a different scalar register. It is a sociology that is directed at the debt collection industry as a whole and its relationship to 'wider' market relations. OnMyWayOut asserts the social 'rootedness' of markets and the inability of price to express the complex assemblage that is 'value'. In so doing, OnMyWayOut asserts that there is a key difference between the moral responsibilities owed to the original creditor and a subsequent collector (a debt purchaser). As will be argued in Chapter Seven, this in fact places this analysis close to collectors' own sociology of the collections market, which they put to work in the attempt to convince debtors to repay.

These 'spontaneous sociologies' (Cochoy, 2007a) can also be seen as variably enacting processes of attachment and detachment. The microsociologies of calculation can, in many ways, be seen as similar in function to those performed by some debt advisers: the site is a way of learning how to orient oneself towards the debt collection industry and to 'see through' some of the opaque technologies that it deploys. However, even if participation does not lead the debtor to become attached to any formal debt management solution (such as a Debt Management Plan), it is possible to see this mode of detachment as affording a secondary (potential) attachment: of the debtor to the forum. Debtors are encouraged to become involved and to provide information to others, even as they take and use information for themselves. OnMyWayOut, meanwhile, seeks a mode of detachment on a very different register: in framing the creditor/collector as having broken an unwritten bond of trust, positing (even if not necessarily enacting) a more politically radical detachment from the market entirely. To do so, however, requires the conduct of the debt collection industry to become attached to wider, normative questions, centring on the validity of claims certain market domains have towards continued participation. That such 'extreme' propositions are relatively rare on the site, suggest that this is one mode of potential detachment that threatens a market assemblage (*agencement*) that has the most performative power invested in it of all: the idea of the (capitalist) market itself.

But there is more to this work, that is part quasi-sociological decomposition, part collective calculative practice. For, as a result of their specifically public mode of articulation, both Tally_69's conversation with more experienced members of the forum and OnMyWayOut's strident politics can also be seen as acts of *public demonstration* (Barry, 2001; Callon, 2004; Girard & Stark, 2007). That is, they are both involved in putting objects in public view, while also involved in the practice of *remaking* those objects. OnMyWayOut is trying to remake defaulting debt as a site of radical politics, while, more modestly, Tally_69 and the forum's 'experts' are trying to work together to remake (her) defaulting debt into a more manageable and less able anxiousness-inducing marketised object.

Writing on the possibilities for, and limits of public demonstration, Michel Callon argues that demonstrations only succeed 'if the event stands up and proves its objectivity in public space'. He continues:

> Is it information or black propaganda? The question cannot be avoided when one of the aims of the producers of events is to show they are facts. […] The word 'protest', which specifies the nature and stakes of the demonstration, conveys this ideal of robustness. To protest is to make a claim and is, as a consequence, to ensure and demonstrate the existence of something […]. Protest requires the solidity of the event that is demonstrated. (Callon, 2004: 126)

Applying Callon's test of robustness to some of the different modes of interaction that can be found on the *Consumer Action Group* debt collection industry forum reveals that those acts of public demonstration that are most solid are not the more explicit forms of political protest that OnMyWayOut's manifesto stands for. This is not meant to devalue such a politics, but to suggest that it struggles to compete with the routine revelations involved in exposing the work of the collector. These mundane spectaculars repeatedly open up for public view the strategy behind and opacities within debt collections technologies. The ongoing interactions between confused 'lay' debtors and informed 'experts' can be seen as building up a complex, messy archive, available not only to existing forum members, but also an affordance to which new defaulting debtors can easily become drawn to with a simple search. This archive repeatedly documents the calculative asymmetries confronting the defaulting debtor. The result is that—as perhaps is the worry for the collections industry—these asymmetries come to be seen less as individualised, private calculative difficulties and more as a controversial public 'issue'. This is the work of 'public-isation', as described by Marres (2007). That is to say, these are the socio-material practices that open up an issue as a public controversy. This is the work of 'de-individualising' the personalising problematic of debt default. It transforms an issue from (for many) a private affair to one capable of enrolling ever more actors to its cause.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented two quite different methods that debtors use to attempt to enact separations from their defaulting debts and from the collections industry. In so doing, it should be recalled that these forms of detachment may only be relevant to, or accessible by, certain debtors. Jane, for example, the debtor presented in the previous chapter, neither has the level of income necessary to be able to take up a Debt Management Plan, nor does she have the skills to find others online who might understand her inarticulable experiences based on their own. Moreover, her attachments run so deep as to make their separation and removal something she struggles to even contemplate. Such disadvantages are further compounded for those debtors who either do not or (likely because of low income) cannot have a third party negotiate with creditors on their behalf (as for many on the *Consumer Action Group*). A Citizens Advice Bureau survey showed that defaulters attempting to manage their debts themselves (as opposed to via a third party) have each of their offers of a reduced settlement accepted by creditors in less than one in five occasions, with a similar proportion having none of their offers accepted at all (MacDermott, 2008: 6).[67] Therefore, whilst recognising the ability for expertise to have a genuinely transformative effect for *some* debtors, the agency of outside knowledge needs to remain measured against both the way that knowledge is embodied and deployed by debtors, and the potential for the debtor's particular situation and life history to *enable* expert knowledge to make a difference. Thus despite her difficulties, Angela, for instance, as young, educated, (potentially) upwardly mobile, and physically able is far better placed

[67] Based on an online survey of members of the public with 1,042 responses. Full figures are as follows: 'All of my creditors accepted my offers': 18%; 'Some of my creditors accepted my offers': 50%; 'None of my creditors accepted my offers': 20%; 'Other': 11%.

than many defaulters to make use of the affordances that debt advice might give her. This includes the opportunity to delegate the negotiation of her debts externally.

That being said, for most defaulting debtors, the unwanted incursions of debt collection technologies demand recourse to expertise. Thus, while getting into debt is possible with only minimal calculative engagement, getting out of debt without external calculative prostheses is, for many, extremely difficult. This points to the way in which debt collection devices themselves can be seen as prompts for 'novelty' (Fraser, 2010), even of an unwanted kind. That is to say, by problematising reality along very particular lines, defaulting debtors are corralled, almost against their will, into generating new, differently formatted connections with other people and agencies. These connections may, as documented in the previous chapter, be domestic, in reshaping household rhythms and routines around debt collection technologies. But they may also, as this chapter suggests, be directed externally, whether towards the case of the debt adviser/Debt Management Plan, or the debt advice internet forum.

These external modes of expertise, designed to restore some of the calculative agency of debtors, yet again shift the problematisation of the reality of debt default. The debt adviser's promise is largely practical and pragmatic: they provide a lens through which the defaulter can 'see through' collections technologies. Further, in the case of the CCCS, a DMP also offers the possibility of the debtor handing over the administrative burden of dealing with creditors to experts. Being in debt is therefore enacted as a technocratic, administrative problem. However, in Angela's interaction with the debt adviser, new calculative opacities emerge. Should she take up the Debt Management Plan she is being offered? Or should she look for better value elsewhere? Or even, should she declare herself bankrupt? Meanwhile the politics of debt default is an issue that is left outside the frame of her conversations with the debt adviser entirely.

In the case of the debt collection forum, on the other hand, things become more messy. Calculations about detachment from a consumer credit debt become not only enacted through a consumer community, but also in the calculation as to *whether or not to* undertake this delegation. At the same time practical advice intersects with and blurs into a cross-cutting, not wholly compatible quasi-revolutionary politics, as well as emotional solidarity. In so doing, the object of detachment can also become the embodied, emotive states to which debts have become attached, with the site being a way of routinely reaching out to others for reassurance and support. Meanwhile the division between 'lay' and 'expert' knowledge becomes unclear, with the latter coming to be understood as partially contingent not just on experience but participation. Being 'expert' in this context means both having lived debt default, as well as routinely living the act of giving debt advice. These are therefore intersecting and not necessary compatible modes of detachment, where both the object of detachment is not only not always economic, but also keeps shifting (see: Michael & Brown, 2004).

But, for the debt collection industry, it is potentially the capacity for the *Consumer Action Group* to open up debt collections as a potential public issue, through its accumulation of mundane explorations of collections technologies that is the greatest threat. This turns the forum not just into a space for public debate, but also into a dynamic, responsive publicly accessible archival affordance. This has the potential to significantly destabilise attachments that thrive through their ability to frame themselves as individualised, and apolitical. This, in part, is the object of the next chapter.

INTERLUDE: An Introduction to the Landscape of Consumer Credit Debt Collection

At this point the thesis moves away from the everyday worlds of debtors and moves towards the organisational world of the collector. This is, however, only to introduce an analytical separation. As we will see, in and through technologies of debt collection these two spaces are not simply connected, they are *made* to connect.

Domestic, everyday spaces— the way they are made, lived, and organized—are more or less familiar to us all. Even if they are sometimes populated by the intimate and the 'strange' (Michael, 2006: 22), this is a strangeness that most of us at least feel we know. The world of debt collection is also strange, as we will see. But it is a strangeness that is less widely understood. This brief interlude is therefore designed to provide an introduction to the world of debt collection and to connect contemporary debt collection practices to their own history and recent changes in the global economic landscape. It is not central to the argument of the thesis, but it does speak to the way in which the industry has emerged, changed, and become the loosely bound market assemblage that it is today. In presenting this overview, I draw principally on insights generated from visits to collections agencies, interviews with industry spokespersons and experts, as well as industry literature.[68]

The UK debt collections industry is one that has undergone many changes in recent years. In particular, the arrival of both 'debt sale' (to be explored shortly) and a major global economic downturn have meant the industry has changed from a relative backwater of the retail lending business to a major profit centre. Debtors' own accounts, as presented in previous chapters, have already provided some valuable insights into the shape of the current UK consumer collections industry, showing how the predominant routes into their lives tend to be via the twin technologies of phone and letter. This broadly matches the way in which the vast majority of defaulting consumer credit debts in the UK are

[68] For a detailed analysis of the debt collections industry and some of its practices, including an extensive assessment of its use of econometric scoring, see the Credit Management Research Centre's [CMRC] industry report (2008).

collected.[69] As with a number of financial industries in the UK—lending as much as banking—the debt collection industry is one in which face-to-face interactions between company and defaulter are increasingly the preserve of more niche areas of the market. Collection agencies are therefore companies whose business is partially an art of making and managing contact remotely.[70]

The consumer debt collections industry is self-evidently deeply connected to the consumer lending industry. Whilst some accounts being collected upon are debts accrued from sources that do not currently require a credit agreement—notably utility debts (gas, water, electricity)—the largest volumes of debt being collected stem from the various forms of unsecured lending that come under the umbrella of consumer credit.[71]

As the preceding insights into defaulters' lives revealed, unsecured lending routinely leads to the accrual of large outstanding sums, spread across multiple creditors—often over half a dozen (see also p. 139). With each account in default likely to become subject to practices of debt collection, a typical defaulter will come into contact with techniques and technologies that, as I will discuss, may vary considerably across different collectors. Whether these differences are meaningful from the debtor's perspective is another matter.

When considering the assembly of the UK collections industry, the first point to note is that a considerable amount of collections activity occurs in-house, by the original creditor, as Chapter Six will examine. These are the banks and credit/store card creditors with which a debtor will have built up their debt with in the first place. These are the agencies with which the debtor will almost certainly have their first interaction as soon as they begin to miss repayments. [72] As with the wider debt collections industry, these internal processes vary in sophistication and scope. They can range from the simple deployment of a small number of reminder and warning letters, to full scale debt collection practices, of variable

[69] As the director of one of the few remaining UK face-to-face debt collection agencies told me, many of the large debt collections operations had either closed down or sold off their so-called 'field operations'. This has left a marketplace that is made up of a number of small companies, employing freelancers, who work for multiple collections agencies as and when required. This tends to be only when a collector has exhausted other avenues.

[70] Also, despite some moves towards outsourcing beyond the UK, it still remains the norm for debt collection operations in this country to have their call centres based in the UK. As one company director writes, most UK credit management departments have tended to see outsourcing as a short-term, tactical measure, preferring to keep their operations in-house (Purvis, 2010).

[71] By way of comparison, at the end of 2009, total outstanding (but not defaulting) UK utilities debts stood at £1,652 million; in the same year outstanding consumer credit debts stood at £226 billion (Cladingbowl, 2010; ONS, , 2010a). A further indicator is that the debt sale market, which has fuelled the growth of the UK debt collection industry, is largely made up of credit card, loan and overdraft debt, along with retail finance and, increasingly, mortgage arrears debt (CMRC, , 2008: 10).

[72] See: CMRC (2008).

degrees of sophistication.[73] These variable activities represent a move along a continuum, from functions that may be considered part of customer account management, to activities that should be considered as very much part of the debt collection industry—despite primary creditors not being represented in the member's list of the debt collection industry's trade body, the Credit Services Association [CSA].[74]

It is when these internal processes are unsuccessful, a period usually of at least 90 days, that many creditors will turn to the wider debt collection industry. [75] Whether or not a debt will be passed externally (either sold, or collected on a commission basis—I will return to this distinction shortly) depends to a significant degree on whether or not the creditor has processes in place, in-house, which are seen as effective enough to rival the margin that external agencies could potentially generate.[76]

However, in recent years there have been significant changes in both creditors' internal debt collection processes and the options at their disposal should they want to 'pass out' a debt. Until relatively recently, if a UK creditor decided they wanted to pass out a debt for collection, there was only one principal option: to pass the debt to a 'contingency agency'—often simply referred to as a DCA [Debt Collection Agency]. These are companies that are employed by creditors, tending to be the original lender, to collect on defaulting debts on commission, taking a percentage share of every debt recovered. A creditor will tend to have a 'panel' of DCAs on its books, consisting of a number of different collections companies who effectively operate in competition with each other to collect on the same debt portfolio. At 'Alpha', for example, one of the agencies I visited in mid-2009, teams were often on a panel with three other collectors.[77] Debts will get allocated to DCAs for a set period of time, during which time they are assessed against the competition (often after six months, sometimes also at three months).[78] If they are more successful than other companies, they will be allocated greater shares of their client's debts. If they are less successful, this share will be reduced, or they may get taken off the client's books altogether.

However, in the late 1990s, drawing on a market model that had already been established in the US for almost a decade, the debt sale market began to become established in the UK (Braddock & Wordsworth, 2006: 22). The first large volume debt sale was in 1998, but the

---

[73] See previous footnote.

[74] See the CSA's UK members list at http://www.csa-uk.com/uk-members-list [Accessed 30.11.10].

[75] See: CMRC (2008: 95; 104).

[76] Interview with Daniel, from a major UK credit reference agency.

[77] 'Alpha' is a pseudonym, as are 'Beta' and 'Delta'.

[78] Interview with Alpha company director.

market initially occupied only a small part of the UK debt collections industry, with few sellers, and only relatively small portfolios changing hand (K. Maynard, 2008). However, spurred to a significant degree by the sheer increase of so-called 'delinquent' consumer debt well before the arrival of the current economic downturn, as detailed in the Introduction to this thesis (see also: CMRC, , 2008), the debt purchase market increased rapidly in size, with industry figures claiming an increase from around £2.5billion worth of debt purchased in 2004 (K. Maynard, 2008), to a peak in 2008 of perhaps £8billion (Berkley, 2009).[79] To put this in context, the CSA estimated in 2007 that its members were collecting on accounts worth around £21 billion worth of debt (CSA, , 2008).

Even before the economic downturn this situation was, however, changing: as the volume of defaults began to rise, the potential for debt collection practices, in particular via debt sale, to become genuine drivers of profits became increasingly apparent. As Daniel, an industry consultant at a major UK credit reference agency, told me, prior to the arrival of debt sale, creditors might have been happy to use, by present standards, a combination of rudimentary in-house collection practices and contingency agencies to collect on a fraction of their 'bad' debt. But then debt sale came along:

> So, [you had] these companies going, yeah, we'll buy your debt off you. And the banks going, oh, we've taken provisions on that, [the bad debt has] been sitting there for the past few years, great, ok, we can get 10p in the pound for it, 15p, 8p, whatever it happened to be, brilliant. Let's do it, get it off our bottom line, we've actually made some money, fantastic.

The previous market model, in which a creditor was hoping at best for a small, fractional return on defaulting debt, was changed by the arrival of debt sale. Old debts, which had zero value in accounting terms, were suddenly revived as assets with real value, able not only to be taken off a creditor's books altogether, but also to often generate, as Daniel suggests, upwards of an 8% return.[80] International regulatory changes gave creditors further reasons to get 'bad' debt off the balance sheet. The capital requirements stipulated in the Basel II agreement, which were implemented in the UK under the FSA at the end of 2007, became a major business opportunity for the debt purchase industry, in that it gave creditors an incentive to decrease the amount of 'bad' debt in their possession as a result of

---

[79] Writing in early 2009, Berkley predicts a figure of between £8 billion and £10 billion for 2008. No published total was, however, available at the time of writing, nor are figures available for 2009 or 2010. However, as will be explored further later in this introduction, the debt purchase market is held to have contracted significantly in 2009, in part due to the unavailability of refinancing options for debt purchasers as a result of the economic downturn, with only early signs of recovery in 2010 (K. Maynard, 2009a).

[80] The prices Daniel refers to appear broadly accurate for the period. The CMRC concluded that in 2005/6, the average price paid for 'bad' debt was 8p in the pound. In 2007, when the debt purchase market was still booming, a sample of debt purchase prices again averaged out at 8p in the pound, with a range of between 5p and 18p (CMRC, , 2008: 152; 170).

changes in how the amount of capital against which they could lend was calculated (CMRC, , 2008; K. Maynard, 2004; Seib, 2008, May 10).[81]

Before the full impact of the economic downturn emerged, the UK debt collection industry had seen something of an explosion in debt sale: volumes of debt sale were growing year on year, with one influential industry survey at the end of 2008 predicting 'the demise of contingency models' (OC&C Strategy Consultants, 2009: 4). There was a sense that operating a purely contingent collections operation was backward-looking, with many contingency agencies deciding to also dip their toes into the water of debt purchase. In one 2008 survey, 46% of agencies sampled offered a debt purchase service, an increase of 27% since 2003; the number offering contingent ('trace and collect') work stayed broadly the same (CMRC, , 2008: 156-157). After the downturn, however, contingency agencies found themselves suddenly in demand again, enjoying what the following year's survey referred to as an 'Indian summer' (OC&C Strategy Consultants, 2009: 4). This change was reflected at Alpha. A large UK contingency operations, it had all but scaled back a previously growing debt purchasing operation, in order to refocus on contingent collections. One of its directors described, for example, how one major bank was now placing £120 million worth of debt into the contingent world, which previously would have been sold off.

There are a range of factors that may have fed into this—one interviewee for instance noted that contingency agencies themselves benefited from the rise of debt purchase, with many purchasers themselves regularly employing contingency agencies to collect on the debts they had bought.[82] But of greater consequence appears to be the relative, and possibly temporary, demise of debt purchase. Perhaps the most significant changes in the marketplace were first, and somewhat ironically, that many debt purchasers were not able to obtain the credit they needed from investors to buy new portfolios. Prior to the downturn, many debt purchasers had been relying on borrowing from banks and investors to fund the purchase of new portfolios. But with the contraction of credit in 2008, for many this route for expansion dried up, leaving them to have to keep working debts they already owned, with potentially diminishing returns. This seemed the case at Beta; one collector noted with frustration the decreasing commission levels she was receiving, partly because of the lack of 'fresh' accounts. Meanwhile Clive, the Debt Management Company Director, described how Beta was well known within the industry to be 'trying to run down its book…their new purchases are miniscule'.

---

[81] On a side note, the USA did not fully adopt the Basel II accord, unlike European banks, with many banks only required to meet Basel I requirements. This may have been in part because of US worries that, under its complex systems of capital calculations, its effect may have been to decrease the capital requirements of its banks, as well as giving large banks an unfair advantage over smaller banks (Anonymous, 2006).

[82] Clive, Debt Management Company Director

Second, debt purchasers were experiencing the consequences of having paid high prices for debt portfolios in the good times, prior to the downturn, which were now not reaping the profits that had been forecast. All three agencies I visited—both contingency and debt purchase—were reporting significant decreases both in average levels of payments received and, in particular, in the number of debtors that would settle or 'settle in full'—in other words pay off either an agreed percentage of their debts, or even pay off their defaulted debts in their entirety.[83]

There was near unanimity on the main reason for the latter in particular: of perhaps even greater significance than the growing levels of unemployment and generally declining economic conditions, was the fact that debtors were experiencing the same problem as many debt purchasers: an absence of available credit. Whereas previously, debtors were able to consolidate their loans by either taking out a new unsecured loan to pay off a series of creditors, or by releasing equity from their homes, now credit had dried up. In one collections call centre, after a call that had ended with the debtor appearing to consider a settlement offer she was presented with, potentially by borrowing money from family members, the call operator turned to me and commented, 'that sort of call used to be normal. You know, she sounded like she was thinking about it. Often these days they are like "no, no, no"'.

This changed socio-economic landscape was undoubtedly a challenge to contingency agencies, as commented upon by a number of industry interviewees; however, they were to some extent insulated from its effects, in part by short term contracts that could be adjusted to take account of this new context (as noted above). Purchasers however, had paid not for the short term right to collect on a particular debt, but for the long term ownership of that debt. And, with returns falling rapidly, the prices they had paid suddenly looked unrealistically optimistic, leaving them often confronting large losses on their purchases.

This complex conflagration, incorporating significant changes to the industry that started before the economic downturn, but was accelerated by its effects, has had one further outcome, which may not have been expected until recently: the development by creditors of increasingly sophisticated in-house collections processes. Again, interviewees cited a number of reasons for this, but broadly it seems that even before the downturn, creditors were already realising that debt collection could provide significant contributions to their

[83] To situate this, Daniel, the credit reference agency debt collection consultant, suggested that industry figures released by the CSA revealed a decrease of about a third in one-off payments to its members, with average monthly payments dropping by £5 to about £23 a month. As these figures are not available to the public, these cannot be verified. See also: Maynard (2009b).

bottom line, in part because of the revenues being generated from selling portfolios to debt buyers. But as the recession started to bite, amounts of debt default increased and debt purchasers were, in part because of a lack of finance, not able to offer the prices creditors thought their debts were worth. Creditors thus started to look to their own collections operations as potential profit centres. As Andrew, a credit reference agency sales director put it, 'the focus was always on lending. Now the focus is on collections and people are running very fast to do what they do better. But they've got 20 years to catch up, in a very short space of time'. Or, as summarised by Clive:

> debt recovery, internally within the lenders, is always the poor cousin second removed. If you wanted to find where the investment has gone, it's gone into the neural network [credit scoring models] to go and find more new clients, new sales etc. The moment you stop lending you've then got to start looking at recovering the money you've lent. The investment hasn't been there. Now, what is the easier option when you look at it [from their perspective]? Should I […] make that investment, or should I throw it out to the industry on a contingency basis, no win no fee, and let them make that investment?

In the race to engage in market expansion and—to borrow a market metaphor—to grab land, the consumer credit industry did not spend much time worrying about developing its collections operations to anywhere near the same degree of sophistication as its lending functions. Instead, historically, contingency agencies were left to skim whatever they could off the 'bad' debt that lenders had. But the industry saw no real reason to overly concern itself with collections—as Richard, a contingency agency client relationships manager recalls,

> [I]f you go back a few years, and certainly longer than when I joined [Alpha Agency] in 2000, [collections] was the back end of the process. The accounts had been 100% provided for, and therefore they passed them out to the highest bidder, and if they got some cash back, hooray, bonus.

In other words, consumer credit lenders were able to maintain healthy balance sheets without the contribution of the debt collections industry, because of the profits being generated from their lending operations; the volume of 'bad' debt was by current standards, extremely low, meaning that it could be written off ('100% provided for'), without having a major impact on the overall profitability of the company. With the rise of 'bad' consumer credit debts before and during the recession this situation had, however, changed. One particular example, cited by Daniel, stands out. He told of one major lender that, because of the downturn, was looking to reduce their spending on their lending operations. However, rather than make staff redundant, they shifted 250 people away from the lending arm of their business towards collections. This shift is both practical and symbolic: consumer collections had, for now at least, firmly grabbed the attention of lenders.

Debt collections in a downturn is not, however, straightforward. An industry analysis of the top 383 companies in the UK debt collections industry, based on figures from 2008-2009, shows that a large number of these companies are making sizeable pre-tax profits, over 40 of which made a margin of over 40%. But beneath these big hitters, sits a large number of companies who are just about getting by: the second largest category (30 companies) includes those collection agencies making a margin of between 0% and 5%. Meanwhile, the third largest category (17 companies) includes those making a sizeable loss, with a loss margin of over 25% (Plimsoll Analysis, 2009: 3.2b).

This speaks to the variable degree of success that companies are having in meeting the very particular challenge of market attachment the defaulting debtor poses. In particular as a result of the economic downturn, the dispositional tendencies of the defaulting debtor have therefore shifted. As one managing director put it, '[w]hile more work is flooding into the industry, most debt collection operations are struggling to get settlement of debt in the same way as before' (K. Maynard, 2009b). What Maynard is referring to is the decreasing effectiveness of some of collectors' prompts, which had previously made debt collection, and in particular, debt purchase until recently so profitable. The debtor had reached the end of their access to credit, leaving the collector seeking to recoup whatever it could, either for itself, or for its clients. In what follows therefore, I examine precisely how the debt collection industry responds to what seems to be a conventional market problem: how to get its 'customers' to pay.

6. The Strategic Management of Affect

In collections, it's not what you say, it's how you say it. Boost your returns by improving relationships.
Experian Data Analytics Twitter post (2009)

Introduction

This chapter begins the process of moving away from the domestic spaces of debt default and towards the centres of production of debt collection practices. In so doing, it traces the processes of attachment *between* collectors and defaulters. The chapter contributes to a number of key disciplinary concerns: building on the previous chapters, it continues the desire to bring a richer vocabulary and expanded empirical focus to the economization programme, capable of speaking to the articulation of 'corporeal materialities' in and through the market (see: Mcfall, 2009a: 53). This expanded mode of analysis, I argue, can be found in the analytical space between 'the capture of affect' (Massumi, 2002) and that which Cochoy (2007a) names as processes of public 'captation'. Also, in moving into the heart of the debt collection industry, it moves into the workplace. This brings the chapter closer to work interested in tracing how organisations seek to both maintain a hold on and shape the conduct of those they direct their attention towards. It therefore sits at the intersection of currents within both economic and organisational sociology.

The chapter draws principally on empirical research undertaken in the call centres of two collections agencies: Alpha and Beta. These two quite different collections operations allow insights into different, but connected aspects of the UK debt collections industry. Alpha is a 'contingency' agency: as noted earlier, these are employed by creditors, tending to be the original lender, to collect defaulting debts on commission. As such, they fulfil particular functions for creditors, tending to be used to collect on debts once they have reached a degree of seriousness where the creditor deems that any internal collections operations they might have are insufficient. It is also commonplace for contingency companies to specialise in particular aspects of collections: Alpha, for instance, tends to collect on accounts with relatively low balances, on which attempts had often already been made to collect on the debt, either by other contingency agencies, or via creditors' own internal collections operations (the latter will be addressed in more detail in the next chapter).

Beta, by contrast is a 'debt purchaser'. As outlined in the previous Interlude, debt purchasers have come to occupy an increasingly significant role in the collections marketplace. Some purchasers acquire 'bad' debt portfolios with the intention of *themselves* sending these out to contingency agencies, often after having undertaken sophisticated econometric statistical analysis of which accounts are more likely to generate a return (a technology this chapter will return to in due course). However many debt purchasers buy defaulting debts with the intention of 'working' these accounts themselves.[84] It is the latter business model that informs Beta's operations. Debt purchasers like Beta are therefore companies that, like contingency agencies, specialise in collections, with the key difference being that they retain the ownership of the account and will therefore potentially collect on that account for a far longer period. Accounts are usually only passed by a creditor to a contingency agency for a limited period of time (this forms part of a deliberate strategy, as the next chapter will examine), tending to be a few months (see p. 130).[85] Debt purchasers, however, as the (new) creditor, themselves take on the responsibility for collecting on that account potentially up to the point of making the decision as to whether to either write off the amount entirely, or to instigate legal action. This process could take many months, or even years.[86]

This contrast therefore offers an insight into two components of the collections industry. Put simply, this provides a contrast between a company that specialises in collecting a debt on behalf of others, for a defined period of time, and a company that seeks, where possible, to see a debt through from the moment it is purchased, until it achieves some form of resolution.

Debtor or customer? The problem of attachment

Like the bodies in Mol's (2002) ethnography of disease, defaulting debtors are multiple. In Chapter Four, we followed defaulting debtors into their homes, which included examining the way in which they sometimes struggle to maintain a sense of themselves as separate from their debts. This is a struggle to avoid the corporeal attachment to the product around which collection technologies cluster. It is in and through these everyday, domestic spaces that attempts to make debt 'matter' to the defaulter are played out.

But when journeying into this domestic space, there is no sense in debtors' accounts that they any longer see themselves as 'customers' of the credit industry. When they do on occasion refer to themselves as such, this is almost exclusively when looking into the past

---

[84] It was not possible to assess the gain precise information on how this breaks down.

[85] That is presuming the attempt to collect is unsuccessful. If the contingency agency does succeed in generating regular repayments from the debtor against the outstanding balance, the creditor will usually leave them to manage the account, at least for the short to medium term.

[86] Another option might include selling on the debt again, although if the debt purchaser has already instigated multiple attempts to collect on the debt without success, potentially over many years, the value of this debt is likely to be very low.

and recounting their journey into debt and their interaction with lenders.[87] *Then*, they assert, they *were* customers of the credit industry. Now, however, they are 'debtors'.[88] The relationship between themselves and the credit industry has therefore changed, from one of potentially fragile, always 'threatened' attachment (Callon et al., 2002: 205), to an attachment that has a (seemingly) solid grip on them. (See also Chapter Four).

