This is the pre-publication draft of the following review: C. Barnett (2013), *Consumption and its Consequences*, by Daniel Miller. *Area* 45, 507–8.


This book is a kind of companion to Miller’s *Stuff* (2009), which synthesised some of his previous research into a fully blown manifesto for material culture studies. He describes this as a ‘much more opinionated book’, and it sets out to redeem the study of consumption from the condescension to which everyday practices of making use of things - buying and exchanging and displaying stuff – is routinely subjected. The core of the book contains chapters which effectively summarise strands of Miller’s ethnographic research, including a defence of consumer culture as a form of culture drawing on research in Trinidad; a chapter summarising his provocative reconceptualization of shopping as a mode of sacrifice and a means of expressing loving relationships; and a chapter summarising a broader research programme on the global ubiquity of denim, which develops an account of the ordinariness of blue jeans that challenges cultural theories focussed on questions of identity and broader assumptions in social though about the normative orientations of everyday practices.

In all of these chapters, materials things are shown to be integral to the expression and maintenance of relationships and values. They add up to an effective critique of what Miller (2008, 195) has called ‘the myth of materialism’ – the view according to which people’s attachments to things is seen as a substitute for authentic relationship. Miller turns this on its head, arguing that such attachments are indicative of strong relationships to others, as well as relatively healthy one’s with oneself. The myth of materialism is closely linked to the tendency for critiques of capitalism to invoke models of the consumer in their support, normally to moralise consumption: “The single main problem with conventional writing about consumption is that it seems to consist largely of authors who wish to claim that they are deep by trying to show how everyone else is shallow” (p. 107). One of the strongest challenges of Miller’s redemption of consumption as a lived practice of relating to others is this critique of the terms of criticism in which consumption is routinely invoked. Above all, in this book as elsewhere, Miller draws attention to the recurring failure to think through the relationship between the experience of poverty and access to material things (see Miller 2001).

The tendency to invoke ‘the consumer’ in critical discussions of capitalism, and other social ills as well, is an example of what Miller has called ‘virtualism’ – the substitution of idealised models for actual understandings of consumers, and the attempt to make the world conform to those abstractions in turn. Miller discusses virtualism in passing in the chapter titled ‘It’s the Stupid Economy’, which is nothing short of an assault on the standing of economic knowledge on the grounds that it lacks any ethnographic purchase on reality. The discussion of virtualism is, however, actually rather brief given the importance that this notion carries in its critique of economic practices, and other fields such as audit and
consultancy and advertising. There is no mention of the question of how this notion of virtualism relates to other similar looking ideas such as the ‘performativity of markets’ – Miller is more concerned, at the end of the day, with showing what economic practices don’t do and don’t know with providing an analysis of how they actually do help make the world we live in (cf. MacKenzie et al 2007). Miller’s critique of economics is rather close to a standard Polanyi-inspired view in which the disembedding of markets generates pathological consequences; for Miller, the problem is the inevitable tendency for systems to attain too much autonomy from each other.

Nevertheless, there is much of value in this chapter (not least, as the title suggests, a willingness to suspend belief in the idea that capitalism is increasingly efficient in ‘knowing’ about its own dynamics and applying that knowledge). It underscores the critical thrust of Miller’s work on consumption, which lies in questioning the authority of economic modes of thinking about problems as well as moralisations of consumption, and seeks to focus the analysis of consumption on close-to-the-ground understandings of issues such well-being, social relations, and poverty.

The book is not, then, just a collection of Miller’s seemingly disparate concerns. It is an accessible introduction to both how consumption is often thought to matter politically, and an intervention in how it should be thought to matter in this way. The synthesis chapters I have mentioned are framed by an opening and closing chapter which takes the form of two fictionalised dinner party conversations between three academics, who articulate three ideal-type perspectives on the politics of consumption: an environmentalist view of the dangers of ‘over-consumption’; a sociological view of consumption as inevitably expressing the dynamics of capitalist accumulation and its attendant inequalities; and an anthropological view of the integral part that consumption of material things plays in maintaining culture and relationships. Miller suggests that each of the avatars in these dialogues represents a part of his own perspective (they all talk about ‘Danny Miller’ in their chats), although it is hard not to see the anthropologist (‘Grace’) as the closest to his fully worked out position, and the environmentalist as the persona he is trying hardest to slough off. This device might sound a little forced and cheesy, but I actually found that it quite succinctly captured both some of the conceits of different approaches to the politics of consumption while also acknowledging some real dilemmas.

Overall, then, this book is a profound contribution to debates about the limits, contradictions and alternatives to contemporary styles of living, working, and provisioning. It acknowledges that consumption is central to a number of pressing political issues, but insists that because of the way in which consumption is routinely misunderstood in many debates, many of the proposed solutions are ‘are not just wrong but profoundly mistaken’. Miller’s redescriptions of consumption as embedded in social relationships has profound consequences indeed, not just for how issues such as inequality, poverty and environmental futures are imagined, but above all for whose voices are considered significant in shaping understandings of just what is at stake in these issues.
References

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