However, within the debt collections industry, from senior management down to collections call centre worker, the debtor is never far away from being described as a customer.[89] Yet, in what sense can they be characterised as such? Defaulters do not enter the collections industry looking to buy anything—not in the conventional sense, in any case. And, at the same time it is often extremely hard for them to leave or 'detach' themselves from their debts, given their financial constraints. This does not seem, therefore, to be a conventional market encounter, characterised by competition between providers, with producers attempting to secure attachments with customers by entreaty. Garry Stran, the chief executive of Clarity Credit Management, a leading UK contingency agency addresses this tension directly:

> Here at Clarity we, *just like almost all other customer service organisations*, place a lot of emphasis on the quality of the conversation that takes place between our people and the customer. In our case *the term 'customer' is slightly misleading as ordinarily the people we are talking to are debtors* who, for whatever reason, have not met the terms of the contract that they entered into. (Stran, 2008: 29; emphasis added)

Are debtors customers or not? Stran seems unsure. Perhaps they are; his collections agency is a 'customer service organisation'. But then again, perhaps not. As Stran notes, their relationship to the collector seems to be defined by their past actions: when they were borrowing and meeting the terms of their contract *then* they were customers; now, however, what they *really* are, are defaulting (contract breaking) debtors. In the collections industry, certain market signifiers (here, customer) appear to be unstable.

But perhaps calling defaulters 'customers' rather than 'debtors' is simply more pleasant, or perhaps it speaks to a certain business ethics? This is potentially what Stran has in mind in framing his company as a customer services organisation; this speaks to the debt collection agency as performing an account management function. From this perspective, for an organisation that places 'a lot of emphasis' on the quality of their conversations, talking about debtors as customers clearly makes sense. Yet there is more to it than that. I

---

[87] This claim is based on an analysis of debtor interview transcripts. On only one occasion did a debtor refer to themselves as a customer in recounting their interactions with the collections industry. On this occasion, however, the participant was recounting how he was addressed *by* the industry.

[88] This is not to claim that this term is always used by debtors when referring to themselves. However, as in Angela's case highlighted in the previous chapter, this speaks to the way in which defaulters frequently come to see their lives as coextensive with their debt.

[89] Drawing on fieldnotes. Of course, a range of terms are used, including 'debtor', 'defaulter', as well as 'customer'. The latter appears, however, to be the preferred, more polite terminology.

Table 1. Average number of creditors owed by CCCS clients, 2003 – 2009

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Average number of creditors	6.4	6.5	6.8	x	x	7.6	6.1

Source: CCCS Annual Statistical Yearbooks (2006, 2007, 2008, 2010); data unavailable for 2006 – 2007.

want to suggest that the tensions in naming debtors point towards the central problematic of the collections industry: the very *weakness* of some of the attachments between defaulters and their products (when viewed from the perspective of the collector).

Despite the bonds that tie defaulters to their credit products often feeling, from the debtor's perspective, almost overwhelmingly enveloping, debt collection is a competitive business. As table 1 below shows, it is common for debtors to owe money to a considerable number of creditors. In this context, the struggle between collectors plays out not in the attempt to enrol customers, but to convince already enrolled debtors to pay *you* over others, for as small an outlay as possible. It is therefore a market. However, the challenge for the debt collector is not to attach borrowers to their credit products, as legally they already are, bound by their credit agreement.[90] Instead, the challenge is to reattach *value* to the product. That is, to make the credit product 'matter' to the debtor in such a way that they perceive/feel that the transfer of value from them to the creditor is a necessary part of their relationship with their debt.

It is in this light of this *competition* amongst collectors for debtors' scarce resources that part of the disjuncture between how debtors understand themselves (as resolutely attached) and how collectors understand them (as all too loosely attached) is to be explained. This therefore points to a shift in the ontology of attachment: for the debtor with multiple debts, this competition for their attachment is largely meaningless. They are attached to their debts *as a whole*; being more or less connected to one defaulter over others will do little to resolve their overall position.[91] For the creditor meanwhile, the debtor's overall

[90] In 2007 a new industry emerged made up of companies that claimed that many credit agreements were unenforceable and that hence, many debtors could potentially write off their unsecured debts. Recently, however, the OFT has sought to challenge this industry, warning debtors that many such claims were misleading (OFT, , 2010).

[91] One notable exception to this can occur when debtors seek to renegotiate their debts, perhaps assisted by a third party. Here, as had happened to a number of my respondents, the attempt is to convince all the creditors owed money to come to an agreement as to a reduced repayment amount. But, it can occur that one or more creditors may resist this, rendering one or more individual companies as major barriers to their attempts to detach themselves from their debts (see Chapter Six). In these cases, individual company identities do, very much, come to matter.

market attachment is only a peripheral concern.[92] What matters most, is a debtor's attachment to them.

From the perspective of the debt collection industry, the debtor can therefore, like the industry itself, be seen as a variably enacted market assemblage: there are parts of their business in which their connection to the debtor can feel more like a more conventional customer-producer relationship. Here, the aim is to keep debtors happy, to make sure that they pay you, not others. But there are parts of their business where translating the debtor into revenue happens at the site of the *obligation* that the debtor has to repay. From the point of view of the collections industry, therefore, the debtor is hybrid: they come to you *both as* a customer and *because of* an (legal) obligation; they are a 'debtor-customer'.

Yet in attempting to meet this challenge, collectors are presented by a further problematic: the emptiness of many of their threats. For, as this and the next chapter will explore, despite frequent threats to the contrary, given the expense, creditors, or the collectors working on their behalf, will often avoid litigation for as long as they can, in particular if the outstanding balance is low. One industry survey captures this quite well; they write:

> Few of the large lenders undertake any litigation internally unless it is clear that the borrower has some worth i.e. assets [or a] regular income stream. Some lenders will often do tests and litigate a sample of say 500 accounts in order to evaluate the success rate and cost effectiveness. Recovery rates are around 2-3% of balances from litigation. Litigation, however, may be an option in the recovery strategy for external agents. In practice few external DCA's litigate to recover debt but use letter/phone cycles and 'doorstep' collections or visits. […]. Most DCA's will, however, threaten litigation as a recovery strategy. (CMRC, , 2008: 109)

This second weakness, rarely fully comprehended by the debtor, operates around the relative lack of affordable, legal sanctions available to the collector. These constraints led one solicitor in the industry to begin an article by repeating a sentiment he claims is commonplace in the industry; that it is 'a debtor's world', concluding that, protected by regulatory frameworks, the debtor has been 'elevated into a very advantageous position' (Kirton, 2010: 25). On one hand, such claims are a tactless exaggeration, in light of the degree of distress and anxiety that actually living 'a debtor's world' entails, as documented previously. On the other, however, it can be seen as pointing towards a frustration emerging from an industry whose key revenue source does not feel secure in its grasp.

[92] In a revealing aside, which speaks to the single mindedness of some collectors, one departmental manager expressed genuine surprise when being asked to comment on the potential impact on debtors of being subject to the prompts of multiple competing collectors. 'To be honest', he said, 'it has never occurred to me'.

Captation and capture

The task of tracing these weaknesses, these problems of market attachment, can be seen, following Cochoy, as the task of following the work of 'captation'; he writes:

> [W]e propose to observe the way in which an individual or collective actor goes about having a hold on their publics. More precisely, it is a matter of studying the actants and the *dispositifs* (devices) which allow the opposite poles of the organization and the market, the institution and public space to be brought together, and of trying to understand their modes of articulation. We aim to show how and by what means a regulated context, dominated by management or administrative procedures, attempts to exert a hold on these less understood, more fleeting, more fluid, collectivities that we know as citizens, users, electors, buyers, consumers, clients (Cochoy & Grandclément, 2005). To do this, we shall focus upon the study of a central figure of relational work, which we call the 'captation of the public'. By *captation* (a French word which has no satisfactory English equivalent), we mean the ensemble of the operations which try to exert a hold over, or attract to oneself, or retain those one has attracted. (Cochoy, 2007a: 204)

In many respects, this outline of a research programme fits the present research object very well. The study of public captation speaks not only to the multiple ways debtors are variably articulated in and through different social spaces. It also speaks to the many problems that the collector faces in attempting to encircle debtors. This clearly includes the socio-material work of securing market attachment: the assembly of relevant devices in and around the (life of the) debtor, to bind them to you over others. This also includes the work of organisational procedure, including the effective management, recruitment, and training of staff, as well as problems of administration, infrastructure, and so forth. But this work is not straightforward. The debtor-customer hybrid *is* fleeting, variable, and difficult to understand. As the aforementioned variation in profit margins within the industry illustrates (p. 135), some organisations are better at following and understanding this actor than others.

In outlining the above research programme, Cochoy sits within a small, but growing body of research that seeks to trace the very particular socio-material *work* that goes into formatting the relationship *between* 'producers' and 'consumers'. In seeing this relationship as potentially provisional, mutually constituted, recursive, and historically specific, this work has variously sought to examine both how producers and consumers are made and related, but also how such categories may blur or fragment. This has opened up a range of questions that are relevant to the present study, some of which have already been addressed, some of which I will return to. This includes attention to the relationships between retail/producer technologies and shaping of particular modes of personhood (du Gay, 2007; Langley, 2008a; Marron, 2009), the socio-material equipping of calculation (Cochoy, 2007b, 2009; Mallard, 2007; Mcfall, 2009a, 2010), the relationship between domestic space and (certain domains of) the market (Hand & Shove, 2007; Marres, 2009; Shove, 2003), and the sociotechnical work of marketing and branding (Cochoy, 1998; Lury, 2004, 2009; Moor, 2007; Slater, 2002). But before moving on to examine the work of debt collection, I want to briefly point to an aspect of market relations that is only at the margins of Cochoy's account of captation, despite a terminological resonance: what can be termed 'the capture of affect' (Massumi, 2002). As explored in the previous chapter, this speaks to the ways in which one market actor (here the creditor—but more generically a 'producer') attempts to establish or reshape the relationship between themselves and another market actor (here the debtor—more generically, the 'consumer') by intersecting with and directing the latter's emergent, corporeal relationality. In common with themes that cross-cut this thesis, this chapter therefore contributes towards (re)inserting into economic sociology an attention to both emergent forms of interaction and the enactment of the embodied market actor.[93]

In so doing, this chapter builds on existing currents within the field, exploring socio-economic objects that may be described as in some ways 'non-representational'. These are objects whose relations are composed in and through spaces of possibility that exist at the margins of cognitive experience. This includes, for instance, Celia Lury's exploration of the brand as an experimental assemblage of 'intensive topological possibilities' (2009: 78), and Nigel Thrift's (2007) analysis of a new mode of non-representational capitalist commoditisation. Thrift writes, for instance, that

> increasingly, commodities are thought of as interfaces that can be actively engineered across a series of sensory registers in order to produce positive affective responses in consumers. (Thrift, 2007: 39)

And that, as he puts it, a 'new version of efficacy' (2007: 50) is 'gradually being foregrounded' (2007: 49) in which

> what is being attempted is to continuously conjure up experiences which draw customers to commodities by engaging their own passions and enthusiasms, set within a frame which can deliver on those passions and enthusiasms by producing goods that resonate. (Thrift, 2007: 50)

Given the arguments contained in the preceding chapters, these two extracts can be said to speak to the character of some of the socio-economic intersections between defaulter and collector. However, in order to do so, they need some editing. Most notably, given the problematics of collection outlined previously, the challenge for collectors is less to 'draw' the debtor towards them, as to 'renew' customers' relationship to their commodities. The reference to the production of 'positive' affect is not entirely inappropriate in this context (even if 'enthusiasms' is): the potential is always there, however distant or unlikely, for the collector to stimulate a range of positive affective responses if it can provide the debtor with some form of resolution. These might include relief or gratefulness, for example. However, at the same time, debt collections practices also clearly incorporate a hefty amount of the stimulation of negative affective responses, including the near-permanent

[93] See Chapter One for a wider discussion of the place of this intersection in the discipline.

state of ‘anxious anticipation’ that debtors describe (see: Adams et al., 2009). And finally, I also prefer to avoid claiming that debt collection cleanly fits with, or is representative of, the existence of a ‘new’ or different epistemic regime. Writing on debt collection back in 1973, for instance, Paul Rock had already identified that one of the key methods of consumer debt collection involved creating what he referred to as ‘controlled anxiety’ (1973: 70). I thus share, with Paul du Gay the desire to question such teleological and epochalist assumptions that tend to abound in the analysis of many consumption practices (2004: 87).

With these edits made, along with some other syntactical changes, that which emerges approaches a definition of what I propose the variably successful enactment of debtor and debt, in and through debt collection practices, involves. It goes something like this:

> Defaulting consumer credit debts can be thought of as interfaces that can be actively engineered by collectors across a series of sensory registers in order to produce *predominantly negative affective responses* in debtors. What is being attempted is to *iteratively* conjure up experiences which *refresh debtors’ existing attachments* to their debts by engaging their own passions, set within a frame which can deliver on those passions by *producing resolutions* that resonate. (Key edits highlighted)

On the one hand, the form and much of the relevance of Thrift’s argument more or less remains. On the other, however, given the need to impose these changes, debt collection can at least be considered as a peculiarly inverted case of the kind of operations he describes. In what follows, I propose to explore the collections process in greater detail, as a way of opening up some of these peculiarities.

Listening in to collections conversations

In order to understand the enactment of (the attachments between) debtor and debt in and through technologies of debt collection, there is much to be gained from looking at the precise ways in which the interaction between debtor and collector can be played out. Aspects of this will be examined in greater depth in the following chapter, which centres on debt collections letters and what I refer to as ‘trading styles’. But in this section I want to begin by focusing on the human to human interaction that occurs between defaulter and collector, focusing in particular on the role of collections call centre workers and the conversation between them and debtors.

Alongside the collections letter, the collections call centre worker sits at the forefront of the full range of discursive interactions between collector and collected. As such, they can, in a similar way to Liz McFall’s (2010) door-to-door insurance agent, be seen as one of the central human ‘market devices’ of those that compose the contemporary UK collections industry. The worker is aided by a range of technological prostheses: most importantly, this includes the autodialler. Depending on the sophistication of the technology being employed by the collections company, this either enables the call centre worker to him/herself automatically make outgoing calls, or, increasingly, to respond to a mixture of automatically generated outgoing calls along with incoming calls from debtors. To this is added the account management software, which again varies by sophistication, but at a minimum allows the collector to take payments, update accounts, and add any relevant notes.

The collections call centre worker's role varies between different collections agencies in part due to the variation in the technologies they work with. Also, as will be discussed, the nature of the role depends to a significant degree on the place of the particular collections operation within the industry. There are also the inevitable variations in the particular history and culture of the company being worked for: industry interviewees suggested that the extent and type of training, for example, varies to a large extent between companies; and, given action taken by the UK regulator against a number of non-compliant companies in 2009, it is clear that not all companies were meeting regulatory guidelines (Office of Fair Trading, 2009a, 2009b). That being said, after listening in to an excess of 100 calls, across the three companies I visited, with numerous different collections call operators, as well as listening to one side of many conversations surrounding me over the course of my visits, one commonality stands out: that in both the conversations and the call centres, it was only infrequently that these would become fraught, or emotional.

Alpha and Beta, the two agencies I visited (in the third, I listened to recorded calls remotely at their head office) are composed of a mostly young workforce, spending a significant portion of their days working in ways that might be familiar to many people that work in call centres in less controversial industries. Their activities include tasks such as taking monthly payments, dealing with queries, and updating records. The frequency of calls they have to deal with varies—at times the volume would increase markedly, in one agency prompting the team leader to corral his team in order get them to hurry through their calls. But there are also times of relative calm, which collectors often use to chat with their neighbour. Of course, it is the collections conversations making up the rest of their time—those in which collectors try to convince debtors into paying—that makes their job a somewhat different, and certainly more controversial proposition than others. And it is the case that, in both Alpha and Beta, some conversations do become heated. However, not only is this not the norm, but even when they do, only extremely rarely do they approximate to the degree of emotional intensity debtors express in their interviews in talking about their debts.[94] Of course, as noted in Chapter Two, sitting alongside a collections agent, listening in on their conversations, in a situation in which they are quite clear about my role as a researcher, is quite far from capturing collections 'in the wild'. However, I nonetheless assert, in part given some of the defences I provided there, that this is not unexpected: for contemporary debt collections practices are precisely operating in and through the space of the apparent disjuncture between mundane and intense modes of (inter)action.

To illustrate this, I will begin by returning to Juliet, the collections worker at Alpha, who was first introduced in Chapter Two. Juliet is a somewhat older, more experienced collector than some of her colleagues, having been at Alpha for nine years. Whilst she is clearly good at her job, it seems to not particularly enthuse her. This is, however, not apparently because of any major unease at having to routinely ask defaulters for money, or any concerns about the personal emotional impact of repeatedly having to make these calls. It appears more, as she says, because she feels 'a bit like a robot'. It is clear what she means: her calls are fairly standardised and similar to one another, with little room for personal expression. This is not meant to imply either that her job does not involve pushing for money or that her calls are wholly devoid of emotional content—the latter will be addressed shortly. However, her work also needs to be understood in relation to how Alpha's particular business model relies as much on its volume of calls made and accounts being worked as emotive input from individual agents. Listening to Juliet is thus to listen to a collector who maintains a steady tone and rarely gets flustered.

However, Juliet is successful. Take, for example, the course of the following conversation, with Emily. From her tone of voice, Emily is perhaps in her thirties, and has a soft Scottish accent. In this conversation, as with many at Alpha, it is clear that she has dealt with the company on at least one previous occasion. This particular call results from Emily ringing Alpha in order to arrange a payment on a long standing overdue debt, a call that is directed to Juliet. As Emily later reveals, after a period of unemployment she has recently been working for a temping agency, which means she feels that she will shortly be able to pay back some of her debt.

The conversation begins, as is usual in collections calls, with Juliet confirming Emily's identity, before Juliet attempts to fix the context that should, from her perspective, frame the call, by (re)stating the reasons for Emily's account now being handled by Alpha. Juliet's way of doing so, is to describe how the debtor's account has been 'escalated' by the

[94] This includes a random selection of recordings of conversations I was able to listen to at Beta, as well as at the third agency, Delta.

creditor and is now being dealt with instead by Alpha. On the one hand this appears to be a statement of fact. The move from creditor to contingency agency might seem to a debtor to mark a debt as having moved to a new, more serious point in its journey of default (see Chapter Six). On the other hand, however, in terms of the ownership of the debt, nothing has changed: the debt is still owned by the original creditor and the debtor's credit rating—which by this stage, will already have been significantly damaged by being marked by a recent 'default' flag in any case—will not be directly affected by this transfer.[95] In this context, Juliet's reference to a call being 'escalated' therefore can be seen as an attempt, even if understated, to generate the kind of emotive response from the debtor described in the previous chapter. The message is that the debtor's situation has undergone an irrecoverable shift, and should be now considered more serious, and accorded more focused attention than they might otherwise have given. This is an attempt to focus the debtor's calculative and emotional labour on their debt.

As the conversation progresses, it becomes punctuated by similar understated prompts. These include Juliet asking Emily twice whether she had the funds to pay the full outstanding balance—a figure of just over £3700—as well as offering a to 'settle' the debt for £3000, to in other words accept a reduced payment in exchange for closing the account. However, although these prompts are unsuccessful in their own terms, they do have an ancillary effect: Emily, who has called up with the intention of paying £100 off her debt, responds to Juliet's framing of the conversation as a space for negotiation. She revises her initial figure upwards: 'If I came into some money, obviously I would. I could maybe pay £150 today, then maybe £50, £60 thereafter?'. After a short pause, Juliet accepts. She reads the offer back, telling Emily that she will call back next month to reassess her situation, before organising the payment. 'That's great, yeah', says Emily, before she thanks Juliet 'very much' for her help, ending with a seemingly upbeat 'okey doke'.

From a regulatory point of view, this conversation—as perhaps could be expected given the research context—is more or less a model of compliance (see: OFT, , 2006). There is no use of 'misleading' threats to unlikely legal action. Juliet in fact at no point makes any threats against the caller, nor is her tone aggressive. Nor does she appear to mislead the

[95] It is possible for a contingency collection agency to access a defaulter's credit file, in the form of a search. This will show up on a debtor's credit file and, depending on the type of search, might impact negatively on their credit rating. The aim of such a search depends on the debtor's circumstance, however could include the need to view a debtor's wider payment history to other creditors prior to making or accepting a tailored individualised offer, or checking information that a debtor is providing (Experian, 2009a). However, not only is such fine grained detail not of much use in the course of a routine collections conversation, as was made clear to me during my time at Beta, accessing credit files in this way incurs a cost and therefore is only used as required.

caller. The conversation also seems to close on an upbeat tone, with an expression of gratitude on Emily's part.

But at the same time, from the collector's point of view, the conversation is a considerable success. Juliet may not have succeeded in collecting even close to the full outstanding balance, but this is not surprising: as was outlined in the Interlude, one of the effects of the restrictions on credit available to consumers post-2007 is, somewhat ironically, a decreased ability to pay off their debts by taking out further lines of credit, making large one-off payments increasingly hard to come by for the collector.

The conversation is therefore a success for Alpha on three counts: first, a single payment of £150 on a balance of this size is large by comparison to the many much lower payments that was the norm; second, this payment is 50% higher than Emily offers at the start of the conversation; and third, the debtor has committed herself to making future payments. Alpha has therefore seemingly done its job on the creditor's behalf: it has secured some repayment, over and above what the debtor was initially going to pay. And, perhaps more importantly, it has (it hoped), re-instigated a regular transfer of value going into the future. It has, to echo the previous chapter, seemingly re-secured the attachment of the debtor to the creditor's asset.

So how should we assess this apparently 'compliant' conversation in the context of the apparent disjuncture between the anxious, affective domestic spaces of debt collection and the seemingly depersonalised forms of interaction between defaulter and collector? There are multiple potential answers to this question, of which I will first outline three.

Answer #1: This is to be found by looking *inside* the content of the conversation. Even if in an understated way, Juliet does, like the letters on the debtor's doormat, attempt to generate moments of emotional, focused affective intensity, whether by pointing to the increasing seriousness of Emily's situation, or demanding the full balance. (This is an amount Juliet, through experience, would have known she was extremely unlikely to receive in the recently worsened economic climate). Here, it is the semantic content of the language that does the ontological work: in the course of their interaction, drawing on mutually understood social cues, both Emily's debt and Alpha become filled with 'meaning'.

Answer #2: This is to be found by looking *outside* the content of this conversation, at Alpha's position in relation to the wider credit market (and beyond). As noted earlier, Alpha is particularly expert in dealing with low balance accounts, which tend to be at quite a late stage in the collections cycle—in other words, accounts in which the amounts owed are comparatively low and which have often already passed through other contingency agencies prior to Alpha. As a rough guide, the average balance across 30 calls, excluding one very high balance account (over £14,000) was £1,276.[96] When collecting on these accounts, the focus thus shifts from the semantic and emotive content of individual calls and towards the successful management of a high volume of accounts, in order to generate low margin returns. This means the business operations of Alpha can be seen as drawing on the practices of other related industries, notably those involved in forms of direct marketing. In Alpha's case, collections conversations can therefore afford to remain mundane, because they are able to run a profitable business by making numerous small returns on accounts—for example, by securing regular payments of as small as £5, or increasing payments from £5 to £10. A key to their success is to be able to do this more often and at a lower cost than many of their rivals. This answer looks towards Alpha's particular socio-economic context, its relationship with its competitors and the wider industry, and the particular way it generates value in contrast to others.

Answer #3. This is to be found by looking *in between* the content of the conversation. In Juliet's conversation with Emily, despite its almost mundane quality, and despite it never appearing to be heading towards an emotional crescendo, the affective, anxious landscape that collections calls are often mixed up with, cannot escape the conversation in its entirety. For, despite its absence in the discursive content of Juliet and Emily's conversation, and despite a lack of any explicit acknowledgement of its existence by Juliet, it can, as so often with collections conversations, be traced in the interstices—in particular in Emily's tone of voice. When Emily speaks she is quiet and stuttering. Although she is resolutely polite and occasionally upbeat, the impression she delivers is of a person who is timid, nervous and, perhaps, frightened. The delivery of her final 'okey doke' sums this up. A variation of the phrase has in part been popularised by becoming the catchphrase of Ned Flanders, the long suffering neighbour of Homer Simpson, in the animated television sitcom *The Simpsons*. Flanders' 'okeley dokely' has come to sum up his near-constant unquenchable optimism in the face of the challenges delivered by a modern world. In particular, it captures his cheery determination to lead his life by (Christian) values of tolerance and forbearance, even when these principles seem rarely to be reflected back to him by others, nor generate little in the way of return. In Emily's case, however, a comparable optimism appears all but extinguished: she renders her 'okey doke' in such a sad, resigned tone, that it infects the conversation with a deep pathos; it speaks of a life being lived at optimism's

[96] In fact, a number of these accounts had already been passed to other contingency agencies which were in fact 'trading styles' of the original creditor; this practice will be examined in the following chapter.

limits.[97] In this version of the answer, there is an attempt to restore some of the emotive, tonal fragments that are not taken into account by Juliet but which nonetheless continue to threaten at the margins. This therefore can be seen as the tracing of the unequal contestation between two modes of articulation; the first is that deployed by Emily, in which she is unable to wholly separate the affective impact of dealing with the collector from the conversation; the second is that deployed by Juliet and the debt collection industry more widely, in which the emotional landscape of debt default is marginalised, being framed as a peripheral concern.[98]

One way of looking at each of these answers is to see them as emerging out of different analytical traditions. The first approximates to a phenomenologically informed analysis: it charts the way in which intersubjective understandings between two actors are arrived at, delivered through language. Even if in a tiny, micro-sociological way, this conversation can be seen as drawing on and in turn reinforcing socially and culturally constituted systems of meaning. Despite the highly constrained and disciplinary nature of the debt collection conversation, it is still a conversation. It is thus still a mechanism, through which real people, in the course of their everyday lives (even if one is at work), create and redefine social and, in this case, socio-economic boundaries. Here, the object of contestation is the degree to which the socio-economic obligation Emily has to her debt translates, in the present, to a transfer of value from her to the collector. Of course, as a research site, this is not ideal for such an analytical approach and, as such could only be the beginnings of a phenomenology of consumer credit collections. To understand in more depth the meaning of this obligation to Emily, we might, from this perspective, have to venture more closely into Emily's life, to understand these categories more clearly from her perspective. Within economic sociology, this analytical tradition might be understood to include, for example, Viviana Zelizer's study of the domestic 'marking' of monies and intimate relations (Zelizer,

[97] This bears comparison with Lauren Berlant's exploration of the 'cruel optimism' of those with 'a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility' (Berlant, 2006: 21). Miranda Joseph should also be acknowledged as the first to draw out in detail the significance of Berlant's work for the consideration of consumer credit borrowing practices (Joseph, 2010).

[98] This is not to say that it is excluded from consideration in its entirety; this is, however, principally framed around the twin issues of 'harassment' and 'mental health'. In relation to the former, debt collection takes place within a regulatory framework in which the collector must be able to demonstrate to the regulator that the conduct of their business is not 'oppressive or otherwise unfair or improper', with the OFT having powers to potentially withdraw a company's credit license if they receive evidence that it is not acting accordingly. Practices considered improper or unfair include 'putting pressure on debtors or third parties' (third parties being those that might be nominated on a debtor's behalf); 'contacting debtors at unreasonable times and at unreasonable intervals'; 'making threatening statements […] or taking actions which suggest harm to debtors' (OFT, , 2006). Industry guidelines also require creditors and collectors to have processes and systems in place to deal with those with mental health issues; however, it is worth noting that the responsibility for diagnosing does not lie with the collector and that it thus only becomes an issue that needs to be considered 'from the point at which the creditor is made explicitly aware of (a) mental health problem(s)' (Money Advice Liaison Group, 2007: 7)

1997, 2001) (see Chapters One, Three and Four), or Patrik Aspers' phenomenological study of fashion markets (Aspers, 2005).

The second answer is not too distantly related to the first; the difference is principally a matter of scale. In this answer, the conversation can be understood in relation to larger scale systemic forces. The debt collection conversation as a site of socio-economic interaction certainly still continues to be understood as a key component of the composition of the debt collection industry, however it needs to be 'embedded' within wider socio-economic norms and practices. As is implicit in using this terminology, within economic sociology, this analytical tradition might be understood to include 'new economic sociology' (see Chapter Three) whose most high profile representatives include the likes of Paul DiMaggio (1994), Frank Dobbin (1994), Neil Fligstein (2001) and Jens Beckert (Beckert & Harshav, 2002; Beckert, 2009).[99] In an attempt to counter economics' explanatory framework that has at the centre the maximising individual, this approach *socially roots* both the individual and the firm.

The third answer can be seen as drawing on a form of post-Foucauldian analysis (for example: Jäger & Maier, 2009; Wodak & Meyer, 2009), which sees communicative interaction as one site through which to trace the enactment of historically specific knowledge practices.[100] This includes focusing on what knowledge practices are valid at certain places and times, on the way that certain forms of subjectivity are enacted through these knowledge practices (Jäger & Maier, 2009: 34). In the case of Emily and Juliet's conversation, the attempt to reinsert some of the affective landscape that leaks between the cracks of the conversation, can be seen as pointing towards the existence of an (unequal) competition between modes of knowledge that in this setting are viewed as incompatible. More specifically, over the course of the conversation, in particular in the negotiation over repayment, it is possible to view Emily variously being enacted as a subject of calculative choice (even if constrained). This occurs in and through the haggling over the amount Emily will pay back, which at the same time frames her anxiousness as irrelevant to the conduct of this market. Such an analysis might be the beginnings of an attempt to trace in the interactions between collector and debtor the enactment of debtors according to modes of contemporary economic governance. The result is to bring the analysis close to currents in a Foucauldian inspired economic sociology centring around the analysis of processes and tactics of neoliberal governmentality (Barry, Osborne, & Rose, 1996; Burchill, Gordon, &

[99] This is not, of course, to claim that this field is homogeneous.
[100] Such an approach might also, however, explore the role played by material devices or 'dispositifs', as outlined by Jäger and Maier (2009).

Miller, 1991; Gordon, 1991; in relation to consumer credit, see: Langley, 2008a; Marron, 2009).

In this chapter, however, I want to propose a fourth answer, one which speaks to and is informed by each of the above, without claiming that this is in any way a unifying synthesis.

Answer #4. This operates within the analytical space opened up by the dialogue between the study of process of 'captation' and the 'capture of affect', or what can be called *affective captation*. This is to be found in seeing both the content of collections conversations (Answers #1 and #3) and the relations within and between collections companies (Answer #2) as pointing to just some of the multiple potential modes of ordering to be found in the relationships that make up the assemblage that is consumer debt collection. From this perspective, debt collection is a site for interlinked, variably deployed socio-material market operations. Methodologically closest to the post-Foucauldian approach, this is interested in tracing the ways in which affective, embodied forms of knowledge are enacted. However, it not only does so by tracing these through both linguistic and non-linguistic/material relations, it sees these as variably and differentially achieved. It is thus not the absence of a theory of materiality in such Foucauldian analyses that is being critiqued here *per se* (although, as McFall (2009a: 53) argues, such approaches may not provide enough of a 'steer' towards materiality), rather the tendency to efface the multiple, processual, not necessarily compatible, and *not necessarily successful* 'modes of ordering' through which entities are enacted (Mol, 2002: 61-71) (see Chapter One). This includes understanding how debt and defaulter are made in and through the domestic spaces of debtors, as explored in previous chapters, how they are made in and through the collections conversation, but also—as will be the particular focus on this chapter—how they are made in and through debt collection seen as a process of (attempted) *strategic* ordering.

With this in mind, I want now to move towards examining the collections conversation as one variable component in a collections *trajectory*, by moving away from Alpha and towards Beta, a major UK debt purchaser.

'Green' and 'Red' teams: A view into a collections trajectory

As outlined at the beginning of the chapter, Beta is a debt purchaser that largely 'works' accounts itself, rather than sending them out to external agencies or re-selling them on to others for a profit. Given that they usually seek to collect on an account until they achieve some form of resolution—a process which could sometimes take years—what a view into Beta offers, is a view on a collections trajectory more or less in its entirety. That is to say, whereas a view into Alpha opens up (broadly) only one mode of engaging with the debtor—the successful management of high volumes of accounts on behalf of multiple creditors—at Beta, as we will see, things become far more complicated.

In order to avoid breaching Beta's anonymity, it is necessary to introduce some ambiguity into the description of its operations. Hence, suffice it to say that Beta divides up its call centre into between four and eight different teams. Each team is assigned a different name, and each is responsible for a different 'stage' in the collections process. Each team is managed individually, has its own targets, and undertakes a relatively distinct role. Broadly, the collections stages represent the proximity of the account towards either legal action or, potentially, being actually or effectively written off.[101] Hence, this ranges from a team that deals with accounts that Beta has just purchased (which I will call the 'Green' team), to one (the 'Red' team) that deals with accounts that were told that they are on the cusp of being subject to legal action by Beta's lawyers, with a number of other teams sitting in-between these two poles. There is also an additional team, whose role was to deal with accounts where the debtor has agreed to make regular repayments and to ensure the ongoing successful management of these accounts (as well as boost returns where possible).

These teams are laid out in linear fashion, mirroring the debtor's potential journey down this trajectory. Towards one end of the long call centre is the Green team, at the other the Red; in-between these are the other teams, in order. The key variable that predicts a debtor's place on this trajectory is time passed: newer accounts tend to be at one end and older accounts at the other (although it is not always so simple, as will be explored below). The result is that just looking at how Beta has chosen to lay out its call centre and partition its staff, provides a simple spatial overview of the temporal trajectory that many defaulting debtors at Beta follow, if they fail to respond adequately to the collector's prompts.

This layout also broadly matches the mode of communicative interaction to which debtors would be potentially subject. Those further away from legal action, hence closest to the Green team, tend to be dealt with more 'gently' and those closest to legal action, and closer to Red, are generally dealt with more 'firmly'. One collector, for instance, characterised the respective difference as one of 'carrots' and 'sticks'. Compare for instance the following extracts from collections conversations at Beta, ranging from earlier in the collections process...

> "…you're in a really good position to get a massive discount on your outstanding balance…"

[101] This distinction refers to the fact that a collector might decide to effectively 'park' a debt that they are having little success with, rather than formally write it off. The former means choosing to temporarily halt, or cut back collections activities, in the hope that the debtor's situation may improve over time, or that the collector might later find new information that might be of use (often tending to be more up-to-date contact details).

"…obviously I understand, it's a recession at the moment…"

"…I do appreciate your circumstances…"

... to later:

"…as you can imagine, the situation with this account is now quite serious…"

"…your account has got to quite a serious point in our debt collections process…"

"…you need to understand that this needs to be resolved and you're not cooperating with us…"

"…obviously, this has come on to the final stage—[this needs to be resolved], otherwise it will go to an external agent, or our litigation agency…"

These are, to return to Cochoy's terms, *different modes of captation*, at either end of a spectrum.[102] At one end, the debtor is framed as a subject with whom the collector can collaborate in the restoration of their attachment to their debt. This mode includes a greater focus on intersecting with debtors at the level of rational, intersubjective discourse, including almost 'selling' to the debtor, usually by seeking to tempt them into clearing their balance at a discounted rate.

Unless the collector can offer some form of resolution there is little chance of being able to produce 'positive' affective responses from the debtor. However, in the above modes of address are also signs of variably enacted attempts to capture and manage the emergent, anxiousness which debtors frequently bring to collections calls (as noted in relation to Emily above). These include modes of attention that can be seen as erring towards the therapeutic, including periods of attentive, uncritical listening. It is this mode of engagement to which a sign that hung over the collections centre presumably refers, which states simply the word 'EMPATHY'. And it is also to this mode of engagement that one team leader is presumably referring to when he jokingly instructs his team, 'can we turn off debt counselling please?!'. He feels, in other words, that in spending too much time listening to and/or empathising with their callers, his team was in danger of losing sight of their ultimate aim: to bring in revenue. At this end of the spectrum, there are attempts to enact a debtor that *do* resemble the subject of neoliberal forms of governance, as described by post-Foucauldian governmentality studies. They are more likely to be understood as subjects that retain a degree of capacity for self-governance, even if this latent capacity has to be given a push via quasi-therapeutic modes of engagement. The obligations a debtor has to their debts are reframed as both moral and self-interested *responsibilities*. If the debtor can be seen as a debtor-customer hybrid, at this end of the spectrum, the modes of captation are more oriented towards the debtor as customer.

[102] The reference to spectrum is not to meant to imply a linear relationship; these modes of ordering are of course heterogeneous and variably differentiated. But at the same time it *is* meant to imply the existence of a hierarchy of forcefulness, one which is quite deliberately constructed and enacted across the collections cycle.

At the other end of the spectrum, however, the attempts to enact the debtor-customer occur along very different lines. This is the part of the journey of debt default that Paul Rock describes as 'a progress into controlled unpleasantness' (1973: 65). It is here that the modes of captation become far more disciplinary. The modes of address directed towards the debtor-customer are far more explicitly directed at the relationships of *legal* obligation that construct this pairing: the debtor-customer hybrid is more a debtor(-customer). Here too, there are clear attempts to capture any negative affective responses that might already be circulating in and through the debtor's world. However, rather than using them as a way of potentially transforming the debtor into a responsible economic citizen, the strategies of captation move closer towards seeing the debtor as an embodied subject of discipline. More important than empathising with the debtor or activating a latent, self-governing subject is the attempt by the collector to impose *their* account of what that debtor's situation is on the debtor, exemplified by collectors instructing the debtor as to what they 'need to understand'. The debtor is less to be reasoned with and understood, and more to be made to feel *more* fearful of their present situation and future consequences.

It is worth noting that at Beta there is also evidence of the collections industry attempting to create a fit between the dispositions of particular collectors and the role they played in this process. One manager at Beta, for instance, drawing on a football metaphor, told me how 'you don't play a left back in goal'. What he means is that he, and the company, are actively aiming to match collectors to the variable approaches being deployed across the collections trajectory. This is captured by the difference in the approaches and hopes of two collectors: Sandra and Ian. Sandra is an older collector, perhaps in her 40s, who has only recently joined Beta after her thirteen year career as a chef was cut short by a recurrent back condition. She reflects upon how difficult she finds it to ask some debtors for money, recalling one instance where she noticed that the date of birth of one debtor meant that she was in her 80s. This left her struggling with her conscience at being required to ask for a repayment; as she says '[w]ell, I just wanted to say no, you don't have to pay'. However, she recently moved into the team that primarily deals with the management of ongoing accounts, within which she is happier, because it feels, as she puts it, more like 'customer services'. Ian, by contrast, is in his early 20s, and has recently left an estate agency to work at Beta. He has been assigned to one of the early-stage collections teams. However he tells me he feels like he is frustrated at constantly having to 'hold himself back' and remain relatively gentle with debtors. He is, he says, looking forward to the day when he might have a chance to work in the harder-edged 'red' team. This may to some extent be connected to the greater financial rewards that can potentially come to those working in, or closer to the final red team, something Ian points towards. However, what is clear, and somewhat unnerving, is Ian's personal passion for a job that many might imagine to be not only stressful, but also controversial.

The variable attempts at enacting debtors as payers in and through the collections process are not, however, limited to the content of conversations: across the collections industry as a whole, these can be seeing being operationalised in a range of ways (including via collections letters; this is the subject of the next chapter). One is the increasing use of econometric techniques in the analysis of debtor behaviour, by both debt purchasers and creditors, the latter in their internal collections departments.[103] For reasons that will become clear, Beta is one such organisation.

Data for this analysis can stem from, and combine, two principal sources. The first is the information that has already been collected by a creditor in relation to the particular account in question. [104] The second is so-called 'white data'. This is highly detailed information on individual accounts shared by creditors to credit reference agencies. This data covers a range of variables, including not only the particular payment performance history of the account in question, but data across all those accounts that report to the particular 'user group' to which they subscribe. It also includes information on any court action that has been successfully taken against a debtor.

Part of the function of econometric analysis in this industry is often to help debt purchasers make decisions as to how to price debt portfolios they are interested in purchasing (although their use of white data in this regard is currently restricted). But an additional usage in the collections industry is, by looking at the past performance of accounts, to identify what Daniel, a credit reference agency industry consultant, referred to as the 'low hanging fruit' for particular attention.[105] These are debtors with the ability to repay, who have in the past shown signs of being the *kind of people* that are more likely to repay and/or the kind of people are likely to repay *more* (than others in an otherwise similar

[103] This argument is made with the caveat that this is a relatively new development in the world of debt collection (unlike its use in the lending decision—see: Poon (2007)) and thus is, as Daniel, working at a major UK credit reference agency, suggested, not being uniformly used across the industry. Further, given that it privileged company information, it is not possible to provide a quantitative measure of how prevalent this is. However, Daniel listed a number of large UK creditors employing such techniques, including a number of major debt purchasers and high street lenders. It should also be noted that it may be the latter of these that are making the most sophisticated use of these techniques; these techniques are being undertaken, as he put it, by 'the bigger banks, who will do it properly'.

[104] This includes the data passed from original creditor to the debt purchaser (the new legal creditor) at the point of purchase.

[105] UK debt purchasers have, since 2007, had access post-purchase to so-called 'white data'. This is highly detailed information which covers a range of variables, including not only the particular payment performance history of the account in question, but data across all those accounts that report to the particular 'user group' to which they subscribe. The industry is, however, lobbying to have access to this data pre-purchase, as reported by Tessara, a major UK debt purchaser (Tessera, 2010).

situation).[106] These are the emergent, embodied, dispositional tendencies, formed out of the highly complex, particular combination of life history and lived body, a tendency that, for the collector that can both identify it and *connect to it*, offers a major competitive advantage.

The person that the collector seeks is that person which, when confronted by a debt collections letter, or when called by a debt collector, is simply marginally more likely than someone otherwise (seemingly) very similar to them, to respond (more) positively. The variables that predict this tendency could be manifold and will vary considerably according to the particular composition of a debt portfolio. As Daniel puts it:

> There will be a lot of different variables. […] What we would do is take a sample and look at the variables that are appropriate type of predictors. So you've got a known outcome […]: you've [successfully] collected [from] this person [and] you didn't [successfully] collect from this person. And you'd look at the variables that predict [that]. And it could be a range of 3000 different variables. So it could be 'Balance to Limit', it could be 'Pays by Direct Debit', it could be 'Has CCJ'. It could be lots and lots of different variables.[107]

In other words, the variable does not particularly matter (to the collector). The analyst—sometimes credit reference agencies who sell their services on—will feed as much data as they can into a database and run models on it. Those variables that emerge as most predictive are, they will suggest, those on which selections and decisions should be based.

There are parallels that can be drawn between this use of econometric modelling and the calculus that surrounds processes of brand management, as described by Lury (2004). Here, she writes, the econometric analysis of consumer behaviour operates within the marginal differences between preferences: '[t]here is no necessary proportionality between causes and effects here; instead an economic calculus (or rationality) of statistical *probability* is at work' (2004: 50; original emphasis). In and through the amplification of minute dispositional tendencies, it is possible to identify that group of defaulters who should have more money invested in them, in the hope of generating a return. That is to say, these are the people that a collector will want to both target first (to get to them before other collectors to) and to target more intensively (for example more letters, more phonecalls).

One effect of this, however, is to generate a perverse politics of debt collection: pointing the collector *towards* those who respond most readily to the prompts of the collector also

[106] Take, for instance, the following extract, transcribed from a US collections industry online webinar, subtitled 'Maximising results by identifying dollars and payers': 'you could [use these techniques] to set up your strategy into those groups […]: these are most likely to pay me, these are least likely to pay me. I'm going to pay more attention to those accounts that are most likely to pay me. I'm going to spend less time on those accounts least likely [to pay] unless [I have resources]. You develop these strategies with costs taken into account. You wouldn't want to be inundating yourself with extra mailings, or [tracing] accounts that aren't looking to pay you a lot of money, or aren't looking to pay you. You'd want to spend those monies […] on those accounts that most likely were' (Banasiak, 2009: 16:40-17:20)

[107] 'Balance to Limit' is, fairly self-evidently, the ratio of the account balance on an account, to the credit limit; a CCJ is a 'County Court Judgement', used to refer to the existence of a judgement connected to the particular account, handed down by a county court in favour of a petitioning creditor.

means pointing the collector *away* from those who respond the least readily. As one industry figure writes, arguing for the value of such techniques:

> Of course, the biggest challenge facing collectors has not changed for decades—maybe even centuries! How do you tell the difference between the 'can't pays' and 'won't pays'?
>
> Obviously there is little point chasing people who cannot pay. So the key is to identify those people that have the means to pay and then take steps to trace them. (Hamilton, 2010)

In other words, those whose past track-record marks them out as potentially more resistant/elusive/destitute/stubborn than others in an otherwise similar position may be subject to less intensive collection practices. From the collector's point of view, it simply is not worth wasting money on them. This goes directly *against* the neoliberal idealisation of the self-governing economic citizen. Difficult to manage debtors are, from the point of view of the collector, rewarded for their non-normative behaviour. Easy to manage debtors are, however, punished.[108]

I will return to a discussion of the politics of some of these processes in the Conclusion. However, the use of such technologies is not restricted to the binary identification of whether a debtor is a payer or not. It can, as in the case of Beta, not only shape *who* is targeted for attention, but *how* debtors, of all sorts, are attended to. This can be explored by reference to a common device in the global collections industry: a collections flow chart. These are used to visualise and develop strategy at various scales, ranging from the macro—for example, to provide a complete overview of a company's collections strategy, incorporating the relationship between different divisions—to the more micro, for example as a way of representing the strategy of a single team or group of collectors.[109] An example of the latter is shown in figure 7 below. This draws loosely on a chart shown to me during my time at Beta, whilst also making a number of changes in order to avoid disclosing details of Beta's particular business operations.[110]

This flow chart shows potential paths along which a debtor might progress if s/he does not respond to the prompts of the collector in a way deemed to be acceptable—usually involving either repaying an agreed amount of the debt, or setting up a future payment arrangement. On this chart, these paths are divided into 'stages': each begins with an action; the debtor enters the next stage if s/he does not respond 'acceptably'. In this simplified

---

[108] This is, in itself, a normative claim. However, I want to emphasize that this is the view of this particular interaction seen *from the collector's* perspective. To otherwise use the language of reward in relation to individuals who may be at their very lowest ebb would not be only inappropriate, it would miss the multiple causal factors that lead (put simply) some debtors to be 'payers' and some not to be.

[109] I was able to view a number of these while interviewing Daniel.

[110] Not only has the chart been significantly simplified, the sequence of events, timings, number and types of letters used, the type of actions to which debtors can be subject to, as well as the number and type of teams at Beta, and their relation to one another, have been amended so as to avoid disclosing any privileged company information. Hence, this chart is indicative of some of the *principles* that can inform collections sequences, rather than a faithful representation of any one team or company's particular practices.

chart, each stage is also marked by a uniform ten day time frame, indicating the minimum amount of time the debtor will be allowed to respond before s/he will be advanced to the next stage and be subject to the next action.

In this example, the most frequent action is the regular issue of automatically generated letters. The content of these letters varies by degree of forcefulness, here 'gentle', 'medium' and 'hard' (specific examples will be discussed in the following chapter). In addition, if a debtor's phone number is accurate and available, it is common practice to follow up letters by placing debtors 'into the dialler'—in other words, to put the debtor into the queue of calls which have been allocated to the autodialler in that particular period. This represents an attempt to maximise the impact of debtors having recently received a letter, by also being able to talk to them directly.

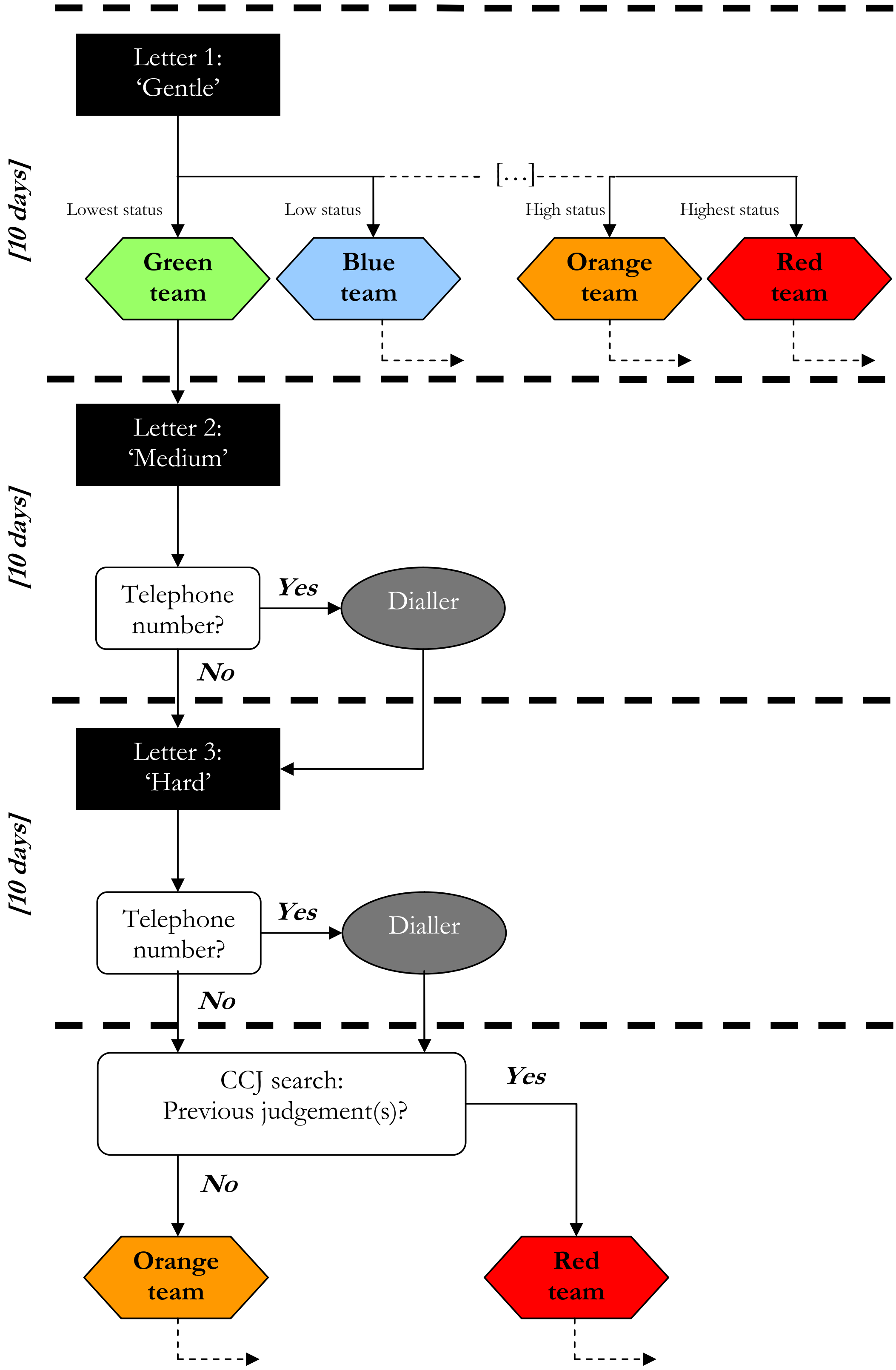
In many respects, this mirrors the organisation of staff across the call centre in line with the trajectory of 'controlled unpleasantness'. Although on a smaller scale, again affective intensity is variably and strategically deployed, with 'time passed' (without resolution from/contact with the debtor) being its key axis. There is also the possibility of debtors leapfrogging 'softer' teams if, by some measure, their account is identified as more serious. Here, for instance, after three unsuccessful letters the collector undertakes a CCJ check, moving those that are flagged as 'positive' (in other words, they have had a legal judgement successfully enforced against them by another creditor in the past) straight to the hardest 'Red' team.[111]

It is, however, the introduction of econometric calculus that provides the collector with a far more nuanced range of options. As shown above, after the initial letter, the action to which a particular debtor will be subject varies according to a measure of their overall 'status'. This assessment is a result of the analysis of a range of variables pertaining to their account, which attempts to capture the likelihood of a positive response by the debtor, as well as taking into account the potential income that is at stake. This enables the collector to be able to act pre-emptively. As soon as the initial letter is shown to have been unsuccessful, the individualised assessment of debtor status allows the collector to decide precisely *how* they are to be dealt with. This includes trying to decide quickly which debtors will have to be moved much closer to legal action.

The relationships that this flowchart visualises can thus be summarised as referring to individually enacted practices of: (1) deploying socio-material technologies of contact

[111] Other options available to the collector include requesting credit reports, used to assess the recent patterns of payments by the debtor on other credit accounts, or land registry searches, used to assess whether the debtor owns any property which might be relevant in assessing possible legal action that could be undertaken.

Figure 7. 'Green Team' collections flow chart



(letters and phone calls) into the intimate spaces of debtors' homes; (2) channelling debtors along different paths by both (a) reacting to the debtors actions/inactions over time and (b) grouping debtors by knowledge about their past actions, notably via econometric scoring but also by drawing on other external datasets; (3) undertaking all this in relation to a strategically deployed hierarchy of affective intensity.

To be a debtor that passes along this flowchart is thus to be subject to forms of performative *in vitro and in vivo experimentation* (Çalışkan & Callon, 2010: 19; see also: Callon, 1998; Callon & Muniesa, 2005; Lury, 2004; Mcfall, 2009a; Thrift, 2007). Both the debtor's past and their actions as they move through the present provide the empirical grounding for a process of repeated 'testing', aimed at discovering what kind of debtor they are—or, more precisely*, what kind of debtor 'dispositions'* they have (Cochoy, 2007a) (see p. 34).

But, given the highly personal, affectively oriented mechanisms through which these experiments operate, they are of a particularly intimate sort. In this respect there are resonances with the work of Noortje Marres (2009). This looks at sustainable living experiments, focusing on the role played by devices that aim to render visible to a person their own environmental entanglements (for example eco-kettles, smart electricity meters). Here, she writes, is to be found an experimental metaphysics centred around problematising the intimate, often unseen 'background' of our passage through domestic space. These technologies, Marres suggests, 'foreground the intimacy of our lives with material objects' (2009: 121). More particularly, she argues, they aim to deliberately problematise everyday, domestic material practices and thus to render visible to us the unavoidable attachments between ourselves and the (issue of the) environment.[112] These are therefore devices that are *deliberately formatted* to intervene in and transform our everyday lives.

The parallels with debt collection should be clear: both debt collection practices and green living experiments aim to problematise attachments that *already* bind a person to an 'issue' (whether the 'public' issue of climate change, or the more 'private' issue of a defaulting debt), an issue that exists even prior to their arrival. Moreover, both do so by intervening and reshaping defaulters' domestic spaces, and they both do so strategically. Debt collection can, however be considered to operate in even more intimate, personal spaces. For a defaulting debt is not a public issue, but a private one. That is not to say that there are not aspects of the intimate landscape of consumer credit default that do not or

[112] Marres in fact uses the term 'entanglement' not attachment in this article; I substitute the latter for reasons of consistency. However, Marres herself comments on the opportunities the language of attachments affords elsewhere (Marres, 2007).

cannot be attached to other issues, whether in households, or via modes of public-isation (see Introduction and Chapter Five).[113] However, the debt collector's aim is to *keep* this attachment private, an attachment that pertains to the interaction between collector, debtor, and their own debt; this is part of the 'framing' of economic space as apolitical (Callon, 1998).

The management of the debt collections journey in these ways can therefore be considered as the strategic 'engineering of affect' (Thrift, 2007: 182). That is, at different points in the collection process and in different ways, debtors are approached by collectors as agents whose emergent, emotive responses offer affordances to the collector. This is not to say that these processes of enactment are always successful, or uniform. But in their attempts, they are almost unavoidably implicated in the ongoing reconstitution of the debtor and their world.

Conclusion

The segmentation of collections teams according to the seriousness of debts, the related changes in tone of the collections calls within these teams, the strategic deployment of collectors' personalities, and the use of carefully constructed collections trajectories as represented in the above collections flow chart: all point to the ways in which certain market assemblages may secure the attachment of market actors in and through the management of their emotional landscape. In particular, the emergent, anxious states of debtors offer the collector affordances that they can seek to exploit, via processes of 'affective captation'.

But also, this chapter has pointed to the ways that such processes are not necessarily inadvertent, but can be deeply cut-through with strategy. Of course contemporary consumer collections practices depend in part on the ability of collection companies to combine technologies of mass contact with collections personnel capable of increasing the income received from collections phone calls. However this is increasingly being combined as part of a collections trajectory in which debtors' emergent anxious states are being strategically operationalised within a *managed process* of collections. As the next chapter will explore, this is a process that is sometimes controlled by original creditors, who use both internal processes and external companies to enact trajectories similar to those described above. But at Beta, a debt purchaser, it is possible to view one such trajectory being operationalised within a single collections organisation.

[113] See, for instance, Chapter Four's discussion of the connections that leak out of the relationship between debtor and debt into the wider household; or see the Introduction for an account of the public space occupied by the issue of debt default.

The debt collection process can thus be seen as one of many contemporary market assemblages that draw on an experimental metaphysics in their attempt to keep a hold on their sources of income. In so doing, consumer debt collection stands as an example of a form of market-making that does so not simply by obtaining and acting on information about potential customers (here: repayers), but by seeking to reshape their world. This is, to return to the terms of Chapter Three, a market metaphysics in which reality of market actors is being differentially and iteratively "transformed" and "disclosed" (Stengers, 2005: 42).

In the case of debt collection, however, doing so does not mean securing an attachment where previously there was none. Here, then, is less a form of market attachment that is 'constantly threatened' (Callon et al., 2002: 205) and more a form of attachment that needs to be coaxed and revived, via different modes of captation. The collector thus tries to *enliven the existing attachments* that bring the debtor to them. In so doing, attempts are made to variably and strategically enact the debtor as different types of economic citizen, ranging from being treated as a customer who comes to the market encounter with agency, to being treated as coming to the market encounter almost wholly through their relationships of legal, enforceable obligation. This can be seen as the attempt to constitute the debtor according to a spectrum of not necessarily compatible 'modes of ordering'. At one end, the debtor is constituted as retaining the latent capacity for economic self governance; at the other, s/he is constituted as an embodied subject of discipline.

It is also worth noting that in this strategic capture of affect, the collector is able to work more or less successfully within regulatory constraints. This is not to deny the existence of practices that break these constraints, but to highlight how econometric, experimental analysis is being used to point the collector to new modes of connecting with the debtor. Rather than the efficacy of collections organisations operating around those procedures that can deliver the strongest threats to the debtor, increasingly, their efficacy operates around their ability to be adaptive. That means not only being able to identify those which will respond to threats and entreaties most readily, but to adapt the organization of debt collection practices to the debtor's dispositional tendencies. This is, even if in a crude way, not only the formatting by the collector *of* the debtor's world, but also the mutual, iterative adjustment of the collector *to* the debtor's world.

At the same time, however, there is a politics to this, one which evades the attention of regulatory control. Part of this politics operates around the increasing ability of collectors to map and intersect with debtors' emergent dispositions, to target those who are less able to resist the collector's prompts. But at the same time, given the tendency for defaulting debtors to owe money to multiple creditors, part of the politics of debt collection needs to be understood by not only focusing on the relationships within one company, as this chapter has done. It also needs to focus on the relations *between* companies. It is this relationality—and sometimes the strategic construction of this relationality—which is one important component in understanding both the affective and political landscape that contemporary debt collection practices are involved in. This is the task pursued by the next chapter.

7. Trading Styles: Following an Internal Collections Trajectory

'Fair is foul and foul is fair…'
(Macbeth, Act I, Scene I)

Introduction

In Chapter Three, this thesis explored the role played by some of the sociotechnical devices that attach debtors to their consumer credit debts at the beginnings of their journey into default. As part of this, it examined the role played by the credit statement. The statement, it was argued, is seen as the device that could (potentially) 'restore' calculation; by regulators in particular, it is idealised as a transparency-enabling device, which could somehow manage and contain the uncertainty of the future.

The statement is (enacted as) all of these things. But it is also something else: it is also a collections device. Even if it is not framed as such by the lending industry, its monthly arrival can nonetheless be seen as a routine deployment of a socio-material collections technology into debtors' homes. In making this assertion, I draw on an insight from Helen, a director at Alpha, the contingency collections agency that we visited in the previous chapter. She says: 'Your credit card company every month sends you a statement, that's collecting their debt, you're paying them. Just because we tend to do it when it's gone into arrears or default, *[it] isn't any different*' (emphasis added). On one hand this is a conclusion that is clearly self-serving: Helen tries to de-politicise consumer collections by including it under the umbrella of consumer lending more generally—an activity that is understood for many as routine and everyday. But, on the other, it also lends itself to being read along different lines. For, while serving to de-politicise collections, her assertion can at the same time be read as (re-)politicising consumer lending. From the vantage point of the collections industry, the consumer lending business is also a collections business. Credit statements are, from this perspective, not mundane conveyors of account information, but soft collections letters. Whether the (re)distribution of the politics of debt default is quite so simple is a question that will be principally addressed in the Conclusion of this thesis. However, for present purposes, Helen's observation is important for two reasons. First, it refocuses attention on the fact that the material devices of both lending and collections *matter*, an argument that this thesis has pursued through. Second, it points to the fiction of an easy separation between lending and collections: they are part of an indivisible assemblage. Yet, as this chapter will explore, in the world of collections, this fiction too can come to matter.

In order to open up these questions further, it is necessary to focus more closely on the apparent disjuncture between the collections industry as seen from the collector's point of view, and the collections industry as seen from the defaulter's. As, for the latter, being subject to the technologies and practices of debt collection certainly *feels* very different (see Chapter Four). This chapter thus begins the task of exploring the following interrelated questions: what, precisely, *are* the differences between the forms of collection respectively enacted by the consumer credit lending industry and the consumer collections industry? Or, more precisely, how, and through what mechanisms, are differences made and similarities obscured? In addressing these questions, the chapter focuses on a central component of the collections trajectory: the creditor's own *internal* collections process. It is in this internal collections trajectory and, in particular, the *branding work* that is practiced as part of this trajectory, that *the generative capacity* of a difference between creditor and collector can be traced.

In so doing, the chapter draws on images of collections letters uploaded by users of the *Consumer Action Group* debt collection forum, the user generated debt advice resource explored in Chapter Five.[114] These letters enable the exploration of two interrelated components of consumer collections: first, it enables a more precise analysis of the function of collections letters, which I argued in Chapter Four can be seen as 'lures for feeling' to the debtor. Second, focusing on this *early* part of the collections process opens up at its clearest the relationship between creditor and collector. As noted in the Interlude, despite internal collections being a key part of the collections industry, it appears it does not like to be seen as such, with no primary creditors represented in the member's list of the debt collection industry's trade body, the Credit Services Association [CSA].[115] At the same time, this is an area of the collections market that is expanding rapidly, in both scope and sophistication (see p. 129). Indeed it is in this interstitial place that the debtor is made most aware of the ontological shift that will be repeatedly returned to over the course of the collections process: between the debtor as customer—desired, entreated, and 'good'—and the debtor as, simply, debtor—obliged, needed, and 'bad'. It is by looking here that some of the strangeness of the collections industry begins to reveal itself at its clearest. It is a world, to return to Macbeth's witches at the top of this chapter, where fair becomes foul and foul can, sometimes, become fair again.

[114] Here, however, I am simply indebted to those participants that have put into public a mode of interaction that is framed as private.
[115] See the CSA's UK members list at http://www.csa-uk.com/uk-members-list [Accessed 30.11.10].

The previous chapter has already documented the centrality to the collector of managing the *process* of collections, over time. Here I explore this further by presenting a dramatisation of a collections letter sequence. That is to say, this is a journey that reconstructs and puts into order some of the key stages through which an account might go through, when passing through a creditor's internal collections department, drawing on actual letters uploaded by debtors themselves. (Further examples of both contingency and debt purchaser letters can be found in Appendix 2). Whilst presenting genuine collections letters, this sequence aims not to simply represent, but to 'amplify' the realities of the journey of consumer credit default (Law, 2004: 116) (see p. 63).[116] Alongside its principal function as a heuristic device, presenting collections letters in this way also offers readers the smallest of windows into the experience of confronting such letters, perhaps for the first time.

Following an internal collections letter cycle

This journey will follow an account that begins life as a Halifax credit card account that is already quite far into the process of going 'bad'.[117] That is to say, the debtor is, for whatever reason, showing the creditor real signs that he or she is not willing or able to repay the full outstanding balance. The account is thus in arrears and is potentially heading towards default.[118] The result is that this particular account is passed to Halifax's internal 'Retail Bank Collections Team'.

As shown in figure 8, the letters this team sends out progress from an early stage collections letter (Letter 1), to a default notice (Letter 2), to a final 'last chance' letter (Letter 3). Each of these letters mark or draw attention towards a significant passage point on the journey into default. These are enacted by the deployment of a sequence of 'disentanglement' or detachment devices (Callon et al., 2002), serving both practical and symbolic functions. The first of these is designed to prevent the borrower building up any more credit. The key attachment device that mediated the customer-lender relationship up to this point—the credit card—is rendered inoperable, that is, 'cancelled'. At the same

[116] The sequence of letters depicted in this chapter has been reconstructed according to insights from a range of sources and, despite mirroring actual practices, does not attempt the task of mirroring the changing trajectories that collectors will deploy over time, or in relation to different types of debtor. (Some of these complexities were explored in the previous chapter).

[117] The choice of bank brand has been made primarily on the basis of the availability of letter evidence. As will be made clear later, similar processes are not restricted to this one bank, or its owners.

[118] Defined by the CMRC as follows: '[m]ost consumer lenders define 'default' as three consecutive missed payments and 'arrears' as one or more missed payments on revolving or fixed term credit accounts' (CMRC, , 2008: 27).

Figure 8. Three internal collections letters

HALIFAX

[Name]
[Address 1]
[Address 2]
[Address 3]
[Postcode]

Retail Bank Collections
PO Box 607
Trinity Road
Halifax
HX1 2UJ
Ref:[xxxxxxxxxxx]

[Date]

Letter 1: Early stage collections

PAY £ [xxx.xx] NOW
Phone: 0870 850 1298
We are open from 8.30am to 7.30pm Monday to Friday,
and from 8.30am to 12.30pm on Saturdays.

Roll Number: [000000000000000]
Overdrawn Amount: £ [xxx.xx]

Do not ignore this letter

Dear Sir/Madam

Despite our reminders, you still haven't brought your account up to date.

If you do not pay the overdrawn amount shown above within five days of the date of this letter, we will issue a 'default notice'. **A record of this will stay on your credit file for six years.**

If you do not take the action set out in the default notice, within the time given, we may hire a debt-collection agency to collect the full debt, or we may start legal action in the **county court. This will involve you getting a county court judgement against you, and bailiffs visiting your property to seize goods to the value of the debt.**

It is in your best interest to pay £[xxx.xx]now.

We have now cancelled your card. Do not try use it. Cut the card in half through the magnetic strip on the back of the card then send it back to us in the enclosed prepaid envelope.

Letter 2: Default notice

This is a default notice served under Section 87(1) of the Consumer Credit Act 1974.

Clause 2.2 of your terms and conditions contains details of the minimum payment you must make each month. You are in breach of that clause as arrears of £[xx.xx]are outstanding.

You must pay £[xx.xx]into your credit card account number [xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx] before [Date]

IF THE ACTION REQUIRED BY THIS NOTICE IS TAKEN BEFORE THE DATE SHOWN NO FURTHER ENFORCEMENT ACTION WILL BE TAKEN IN RESPECT OF THE BREACH.

IF YOU DO NOT TAKE THE ACTION REQUIRED BY THIS NOTICE BEFORE THE DATE SHOWN THEN THE FURTHER ACTION SET OUT BELOW MAY BE TAKEN AGAINST YOU.

We will terminate our agreement with you and close your credit card account [xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx]. You must pay the full balance owing on your account immediately. If you do not do this, we may take legal proceedings against you and/or instruct a debt collection agency to recover any amount you owe us on your account.

Letter 3: Last chance

We have recently issued a Notice of Default as you are in breach of your agreement.

You have failed to repay the requested amount by the date shown on the notice. As a result we have terminated your credit agreement.

Your account details are currently being transferred to a Debt Recovery Agent who will contact you in due course.

To prevent this course of action please ring us NOW.

Failure to do so will result in futher details of the default being passed to a licensed credit reference agency and recorded on your credit file. This will make it difficult for you to obtain credit in the future.

time, the creditor asserts their continuing claim over the device. They demand back redundant, effectively worthless pieces of plastic and electronics, cut into pieces. This seeks to effect a small, symbolic repossession.

The second passage point is legal: the serving of a 'default notice'. An unsecured creditor will typically spend at least some time trying to collect on outstanding debts, however after between 3 and 6 months without payment having been received the borrower will be formally notified that a debt will go into 'default' (if repayment is not made within 28 days).[119] This notification must be conveyed in written form before a creditor can take any action to recover all or part of a debt.[120] This letter is thus different from many associated with being subject to debt collection, in that it is filled with agency by a body outside of the collector: the legal framework within which the creditor is bound. However, it also marks a secondary passage point for the debtor, as the creditor must report the default to the credit reference agencies. This is, from the debtor's point of view, perhaps more serious than having a card cancelled. For, while missed payments will only have a temporary impact on a borrower's credit rating if repayments resume, a default stays on a credit file for six years. Having even one default on a credit file may severely impact the possibility of obtaining future credit through conventional routes for this period—as Daniel, from a major UK credit reference agency, put it 'when you have defaults on your credit file, you are instantly sub-prime, basically'.[121]

The final letter is less marking a passage point, as pointing towards one. It is framed as the last chance for the borrower to act, before the account is passed *away* from the creditor, towards a 'Debt Recovery Agent'. The message is clear: after this point, the debtor will have to deal with someone else.

It is important to recognise that in this journey from creditor towards collector, there are, to a greater extent than later in the collections cycle, *genuine* sanctions being threatened and enacted against the debtor. The debtor progressively loses their right to borrow from the creditor and, if they do not respond to Letter 3, their future right to other (non-sub-prime) credit. However, mixed in with these potential or actual sanctions are a range of other semiotic devices that seek to shape the calculative space of the debtor. Variations of most

[119] Default is often defined as having missed three consecutive payments (three months). As specified in recent industry guidance, unless there are particular circumstances which might warrant otherwise, the industry is expected *not* to routinely file accounts as being in default where payments have been missed for fewer than three months, but it is also expected *to* file default notices if payments have been missed for six consecutive months (Information Commissioners Office, 2007: 6).

[120] Which in accordance with amendments made in 2006, cannot commence until fourteen days after being issued (BIS, , 2006: 14.36).

[121] Default notices stay on a credit file for six years. Some lenders may choose to lend despite a default notice, however these tend to be sub-prime lenders, charging significantly higher interest rates.

of these are extremely common in the collections industry.[122] These include the deployment of explicit threats, including:[123]

- Threatening legal action: from highlighting—sometimes in bold—various possible legal outcomes, including action being taken in a 'county court', references to a 'county court judgement', 'bailiffs' and the particularly resonant promise of them 'visiting the property to seize goods to the value of the debt' (Letter 1), to the more nebulous threat of 'legal proceedings' (Letter 3).
- Threatening a debtor's credit file: although, it is worth noting that, by Letter 3, the threat has still not been carried out, despite being first raised in Letter 1. Notifying a credit reference agency of a default is an absolute passage point, not a continuum.

The letters also employ varied modes of address (see Chapter Five), including:

- Suggesting the borrower retains the (latent) capacity to self-govern: 'It is in your best interest…' (Letter 1); 'This will make it difficult for you to obtain credit in the future' (Letter 3); 'please' (Letter 3);…
- …as compared to seeing debtors as responding best to didactic orders: 'Do not ignore this letter' (Letter 1); 'Do not try to use it' (Letter 1); 'You must pay…' (Letter 2).

Finally, the letters employ use a range of mechanisms to attempt to be intensive, striking, and/or high impact, including:

- Strategically using colour, typographic and graphic design: Red to imply urgency (Letter 1); bold, centralised text (Letter 1); various other strategically HIGHLIGHTED <u>SHOUTING</u> throughout.
- Suggesting processes are being set in motion: the most resonant of these is in Letter 3, which speaks of 'Your account details […] *currently being transferred* to a Debt Recovery Agent' (Letter 3, emphasis added). The letter evokes action that is being taken in the present, to the extent that the reader is asked to imagine what is depicted as the physical labour of transferring account details to a third party, at the very point at which the letter is being read.
- Seeking to elicit immediate action: these are omnipresent in collections letters; here, they include: 'To prevent this course of action please ring us NOW'; 'PAY £ [xxx.xx] NOW' (in red); 'If you do not pay within five days of the date of this letter'; and so forth.

---

[122] Based on examining hundreds of letters on the *Consumer Action Group*.

[123] See Rock's (1973: 51-106) analysis of the in many way similar threats being deployed in the 1970s.

- Using capitalisation and syntax to imply legal status: these include here a 'default notice' becoming a 'Notice of Default' between letters 2 and 3 and a 'debt collection agency' becoming a 'Debt Recovery Agent'.

These devices—ranging from the explicitly to the implicitly threatening, from attempts to elicit self governance, to attempts to impose a worldview on the debtor, to raising and lowering of the affective intensity of the letter—can be seen as trying to successfully 'resonate' with the reader that picks it up (see Chapter Four). That is to say, these letters should not be seen as operating in a vacuum: instead, they are affective 'lures', aimed at intersecting with both the readers' anxious anticipatory domestic landscapes and their emergent dispositional tendencies, with the latter including their very particular embodied history and expertise.

When collections letters are grouped together as they are here, some of the weaknesses of the collector begins to seep through: what happens, for instance, to the very specific legal threats from Letters 1 to 3? A detailed range of consequences, becomes a nebulous 'legal action', before disappearing altogether. (See Chapter Six for a discussion of collectors' litigation practices). Meanwhile, although the threat of potential damage to the debtor's credit file is raised first in Letter 1, by Letter 3 the credit reference agency has still not been notified. In fact, the only threat that is carried out over the course of this sequence, is the serving of the default notice in Letter 2.

However, it is worth recalling the considerable fear and anxiousness such letters can generate amongst debtors, as documented in Chapter Four. Given the absence of access to the requisite expert knowledges able to engage in the hermeneutic analysis needed to 'decode' these technologies (the subject of Chapter Five), they can come to be read by debtors as intensely personal, as communicating deeply to *them* and the particularities of *their* lives.

It is around these calculative challenges that some of the more obvious distinctions between the credit statement and the collections letter can be detected. I argued in Chapter Three that the credit statement has at its heart the impossibility of providing a wholly stable calculative frame for the user that cannot pay off their full balance at the end of the month. For, even if this user were to sit down and attempt to construct a repayment plan, there will still at the heart of this calculation be the inevitable uncertainty that comes with having to depend on a future that is yet to pass. That is, despite all our best efforts, we are inevitably plagued by uncertainty (Knight, 1921) (see p. 80).

The collections letter is not so different. But, rather than managing the opacity of future events, it seeks to *amplify* it. The very unknowability of the future provides an affordance to which it can connect a range of other potential opacities. Some of these cluster around the opacities that characterise many of our journeys through modern social life. These include the difficulty of understanding the language and functioning of legal and socio-economic processes—including the complexities of the credit scoring system, the role of the courts, bailiffs and so forth. But also, they attach to the broad lack of public understanding of how collections operations make their decisions. Unless the reader has the expertise to themselves do the work of reading *against* the collections letter, they are left wondering as to a range of potential future outcomes: Will a bailiff be sent round? Is it in my best interest to repay rather than damage my credit rating? Do I need access to consumer credit in the next six years? Do debt collectors really take people like me to court?

It is this generative amplification of indeterminacy that is at the heart of the collections industry. Brian Massumi writes that

> [a] threat is only a threat if it retains an indeterminacy. If it has a form, it is not a substantial form, but a time form: a futurity. The threat as such is nothing *yet*—just a looming. It is a form of futurity yet has the capacity to fill the present without presenting itself. Its future looming casts a present shadow, and that shadow is *fear*. (Massumi, 2005: 35; original emphasis)

Massumi's claim speaks to part of the potential efficacy of debt collections technologies. They operate in and through their ability not only to intersect with the lived life of debtors, but also to drag possible futures into the present. Through threats (and perhaps attendant fear—although I would argue that this is only one possible affectively generated response), the present is made to live with that which could (but will not inevitably) come to pass, as well as being connected to the events that have shaped a person's embodied, learned capacities. As Rose writes, drawing on the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, the present can be seen as 'a floating "now" […] a continuous movement away from the Past and towards the Future' (2002: 33), in which the present becomes 'the active or actual condition for preserving the Past and for making the Future real' (2002: 34).

The deployment of threat is undoubtedly central to the debt collection industry, as the above examples show. However, in looking at their specific composition, it is possible to observe how their success as 'captation devices' (see Chapter Six) depends on the varied, potentially uneven 'patterning' of threat (Pain, 2009). This includes coupling threats to entreaties, and surrounding these with an array of semiotic prompts. For, reading debt collections letters in these ways reveals less the articulation of a single unitary message or mode of ordering, more a range of not fully coherent messages, being articulated near simultaneously. The letters thus deploy a messy assemblage of performative, affective 'hooks' (Muniesa, 2009b), with the collector hoping that at least one will snag the debtor's attention.

Precisely how Halifax's letters have come to be formatted as they have is a matter of conjecture. However, by way of comparison, one of the managers at Beta described how their letters are be circulated amongst key senior staff and minutely deconstructed before being sent out, with the language, the layout, all the potential subject of discussion. He also pointed to one letter in the strategy that he is fully aware is the team's 'most successful'. Meanwhile Experian recently conducted focus groups with the aim of exploring the formatting of collections letters, which came up with conclusions such as:

> 'Customers need to be threatened with the consequences of not paying.'
>
> 'Scare-tactics without the possibility of working out a solution are likely to result in a 'head in the sand mentality.''
>
> 'Respondents expect a different approach and tone of voice depending on (a) the amount owed; (b) how overdue the debt is and (c) the type of company communicating to them.'
>
> 'Serious threats ([c]redit rating, legal action) tend to concern younger audience far more'
>
> 'Informal language is ineffective'
>
> 'The prospect of home visits works for late payers'
>
> 'The younger group favoured headlines in bold and red (since they were accustomed to waiting for 'red letters'). Older respondents were less influenced by red text. Respondents also suggested that using red to highlight more than one area of a letter is ineffective.'
>
> (Experian, 2009b: 24)

Whether these conclusions reflect the reality of experiencing debt collections letters is not here the point. What this survey stands for is the presence in the collections industry of the collections letter as a subject that remains up for debate. In the above report, these debates are channelled through the attempt to variously match the format of collections letters to the debtor's age and stage of indebtedness (earlier or later), focusing on a range of stimuli. These include colour, tone of voice, type of language used, the variable efficacy of specific threats, as well as—importantly—the need to offer at least the promise of a solution.

Further, within the industry, the potential variation in collections lettering can—and is—being connected to more quantitative forms of *in vivo* experimentation, what is referred to in the industry as 'champion versus challenger' testing. This is a process advocated by the Experian report and is commonplace in the collections industry (CMRC, , 2008: 95). Experian explain this process as follows:

> Perhaps the most important improvement an organisation can take is to regularly review its processes and continually evolve its approach to collections *through experimentation*. Champion v[ersus] challenger allows the organisation to *test in a controlled manner the timing, approach, tone, message, and segmentation of the collection process* on a small population of its debtor base in order to understand what works and what doesn't in different circumstances. Results in the *test environment* can be *measured and compared* against the dominant champion strategy. Successful evolutions can then be rolled out across the broader debt portfolio. (Experian, 2009a: 19; emphasis added; see also: Ayub, 2004; Deloitte, 2009)

As with the use of existing data to predict debtor behaviour (see Chapter Five), an experimental metaphysics thus also can be applied to the development of letter sequences.

The newly optimised 'challenger' sample is unleashed against a small sample of the debtors, with the aim of assessing its effectiveness against the existing 'champion'. Indeed, as outlined above, this can be extended to a range of other variables beyond letter design, including the timing of letters, their relationship to the deployment of phonecalls. In addition, these variables can themselves be coupled to *in vitro* econometric tests, enabling the measurement of the success of targeting certain types of approaches to certain types of debtors (CMRC, , 2008; Deloitte, 2009).

That is not to say that all collectors are this sophisticated—although, there is evidence that many are increasingly becoming so, particularly retail lenders' own internal credit collections departments (CMRC, , 2008) (see also p. 133). However, even if collectors' experiments are based less on carefully planned and monitored research and more on a combination of trial and error and the circulation of industry knowledge about the likely responses of the debtors, this can still be seen as a mode of engagement predicated on a logic that sees the debtor as a modifiable and testable entity. For, as one collections professional puts it, 'Champion Challenger is not new - *it merely formalises a process which has always been at the heart of a collections department's work practices* - continually evaluating performance and developing new approaches that may work better' (Ayub, 2004: 1; emphasis added). Collections has thus long been market assemblage predicated on experimentation. Rock noted as far back as 1973 that collections procedures were 'organized around a serial testing system' (1973: 92). The rise of behavioural scoring, coupled with the recent investment that has flowed into the industry (see Interlude), and the rise in the authority of more qualitative forms of market testing (for example the focus group) has, however, enabled this logic to become amplified and the tests to insert themselves deeper into the everyday world of the debtor.

There is one further relationship that offers an affordance to 'Champion versus Challenger' type epistemologies that has not, however, been discussed here. This is the relationship that exists between a creditor and an external agency. In particular, as I will shortly proceed to argue, examining the relations *between* these different components of the consumer credit market also offers insights into the ongoing work that goes into separating 'lender' from 'collector'. For, it is in these relations that is contained perhaps the most potent weapon for the creditor seeking to recoup their debt: this is the threat of being passed 'out', for the first time, from the original creditor to an external collections agency. This threat was also put to Experian's focus groups; the report concludes:

> Passing the debt to a third party debt recovery agency is a big motivator in repayment.
>
> Both groups shared the view that a third party's involvement is indication that the situation has seriously escalated, because:

- The agency will only get paid if it recovers the debt
- An additional collection fee is a possibility
- A third party agency will not care about the long-term customer relationship: they have no need to tread carefully

(Experian, 2009b: 24)

Experian's focus groups have, I suggest, indeed put their finger on the resonant potential for the collector of the 'first move'. This is the move away from the creditor, to an external collections agency. For these groups, it was the prospect of this change that seems to threaten the entry into a more mercenary, more expensive, and more brutal world.

It is the potential this particular threat offers the collector that I will explore in the following section. I focus in particular on creditors' use of what I will refer to as 'trading styles'. This brings us back to the Halifax account with which we begun this section. We rejoin it at the point at which Halifax has apparently made good on its threat to send the account out to an external agency. The account thus moves from being collected on by Halifax's internal collections team, to be collected on by 'Blair, Oliver and Scott'.

Blair, Oliver and Scott

As their letterhead in figure 9 shows, Blair, Oliver and Scott are a debt collections company, with offices registered in Fife. However, irrespective of what might be imagined from the assertion in the first line of the 'welcome' letter that they are 'a professional Debt Collection Agency', they are in fact a company with no permanent employees working for them directly.[124] Nor, as their annual accounts show, do they trade.[125] The reason for this may be contained in their name, the acronym for which mirrors that of their owners: Bank of Scotland (BOS). As public accounts show, Bank of Scotland plc are their parent company and have been since their earliest accounts were filed in 1994.[126] Bank of Scotland are however now part of the HBOS group (itself recently acquired by Lloyds TSB), which came into existence in 2001 when the Bank of Scotland merged with Halifax. In this light, the reason for their letters being sent to Halifax debtors becomes clear: as Blair, Oliver and Scott's 2008 public accounts state: 'HBOS uses the Company's name in the collections administrative process' (Blair, Oliver and Scott, , 2009: 11).

[124] As their annual accounts state: '[t]he company employed no permanent staff directly. All staff and audit costs are borne by the parent undertaking' (Blair, Oliver and Scott, , 2009: 11).

[125] As their annual accounts show, the only transactions on their accounts are the nominal £2 received annually from the parent company due as part of their conditions of ownership (Blair, Oliver and Scott, , 2009)

[126] The company name was registered three year's earlier with Company's House in 1991.

Figure 9. Blair, Oliver and Scott collections letter cycle

Blair, Oliver and Scott LIMITED
DEBT COLLECTORS

PO BOX 66, Rosyth, Fife, KYII 2WG *also at* ADMAIL 2037, MANCHESTER, M60 5EE
Licensed under the Consumer Credit Act 1974 Registered Office: Arrol House, Viking Way, Rosyth KYII 2UT Registered in Scotland No. 133457

[Name]
[Address 1]

Letter 1: 'Welcome' letter

Dear Sir/Madam,

Client: HALIFAX

Account Number: [xxxxxxxx]

Balance: £ [xxxx.xx]

Blair, Oliver & Scott Ltd. is a professional Debt Collection Agency instructed by our above named client to obtain payment of the balance owed by you. Our client requires payment of the full balance outstanding as soon as possible.

What action should you take?
- Make payment in full to the account; or
- Contact our agents on the Helpline number below to discuss possible payment options.

What will happen if you do not take any action?
- We can instruct one of our local door-to-door agents to call on you and discuss payment of the debt; or
- Court action may be taken to seek a judgment against you. If you are a homeowner and do not pay the amount the court orders you to pay, we may then reapply to the court for a charging order on your property. This will give us repayment of the outstanding debt from the proceeds whenever the property is sold.

TO MAKE PAYMENT:
- Call the Helpline number, below, for payments by debit/credit card or to set up a

Letter 2: Prompt

Dear Sir/Madam,

DO NOT IGNORE THIS LETTER

HALIFAX

Account Number. [xxxxxxxx]

Balance: £[xxxx.xx]

We are urgently trying to contact you to discuss the repayment of your debt, however, you do not appear to have responded to our requests for payment or provided acceptable repayment proposals.

Please call the Helpline number below to speak to our agents who will be able to discuss all your repayment options with you.

We would urge you to sort this issue out immediately to prevent us having to take further action to recover the debt. This action may include door-to-door collectors calling on you to discuss payment or court action to seek a judgment against you. If you are a homeowner and do not pay the amount the court orders you to pay, we may then reapply to the court for a charging order on your property. This will give us repayment of the outstanding debt from the proceeds whenever the property is sold.

Should you wish further advice regarding this matter we suggest that you contact a solicitor or your local Citizens' Advice Bureau, who can give you free money advice.

Yours faithfully,

D Hood

Blair, Oliver & Scott.

Helpline Number: 0845 601 0521
We are open: Monday-Friday 8.00-19.30, Saturday 8.00-16.00

TO MAKE PAYMENT

I will argue that Blair, Oliver and Scott is above all a brand, even if not one with a particularly high public profile. It is a brand used in HBOS' own internal collections operations. Including the apparently trademarked hunting dog image, this brand is deployed in three principal ways: on letterheads, as for example that shown in figure 9; on a very basic two page website (www.blairoliverscott.co.uk); and when the name is used in phone communications via its call centre. However, even if they answer to the Blair, Oliver, Scott brand name, this call centre is not populated by Blair, Oliver and Scott staff (it has none), but by HBOS/Lloyds TSB employees. For, as figure 10 shows, the Fife address refers to a building in a business park branded with the Bank of Scotland logo. Yet the recipients of its letters and those that communicate with employees working under its name are not, it can be surmised, intended to realise this. The letters refer to their 'above named' 'client' Halifax, who has 'instructed' them to collect on their behalf. And yet the client is part of the group that owns the company. Given that this is an HBOS internal collections department, it will not be in the business of collecting from 'clients' outside this group (this is the function served by 'genuine' external collections agencies). As with many contemporary collections devices, these have a history: Rock observed similar practices in the early 1970s, noting the practice of creditors setting up what he called 'dummy firms' (1973: 24, 68). Rock was writing before the explosion of consumer credit lending, when consumer debt collection was a very different business. Not only could debtors still be jailed for non-payment, but the regulatory framework was far more lax and intervened far less in the minutiae of collectors' day to day activities than it does now.[127]

Yet, despite the separation of almost three decades and the significant changes in the collections industry, there are still no major impediments to today's collectors mirroring their 1970s counterparts and setting up very similar 'dummy firms'. It is perfectly permissible for any company—debt collections or not—to trade under a different name, as long as somewhere in written communications this connection is mentioned. In these cases, references to the parent company name should be included somewhere in the letter. In collections letters, this tends often to be towards the bottom in relatively small print. This is one method of setting up a 'dummy firm' and can be termed 'trading styles proper'. That is, they use a variety of legally required wordings including, for example, '…trading as…', '…a trading style of…', '…a registered business name of…', '…is the practicing name of solicitors employed by…'. This practice can also be extended to include not only

[127] See the OFT's Debt Collection Guidance (OFT, , 2002).

Figure 10. Blair, Oliver and Scott registered address[128]

companies branded as debt collection agencies, but also companies branded as solicitors. Letters may be sent from this 'company', irrespective of whether or not its content relates to any legal action that has yet been instigated.[129] There is, however, second method, which obviates the legal requirement for wording identifying a connection to a parent brand (although I have no evidence that this second option is being used to create solicitor identities). This method uses a legally distinct 'subsidiary' company, owned by the parent. In this case, written communications with debtors do *not* have to make explicit the identity of the legal owner of the company. This is the approach employed in the case of Blair, Oliver and Scott. Such companies do not however trade and are effectively dormant, as an examination of their annual public accounts will show.[130]

In the case of these subsidiary companies, phone numbers and addresses rarely match the primary contact details of the parent and addresses can on occasion refer to solicitors' offices. As a result, the only definitive way of tracing these links involves finding, paying for (a nominal fee of £1 to Company's House) and then interpreting the specificities of a company's annual accounts. (That being said, one good way of getting a rough and ready steer is to venture onto the *Consumer Action Group*. There, forum members are already engaging in some of the work of decomposition (see Chapter Five) that I extend here—

[128] Image from Google Street View. Location postcode: KY11 2UT. Accessed 25.03.10. Licensed from Google under Fair Dealing laws in the UK, Fair Use laws in the US.

[129] This does mean that a creditor cannot, or does not, take legal action against debtors after contacting them via a company branded as a solicitors, using employees who work in-house (as solicitors). There are also regulatory guidelines which detail the kinds of activity the OFT considers unfair, including 'falsely implying or stating that action can or will be taken when it legally cannot'. However, these guidelines relate to the written content of letters. The OFT guidance does address branding activities, but these address the use of a logo/business name which 'falsely implies government backing' or 'implies public body status', as well as 'falsely claiming trade body membership'; as long as these conditions are not breached, these need not apply to companies branded as solicitors (OFT, , 2006: 4).

[130] There are often tiny annual 'technical' trades between parent and subsidiary, as in the case of Blair, Oliver and Scott, where this amounted to £2.

Table 2. Subsidiaries and collections trading styles of major UK creditors

	1st level (Parent company)	2nd level (subsidiary [S] or trading style [TS] of parent company)	3rd level (trading style of subsidiary company)
Major primary creditors	Barclays Plc (including Barclaycard)	Mercers Debt Collection Ltd (DCA [S])	Calder Financial (DCA)
	HBOS (now owned by Lloyds TSB)	Albion Collections (DCA [S])	
		Blair, Oliver and Scott (DCA [S])	
	HSBC	Metropolitan Collection Services Ltd (DCA [S])	Payment Services Bureau (DCA)
			Central Debt Recovery Unit (DCA)
		DG Solicitors (Solicitors [TS])*	
	Lloyds TSB (see also separate entry for HBOS)	BLS Collections (DCA [TS])	
		MHA Collections (DCA [TS])	
		Sechiari Clark & Mitchell (Solicitors [TS])*	
	Royal Bank of Scotland Group (including NatWest)	Triton Credit Services Ltd (DCA [TS])	
Major debt purchasers	Cabot Financial	Fire (DCA [S])	
		Morgan Solicitors (Solicitors [TS])*	
	capQuest	Telogram Limited (DCA [S])	
	Lowell Group	Red Debt Collection Service (DCA [TS])	
		Hamptons Legal (Solicitors [TS])	

*Unconfirmed

although this work is patchy and not always accurate). For the sake of simplicity, I group both trading styles 'proper' and 'subsidiary' companies under the single category of 'trading styles', drawing the term from letters themselves. For, despite the different methods of creating this 'distinct' company, as well as the differential degree to which the connection to the parent brand is obscured, they both, as I will come on to explore in more depth shortly, are intended to have (more or less) the same effect.

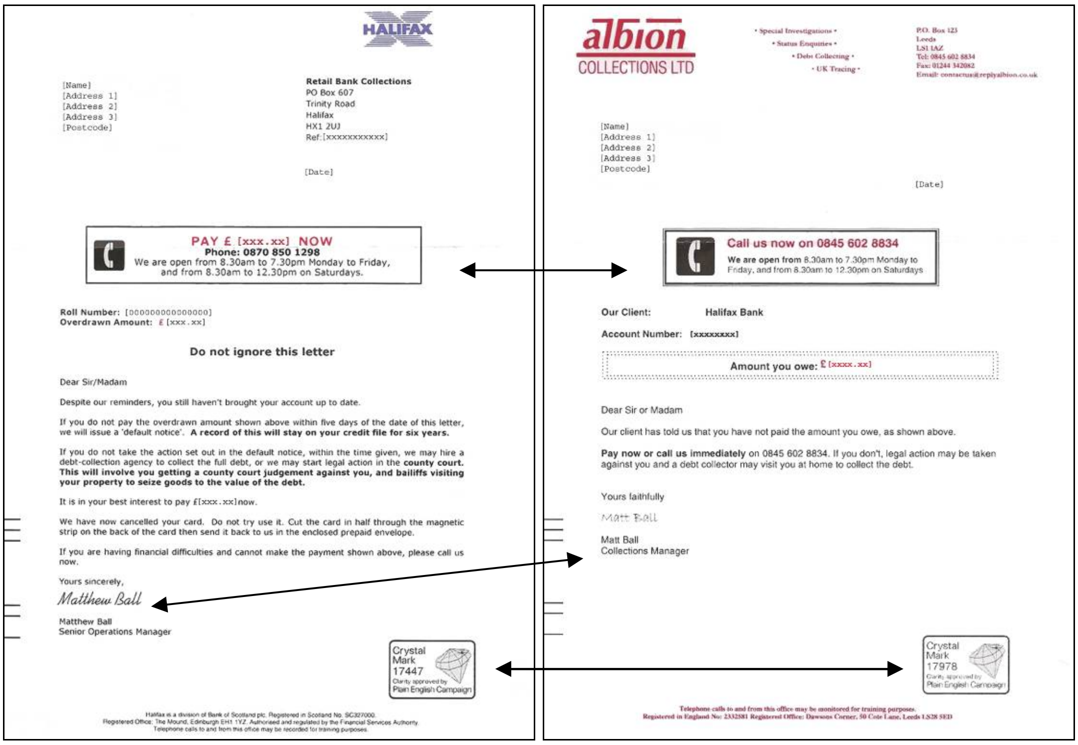
Table 2 shows how common this practice is. The table shows a selection of the trading styles that have been deployed by many of the UK's largest retail banks and debt purchasers. This has been assembled by undertaking an analysis of scanned letters posted to the *Consumer Action Group* and by examining Companies House records. This table is likely incomplete, being limited by the availability of letter evidence; by way of comparison, one recent industry report recorded that one major UK particular bank may use up to seven (CMRC, , 2008: 110) (although from discussions on the *Consumer Action Group*, the sense is that such a high number of trading styles is rare). However, even within this incomplete table, it is possible to trace some of the effort that is going into creating these trading styles. Thus, for example, both HSBC and Barclays Plc use companies branded as trading names of a subsidiary company. These are trading styles two levels removed from that of the first level parent company. In other words, the third level companies are effectively trading styles of trading styles.

As I will explore further in the following section, part of what is being played with in these brands is shock: of leaving a familiar brand behind and encountering a hitherto unknown one. In this respect, I will take a brief detour away from the letters of Halifax and Blair, Oliver and Scott, by focusing briefly on the use of similar tactics by other banking brands.

Figure 11 shows extracts from the letters of some other major UK banking brands and their attendant collections trading styles. Armed with this point of contrast, Blair, Oliver and Scott emerges as an exception: its brand identity is relatively worked through, incorporating a logo (the dog), and a muted, restrained look and feel as conveyed by the combination of blues in its letterhead. That being said, unlike the others, the company name, apparently incorporating three surnames, does echo the naming conventions of legal practices, which may be indicative of a deliberately different strategy. By contrast, Albion (a second internal-external trading style used by the HBOS group), Mercers (Barclays Plc), and BLS (Lloyds TSB), all employ a similar approach, in which the brand is deliberately

Figure 11. A sample of three different 'trading styles'

Halifax/Albion



HALIFAX

[Name]
[Address 1]
[Address 2]
[Address 3]
[Postcode]

Retail Bank Collections
PO Box 607
Trinity Road
Halifax
HX1 2UJ
Ref:[xxxxxxxxxxx]

[Date]

PAY £ [xxx.xx] NOW
Phone: 0870 850 1298
We are open from 8.30am to 7.30pm Monday to Friday, and from 8.30am to 12.30pm on Saturdays.

Roll Number: [0000000000000000]
Overdrawn Amount: £ [xxx.xx]

Do not ignore this letter

Dear Sir/Madam

Despite our reminders, you still haven't brought your account up to date.

If you do not pay the overdrawn amount shown above within five days of the date of this letter, we will issue a 'default notice'. **A record of this will stay on your credit file for six years.**

If you do not take the action set out in the default notice, within the time given, we may hire a debt-collection agency to collect the full debt, or we may start legal action in the **county court. This will involve you getting a county court judgement against you, and bailiffs visiting your property to seize goods to the value of the debt.**

It is in your best interest to pay £[xxx.xx]now.

We have now cancelled your card. Do not try use it. Cut the card in half through the magnetic strip on the back of the card then send it back to us in the enclosed prepaid envelope.

If you are having financial difficulties and cannot make the payment shown above, please call us now.

Yours sincerely,

Matthew Ball

Matthew Ball
Senior Operations Manager

Crystal Mark 17447 Clarity approved by Plain English Campaign

Halifax is a division of Bank of Scotland plc. Registered in Scotland No. SC327000.
Registered Office: The Mound, Edinburgh EH1 1YZ. Authorised and regulated by the Financial Services Authority.
Telephone calls to and from this office may be recorded for training purposes.

albion COLLECTIONS LTD

• Special Investigations •
• Status Enquiries •
• Debt Collecting •
• UK Tracing •

P.O. Box 123
Leeds
LS1 1AZ
Tel: 0845 602 8834
Fax: 01244 342082
Email: contactus@replyalbion.co.uk

[Name]
[Address 1]
[Address 2]
[Address 3]
[Postcode]

[Date]

Call us now on 0845 602 8834
We are open from 8.30am to 7.30pm Monday to Friday, and from 8.30am to 12.30pm on Saturdays

Our Client: **Halifax Bank**

Account Number: **[xxxxxxxx]**

Amount you owe: £ [xxxx.xx]

Dear Sir or Madam

Our client has told us that you have not paid the amount you owe, as shown above.

Pay now or call us immediately on 0845 602 8834. If you don't, legal action may be taken against you and a debt collector may visit you at home to collect the debt.

Yours faithfully

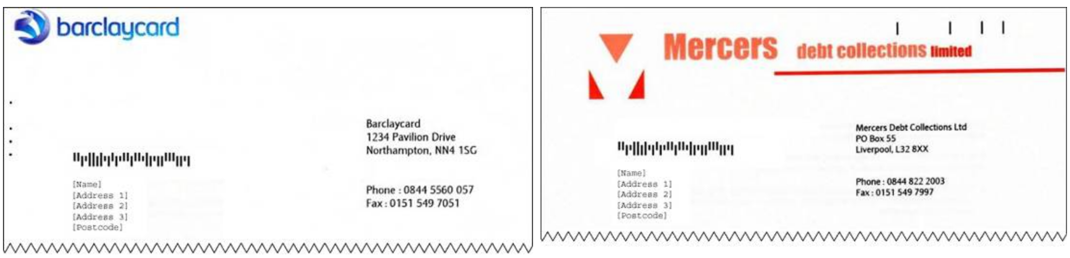
Matt Ball

Matt Ball
Collections Manager

Crystal Mark 17978 Clarity approved by Plain English Campaign

Telephone calls to and from this office may be monitored for training purposes.
Registered in England No: 2332581 Registered Office: Dawsons Corner, 50 Cote Lane, Leeds LS28 5ED

Barclaycard/Mercers



barclaycard

[Name]
[Address 1]
[Address 2]
[Address 3]
[Postcode]

Barclaycard
1234 Pavilion Drive
Northampton, NN4 1SG

Phone : 0844 5560 057
Fax : 0151 549 7051

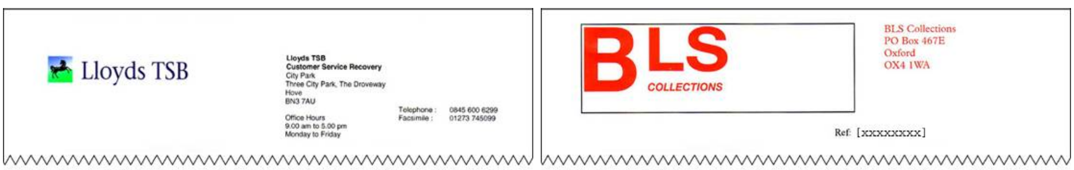
Mercers debt collections limited

[Name]
[Address 1]
[Address 2]
[Address 3]
[Postcode]

Mercers Debt Collections Ltd
PO Box 55
Liverpool, L32 8XX

Phone : 0844 822 2003
Fax : 0151 549 7997

Lloyds TSB/BLS



Lloyds TSB

Lloyds TSB
Customer Service Recovery
City Park
Three City Park, The Droveway
Hove
BN3 7AU

Office Hours
9.00 am to 5.00 pm
Monday to Friday

Telephone : 0845 600 6299
Facsimile : 01273 745099

BLS COLLECTIONS

BLS Collections
PO Box 467E
Oxford
OX4 1WA

Ref: [xxxxxxxx]

underworked, consisting of a very simple, bold reddish, text-based logo. Particularly in the case of both Mercers and BLS, the branding is almost amateurish in its rough and ready appearance, extending in Mercers' case to a cheap-looking stencil effect in the letterhead, including faded shades of red.[131] The combination of all these messages is clear: the debtor has moved from dealing with a major banking establishment, with decades of history and a reputation to consider, to a small, perhaps amateurish operation that may have far fewer worries about pressing debtors harder for the money they owe. (This effect is not always wholly convincing when letters from creditor and 'collector' are placed alongside each other, a luxury not likely to be available to the debtor. As indicated, there are considerable similarities between the letters from Halifax and Albion, as shown in figure 11; there are also echoes of Halifax's central 'Do not ignore this letter' in Blair Oliver and Scott's 'Welcome' letter (figure 9, Letter 1)).

The shock of having to suddenly deal with a new, unknown company is therefore reinforced by having to deal either with a company whose name conveys quasi-legalistic overtones, or one that appears not to—on the face of it—have either the budget or the inclination to invest in company branding. As Rock argues, trading styles enable a creditor to '*embroider and enlarge* the threats he [*sic*] can offer' (1973: 68; emphasis added). Or, to put this in the terms employed in this thesis, the ability to mobilise multiple company identities allows for not only the amplification of threat, but also the delivery of threat through a different *mode* of engagement.

The firm/brand distinction as market device: The work of anti-branding

In an episode of the American drama series Mad Men, centring on a New York advertising agency in the 1960s, a potential client comes into their offices to watch, through a one way mirror, members of the public who have brought their dogs in to try different brands of dog food. Each dog is given a bowl, which they happily tuck into. But the moderator then informs the owners of the brand name of the food the dogs are eating. It is a brand that has been recently associated with a consumer controversy: the product has been exposed as containing horse meat. The participants pull their pets away in horror. In the ensuing conversation, the advertising executive turns to the client and tells her: '[a]ny agency that does not change the name is stealing your money. The product is good […] but the name has been poisoned' (AMC, 2009).

[131] This is apparently not a printing error, as it is consistent across a number of letters gathered from the Consumer Action Group.

This scene speaks to one of the central promises of (re)branding work: to be able to manage the relationship between product and perception. However, the work of branding is not as simple as changing a name. Instead, following Celia Lury, it can be seen as a way of both managing the vicissitudes of change, while also seeking to shape its course. Brands can therefore be seen as both reactive and generative. Lury writes: 'marketing is neither an image stuck on top of a product or something added on to production, in a linear fashion; rather, it may lead to a *reconfiguration of its temporality*' (2004: 57; emphasis added). In this fictional case, therefore, what this particular dog food *is*, has been shaped by the arrival of a new set of unwanted relations or 'entanglements' (the negative connotations of killing horses for food) that were, until recently, absent from this particular product (see: Callon, 1998). What the advertising executive promises is to undertake a rebranding exercise, to separate the product from those relations that have, from the producers point of view, become undesirably attached to it. Returning to the Whiteheadian conception of time outlined above, this can be seen as the brand mediating the dynamic, unpredictable relationships between present, past and future (see p. 171). In so doing, the brand manages the *multi-dimensionality* of products (Lury, 2004: 19). That is to say, it manages the way in which products inevitably intersect with what might be called multiple different, not necessarily compatible 'modes of ordering', which inevitably change over time (see: Mol, 2002). It is thus one (highly particular, dynamic, reactive) incarnation of the many market 'devices' that are routinely involved in performing, stabilising, and adding generative capacity to markets (Lury, 2004: 3).[132]

However, it is rare that brands pull ostensibly 'negative' associations towards them. As Liz Moor writes, companies (tend to) 'employ PR professionals to *counter* negative publicity and […] spend considerable time and money trying to shape the perceptions of brands', giving as examples the rise of dedicated 'brand environments' and attempts to build a particular 'context of use' into products (2007: 109; emphasis added). Yet that is precisely what is happening with the use of trading styles. Creditors create a deliberately rudimentary brand identity that variously seeks to draw to it associations of unprofessionalism, threat, a lack of concern for public perception and, in the case of Blair, Oliver and Scott, of a company that is perhaps at best functional and unwelcoming. Moreover, none of these brands promote themselves to the wider public (unless you choose to count a spartan website). Trading styles, therefore, do not require the conventional machinery of publicization with which brands are usually associated. This is what might be called the

[132] See also (amongst others): Callon (1998), Callon & Muniesa (2005), Mcfall (2009b), Muniesa, Millo, & Callon (2007).

work of 'anti-branding': the reverse engineering of some of the most common characteristics of brands.[133]

Yet these anti-brands are still brands. Like many of those brands that are examined by analysts of consumer culture, they too are designed as market devices that seek to both manage and shape change, to the advantage of a producer (here: a creditor). Also, like more conventional brands, these trading styles also need to be understood in terms of their dynamic relation to other brands. Their competitive target is, however particularly narrow: it is less other brands in their sector (other collections 'brands', for instance) than the retail banking brands against which they hope to stand as a point of contrast. Thus Halifax, for example, has a long brand history, which incorporates heavy investment in conveying particular values to both current and potential users. Most well known are a series of television adverts centring on the ever cheery, all singing, all dancing Halifax employee Howard Brown, for instance. Brown, who became a minor celebrity for a period, can be read as attempting to communicate Halifax as variously warm, employee led, and with a sense of fun (Brown was dropped by Halifax from their campaigns in 2008, supposedly because the bank wanted to project a more sober image to fit the economic climate (Knapton, 2008, August 7)). The shift to either a deliberately rudimentary, underworked brand identity, or one that, like Blair, Oliver and Scott, conveys unwelcoming, quasi-legalistic overtones, marks a deliberate departure from this welcoming brand identity.

Part of the function of the 'trading style' brand is therefore to enable the producers of consumer credit to manage one of its unavoidable consequences: that the attachments between *some* users and their consumer credit product will (once they cannot pay) become constituted through a relationship with the past—one of obligation—rather than one oriented towards the future—towards the desire, or potential need for the product. One of the functions of either the trading style or the genuinely exterior collector is thus to enable the consumer credit lender to manage its unavoidable reliance on change and, in particular, on uncertainty. It stands ready to absorb negative associations, to, in other words, keep the parent brand 'sacred', while it goes about with the more 'profane', messy, visceral business of debt collecting. In this context, Blair, Oliver and Scott enables Halifax to attempt to enact an ontological distinction between internal ('Retail Bank Collection': still part of the bank) and external (being 'transferred' to a 'Debt Recovery Agent'). Part of the role of the trading style, or indeed the 'genuinely' external DCA, is therefore to act as a vector through

[133] This is not meant to imply any direct comparison to the 'anti-branding' work undertaken by some activists in certain anti-globalization movements (for example 'adbusting' or 'culture jamming'), as most notably documented by Naomi Klein. There are some similarities with brands that could be argued to draw towards them associations of 'brandlessness' (Muji, for example). However, 'brandlessness' is again, not equivalent to the work of pulling unpleasant or threatening associations towards a brand identity.

which the creditor can channel some of the unwanted associations that consumer credit lending generates.[134]

But, given that Halifax does some initial collections 'internally', under its own brand, what is the ontological distinction that it is trying to both draw on and bolster? I suggest that the key affordance the creditor is drawing on is the market itself. More particularly, it is some of the *inadequacies* of many contemporary market forms. It is these that some of the participants of Experian's focus group are pointing towards: 'A third party agency', they assert, '*will not care* about the long-term customer relationship: *they have no need to tread carefully*' (Experian, 2009b: 24; emphasis added). The focus group participants are aware of what an account being sent out to an external agency might mean: that you are less likely to be protected by the safety that comes with being connected to a large, well known banking brand. This is an understanding of contemporary markets as spaces where the transfer of legal obligations is not always accompanied by the transfer of moral obligations.[135] Even if an agency is quite explicit about the legal responsibility not having left the original creditor (as in Blair, Oliver and Scott's reference to Halifax, the 'client'), Halifax's apparent decision to move the account externally is understood as a considerable disavowal of their duty of (customer) *care*.

This is thus the final move of the anti-brand: it is designed, as much as it can, to obscure its relationship to the parent brand. This is in some way similar to the downplaying of the relationship between a subsidiary and parent brand elsewhere in the market, or companies having multiple brands in the same sector, or the confusions that may arise from a brand being owned by multiple companies (Lury, 2004: 91). These tensions can be particularly acute when the values of the parent brand are in tension with the subsidiary, often as a result of a takeover.[136] However, these instances are different from a parent brand *strategically* establishing a subsidiary brand *in order to provide a mirror* to its own brand values.

The key market device being played with in the deployment of trading styles, however, is not the brand *per se*, but the *distinction* between 'firms' and 'brands': the former is a legally distinct organizational entity; the latter is the trademark, image, or series of signs that a company will possess that it can use to distinguish itself from the competition, or to distinguish between goods that it owns. This distinction comes to be particularly pertinent when attempting to hold a company to account for its actions. Take, for example, the

[134] See: Rock (1973: 55).

[135] For a detailed summary of the place of morality in markets, see Foucarde and Healy (2007).

[136] For example: Ben & Jerry's (independent, local, 'human') versus Unilever (corporate, global, 'faceless'); Green & Blacks chocolate ('ethical') versus Kraft Foods ('uncaring'); The Body Shop (opposed to animal testing) versus L'Oreal (alleged to continue to test on animals (Booth, 2006)).

controversies that frequently surround the global clothing industry. It has become a common feature for advocacy groups to challenge companies at the level of their *inter*-company relations: so, for example, to expose a parent company's reliance on external agencies who employ child labourers. The company's defence, in trying to close down the controversy, tends to be to turn to forms of audit practice as either a defence, or as proactive response, with the aim of enhancing the 'accountability' of its organisation.[137] This is one simplified example of the many and varied processes through which accountability and control are routinely being shifted by companies in and through the management of brand identity (Lury, 2004: 97-99). However, to keep with this example, it would be far more sensational if a major clothing retailer were exposed as itself *directly* employing children. To be undertaking such practices at the level of *intra*-company relations would, I suggest, pose a threat for its brand image that would be far more difficult to contain.

However, for the collector, the tendency for markets to find it easier (and, often, more profitable) to focus on optimising the efficiency of the transfer of economic value rather than moral responsibility ('values') offers an opportunity. Or, more precisely, the key opportunity is the *distinctive partialities of market ties between companies*, as opposed to those between a brand and a parent company. This is an opportunity that, via the use of genuinely or fictitiously external agencies, becomes translated into a key 'market device'. For, increasingly, the creditor has the organizational capacity to conduct collections itself. What it needs, however, is the 'existence' of a debt collections industry, understood as operating in a related but distinct market arena to the lending industry, composed of legally autonomous but interdependent companies. This is a conclusion shared by the Credit Management Research Centre [CMRC], who had access to the collections operations of some of the largest lenders in the UK. They describe the collections operations of 'a major bank' as follows:

> Collection strategies are undertaken through different trading styles i.e. the use of 'in-house' agents trading under a different name to the bank and in-house solicitor companies. *This 'separateness' from the bank is considered integral to the effectiveness of the debt recovery operation*. (CMRC, 2008: 110; emphasis added)

In the case of the use of collections trading styles, therefore, the creditor attempts to itself *enact* a differentiated market space, in which, alongside their own collections operations, they 'manufacture' distinct collection agencies and solicitors. This can be seen as drawing on creditors' own (economic) sociology of the market: they recognise it as a domain that is deeply 'social' and draw on this to their advantage. There are clear additional

[137] Michael Power (1997) has documented accounts of the rise and efficacy of, and opacities within so-called 'audit culture'. See also: Strathern (2000); Dolan (2008).

benefits of doing so for the creditor, over and above generating 'shock' amongst defaulters, including greater control, as well as the ability to benchmark ('Champion Challenge') the performance of its own collectors to genuinely external DCAs (CMRC, , 2008: 80-155). However, it would only do so if the illusion of separateness can be maintained for at least enough defaulters to make it worthwhile.

The enactment of a particular version of market operations, via the deployment of trading style 'anti-brands,' can be seen as generative in a number of ways. First, it not only draws on an understanding of the tendency for the market to enact a distinction between the 'values' of a company and those to whom it sub-contracts, it also seeks to exploit this distinction. It is thus an example, albeit a peculiarly inverted one, of a market assemblage where moral values are not simply externalised, they are instead strategically and variably performed. Second, it not only recognises the calculative challenges faced by debtors in understanding the opacities of the debt collections industry, it amplifies them. By 'enacting' a move away from the creditor, the defaulter is forced to confront a new, unfamiliar entity, whose values are uncertain and whose actions are harder to predict. Third, it enables the creditor greater control over the collections process, providing it with richer information about what *kind* of debtors it is dealing with, which it can feed into its decision making processes (see Chapter Five). And fourth, it allows the creditor to operate more freely in the lending market, by managing the risk of brand 'contamination'. It is by disentangling the work of lending and collections in this way that the creditor can (seek to) prevent the business of securing *voluntaristic* attachments—offering a lending 'service'—from becoming destabilised by the (more forceful) business of attempting to maintain and elicit value from attachments of *obligation*.[138]

Conclusion

Compared to many other markets, the debt collections industry often seems peculiarly topsy turvy: 'customers' are delivered to the industry already bound by obligation (see Chapter Six); calculation operates (in part) around the promise to be rid of a product, rather than to secure a new one; and collectors' language tends to operate more around threat than entreaty. However, looking at creditors' internal collections operations offers some revealing insights into why this might be, which have implications for considering the formatting of other market domains.

First, exploring the formatting and deployment of collections letters points towards the complex interrelatedness of two central technologies of consumer credit: the credit

[138] As discussed in Chapter Six, this is not an absolute distinction, with 'obligation' becoming differentially articulated within the collections process. See page 153.

statement and the collections letter. Both, it has been argued, can be seen as devices that manage future uncertainty. The statement seeks (sometimes in vain) to shut this uncertainty down. The collections letter, however, makes use of this uncertainty to amplify the calculative challenges that a debtor is faced with. This contrast is important for pointing towards an example of markets where creating opacity is not (only) an unintended side effect, but (also) an explicit aim. Michel Callon and John Law (2005) have noted similar instances, in their account of the necessary correspondence between calculation and non-calculation (or, adapting Cochoy's term (2002), 'qualculation' and 'non-qualculation'). They argue, convincingly, that the material formatting of calculation cannot be separated from the material formatting of non-calculation. This is true in the case of the credit statement: as was argued in Chapter Three, the statement both raises the possibility of non-calculation, while attempting to manage it. And it is also true in the case of the collections letter: the strategic deployment of opacity is used as a way of shifting the terrain of calculative possibility. In the context of the defaulter's likely limited means, the creditor's aim is, however possible, to focus their calculative effort on *it* and at that particular moment in time.

But, nowhere in the examples Callon and Law provide (a Quaker prayer meeting, idealised gift giving, an investigation of a rail crash, a telethon), is the market shown to be quite as aware of the generative possibilities of non-calculation, of indeterminacy, as in the case of the collections industry. As this and the preceding chapter have sought to demonstrate, the collections industry has made the strategic deployment of non-calculation, of opacity, its key experimental object. In particular, it is increasingly being coupled to social scientific modes of knowing (statistical modelling, qualitative research) that enable the collector to either focus attention on where opacities are not opaque enough, or to be able to target those persons who are least likely to be able to do the work of rendering some of these opacities a little more transparent.

The trading style is one particularly important example of such practices, as they operate within the collections industry. It plays with the potential afforded by the first move away from 'lender', to an external agency. In so doing, it employs a form of inverse branding work both to enact and render generative a distinction between collector and lender. Branding in the case of the debt collection industry is thus used above all to both *manage and generate change*. Without the existence of a collections industry, the collector encountering a debtor apparently unwilling or unable to repay his or her debts would be faced with a stark binary choice: either the creditor pursues the debt through the courts, or it (eventually) writes the debt off. The collections industry, even if the creditor has to make it itself, enables a single credit account to be subject to multiple moments of re-presentation: it attempts to render the product dynamic, to (re)introduce change as one of its indissoluble qualities.

In so doing, the trading style also turns to the *market itself* as a market device. In this reflexive move, what are more conventionally seen as the 'overflows' of market making—the tendency for moral issues to be differentially articulated in different domains of market practice—are turned back on the market, in the *strategic performation* of distinct collections market actors. This is thus one further mode of engagement that the collector seeks to deploy in its attempt to connect with debtors: it turns to the market itself, its well understood partialities, as a way of trying to stimulate a response. This renders the construction of a distinction between 'lender' and 'collector' a generative act of *difference-making*.

Bringing together the existence of a relationship between the collections letter and the credit statement, and the banking brand and the debt collection brand, does some important political work, I suggest. It opens up the fiction of any easy separation between the lending and collections industry. It also opens up the way that, in the relations between these two entities, moral questions are produced and managed, being variously under- and over-coded. Destabilising the separation between 'lender' and 'collector' does not mean that these two market entities should be pushed too quickly together. Bring them too close together and the particular dynamics of collections practices are glossed as simply a necessary part of the wider collections industry. Push them too far apart and the complicity of lenders in routine practice of collections is obscured. As I will argue in the Conclusion, to complicate the politics of the collections industry still further, it is necessary to think beyond either the binary of lender/collector, or a unitary 'consumer credit industry'.

Conclusion

This thesis has followed a journey of consumer credit default, moving from the everyday lives and practices of borrowers and defaulters, to the world of the consumer credit debt collector. Over its course, it has traced multiple processes of attachment and detachment, operating through a disparate, not always compatible array of modes of engagement and action. It has sought to explore what can be learned from following the socio-material processes that are routinely being deployed and responded to in a range of market encounters, which combine to produce that not fully stable, not fully coherent market assemblage that is consumer credit. In so doing, I hope to have shed light on an area of socio-economic life that has, for too long, remained at the fringes of sociological modes of attention. One of the thesis' most simple contributions, therefore, is to add its voice to a disciplinary body of work that remains, at present, too thin.

It has done so by paying attention to actors' own attempts to makes sense of the various different ways in which their realities have been problematised. This applies as much to the intimate domestic spaces of debt default as to the organisational spaces of the collector. It is also a methodological principle that has been shown to be as relevant in listening to what debtors and collectors say about their practices, as it has been in observing and following what they do. The thesis has therefore sought to demonstrate the value of a sociology that is open to the sociologies of others. This is a mode of analysis that is pursued in a collaborative spirit, arguing for the potential that is afforded by being attentive to precisely what is being said and done, by whom, and how, and the insights this provides into how the world is being made, unmade, and problematised.

Here, I will reflect on the journey this thesis has followed, beginning by gathering together some of the strands that have cross-cut its account. I will focus in particular on what this journey alongside consumer credit default has to contribute towards a sociology of economic life. The thesis will then conclude by exploring how to account sociologically for the differential politics of consumer credit.

The socio-material making of markets

One of the central claims that this thesis has made, is that markets need to be understood as a composite of both human and non-human interactions. Building in particular on insights from the 'economization' programme and writers working with concepts and methods drawn from ANT, I have explored the way in which, across a range of consumer credit market interactions, materiality really does matter. From the moment a consumer picks up a credit card, or takes out an unsecured loan, they are moving towards an engagement with a market assemblage that is saturated with multiple, variably enacted and enacting, socio-material devices. This thesis has certainly not covered all of these. Its focus has been on the particular space of interaction between consumer credit 'consumer' and consumer credit 'producer'. Within these broad, sometimes ill-fitting categories, are contained the variable modes of attachment that are variously sought—and disrupted—between market entities including borrower, debtor, defaulter, 'can't pay', 'won't pay', customer, creditor, lender, and collector (to name a few). But the manner in which these attachments are made and unmade are shown to be resolutely dependent on the way people and things both format and are formatted by processes of ongoing, mutual adjustment.

A particular focus has been on the way in which these mutual adjustments shape the calculative practices of borrowers, debtors, and defaulters. From the everyday spaces of borrowing, to assessments of purchases, to dealing with the routine incursions of the collector, calculative practices and possibilities have been revealed as a socio-material outcome. The attention paid by the economization programme to the role performed by 'market devices' in shaping markets and market encounters has been central to this argument. The credit card, the statement, the collections letter, the collections worker, the econometric analyst: each have been shown to play a role in 'calibrating' not only market entities, but the market itself (Muniesa et al., 2007: 5). In moving through the different spaces in which these devices are being deployed and formatted, people have been shown to be eminently able to make considered, calculative choices, whilst also frequently having those calculative choices postponed, distributed, or rendered opaque.

In following this moving object, this thesis has traced multiple modes through which attachments between market actors are formatted. It has shown that attachments are not simply 'made' and 'unmade', but that the study of the precise quality of market attachments opens up the empirical terrain upon which socio-economic action can and should be studied. In so doing, this thesis has sought to enrich the study of processes of market attachment, by focusing not simply on movements of attaching and detaching, but on the multiple registers or 'modes of engagement' through which these processes occur.

In so doing, the thesis has argued for the value of bringing some of the insights of the economization programme towards the more everyday, intimate spaces of socio-economic life. These are the homes, bodies, mundane routines, and consumption practices of economic citizens. The case of consumer credit borrowing, debt and default, not only demonstrates both the deep interdependence between markets and spaces and forms of action formatted as 'private', but also demonstrates precisely how markets may intersect with and shape their composition.

A particular focus has been on the socio-material work that goes into not only formatting calculation, but also non-calculation, building on exploratory work in this area by Michel Callon and John Law (2005). The thesis has shown, as they suggest, that in certain markets, both the socio-material construction of non-calculation and calculation (or, following Cochoy, non-qualculation and qualculation) are deeply intertwined. In the course of their journeys into default, for example, borrowers experience the routine decomposition of calculative possibility, both in routine interactions with some of consumer credit's transactional devices, as well as with those devices designed to restore their calculative capacity. These socio-material devices are shown not only to be incapable of containing uncertainty, but also as actively amplifying calculative opacity, by allowing themselves to recede from view, to push calculative engagements to one side. In tracing these processes, the moment of transaction itself is opened up as an empirical site that has been under-researched. Different monetary media are shown to engender significantly different calculative practices and hence different market attachments, not simply because of the culturally coded 'meanings' that are ascribed to different forms of money (Zelizer, 1997), but also because of the particular, variably socio-materially formatted, corporeal modes of (in)action they afford.

Callon and Law, despite positing a role for what they refer to as potential 'Machiavellian' manipulation of non-calculation, do not explore this possibility in depth. This thesis, however, has shown how, to the collections industry, the strategic, socio-material management of non-calculation is central. The collections letter, for example, is a market device that seeks to amplify non-calculability. It does this by a strategic amplification of indeterminacy. The lack of broad public understanding of the debt collections industry's practices, the legal system, or the complexities of credit scoring, are coupled to the inevitable impossibility of being able to know, for certain, the course of future events. It is in constructing this non-calculability that, they hope, the defaulter will focus their calculative energy not on picking through whether or not threats are likely to be enacted or not, but on the far simpler task of calling the collector to discuss their situation and, perhaps, negotiate.

The creation by creditors of fictitious external companies or 'trading styles' is another such example. However, despite being (principally) enacted via letters, it is less the letter that is the market device, more the market itself, as mediated by branding practices. Here, by reverse-engineering many of the more conventional functions of brands, the partialities (or, more normatively 'inefficiencies') of the market, and especially the illiquidity of moral obligations, are drawn on as potentially generative affordances. More particularly, by suggesting to a debtor that their account has been passed to an external collector (while, in fact, the account continues to be managed by an in-house collections department), the collector suggests that they are dispensing with their duty of customer care. Here non-calculation operates through the strategic concealment, via a process of socio-material ordering, of the relations between trading style and the parent brand.

Debt collection technologies have also shown to be deeply performative and, in many ways, fitting Michel Callon's (1998, 2007) claim that the economy is being routinely made in line with economic theories and tools, its sociotechnical assemblages (*agencements*). The trading style, for example, draws heavily on marketing practices and technologies, even as it inverts them, in the strategic performation of distinct collections market actors. But perhaps the most striking example, is the increasing use of econometric modelling as part of the collections strategy. Here, debtors are subject to forms of *in vitro* and *in vivo* experimentation (Çalışkan & Callon, 2010: 19). The debtor's past actions and responses to collections technologies become the data for a process of repeated 'testing'. This is an 'experimental metaphysics' (Latour, 2004a; Marres, 2009), in which 'reality'—the debtor's world—provides not only the grounds for analysis, but also intervention. As the thesis has shown, debtors' worlds really are both the object of—and (often) being reshaped in line with—markets (see: Callon & Muniesa, 2005: 1234; Mcfall, 2009b: 171).

This thesis has therefore made an argument *for* many of the insights of the economization programme. These provide, it has suggested, an in important steer towards the socio-material construction of markets and market encounters, including drawing attention to the distribution of calculative agency in and through a range of marketised tools and processes. As such, I have also pointed towards the limitations of approaches that both seek to socially 'root' markets—notably work clustered around both so-called 'new' economic sociology and phenomenological readings of markets—and that look to the market as a site for the enactment of modes of economic governance—as clustering around post-Foucauldian analytical frameworks. These modes of analysis have much that is important to say about markets. However, they are limited by their narrow foci on just some of the multiple, not necessarily compatible, not necessarily successful modes of ordering that are to be found operating amongst market assemblages.

Devices, dispositions and expertise

This thesis has argued, however, that to understand processes of economization, a focus on 'devices' alone is not enough. Here it begins to push against the existing descriptive repertoire of the economization programme. One productive route into a richer understanding these processes is by attending equally to the role of 'devices' and 'dispositions', following Franck Cochoy (2007a). This points the economization programme towards a greater need to attend not only to formatting of market technique and technology, but how market devices orient themselves towards, stimulate and shape the embodied habits, moods, and reactions of those that they intersect with. The thesis has argued that such an approach is central to understanding the differential modes of engagement that market actors bring to the varied calculative challenges they face. The thesis has shown both how debtors' dispositions shape their modes of calculative engagement and, importantly, how the collections market itself is increasingly orienting itself towards variations within the dispositions of those that it targets.

This is made clear in the thesis' exploration of modes of performative econometric testing. Here, it is the minute, differentially embodied, dispositional tendencies that are targeted and amplified by the collections industry. This testing is put to work to identify those who are (minutely) more ready to be the target of a particular modality of market attachment than others. At the same time, the collections industry makes use of dispositional variations in its own staff, strategically assigning collections workers to areas of their business in such a way as to create a fit between the dispositions of the collector and the defaulter.

In tracing the significance of dispositional variations to the ability of markets to shape consumers' worlds, the thesis has also pointed towards the variable role played by expertise. On the one hand, outside expert knowledge, as provided by the debt adviser, or via user-generated advice on an internet forum, provides a way of debtors gaining access to much needed calculative prostheses, which provide some counterweight to the calculative asymmetries they confront. This can, for instance, enable them to 'see through' some of the threats that are being deployed against them by the collector. This transforms collections technologies from opaque and intensely personalising, communicating to them and the particularities of their lives, to far weaker, speculative attempts by the collector to elicit a reaction. One potential consequence is to transform non action (ignoring letters, for example) from being understood as the conduct of an irresponsible economic citizen, to a morally legitimate and economically rational response.

On the other hand, however, I argue that the capacity for expertise to be transformative needs to be understood in relation to the embodied, dispositional tendencies of market actors. Further, attention is also required to the ways in which expertise can itself generate calculative opacities. With respect to the former, Jane, for instance, stands as an example of someone whose life, body, and disposition are unsuited for the task of debt default. She has had recourse to expertise, in the form of debt advice, but this has done little to combat the way in which the persistent, ongoing incursions of collections technologies problematise her relationship with her own body, as well as the sheer administrative burden of debt default. Angela, by contrast—young, educated, upwardly mobile, and physically able—is simply, dispositionally, far more able to allow expertise to make a difference.

However, as this thesis has documented, both the 'formal' expertise of the debt adviser and the user-generated advice of the forum should not be seen simply as the 'restoration' of (a deficit of) calculative capacity. Instead, these forms of expertise variously present debtors with the possibility of delegating calculative and, in the case of the Debt Management Plan, administrative responsibility. The 'qualculation' engendered by debtors' engagement with outside expertise is revealed as often focused less on being provided with definitive, quantified, calculative solutions to the prompts of the collector and more on accessing practical, viable responses to the insistent, ongoing, opaque, anxiousness-inducing prompts of the collectors. As the thesis has shown this is not a solution to the problem of calculative opacity. In the case of the Debt Management Plan, for instance, the very question as to whether the market or the not-for-profit provider provides better 'value', can end up being pushed beyond the edge of debtors' calculative frames. Or, in the case of the user-generated debt forum, processes of calculation are shown as being oriented principally around the decision as to whether or not to delegate calculative work to others. This is, I argue, not simply the restoration of calculation, but the *calculated submission to non-calculation*.

Intimate economised spaces: Tracing an emergent empirics

However the thesis has also argued that, in tracing market processes, there is room to expand both the vocabulary and empirical focus of the economic sociology yet further, capable of speaking to the articulation of 'corporeal materialities' in and through the market (see: Mcfall, 2009a: 53). This is an area of social life that exists only at the margins of accounts of consumer 'dispositions'. In particular, as the thesis has argued throughout, within the study of socio-economic processes, there has been a lack of attention to corporeal, 'affective' modes of social action and economic calculation. These are relations that are emergent, excessive and operate at the limits of the phenomenal, in which people are seen as being composed in ongoing dynamic relation to their own bodies. This is thus a call for a study of markets that is open to the study of those processes through which both *markets and bodies* are mutually formatted.

In examining debtors' descriptions of the borrowing practices that lead them into debt, pointers towards the role of these liminal modes of social action can be detected, but only in the interstices of users' accounts. Thus, for example, borrowers talk of the different 'feel' of using diverse monetary media, of the calculative possibilities afforded by the corporeal, physical labour of counting cash, and of the decalculative effects of just having to 'slap' a card on the counter (as one debtor put it). However, in fleeting transactional moments, the role played by corporeal, affective modes of action in shaping and being shaped by calculative practices is underarticulated and undercoded. In particular, transactional forms of consumer credit afford easy passage through consumer space precisely by not imposing themselves on calculative, corporeal modes of engagement. This mode of monetary exchange precisely enables a certain 'weightlessness', a de-emphasising of the way the body is adjusting itself to, and being adjusted by, a range of differently formatted market encounters.

However, as borrowers become defaulters, the centrality of corporeal, emergent forms of action to markets becomes impossible to ignore. The economised body is placed at the centre of defaulters' accounts of the experience of default. And it can be found at the centre of the organisation of the consumer collections industry. Consumer collections practices are shown to depend on technologies that engage in simultaneous processes of (affect) 'capture' (Massumi, 2002) and market 'captation' (Cochoy, 2007a). That is to say, these are technologies that are predicated on their ability to attach market actors together in and through both everyday, 'intimate' spaces (Michael, 2006; Zelizer, 2001) and corporeal, emergent forms of action (Clough, 2009; Massumi, 2002; Thrift, 2007). The thesis thus makes a case for restoring to economic sociology, some of the richness of a specifically Deleuzian attention to what assemblages do and through which modes of human (inter)action they routinely operate.

In part, this thesis has made a case for tracing these processes in and through the spaces of everyday life itself. Following Gardiner, this is to see the everyday as a site for engagement with the more 'extraordinary'—if messy, visceral and 'profane'—dimensions of social life (2000: 208). In journeying into debtors' households, for instance, it is possible to see the extent to which embodied, domestic relations are repeatedly problematised in and through collections technologies. The persistent intrusions of collections letters and phonecalls means that they integrate themselves into the routines and practices of everyday life. They become involved in generating 'anxious', affective, anticipatory household landscapes, punctuated by irregular 'intensive' moments, as letters are picked up, or as the phone starts to ring. One consequence is that collections technologies become unavoidable household passage points. Children wait anxiously for the reaction of their mother as she reads the content of a newly arrived letter. Georgina tries to hide letters from her husband, worried about the impact their contents might have on both their relationship and his wellbeing. As such, collections technologies become unavoidable socio-material 'lures', capable of shaping and being reshaped by the conduct of domestic relations.

The everyday is not, however, simply a space through which to study either the *effects* of markets, or actors' *experiences* of markets. Instead, the thesis has argued that markets are made in and reshaped through such everyday socio-economic, corporeal interactions. The principal aim of collections technologies thus remains the generation of calculative attention. And it is, I argue, precisely by targeting the debtor's embodied, everyday life that it hopes to do so. Given both debtors' constrained financial means and the competition within the collections industry, the collector's task is to focus calculative attention on *them*, not a competitor. Generating an ongoing state of future oriented 'anxious anticipation' is part of this. But it is by 'capturing' these emergent, affective affordances that the collector hopes to achieve this calculative focus. In Eve's case, for example, the arrival of the collections letter transforms her ongoing anxiousness into the far more intensive states of panic *and* calculative focus. Panic is not simply a by-product, it is the mechanism through which the collector attempts to train a debtor's calculative attention on its letters and their debt. In so doing, the collector offers a further promise: that of respite. This is a respite from being subject to its collections technologies, in exchange for a payment, or a commitment towards future payments. In exchange for a debtor reattaching (the transfer of) 'value' to their debt, the collector promises to 'detach' itself from the mesh of household relations.

But, in part given that most debtors owe money to multiple creditors, the attachments between collector and household are manifold and are unlikely to be simultaneously resolvable. It is here that the thesis argues for the need to pay greater attention to the *modes of attachment* that markets operate in and through. In the case of consumer debt default, this translates into debtors beginning to talk struggle to consider their mental and bodily processes as distinct from their debts. Debts, defaulters say, come to be part of their bodies, their thought processes 'all the time'. To draw on Halewood, their debt becomes a 'hard, physical, manifestation in individualized bodies' (2005: 76). Or, to put it in Annemarie Mol's terms, bodies become distributed and enacted, in and through technologies of debt collection. In Ruth's case, for example, the repeated infolding an unfolding of her debt, mediated by collections technologies, means that it becomes deeply connected to her moods. Further, she is unable to stop it becoming an actor in the reconfiguration of the relationship between her mind and her body, as one threatens to leech into the other, making her ill. In the case of Jane, meanwhile, her body is shown to be particularly ill-equipped to deal with debt default. She lacks not simply the calculative power to respond to the prompts of the collector, but, in part because of her ME, the *bodily authority* to do so. The resulting problematisations between debt and body mean that the former become, as she puts is, 'embedded' in the latter. This is a mode of attachment that runs so deep that she imagines a residual corporeal bond remaining, even if she were to enact a formal detachment from her debts.

Technologies of debt collection therefore stand as instances of a domain of the market engaged in what I refer to as routine acts of *private demonstration*. That is to say, by inserting themselves, undesired, within intimate relations—between debtors and both their own individuating bodies and those of other household members—collections technologies both *disrupt and render visible* those relations. These are therefore processes of market (re)attachment that operate in and through intervening in and making apparent debtors' control over the stability of relations between them, their own bodies, and other household members. I will return to the politics implied by such processes below.

Markets do not, however, only engage in the 'capture' of such emergent forms of action in and through intimate, domestic spaces. Move to the world of the collector and it becomes clear that, here too, debtors are considered as market actors that can be targeted in and through corporeal, affective relations. A look at Beta's collections call centre renders this visible: collections teams are organized in a hierarchy of affective intensity, from approaches that range from 'gentle' to 'hard'. This hierarchy is also reflected in both the deployment of collections letters and the different approaches that collectors take with debtors as they progress down debt collections trajectories.

It is by looking more precisely at the particular modes of attachment and captation being variably deployed by collections call centre workers and in collections letters that these processes become even more evident. At one end of the hierarchy, this orients itself far more often towards the therapeutic and the 'empathetic'. These modes of attachment operate around attempting to enact a debtor as the subject of neoliberal forms of governance, as described by post-Foucauldian governmentality studies. Here the debtor is seen as retaining the possibility for self-governance, even if this is a capacity that is seen as 'latent'. At the other end of the hierarchy, however, modes of attachment operate in and through attempting to enact the debtor as an embodied subject of discipline. Here, the mechanism shifts towards the collector didactically seeking to impose its worldview over the debtor.

It is in the coupling of collections technologies to forms of econometric analysis where these processes are perhaps at their most explicit. In exploring this, the thesis also points to the limits in how the concept of 'performativity' is deployed in the economization programme. I argued previously these forms of *in vitro* and *in vivo* experimentation may be considered as performative, in reshaping debtors' worlds in line with the tools of economic analysis. This is true. And it is also the case that these technologies target and enact different debtor dispositions, in line with Cochoy's account. But what can be added to this picture is a more precise account of the *mechanism* through which this process is enacted, when it comes to the intimate, everyday lives of consumers. I argue that to understand these processes, it is necessary to understand how such technologies are being *strategically* oriented towards the emergent, emotive responses of consumers. This is thus not only the strategic engineering of debtor dispositions, it is also, following Thrift, the strategic 'engineering of affect' (2007: 182).

The distributed politics of consumer credit default

In Chapter One, I highlighted Paul Rock's account of the reasons for the relative invisibility of debt collection as an object of public interest, in which he also addresses the relative lack of attention within sociology (amongst other disciplines). I will repeat his argument, as it is relevant here. For Rock, debt collection is prevented from being recognised by both the public and sociologists as a 'problem', as he puts it, in part because 'it is so organised that *it contains very few of the mechanisms which can attract and hold the attention of people* towards a social problem' (1973: 4-5; emphasis added).

One way of reinterpreting this, in light of recent work on the politics of issue formation, is to view debt collections as an issue that lacks mechanisms of 'public-isation' (Marres, 2007: 773; see also: Latour, 2007). That is to say, that even with the increasing media interest in debt collection (see Introduction) and the rise of online defaulter forums (see Chapter 5), debt collection remains at the fringes of public and academic debate. One of the central reasons for this, Rock argues, is that debt default and hence debt collection are seen as centring on failures of individual economic competence. As such, these are isolated failings, with little that might render the issue (as a whole) as one of broad social or public relevance (1973: 15).

In this concluding section, I want to explore this in greater depth. In particular, I will argue that, in many ways, Rock's analysis still holds. However, this is not simply because there is *a lack* of 'public-isation' mechanisms surrounding debt default, but also, to draw on Marres' formulation, that this is an issue that is replete with acts and practices of '*de-publicisation*'. These are the socio-material practices that enact an issue as *less publicly visible* and therefore as less appropriate for forms of outside involvement (Marres, 2007: 774). At the same time, I argue that these practices need to be understood in relation to a technology *of* visibility: the demonstration. However, rather than focusing attention on demonstrations oriented towards acting in and shaping public space—public demonstrations—in studying markets, I argue there is room to also focus on demonstrations that operate through and attempt to format ostensibly 'private' space.

As I argued in Chapter Four, by making this claim the aim is not essentialise the domestic *as* a private space, but instead to draw attention to the differentiated politics of witnessing that are enacted by formatting certain issues as public and others as private. As Andrew Barry argues, part of the reason public demonstrations are inevitably political, is because of the forms of inclusion and exclusion they enact, around *who can and should be allowed to witness them* (2001: 178). I will argue that same can be said for the demonstrations enacted via collections technologies. In other words, there is a politics to the telling of the 'fact' of a debtor's relationship to their debt in private, as well as to keeping it *as a private issue*. In particular, in exploring the everyday market relations that cluster around the 'consumer', it needs to be recognised that there is a heavy amount of performative work at play that aims to render an economic citizen as individualised and individually responsible for his or her calculative actions.

This thesis has traced how, because of the particular market challenges the collections industry faces, it has developed an increasingly sophisticated methodologies for predicting and shaping calculative action. This is oriented around a performative metaphysics that recognises the (economic) opportunity presented by the affective captation of the corporeal and the domestic. Qualitative forms of expertise (focus groups, the accumulation of industry knowledge, the work of 'anti-branding') are increasingly being coupled to quantitative modelling techniques not only to analyse the social worlds of debtors, but also to *intervene and shape* these worlds.

As a (social) scientific, experimental enterprise, the collections industry is thus deeply involved not only in abstracting from reality, but generating new socio-economic realities. Therefore, as well as the politics of witnessing that are implied by these privatising demonstrations, the deployment of these technologies entails a politics of socio-material reordering. This is what Mol might call the ontological politics of debt default. In the case of the defaulting debtor, this operates around the reordering of their lives around the repeated demonstrations, via technologies of debt collection, of the 'truth' of their debt. Barry argues that a 'truth telling' demonstration can never be disinterested: 'it is always intended to have effects on, or challenge the minds or effect the conduct of others' (2001:

178). In the case of debt collection, the privatising collections demonstration has made this an explicit *raison d'être*.

In particular, the thesis has examined how domestic space and embodied, emergent dispositional tendencies are targeted as key mechanisms through which the collector can seek to transform an attachment constituted through obligations (between a debtor and their debt), into an attachment constituted through relations of value. It has shown repeatedly how defaulters' everyday lives become deeply entangled with their own debts and technologies of debt collection. Moreover, these are not simply socio-material, corporeal entanglements that are an under-articulated 'side effect' of technosocial life, to be opened up for public view by the social analyst (see: Marres, 2009: 124), but entanglements that are variably and strategically enacted by the collector. The body, household routines and relationships, mundane technologies (the phone and letter): these are the socio-material affordances which come to be at the centre of the *business* of debt collection. Following a tale of consumer credit default is, therefore, to follow a domain of socio-economic life where a portion of the population *really are* being subject to their domestic, everyday routines becoming deeply entangled in the market. On the face of it, therefore, one tale that could be told about the politics of debt default would be a familiar sociological account of a (even deeper) colonization of everyday life by forces of market rationalisation.

However, as writers such as Daniel Miller (1998) and Viviana Zelizer (1997, 2001) have shown, such theses miss the ways in which people routinely mix and shape their relationship to markets to their own advantage. This is not to dismiss the potential for markets to intervene in people's lives in ways that they may find deeply undesirable. However, it is important to be attentive to the ways in which intimate, everyday market encounters are spaces for creative, mutual adjustment. Thus, in respect of consumer default, I want to point to some areas that complicate this picture, focusing on different not necessarily compatible *modes* through which the individualising, privatising politics of debt default can be understood.

The first mode operates around the attempt to (re)enact the debtor as economically responsible. The aim of all collections technologies is not to reinforce the attachment between the debtor and their debts (in general), but to enact and enliven the attachment to *a single defaulting consumer credit* account (in particular). As such, being subject to the routine incursions of collections technologies is therefore to have repeatedly demonstrated a series of individualised forms of accountability. Whether operating through attempts to (re)activate latent forms of economic self-governance, or more didactic modes of address, targeting the debtor as a subject in need to disciplinary stimulus, these are modes of address that variously attempt to re-engage debtors via their obligations as economic citizens, *to each creditor, individually*.

The second mode intersects with the first, operating around the inarticulablity of the experience of being subject to affective, performative consumer collections methodologies. As most centrally articulated by Jane, the socio-material entanglements that collections demonstrations enact, not only become deeply embodied and internalised, but are also extremely difficult to articulate to others. Worried that, without having experienced a similar situation, others will not 'understand', Jane is left having to '[put] a face on [while] there's this other thing going on'. In so doing, she herself de-publicises the issue of credit default, reframing it as an issue between her and her own bodily incapacities. When coupled with a feeling of having failed to perform appropriately as a responsible economic citizen, this leaves debtors lacking both the language and a sympathetic public to whom they can articulate their (privatised) issue of default.

The third mode centres on the variable 'openness' of debtors' bodies to the prompts of the collector. Here, the degree to which these privatising technologies succeed becomes an empirical, experimental question. Here, via the amplification of minute, embodied, dispositional tendencies via econometric testing means it is possible to focus on defaulters who will respond more readily to debt collection technologies. These will potentially be targeted earlier and they will be targeted more intensively. Here, however, there is an inversion of the neoliberal idealisation of the self-governing economic citizen. Easy to manage, more responsive debtors are effectively 'punished' for their greater readiness to responsibilise themselves and perform as conscientious self managing, economic citizens.

These are three of multiple possible modes through which the ontological politics of default are managed and enacted, to varying degrees of success. As such, they point toward just some of the variable ways in which the politics of market attachment is being made and unmade in and through the landscape of consumer credit default. These examples have, however, shown that the success of these modes of attachment is neither uniform, nor does it necessarily bear a close relation to norms of equity or fairness. As argued in Chapter 3, these point towards the existence of a politics to the degree of mobility in and out of markets, where speaking of all attachments as 'constantly threatened' jars (Callon et al., 2002).

However, the defaulters' forum provides evidence of an attempt to combat the de-publicising effects of being subject to debt collection technologies. The mechanism for its work of 'public-isation' is the particular mode of expertise that the forum offers: it is an expertise that gains part of its legitimacy from personal familiarity with the experiential, corporeal dimensions of debt default. Even if new members struggle to articulate their personal experiences, veteran forum members make it clear that their situation *is* understood. Further, in providing ongoing responses to the calculative opacities that confused 'lay' debtors are routinely confronted with, the forum builds up a complex, messy archive which is not only available to existing forum members, but also that acts as an affordance to which 'new' defaulting debtors can become drawn with a simple search. The site takes the privatising demonstrations of the collector and puts them in public view, thereby (re-)publicising debt default, as an issue with genuine public relevance, capable of enrolling actors to its cause. However, even here, the framing of the market as a site for individualised responsibilities is not so much challenged as managed. Thus, the strident modes of articulation drawn on by one contributor, who proposes a radical detachment from the market entirely, whilst not unwelcome on the forum, are only in evidence in the interstices of its more mundane everyday usage. That is to say, this is a mode of 'truth' telling that, within this particular 'ethno-epistemic assemblage' (Irwin & Michael, 2003), has difficulty maintaining a robust claim to existence (Callon, 2004; Latour, 2004a).

There is one further site that has been traced in this thesis, through which the politics of consumer lending and default can be observed in the process of being variously publicised and de-publicised. This is the multiple enactment of the defaulting debtor through the binaries of lender/collector, customer/debtor and borrower/defaulter. Here I draw on insights from within the collections industry itself. In particular that from Helen, the director of Alpha agency, and her assertion that credit statements and collections letters are, in essence, 'the same'.

This assertion, I argued, if clearly self-serving, does merit attention. For, whilst serving to de-politicise collections, it can also be read as (re-)politicising consumer lending. It reframes the consumer lending business as a collections business and credit statements as soft collections letters. Whilst this thesis has shown that, clearly, the modes of attachment and detachment that surround a borrower and those that surround a defaulter are far from being 'the same', what this reframing points to is how the politics of consumer credit lending and collections is being distributed across a series of mutually adjusting, interrelated market actors. Moreover, as in the case of trading styles, this redistribution can be coupled to the *strategic performation* of the lender/collector binary.

Looking from the perspective of the consumer collector opens up the integration of collections technologies into the heart of consumer credit. It also shifts the composition of the controversies surrounding both lending and collections. Creditors are increasingly bringing collections functions in-house, sometimes diverting funds and staff away from their lending operations. But at the same time, creditors themselves draw on the apparent binary of lender/collector as a profitable market device, in their use of internal-external trading styles, to convince debtors that they have renounced some of their duty of care. In this light, one place to look for what is under-articulated in the controversies surrounding consumer credit, is the increasing if tacit recognition in the actions of creditors of the benefits of bringing lending and collecting functions closer together. At the same time, however, they are keen not to disturb the fiction of their separation. To do otherwise would be to disrupt the progress of a highly generative market assemblage.

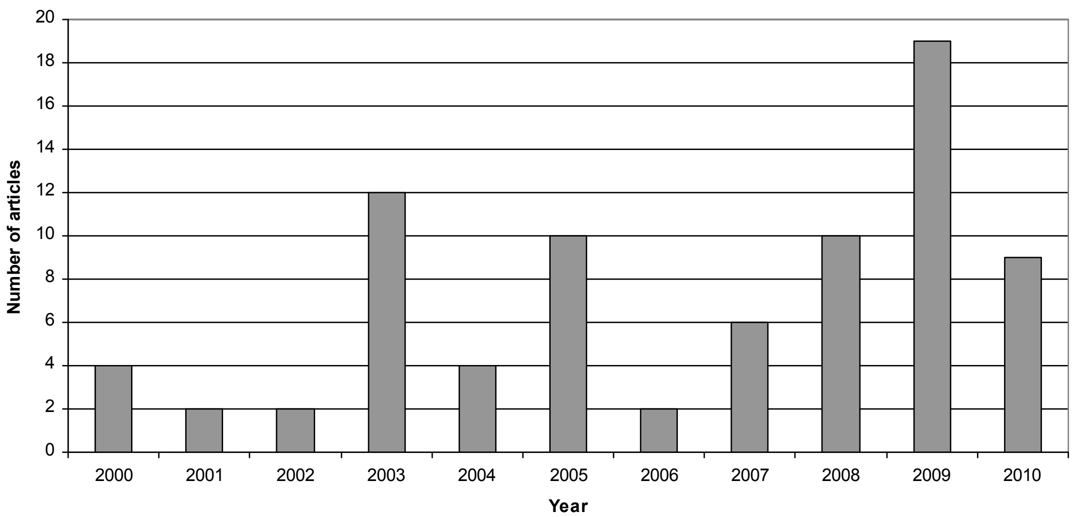
Appendix 1. UK Newspaper Coverage of Debt Collection Industry Practices

Search undertaken using ProQuest UK newspaper electronic database; searching all full text articles using search term: 'debt collect*'

<u>Selection criteria</u>

- 1. Stories have to have debt collection practices *at their core* (hence excluding stories focusing primarily on consumer credit borrowing, or commercial debt management companies, or articles only mentioning debt collection in passing)
- 2. All articles to include a focus on consumer credit debt. Hence excludes stories around, for example, mortgage, broadband, and utilities collections, as well as stories centring on court appointed bailiffs
- 3. All newspapers to have national coverage (hence excluding Scottish editions and regional newspapers)
- 4. Excluding short articles, tending to be in business sections, providing reportage as to the collection industry's performance, or stock market activity
- 5. All reader letters to newspapers excluded
- 6. All consumer advice pieces responding to reader's letters excluded, including those where a newspaper takes action on a consumer's behalf
- 7. Any duplicate stories in different editions of the same newspaper excluded

*Figure 12. Number of articles focusing on consumer debt collection, national UK newspapers, 2000 – 2010**

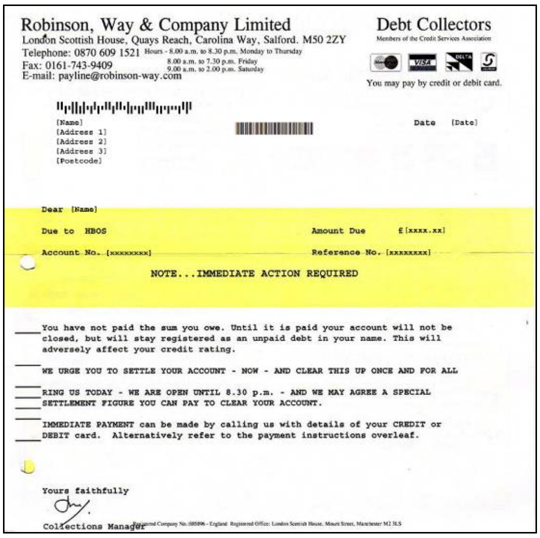


* Excluding December 2010. Results are affected by newspaper reporting of OFT and government actions being taken or proposed against debt collectors. In 2003, for instance, these make up half (five) of the stories in this year. Similar stories in 2005 comprise three articles. In 2008 there were just two such articles, and in 2009 there were four.

Appendix 2. Further Examples of Collections Letters

Figure 13. Examples of contingency collections letters (Robinson Way)

Letter 1



Robinson, Way & Company Limited
London Scottish House, Quays Reach, Carolina Way, Salford. M50 2ZY
Telephone: 0870 609 1521 Hours - 8.00 a.m. to 8.30 p.m. Monday to Thursday
8.00 a.m. to 7.30 p.m. Friday
9.00 a.m. to 2.00 p.m. Saturday
Fax: 0161-743-9409
E-mail: payline@robinson-way.com

Debt Collectors
Members of the Credit Services Association
You may pay by credit or debit card.

[Name]
[Address 1]
[Address 2]
[Address 3]
[Postcode]

Date [Date]

Dear [Name]

Due to HBOS

Amount Due £[xxxx.xx]

Account No. [xxxxxxxx]

Reference No. [xxxxxxxx]

NOTE...IMMEDIATE ACTION REQUIRED

You have not paid the sum you owe. Until it is paid your account will not be closed, but will stay registered as an unpaid debt in your name. This will adversely affect your credit rating.

WE URGE YOU TO SETTLE YOUR ACCOUNT - NOW - AND CLEAR THIS UP ONCE AND FOR ALL

RING US TODAY - WE ARE OPEN UNTIL 8.30 p.m. - AND WE MAY AGREE A SPECIAL SETTLEMENT FIGURE YOU CAN PAY TO CLEAR YOUR ACCOUNT.

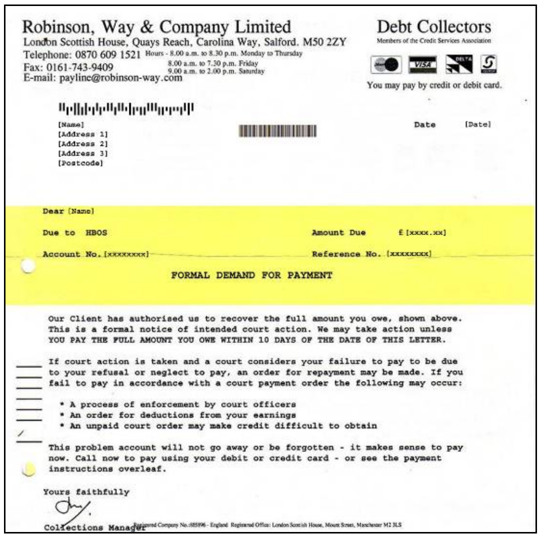
IMMEDIATE PAYMENT can be made by calling us with details of your CREDIT or DEBIT card. Alternatively refer to the payment instructions overleaf.

Yours faithfully

Collections Manager

Registered Company No. 885896 - England Registered Office: London Scottish House, Mount Street, Manchester M2 3LS

Letter 2



Robinson, Way & Company Limited
London Scottish House, Quays Reach, Carolina Way, Salford. M50 2ZY
Telephone: 0870 609 1521 Hours - 8.00 a.m. to 8.30 p.m. Monday to Thursday
8.00 a.m. to 7.30 p.m. Friday
9.00 a.m. to 2.00 p.m. Saturday
Fax: 0161-743-9409
E-mail: payline@robinson-way.com

Debt Collectors
Members of the Credit Services Association
You may pay by credit or debit card.

[Name]
[Address 1]
[Address 2]
[Address 3]
[Postcode]

Date [Date]

Dear [Name]

Due to HBOS

Amount Due £[xxxx.xx]

Account No. [xxxxxxxx]

Reference No. [xxxxxxxx]

FORMAL DEMAND FOR PAYMENT

Our Client has authorised us to recover the full amount you owe, shown above. This is a formal notice of intended court action. We may take action unless YOU PAY THE FULL AMOUNT YOU OWE WITHIN 10 DAYS OF THE DATE OF THIS LETTER.

If court action is taken and a court considers your failure to pay to be due to your refusal or neglect to pay, an order for repayment may be made. If you fail to pay in accordance with a court payment order the following may occur:

* A process of enforcement by court officers
* An order for deductions from your earnings
* An unpaid court order may make credit difficult to obtain

This problem account will not go away or be forgotten - it makes sense to pay now. Call now to pay using your debit or credit card - or see the payment instructions overleaf.

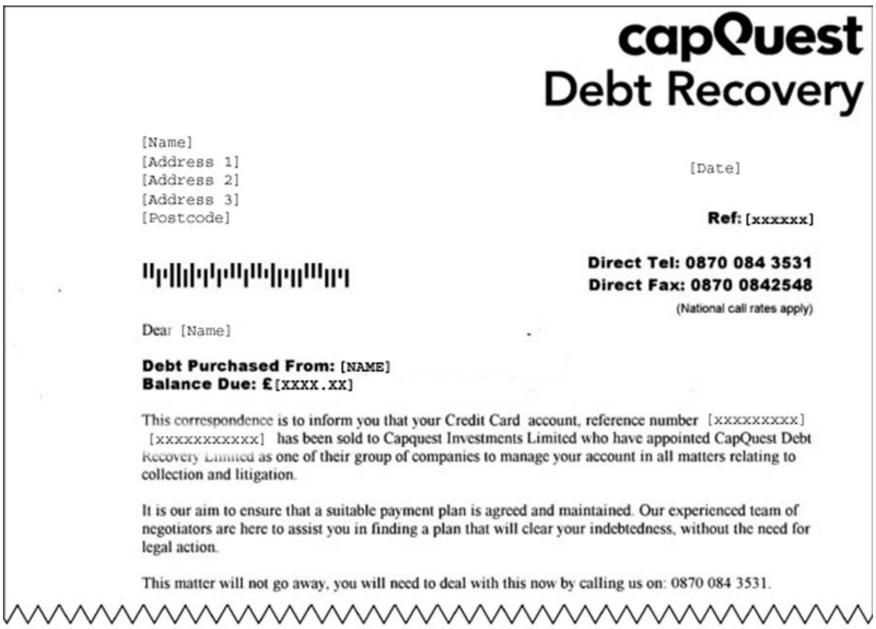
Yours faithfully

Collections Manager

Registered Company No. 885896 - England Registered Office: London Scottish House, Mount Street, Manchester M2 3LS

Figure 14. Examples of debt purchase collections letters (capQuest)

Letter 1: Notice of purchase



capQuest
Debt Recovery

[Name]
[Address 1]
[Address 2]
[Address 3]
[Postcode]

[Date]

Ref: [xxxxxx]

Direct Tel: 0870 084 3531
Direct Fax: 0870 0842548
(National call rates apply)

Dear [Name]

Debt Purchased From: [NAME]
Balance Due: £[XXXX.XX]

This correspondence is to inform you that your Credit Card account, reference number [xxxxxxxxx] [xxxxxxxxxxx] has been sold to Capquest Investments Limited who have appointed CapQuest Debt Recovery Limited as one of their group of companies to manage your account in all matters relating to collection and litigation.

It is our aim to ensure that a suitable payment plan is agreed and maintained. Our experienced team of negotiators are here to assist you in finding a plan that will clear your indebtedness, without the need for legal action.

This matter will not go away, you will need to deal with this now by calling us on: 0870 084 3531.

Letter 2: Letter pre-litigation

capQuest
Debt Recovery

Ref [xxxxxx]

[Date]

[Name]
[Address 1]
[Address 2]
[Address 3]
[Postcode]

Legal Line: 0870 084 3517
Legal@capquestco.com
Fax: 0870 0842576
(National call rates apply)

LETTER BEFORE ACTION

Dear [Name]

We note with regret that you have chosen not to deal with this matter despite our previous communication endeavouring to assist you in coming to a satisfactory arrangement to settle this account without the need for legal action.

It is therefore our intention to progress your account to our pre-litigation system where the relevant validations and checks will be completed. Your account will then be passed to our solicitors who may commence legal action on or around [Date]

Through the litigation process we will seek an Order of the Court, directing you to pay monies outstanding. If we are successful and it is necessary to do so, we will seek to enforce such an Order with a Warrant of Execution. In the event that we do obtain a Warrant of Execution, a Court Enforcement Officer (Bailiff) will be assigned to attend your address and carry out the Warrant.

The Bailiff will take an inventory and levy goods. You will be informed that the Bailiff has impounded the goods and you will be asked to sign a Walking Possession Agreement, acknowledging that the impounded goods are in the possession

References

Aalbers, M. B. (2008). The financialization of home and the mortgage market crisis. *Competition and Change, 12*(2), 148-166.

Acker, J., Barry, K., & Esseveld, J. (1996). Objectivity and truth: Problems in doing feminist research. In H. Gottfried (Ed.), *Feminism and social change: Bridging theory and practice* (pp. 60-87). Illinois: University of Illinois Press.

Adams, V., Murphy, M., & Clarke, A. E. (2009). Anticipation: Technoscience, life, affect, temporality. *Subjectivity, 28*(1), 246-265.

Adkins, L. (1995). *Gendered work: Sexuality, family and the labour market*. Buckingham; Bristol, PA: Open University Press.

Adkins, L. (2005). The new economy, property and personhood. *Theory, Culture & Society, 22*(1), 111-130.

Adkins, L., & Lury, C. (1999). The labour of identity: Performing identities, performing economies. *Economy and Society, 28*(4), 598-614.

AMC. (2009, October). Episode 11: The gypsy and the hobo. *Mad Men, Season 3*.

Anonymous. (2006, May 20). Survey: One Basel leads to another. *The Economist,* p. 12.

Aspers, P. (2005). *Markets in fashion: A phenomenological approach*. London: Routledge.

Atkinson, P., & Silverman, D. (1997). Kundera's immortality: The interview society and the invention of the self. *Qualitative Inquiry, 3*(3), 304-325.

Ayub, E. (2004). Identifying the optimum collections strategy through the use of champion challenger analytical tools [Online]. *Talgentra White Paper*. Retrieved 25.03.10, from http://www.gentrack.com/content//champchallwp.pdf

Back, L. (2007). *The art of listening*. London: Berg.

Banasiak, D. (2009). Accurate collections in a tough economy: Statistical scoring [Online Webinar]. *Predictive Metrics Webinars*. Retrieved 14.04.10, from http://www.predictivemetrics.com/validationForm.asp?Source=webinar&Doc=/webinars/ProfitableCollectionsinToughEconomicTimes.wvx

Bank of England. (2010a). Table A5.6: Monthly consumer credit [Online]. Retrieved 13.10.09, from http://www.bankofengland.co.uk/statistics/ms/2009/dec/taba5.6.xls

Bank of England. (2010b). Trends in lending: Consumer credit. Retrieved 17.11.10, from http://www.bankofengland.co.uk/publications/other/monetary/ConsumerCreditOctober2010.xls

Bank of England. (2010c). Trends in lending: September 2010. Retrieved 17.11.10, from http://www.bankofengland.co.uk/publications/other/monetary/TrendsSeptember10.pdf

Bar-Gill, O. (2006). Bundling and consumer misperception. *The University of Chicago Law Review 73*(1, Symposium: Homo economicus, homo myopicus, and the law and economics of consumer choice), 33-61.

Barad, K. (2003). Posthumanist performativity: Toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 28*(3), 801-831.

Barrow, B., & Coney, J. (2008, February 2). Now the credit cards crunch: Bank to block 160,000 customers cards in crackdown on out-of-control debts. *Daily Mail,* p. 1. from http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=1423191081&Fmt=7&clientId=48828&RQT=309&VName=PQD.

Barry, A. (2001). *Political machines: Governing a technological society*. London: The Athlone Press.

Barry, A., Osborne, T., & Rose, N. S. (1996). *Foucault and political reason: Liberalism, neo-liberalism, and rationalities of government*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Bass, J. (1983). Dunners and defaulters: Collectors' work as a context for naming. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 12*(1), 49-73.

Baudrillard, J. (1998). *Consumer society: Myths and structures*. London: Sage.

Bauman, Z. (2007). *Consuming life*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Beale, N. (2009). No need to hide in bed when you're in the red: Consumer rights: Solicitor Ned Beale on what to do when the debt collectors are knocking at your door [Online]. *The Guardian*. Retrieved 08.08.10, from http://www.guardian.co.uk/money/2009/aug/08/debt-collectors

Beckert, J. (2009). The social order of markets. *Theory and Society, 38*(3), 245-269.

Beckert, J., & Harshav, B. (2002). *Beyond the market: The social foundations of economic efficiency*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ Press.

Bell, V. (2007). *Culture and performance*. Oxford and New York: Berg.

Berkley, L. (2009). Getting the facts straight. *Credit Management, May*, 24.

Berlant, L. (2006). Cruel optimism. *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies, 17*(3), 20-36.

Beunza, D., & Garud, R. (2007). Calculators, lemmings, or frame-makers? The intermediary role of securities analysts. In M. Callon, Y. Millo & F. Muniesa (Eds.), *Market devices* (pp. 13-39). Oxford: Blackwell.

Beunza, D., & Stark, D. (2004). Tools of the trade: The socio-technology of arbitrage in a Wall Street trading room. *Industrial and Corporate Change, 13*(2), 369-400.

Blair, Oliver and Scott Ltd. (2009). *Directors report and financial statements: Year ended 31 December 2008*. London: Companies House.

Booth, R. (2006, 17 March). Activists call Body Shop boycott [Online]. *The Guardian*. Retrieved 14.11.10, from http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2006/mar/17/retail.animalrights

Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment*. London: Hogarth Press.

Bowlby, J. (1973). *Separation: Anxiety and anger*. London: Hogarth Press.

Braddock, N., & Wordsworth, P. (2006). Consumer debt sale [Online]. *Recovery* (Spring). Retrieved 25.02.10, from http://www.r3.org.uk/uploads/documents/spring2006.pdf

Brante, T. (1993). Reasons for studying scientific and science-based controversies. In T. Brante, S. Fuller & W. Lynch (Eds.), *Controversial science: From content to contention* (pp. 177-191). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

British Bankers' Association. (2008). The banking code: Setting standards for banks, building societies and other banking service providers [Online]. Retrieved 15.07.10, from http://www.bba.org.uk/content/1/c6/01/30/85/Banking_Code_2008.pdf

British Bankers' Association, Building Societies Association, & The UK Cards Association. (2009). The lending code: Setting standards for banks, building societies and credit card providers [Online]. Retrieved 15.07.10, from http://www.lendingstandardsboard.org.uk/docs/lendingcode.pdf

Brown, N., & Michael, M. (2002). From authority to authenticity: The changing governance of biotechnology. *Health, Risk & Society, 4*(3), 259-272.

Burchill, G., Gordon, C., & Miller, P. (1991). *The Foucault effect: Studies in governmentality*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Burton, D. (2008). *Credit and consumer society*. London: Routledge.

Burton, D., Knights, D., Leyshon, A., Alferoff, C., & Signoretta, P. (2004). Making a market: The UK retail financial services industry and the rise of the complex sub-prime credit market. *Competition and Change, 8*(1), 3-25.

Butler, J. (2003). Violence, mourning, politics. *Studies in Gender and Sexuality, 4*(1), 9-37.

Butler, J. (2010). Performative agency. *Journal of Cultural Economy, 3*(2), 147-161.

Cairns, R., & Hotopf, M. (2005). A systematic review describing the prognosis of chronic fatigue syndrome. *Occupational Medicine, 55*(1), 20-31.

Calder, L. (1999). *Financing the American dream: A cultural history of consumer credit*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Çalışkan, K. (2007). Price as a market device: Cotton trading in Izmir Mercantile Exchange. *Sociological Review, 55*(s2), 241-260.

Çalışkan, K., & Callon, M. (2009). Economization, part 1: Shifting attention from the economy towards processes of economization. *Economy and Society, 38*(3), 369-398.

Çalışkan, K., & Callon, M. (2010). Economization, part 2: A research programme for the study of markets. *Economy and Society, 39*(1), 1-32.

Callon, M. (1986a). The sociology of an actor-network: The case of the electric vehicle. In M. Callon, J. Law & A. Rip (Eds.), *Mapping the dynamics of science and technology: Sociology of science in the real world* (pp. 19-34). London: Macmillan Press.

Callon, M. (1986b). Some elements of a sociology of translation: Domestication of the scallops and the fishermen of St. Brieuc Bay. In J. Law (Ed.), *Power, action, and belief: A new sociology of knowledge?* (pp. 196-233). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Callon, M. (1998). Introduction: The embeddedness of economic markets in economics. In M. Callon (Ed.), *The laws of the markets* (pp. 1-57). Oxford: Blackwell.

Callon, M. (2002). Writing and (re)writing devices as tools for managing complexity. In J. Law & A. Mol (Eds.), *Complexities: Social studies of knowledge practices* (pp. 191-217). Durham, N. Ca: Duke University Press.

Callon, M. (2004). Europe wrestling with technology. *Economy and Society, 33*(1), 121-134.

Callon, M. (2005). Why virtualism paves the way to political impotence. *Economic Sociology European Electronic Newsletter, 6*(2), 3-20.

Callon, M. (2007). What does it mean to say that economics is performative? In D. MacKenzie, F. Muniesa & L. Siu (Eds.), *Do economists make markets: On the performativity of economics* (pp. 311-357). Princeton and Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Callon, M. (2010). Performativity, misfires and politics. *Journal of Cultural Economy, 3*(2), 163-169.

Callon, M., & Law, J. (2005). On qualculation, agency and otherness. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space, 23*(5), 717-733.

Callon, M., Méadel, C., & Rabeharisoa, V. (2002). The economy of qualities. *Economy and Society, 31*(2), 194-217.

Callon, M., & Muniesa, F. (2005). Peripheral vision: Economic markets as calculative collective devices. *Organization Studies, 26*(8), 1229-1250.

Channel 4. (2009, 20 July, 8pm). Undercover debt collector. *Dispatches*.

Cladingbowl, M. (2010). Using insight and agility. *Credit Collections and Risk, July*, 37.

Clough, P. T. (2009). The new empiricism: Affect and sociological method. *European Journal of Social Theory, 12*(1), 43-61.

Clough, P. T., Goldberg, G., Schiff, R., Weeks, A., & Willse, C. (2007). Notes towards a theory of affect-itself. *Ephemera, 7*(1), 60-77.

Cochoy, F. (1998). Another discipline for the market economy: Marketing as a performative knowledge and know-how for capitalism. In M. Callon (Ed.), *The laws of the markets* (pp. 194–221). Blackwell: Oxford.

Cochoy, F. (2002). *Une sociologie du packaging, ou l'âne de Buridan face au marché [A sociology of packaging, or Buridan's ass in the face of the market]*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

Cochoy, F. (2007a). A brief theory on the 'Captation' of publics: Understanding the market with Little Red Riding Hood. *Theory, Culture & Society, 24*(7-8), 203-223.

Cochoy, F. (2007b). A sociology of market-things: On tending the garden of choices in mass retailing. In M. Callon, Y. Millo & F. Muniesa (Eds.), *Market devices*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Cochoy, F. (2008). Calculation, qualculation, calqulation: Shopping cart arithmetic, equipped cognition and the clustered consumer. *Marketing Theory, 8*(1), 15-44.

Cochoy, F. (2009). Driving a shopping cart from STS to business, and the other way round: On the introduction of shopping carts in American grocery stores (1936--1959). *Organization, 16*(1), 31-55.

Cochoy, F., & Grandclément, C. (2005). Publicizing Goldilocks' choice at the supermarket: The political work of shopping packs, carts, and talk. In B. Latour & P. Weibel (Eds.), *Making things public: Atmospheres of democracy* (pp. 646-659). Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press.

Coffey, A., Holbrook, B., & Atkinson, P. (1996). Qualitative data analysis: Technologies and representations [Online]. *Sociological Research Online*, *1*(1). Retrieved 19.08.10, from http://www.socresonline.org.uk/1/1/4.html

Collins, H. M. (1981). *Knowledge and controversy: Studies of modern natural science*. London: Sage.

Collins, H. M., & Evans, R. (2002). The third wave of Science Studies: Studies of expertise and experience. *Social Studies of Science, 32*(2), 235-296.

Consumer Action Group. (2008). So - they don't like these forums !! [Online]. Retrieved 06.12.10, from http://www.consumeractiongroup.co.uk/forum/showthread.php?158466-So-they-don-t-like-these-forums-!!/page4

Consumer Action Group. (2010). Halifax/Kensington now Robinson Way. Retrieved 06.12.10, from http://www.consumeractiongroup.co.uk/forum/debt-collection-industry/258952-halifax-kensington-now-robinson.html#post2770773

Consumer Credit Counselling Service. (2006). CCCS statistical yearbook 2005 [Online]. Retrieved 11.11.10, from http://www.cccs.co.uk/Portals/0/Documents/media/reports/statisticsyearbooks/stats-yearbook-2005.pdf

Consumer Credit Counselling Service. (2007). CCCS statistical yearbook 2006 [Online]. Retrieved 11.11.10, from http://www.cccs.co.uk/Portals/0/Documents/media/reports/statisticsyearbooks/stats-yearbook-2006.pdf

Consumer Credit Counselling Service. (2008). CCCS statistical yearbook 2007 [Online]. Retrieved 11.11.10, from http://www.cccs.co.uk/Portals/0/Documents/media/reports/statisticsyearbooks/stats-yearbook-2007.pdf

Consumer Credit Counselling Service. (2009). CCCS statistical yearbook 2008 [Online]. Retrieved 11.11.10, from http://www.cccs.co.uk/Portals/0/Documents/media/reports/statisticsyearbooks/stats-yearbook-2008.pdf

Consumer Credit Counselling Service. (2010). CCCS statistical yearbook 2009 [Online]. Retrieved 11.11.10, from http://www.cccs.co.uk/Portals/0/Documents/media/reports/statisticsyearbooks/stats-yearbook-2009.pdf

Cooren, F. (2004). Textual agency: How texts do things in organizational settings. *Organization, 11*(3), 373-393.

Cooren, F., Brummans, B. H. J. M., & Charrieras, D. (2008). The coproduction of organizational presence: A study of Médecins Sans Frontières in action. *Human Relations, 61*(10), 1339-1370.

Cotterill, P. (1992). Interviewing women: Issues of friendship, vulnerability, and power. *Women's Studies International Forum, 15*(506), 593-606.

Credit Management Research Centre. (2008). Credit and Debt Management Survey 2008. Retrieved 25.02.10, from http://www.cmrc.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/CreditandDebtSurvey2008.pdf

Credit Services Association. (2008). Factsheet: Employment in the debt collection and debt purchase industry [Online]. Retrieved 26.02.10, from http://www.csa-uk.com/media/editor/file/Employment%20in%20the%20debt%20collection.pdf

Crow, G., Wiles, R., Heath, S., & Charles, V. (2006). Research ethics and data quality: The implications of informed consent. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 9*(2), 83-95.

Davis, C. (2009). Interview: The consumer forums [Online]. Retrieved 04.11.10, from http://www.sparkbb.com/free-forum-articles/interview-theconsumeractiongroup-forum.php

Deleuze, G. (1999). *Foucault* (S. Hand, Trans.). London: Continuum.

Deleuze, G. (2001). *The fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (T. Conley, Trans.). London: Athlone Press.

Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1988). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia* (B. Massumi, Trans.). London: Athlone Press.

Deloitte. (2009). Achieving excellence in default management [Online]. Retrieved 25.08.10, from http://www.deloitte.com/assets/Dcom-UnitedStates/Local%20Assets/Documents/us_fsi_BS_Default%20management_sept08.pdf

Denzin, N. K. (2001). The reflexive interview and a performative social science. *Qualitative Inquiry, 1*(1), 23-46.

Department for Business, Information and Skills. (2006). Amendments to consumer credit act [Online]. Retrieved 28.11.10, from http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2006/en/06en14-a.htm

Department for Business, Information and Skills. (2009). A better deal for consumers: Review of the regulation of credit and store cards: A consultation [Online]. Retrieved 15.12.10, from http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/BISCore/corporate/docs/C/Credit-Card-Consultation.pdf

Department for Business, Information and Skills. (2010). Review of the regulation of credit and store cards: Summary of responses to consultation [Online]. Retrieved 16.07.10, from http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20100407022214/http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/corporate/docs/c/10-772-consumer-credit-card-summary-responses.pdf

Department of Trade and Industry. (2003). Fair, clear and competitive: The consumer credit market in the 21st century [Online]. Retrieved 14.07.10, from http://www.berr.gov.uk/files/file23663.pdf

Deutsche Bundesbank. (2010). MFI (Monetary Financial Institutions) balance sheets: Outstanding amounts, 2009-11 [Online]. Retrieved 13.10.10, from http://www.bundesbank.de/statistik/statistik_eszb_neuesfenster_tabelle.php?stat=outstanding_amounts&lang=.en#COMM

Dewey, J. (1958). *Experience and nature*. New York: Dover Publisher.

DiMaggio, P. (1994). Culture and economy. In N. Smelser & R. Swedberg (Eds.), *The handbook of economic sociology* (pp. 22-57). New York and Princeton: Russell Sage Foundation and Princeton University Press.

Disney, R., Bridges, S., & Gathergood, J. (2008). Drivers of over-indebtedness [Online]. *Report to the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform* Retrieved 27.08.10, from http://www.bis.gov.uk/files/file49248.pdf

Dobbin, F. (1994). *Forging industrial policy: The United States, Britain and France in the railway age*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Dolan, C. S. (2008). Arbitraging risk through moral values: The case of Kenyan fairtrade. In G. De Neeve, P. Luetchford, J. Pratt & D. C. Wood (Eds.), *Research in economic anthropology* (Vol. 28, pp. 271-296). Bingley: JAI Press.

Dominy, N., & Kempson, E. (2003). Can't pay or won't pay?: A review of creditor and debtor approaches to the non-payment of bills [Online]. Retrieved 03.11.10, from http://www.bris.ac.uk/geography/research/pfrc/themes/credit-debt/pfrc0308.pdf

Douglas, M. (1967). Primitive rationing. In R. Firth (Ed.), *Themes in Economy Anthropology* (pp. 119-147). London: Tavistock.

du Gay, P. (2004). Self-service: Retail, shopping and personhood. *Consumption Markets & Culture, 7*(2), 149-163.

du Gay, P. (2007). *Organizing identity: Persons and organizations 'after theory'*. London: Sage.

Edmund, C. (2009, December 1). Danger of credit card crisis as bank write-offs double. *The Daily Telegraph,* p. 1. from http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=1912203201&Fmt=7&clientId=48828&RQT=309&VName=PQD.

Engelhardt, T. H., & Caplan, A. L. (1987). *Scientific controversies: Case studies in the resolution and closure of disputes in science and technology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Experian. (2009a). Guidance on the use of Experian credit bureau data to aid collections activity: A briefing paper from Experian [Online]. Retrieved 14.01.10, from http://www.experian-da.com/resources/twitter/ExperianDA_BP_CreditBureauData.pdf

Experian. (2009b). The impact of the effective use of tone of voice in collection letters [Online]. *Credit Management in Australia*, *July*. Retrieved 25.03.10, from http://www.experian-da.com/resources/instant/articles/AICM_July_2009_p22-24.pdf

Experian Data Analytics. (2009). In collections, it's not what you say, it's how you say it. Boost your returns by improving relationships [Twitter post]. Retrieved 21.01.10, from http://twitter.com/Experian_DA/status/2739961491

Fielding, N. G., & Lee, R. M. (1998). *Computer analysis and qualitative research*. London: Sage.

Filmer, P. (1975). Sociology and social stratification: Issues of reflexivity and tradition. In B. Sandywell, D. Silverman, M. Roche, P. Filmer & M. Phillipson (Eds.), *Problems of reflexivity and the dialectics in sociological inquiry: Language theorizing difference*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Finch, J. (1984). 'It's great to have someone to talk to': The ethics and politics of interviewing women. In C. Bell & H. Thomas (Eds.), *Social researching: Politics, problems, practice* (pp. 70-87).

Finney, A., Collard, S., & Kempson, E. (2007). Easy come, easy go: Borrowing over the life-cycle [Online]. *Personal Finance Research Centre*. Retrieved 27.08.10, from http://www.bristol.ac.uk/geography/research/pfrc/themes/credit-debt/pfrc0710.pdf

Fligstein, N. (2001). *The architecture of markets: An economic sociology of twenty-first-century capitalist societies*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Ford, J. (1988). *The indebted society: Credit and default in the 1980s*. London: Routledge.

Foucault, M. (1975). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Foucault, M. (1981). *The history of sexuality volume one: An introduction*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Foucault, M. (1997a). The birth of biopolitics. In P. Rabinow (Ed.), *Ethics: Subjectivity and truth. Essential works of Michel Foucault* (Vol. I, pp. 73-79). London: Penguin Press.

Foucault, M. (1997b). The ethics of the concern of the self as a practice of freedom. In P. Rabinow (Ed.), *Ethics: Subjectivity and truth. Essential works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984* (pp. 281–301). London: Penguin Press.

Fourcade, M., & Healy, K. (2007). Moral views of market society. *Annual Review of Sociology, 33*, 285-311.

Fraser, M. (2006a). The ethics of reality and virtual reality: Latour, facts and values. *History of the Human Sciences, 19*(2), 45.

Fraser, M. (2006b). Event. *Theory, Culture & Society, 23*(2-3), 129-132.

Fraser, M. (2009). Experiencing Sociology. *European Journal of Social Theory, 12*(1), 63-81.

Fraser, M. (2010). Fact, ethics and event. In C. B. Jensen & K. Rödje (Eds.), *Deleuzian intersections in science, technology and anthropology* (pp. 74-82). New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books.

Gabb, J. (2008). Affective boundaries: Setting the parameters of appropriate behaviour. In P. Redman (Ed.), *Attachment: Sociology and social worlds* (pp. 19-50). Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Gardiner, M. E. (2000). *Critiques of everyday life*. London: Routledge.

Giddens, A. (1987). *Social theory and modern society*. Standford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Girard, M., & Stark, D. (2007). Socio-technologies of assembly: Sense making and demonstration in rebuilding Lower Manhattan. In V. Mayer-Schönberger & D. Lazer (Eds.), *Governance and information technology: From electronic government to information government* (pp. 145-176). Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.

Gomart, E., & Hennion, A. (1999). A sociology of attachment: Music amateurs, drug users. In J. Law & J. Hassard (Eds.), *Actor network theory and after* (pp. 220-247). Oxford: Blackwell.

Gordon, C. (1991). Governmental rationality: an introduction. In G. Burchill, C. Gordon & P. Miller (Eds.), *The Foucault effect: Studies in governmentality* (pp. 1-51.). Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Granovetter, M. (1985). Economic action and social structure: The problem of embeddedness. *American Journal of Sociology, 91*(3), 481-510.

Gregory, C. A. (1997). *Savage money: The anthropology and politics of commodity exchange*. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publications.

Grossman, E., Luque, E., & Muniesa, F. (2008). Economies through transparency. In C. Garsten & M. L. de Montoya (Eds.), *Transparency in a new global order: Unveiling organizational visions* (pp. 97-121). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Guseva, A., & Rona-Tas, A. (2001). Uncertainty, risk, and trust: Russian and American credit card markets compared. *American Sociological Review, 66*(5), 623-646.

Guyer, J. (2004). *Marginal gains: Monetary transactions in Atlantic Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Guyer, J. (Ed.) (1995). *Money matters: Instability, values and social payments in the modern history of West African currencies*. London: James Currey.

Halewood, M. (2003). *Subjectivity and matter in the work of A.N. Whitehead and Gilles Deleuze: Developing a non-essentialist ontology for social theory*. Unpublished PhD, Goldsmiths, University of London, London.

Halewood, M. (2005). On Whitehead and Deleuze: The process of materiality. *Configurations, 13*(1), 57-76.

Halewood, M., & Michael, M. (2008). Being a sociologist and becoming a Whiteheadian. *Theory, Culture & Society, 25*(4), 31-56.

Hamilton, L. (2010). Credit (information) where it is due. *Credit Collections and Risk, September*, 37-38.

Hand, M., & Shove, E. (2007). Condensing Practices. *Journal of Consumer Culture, 7*(1), 79-104.

Haraway, D. (1997). *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium. FemaleMan©_Meets_ OncoMouse: Feminism and technoscience*. New York and London: Routledge.

Hardie, I., & MacKenzie, D. (2007). Assembling an economic actor: The agencement of a hedge fund. *The Sociological Review, 55*(1), 57-80.

Hari, J. (2009, August 14). Cruel and out of control: The new face of debt collecting. *The Independent,* p. 26.

Harman, G. (2009). *Prince of networks: Bruno Latour and metaphysics*. Melbourne: Re.Press.

Hart, K. (1986). Heads or tails? Two sides of the coin. *Man, 21*, 637-656.

Hart, K. (2000). *The memory bank: Money in an unequal world*. London: Profile Books.

Hennion, A. (2007). Those things that hold us together: Taste and sociology. *Cultural Sociology, 1*(1), 97-114.

Heyl, B. S. (2001). Ethnographic interviewing. In P. Atkinson, A. Coffey, S. Delamont, J. Lofland & L. Lofland (Eds.), *Handbook of ethnography* (pp. 369-383). London: Sage.

Hill, R. P. (1994). Bill collectors and consumers: A troublesome exchange relationship. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing, 13*(1), 20-35.

Immergluck, D. (2008). From the subprime to the exotic: Excessive mortgage market risk and foreclosures. *Journal of the American Planning Association, 74*(1), 59-76.

Immergluck, D. (2009). *Foreclosed: High-risk lending, deregulation, and the undermining of America's mortgage market*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Information Commissioners Office. (2007). Data protection technical guidance: Filing defaults with credit reference agencies [Online]. Retrieved 25.02.10, from http://www.ico.gov.uk/upload/documents/library/data_protection/detailed_specialist_guides/default_tgn_version_v3%20%20doc.pdf

Ingham, G. (2001). Fundamentals of a theory of money: Untangling Fine, Lapavitsas and Zelizer. *Economy and Society, 30*(3), 304-323.

Ingham, G. (2006). Further reflections on the ontology of money: Responses to Lapavitsas and Dodd. *Economy and Society, 35*(2), 259-278.

Inglis, D. (2009). Cosmopolitan sociology and the classical canon: Ferdinand Tönnies and the emergence of global Gesellschaft. *The British Journal of Sociology, 60*(4), 813-832.

Insight. (2009, April 12). Lloyds bank staff 'put frighteners' on debtors: Debt collectors are harassing customers with talk of home repossessions and blacklists. *Sunday Times,* p. 7.

Irwin, A., & Michael, M. (2003). *Science, social theory and public knowledge*. Maidenhead: Open University Press/McGraw-Hill.

Jäger, S., & Maier, F. (2009). Theoretical and methodological aspects of Foucauldian critical discourse analysis and dispositive analysis. In R. Wodak & M. Meyer (Eds.), *Methods of critical discourse analysis* (pp. 34-61). London: Sage.

Jasanoff, S. (2003). Breaking the waves in Science Studies: Comment on H. M. Collins and Robert Evans, 'The third wave of Science Studies'. *Social Studies of Science, 33*(3), 389-400.

Jeacle, I., & Walsh, E. J. (2002). From moral evaluation to rationalization: Accounting and the shifting technologies of credit. *Accounting, Organizations and Society, 27*(8), 737-761.

Jones, R. (2009, December 5). Money: Debt agencies look to silence the critics: Rupert Jones on a move to take on 'irresponsible' forums. *The Guardian,* p. 7.

Joseph, M. (2010, 24 March). *Doing time: Subjectivities of credit and debt.* Paper presented at Quorum Research Seminar Series, Queen Mary, University of London.

Karen, M. (2006, April 6). 'Unlawful' credit card charges to be slashed. *The Times,* p. 1. from http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=1016834411&Fmt=7&clientId=48828&RQT=309&VName=PQD.

Kempson, E. (2002). Over-indebtedness in Britain [Online]. *Department of Trade and Industry / Personal Finance Research Centre*. Retrieved 27.08.10, from http://www.bristol.ac.uk/geography/research/pfrc/themes/credit-debt/pfrc0203.pdf

Kirby, V. (1997). *Telling flesh: The substance of the corporeal*. New York: Routledge.

Kirton, T. (2010). Meaning business: The need for litigation. *Credit Collections and Risk, January*, 25.

Klein, L. (1999). *It's in the cards: Consumer credit and the American experience*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger.

Klein, N. (2000). *No logo*. London: Flamingo.

Knapton, S. (2008, August 7). Halifax's Howard dropped as downturn bites [Online]. *The Telegraph*. Retrieved 18.03.10, from http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/celebritynews/2515362/Halifaxs-Howard-dropped-as-recession-bites.html

Knight, F. (1921). *Risk, uncertainty and profit*. New York: AM Kelley.

Knorr Cetina, K., & Bruegger, U. (2000). The market as an object of attachment: Exploring postsocial relations in financial markets. *Canadian Journal of Sociology/Cahiers canadiens de sociologie, 25*(2), 141-168.

Langley, P. (2008a). *The everyday life of global finance: Saving and borrowing in America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Langley, P. (2008b). Financialization and the Consumer Credit Boom. *Competition and Change, 12*(2), 133-147.

Langley, P. (2009). Debt, discipline, and government: Foreclosure and forbearance in the subprime mortgage crisis. *Environment and Planning A, 41*(6), 1404-1419.

Lapavitsas, C. (2003). *Social foundations of markets, money and credit*. London: Routledge.

Latour, B. (1987). *Science in action: How to follow scientists and engineers through society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Latour, B. (1993). *We have never been modern*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Latour, B. (1997). Trains of thought: Piaget, formalism and the fifth dimension. *Common Knowledge, 6*(3), 170-191.

Latour, B. (1999a). On recalling ANT. In J. Law & J. Hassard (Eds.), *Actor network theory and after* (pp. 15-25). Oxford: Blackwell.

Latour, B. (1999b). *Pandora's hope: Essays on the reality of science studies*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ Press.

Latour, B. (2004a). *Politics of nature: How to bring the sciences into democracy* (C. Porter, Trans.). Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press.

Latour, B. (2004b). Why has critique run out of steam? From matters of fact to matters of concern. *Critical Inquiry, 30*(2), 225-248.

Latour, B. (2005a). *Reassembling the social: An introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Latour, B. (2005b). What is given in experience. *Boundary 2, 32*(1), 223-237.

Latour, B. (2007). Turning around politics: A note on Gerard de Vries' paper. *Social Studies of Science, 37*(5), 811-820.

Latour, B. (2008). A textbook case revisited: Knowledge as a mode of existence. In E. J. Hackett, O. Amsterdamska, M. Lynch & J. Wajcman (Eds.), *The handbook of science and technology studies* (Third ed., pp. 83-112). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Latour, B. (2010). *The making of law: An ethnography of the Conseil D'État*. Cambridge; Malden, MA: Polity Press.

Latour, B. (forthcoming). *Modes of existence*.

Latour, B., & Stark, M. G. (1999). Factures/fractures: From the concept of network to the concept of attachment. *Res: Anthropology and aesthetics, 36*, 20-31.

Latour, B., & Woolgar, S. (1979). *Laboratory life: The construction of scientific facts*. London; Beverly Hills: Sage.

Lave, J. (1988). *Cognition in practice: Mind, mathematics and culture in everyday life*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.

Law, J. (1994). *Organizing modernity*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Law, J. (2004). *After method: Mess in social science research*. Oxon; New York: Routledge.

Law, J. (2008). On sociology and STS. *Sociological Review, 56*(4), 623-649.

Law, J., & Mol, A. (2001). Situating technoscience: An inquiry into spatialities. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space, 19*(5), 609-621.

Lee, R. M., & Fielding, N. G. (1996). Qualitative data analysis: Representations of a technology: A comment on Coffey, Holbrook and Atkinson [Online]. *Sociological Research Online*, *1*(4). Retrieved 19.08.10, from http://www.socresonline.org.uk/1/4/lf.html

Lépinay, V.-A. (2007a). Decoding finance: Articulation and liquidity around a trading room. In D. MacKenzie, F. Muniesa & L. Siu (Eds.), *Do economists make markets: On the performativity of economics* (pp. 87–127). Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Lépinay, V.-A. (2007b). Parasitic formulae: The case of capital guarantee products. *Sociological Review, 55*(s2), 261-283.

Leyshon, A., & Thrift, N. (1999). Lists come alive: electronic systems of knowledge and the rise of credit-scoring in retail banking. *Economy and Society, 28*(3), 434–466.

Liamputtong, P. (2007). *Researching the vulnerable: A guide to sensitive research methods*. London: Sage.

Lury, C. (2004). *Brands: The logos of the global economy*. London: Routledge.

Lury, C. (2009). Brand as assemblage. *Journal of Cultural Economy, 2*(1), 67-82.

MacDermott, A. (2008). With a little help from my friends: How advisers, creditors and debt collectors can work together to help people in debt negotiate repayments themselves [Online]. Retrieved 19.06.10, from http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/with_a_little_help_from_my_friends-briefing-final-pdf-2.pdf

MacKenzie, D. (2006). *An engine, not a camera: How financial models shape markets*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

MacKenzie, D. (2007). Is economics performative? Option theory and the construction of derivative markets. In D. MacKenzie, F. Muniesa & L. Siu (Eds.), *Do economists make markets: On the performativity of economics* (pp. 311-357). Princeton and Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Maestro. (2007). Benefits of Maestro. Retrieved 05 June, 2007, from http://www.maestrocard.com/uk/about/benefits.html

Mallard, A. (2007). Performance testing: Dissection of a consumerist experiment. *Sociological Review, 55*(s2), 152-172.

Manning, R. (2000). *Credit card nation: The consequences of America's addiction to credit*. New York: Basic Books.

Marres, N. (2007). The issues deserve more credit: Pragmatist contributions to the study of public involvement in controversy. *Social Studies of Science, 37*(5), 759–780.

Marres, N. (2008). The making of climate publics: Eco-homes as material devices of publicity. *Distinktion, Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory, 16*, 27-45.

Marres, N. (2009). Testing powers of engagement: Green living experiments, the ontological turn and the undoability of involvement. *European Journal of Social Theory, 12*(1), 117-133.

Marron, D. (2007). 'Lending by numbers': credit scoring and the constitution of risk within American consumer credit. *Economy and Society, 36*(1), 103-133.

Marron, D. (2009). *Consumer credit in the United States: A sociological perspective from the 19th Century to the present*. New York: Palgrave.

Martin, R. (2004). Interviewing the stigmatised: Experiences of collecting data from consumer bankrupts in Australia. In M. Pawar (Ed.), *Data collecting methods and experiences: A guide for social researchers* (pp. 61-78). Elgin: New Dawn Press.

Massumi, B. (2002). *Parables for the virtual: Movement, affect, sensation*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.

Massumi, B. (2005). Fear (the spectrum said). *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique, 13*(1), 31-48.

Maurer, B. (2006). The anthropology of money. *Annual Review of Anthropology, 35*, 15-63.

Maynard, K. (2004). The debt sale market: Help to shape its future. *Credit Management, October*, 34.

Maynard, K. (2008). The spread of debt sale [Online]. *Credit Collections and Risk* (July, CCR2 Supplement). Retrieved 26.02.10, from http://www.cabotfinancial.com/download/97

Maynard, K. (2009a). Debt purchase opportunities either side of the Atlantic. *Credit Management, October*, 25.

Maynard, K. (2009b). What's in store for debt buyers? *Credit Management, January*, 21.

Maynard, M., & Purvis, J. (Eds.) (1994). *Researching women's lives from a feminist perspective; Gender and society: Feminist perspectives on the past and present*. Oxon and New York: Taylor and Francis.

Mcfall, L. (2009a). The agencement of industrial branch life assurance. *Journal of Cultural Economy, 2*(1), 49-65.

Mcfall, L. (2009b). Devices and desires: How useful is the 'new' new economic sociology for understanding market attachment? *Sociology Compass, 3*(2), 267-282.

Mcfall, L. (2010). Good, average men: Statistics, anti-statistics and the promotion of life assurance, *CRESC 6th Annual Conference: The Social Life of Methods*. Manchester.

Meyer, M. (2009). From 'cold' science to 'hot' research: The texture of controversy [Online]. *CSI Working Paper Series*, *16*. Retrieved 14.05.10, from http://www.csi.ensmp.fr/Items/WorkingPapers/Download/DLWP.php?wp=WP_CSI_016.pdf

Michael, M. (2004). On making data social: Heterogeneity in sociological practice. *Qualitative Research, 4*(1), 5-23.

Michael, M. (2006). *Technoscience and everyday life: The complex simplicities of the mundane*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Michael, M., & Brown, N. (2004). The meat of the matter: Grasping and judging xenotransplantation. *Public Understanding of Science, 13*(4), 379-397.

Miller, D. (1998). *A theory of shopping*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Miller, D. (2002). Turning Callon the right way up. *Economy and Society, 31*(2), 218–233.

Millo, Y. (2007). Making things deliverable: The origins of index-based derivatives. *The Sociological Review, 55*(2), 196-214.

Mol, A. (2002). *The body multiple: Ontology in medical practice*. Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press.

Mol, A. (2008). *The logic of care: Health and the problem of patient choice*. London and New York: Routledge.

Money Advice Liaison Group. (2007). Good practice guidelines: Debt management and debt collection in relation to people with mental health problems [Online]. Retrieved 14.09.10, from http://www.malg.org.uk/documents/MALGMHGuidelines2007.pdf

Montgomerie, J. (2006). The financialization of the American credit card industry. *Competition and Change, 10*(3), 301-319.

Montgomerie, J. (2007). The logic of neo-liberalism and the political economy of consumer debt-led growth. In S. Lee & S. McBride (Eds.), *Neo-liberalism, state power and global governance* (pp. 157-172). Dordrecht: Springer.

Moor, L. (2007). *The rise of brands*. Oxford: Berg Publishers.

Muniesa, F. (2008). Trading-room telephones and the identification of counterparts. In T. J. Pinch & R. Swedberg (Eds.), *Living in a material world: Economic sociology meets science and technology studies* (pp. 291-313). Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press.

Muniesa, F. (2009a). Attachment and detachment in the economy. In P. Redman (Ed.), *Attachment: Sociology and social worlds* (pp. 111-141). Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Muniesa, F. (2009b). What do you think an indicator is, anyway?, *ATACD: Changing Cultures: Cultures of Change*. University of Barcelona, Barcelona.

Muniesa, F., Millo, Y., & Callon, M. (2007). An introduction to market devices. *Sociological Review, 55*(s2), 1-12.

Nayak, A., & Beckett, A. (2008). Infantilized adults or confident consumers? Enterprise discourse in the UK retail banking industry. *Organization, 15*(3), 407-425.

Oakley, A. (1981). Interviewing women: A contradiction in terms. In H. Roberts (Ed.), *Doing Feminist Research* (pp. 30-61). London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Obermaier, K. (2009, February 10). Debt collection: Adopting the right attitude *The Times,* p. 12.

OC&C Strategy Consultants. (2009). The CMDC index. *Credit Today* (October), Special supplement.

Office for National Statistics. (2010a). Consumer credit business. Retrieved November 17, 2010, from http://www.statistics.gov.uk/StatBase/Product.asp?vlnk=14939&Pos=&ColRank=1&Rank=422

Office for National Statistics. (2010b). Household income: Top to bottom income ratio four-to-one. Retrieved 14 August, 2010, from http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=334

Office of Fair Trading. (2002). Debt collection guidance for consumer credit licence holders and applicants: A consultation paper [Online]. Retrieved 23.01.10, from http://www.oft.gov.uk/shared_oft/business_leaflets/credit_licences/oft611.pdf

Office of Fair Trading. (2006). Debt collection guidance: Final guidance on unfair business practices [Online]. Retrieved 23.01.10, from http://www.oft.gov.uk/shared_oft/business_leaflets/consumer_credit/oft664.pdf

Office of Fair Trading. (2007). Response to the super-complaint on credit card interest rate calculation methods by Which? [Online]. Retrieved 03.05.10, from http://www.oft.gov.uk/shared_oft/reports/financial_products/oft935.pdf

Office of Fair Trading. (2008). Consumer Credit Act 1974: Post-contract information requirements [Online]. Retrieved 15.07.10, from http://www.oft.gov.uk/shared_oft/business_leaflets/consumer_credit/oft1002.pdf

Office of Fair Trading. (2009a). OFT imposes requirements on 1st Credit over debt collection practices [Online](20.01.10). Retrieved, from http://www.oft.gov.uk/news/press/2009/20-09

Office of Fair Trading. (2009b). OFT imposes requirements on Mackenzie Hall to improve handling of disputed debts [Online](20.01.10). Retrieved, from http://www.oft.gov.uk/news/press/2009/44-09

Office of Fair Trading. (2010). Consumers warned on 'unenforceable debt' claims [Online], *2010*(11 November). Retrieved, from http://www.oft.gov.uk/news-and-updates/press/2010/105-10

Orton, M. (2008). The long-term impact of debt advice on low income households [Online]. *Project Working Paper 2*. Retrieved 13.10.10, from http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/research/current/debt/wp2year1report.pdf

Owens, N. (2007). The bully bailiffs; Exposed: Cruel tricks of the debt-chasers. *Sunday Mirror,* p. 17.

Pain, R. (2009). Globalized fear? Towards an emotional geopolitics. *Progress in Human Geography, 33*(4), 466-486.

Parry, J., & Bloch, M. (Eds.) (1989). *Money and the morality of exchange*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.

Pateman, C. (1988). *The sexual contract*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Pia Pozzato, M. (2001). Au supermarché: Libertés et contraintes dans le temple de la consommation. *Protée, Printemps*, 57-63.

Pinch, T. J., & Bijker, W. E. (1984). The social construction of facts and artefacts: Or how the sociology of science and the sociology of technology might benefit each other. *Social Studies of Science, 14*(3), 399-441.

Plimsoll Analysis. (2009). *UK debt collection industries: An overview* (Second). Stockton: Plimsoll Publishing Limited.

Poon, M. (2007). Scorecards as devices for consumer credit: The case of Fair, Isaac & Company Incorporated. In M. Callon, Y. Millo & F. Muniesa (Eds.), *Market devices* (pp. 284-306). Oxford: Blackwell.

Poon, M. (2009). From new deal institutions to capital markets: Commercial consumer risk scores and the making of subprime mortgage finance. *Accounting, Organizations and Society*(34), 654-674.

Poulter, S. (2004, May 5). Credit card meltdown; spend now, pay later binge may force interest rate rise. *Daily Mail,* p. 1.

Poulter, S., & Wilkes, D. (2004, March 11). Credit 'kills' a family man; Ministers to be told how father-of-two committed suicide over £70,000 debt from 19 credit cards p. 1.

Power, M. (1997). *The audit society: Rituals of verification*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Purvis, M. (2010). Strategic solution, not a tactical fix. *Credit Collections and Risk, June*, 30.

Puwar, N. (1997). Reflections on interviewing women MPs [online]. *Sociological Research Online*, *2*(1). Retrieved 06.06.10, from http://www.socresonline.org.uk/2/1/4.html

Ranjith, G. (2005). Epidemiology of chronic fatigue syndrome. *Occupational Medicine, 55*(1), 13-19.

Ritzer, G. (1995). *Expressing America: A critique of the global credit card society*. Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press.

Ritzer, G. (2005). *Enchanting a disenchanted world: Revolutionizing the means of consumption* (2nd). Newbury Park, CA: Pine Forge Press.

Rock, P. (1973). *Making people pay*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Rose, P. (2002). *On Whitehead*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thompson Learning.

Rugh, J. S., & Massey, D. S. (2010). Racial segregation and the American foreclosure crisis. *American Sociological Review, 75*(5), 629–651.

Russell, C. (1999). Interviewing vulnerable old people: Ethical and methodological implications of imagining our subjects. *Journal of aging studies, 13*(4), 403-417.

Schor, J. B. (1998). *The overspent American: Upscaling, downshifting, and the new consumer*. New York: Basic Books.

Seib, C. (2008, May 10). Market for offloading bad debt balloons as banks free up capital [Online]. *The Times*. Retrieved 26.02.10, from http://business.timesonline.co.uk/tol/business/industry_sectors/banking_and_finance/article3904501.ece

Senior, A. (2005, April 16). Credit card trap begins to close *The Times,* p. 1.

Shaoul, M. (1997). *The acrobat of desire: Consumer credit and its linkages to modern consumerism*. London: Macmillan.

Shipton, P. (1989). *Bitter money: Cultural economy and some African meanings of forbidden commodities*. Washington: American Anthropological Association.

Shove, E. (2003). *Comfort, cleanliness and convenience: The social organization of normality*. Oxford; New York: Berg.

Slater, D. (2002). From calculation to alienation: Disentangling economic abstractions. *Economy and Society, 31*(2), 234–249.

Smith, C. (2000). Understanding real markets: confronting old fallacies, emerging possibilities and imminent challenges, unpublished manuscript.

Stalder, F. (2001). *Making money: Notes on technology as environment.* Unpublished PhD, University of Toronto, Toronto.

Stark, D. (2009). *The sense of dissonance: Accounts of worth in economic life*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Stengers, I. (2005). Whitehead's account of the sixth day. *Configurations, 2005*(13), 35-55.

Stengers, I. (2008). A constructivist reading of Process and Reality. *Theory, Culture & Society, 25*(4), 91.

Stran, G. (2008). A different view. *Credit Management, September*, 29.

Strathern, M. (1988). *Gender of the gift*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Strathern, M. (1999). *Property, substance and effect: Anthropological essays on persons and things*. London and New Brunswick, NJ: The Athlone Press.

Strathern, M. (Ed.) (2000). *Audit cultures: Anthropological studies in accountability, ethics and the academy*. London: Routledge.

Sullivan, T. A., Warren, E., & Westbrook, J. (1999). *As we forgive our debtors: Bankruptcy and consumer credit in America*. Washington: Beard Books.

Sullivan, T. A., Warren, E., & Westbrook, J. (2000). *The fragile middle class: Americans in debt*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Swedberg, R. (1997). New economic sociology: What has been accomplished, what is ahead? *Acta Sociologica, 40*, 161-182.

Tessera. (2010). SCOR decision to help industry. Retrieved November 17, 2010, from http://www.tessera.co.uk/Archive/2010/November/news-04.php

The ME Association. (2010). The symptoms and diagnosis of ME/CFS: Typical features of ME/CFS [Online](04.02.10). Retrieved, from http://www.meassociation.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=90%3Asymptoms-and-diagnosis&catid=38%3Aabout-me&Itemid=173&limitstart=1

The Prime Minister's Office. (2010). CCR petition [Online], *2011*(3 June). Retrieved, from http://petitions.number10.gov.uk/CCRpetition/

Thompson, L. (2009, March 14). Beware of the debt traps set by companies that trade on misery: Lauren Thompson on how cash-strapped households can avoid being ripped off as they try to survive the recession. *The Times,* p. 62.

Thrift, N. (2007). *Non-representational theory: Space, politics, affect*. London: Routledge.

Toscano, A. (2005). *The theatre of production: Philosophy and individuation between Kant and Deleuze*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Toynbee, P. (2008, October 25). Don't expect to find a banker down at bankruptcy court: It's boom time for debt and repossessions, as my old neighbour can testify. So what is the point of us owning banks? *The Guardian,* p. 33.

Vickers, A. (2004, March 17). Credit card madness; Spend, spend Britons run up 75% of Europe's entire debts on plastic. *Daily Express,* p. 1.

Wainwright, T. A. (2009). *The geographies of securitisation and credit scoring.* Unpublished PhD, University of Nottingham, Nottingham.

Whitehead, A. N. (1978). *Process and reality* (Corrected edition D. R. Griffin & D. W. Sherburne (Eds.)). New York: The Free Press.

Williams, F. (2010). *Fight back against unfair collection practices*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: FT Press.

Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (2009). *Methods of critical discourse analysis* (R. Wodak & M. Meyer (Eds.)). London: Sage.

World Savings Bank Institute. (2006). Evolution of outstanding consumer loans at the end of the year, 1995-2004 (in euro millions) [Online]. Retrieved 13.10.10, from http://www.wsbi.org/uploadedFiles/Publications_and_Research_(ESBG_only)/Statistics/08%20Consumer%20credit%20in%20the%20EU.xls

Wynne, B. (2003). Seasick on the third wave? Subverting the hegemony of propositionalism: Response to Collins & Evans (2002). *Social Studies of Science, 33*(3), 401-417.

Zelizer, V. (1997). *The social meaning of money: Pin money, paychecks, poor relief, and other currencies*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Zelizer, V. (2001). *The purchase of intimacy*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Zelizer, V. (2002a). Enter culture. In M. F. Guillén, R. Collins, P. England & M. Meyer (Eds.), *The new economic sociology: Developments in an emerging field* (pp. 101-125). New York: Russell Sage Foundation Publications.

Zelizer, V. (2002b). Intimate transactions. In M. F. Guillén, R. Collins, P. England & M. Meyer (Eds.), *The new economic sociology: Developments in an emerging field* (pp. 274-300). New York: Russell Sage Foundation Publications.