



## Consumption and its contradictions: Dialogues on the causes of buying

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### review of

Miller, D. (2012) *Consumption and its Consequences*. Polity Press: London. (PB, pp. 200, £15.99, ISBN 978-0745661087)

Daniel Miller is Professor in Material Culture at the Department of Anthropology, University of Central London. Since the mid-1980s he has been a central figure in discussions and debates around consumption. Miller's predominantly ethnographic work has been a seminal series of explorations into the implications of mass consumption on human relationships, collective identity and behaviour (Miller, 1987), the commercial success of Christmas as a global event (Miller, 1993), cross-disciplinary discussions on the nature of consumption (Miller, 1995) and theories of shopping (Miller, 1998). His more recent work demonstrates the complexity of consumption practices, material culture and materiality in relation to the (social) media, convincingly demonstrating how commodities and objects define interpersonal relationships (Miller, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2011).

Initially trained as an archaeologist, Miller's broad body of work also draws on domestic design theory, sociology, Hegelian, Marxist and Simmelian accounts of consumption, continental philosophy and marketing theory, as well as a variety of additional disparate fields. His recent *Stuff* (2010) combined such diverse traditions in order to develop a general theory of social relationships mediated by the presence of things. The publication of this new book, the focus of the present

review, will come as little surprise, then, to those who have followed the development of Miller's thinking, not least of all because it is offered as a sequel to *Stuff*. Here I examine whether and to what extent *Consumption and its Consequences* accounts for what consumption is and for why individuals consume, as it sets out to do.

The book cover depicts a miniature of the globe carried by two hands in a supermarket trolley and evokes the cover of the English edition of Baudrillard's *Consumer Society* (1998). Within the prologue, Miller provides a succinct account of his educational background and training as a qualitative fieldworker whilst expressing, in a few semi-polemical sentences, his growing scepticism towards the application of quantitative and experimental research methods within the humanities and the social sciences. This follows a brief auto-biographical narrative of Miller's introduction to politics, from his early readings and ideological affiliation to Marxism right up to his contemporary trust and faith within the ideals of social-democracy Norway, Miller argues, constitutes the role-model. His advocacy of the 'Nordic Model' is immediately followed by his assertion

that the world has consistently improved in terms of welfare of most of its populations and there are good reasons for thinking it will continue to do so. (8)

Miller acknowledges that such an angle might be unpopular. What the reader is also left with, however, is a large question mark over whether and how he might discuss the collapse of the Western banking system and its consequences not only upon individual or collective consumption but also on public expenditure, welfare and social inequality. I will return to this point below.

The structure of the book, comprised of six chapters, offers a welcome break from conventional textbook accounts of consumer behaviour and consumption in general. The first and final chapters are presented as dialogues between three fictional characters whose views, opinions and beliefs represent different political perspectives. Introducing and discussing the consequences of consumption through lively dialogues, argumentation and opposing views, Miller attempts to update and refresh his previous writing and research findings - presented in *Stuff* and elsewhere - with the views of three seemingly distinct or semi-autonomous ideological camps. The middle chapters of the book summarise research which he has conducted, published and discussed over the last twenty years. Readers already familiar with Miller's ideas might hesitate to revisit his previously published findings on consumption, shopping and material culture. Others will find the opportunity to introduce themselves to Miller's prolific work on consumption and consumer society infused with political overtones.

In Chapter 1, the three characters embark upon a conversation in a comfortable North London house. Mike, a middle-aged professor of environmental studies represents the green perspective. Chris, a senior lecturer in sociology, voices the left of the political spectrum. Grace, raised in the Philippines, works as a lecturer in anthropology and brings forward her experiences as a fieldworker exposed to poverty. Having met in a conference, they decide to exchange, compare and update generic views about consumption, politics and climate change. Mike's green call for immediate and sustained reduction in consumption and the development of ecological consciousness opens the dialogue by highlighting the variety of opposing views which exist amongst environmentalists. Subsequently, the dialogue is almost monopolized by Grace's personal experiences which contrast her impoverished upbringing in the Philippines to her later exposure to the lifestyle of the contemporary affluent middle-income Londoner. Through the vehicle of Grace's torrential monologue, Miller brings together issues around immigration, class consumption, education and conspicuousness by emphasizing the striking contradiction between Western consumers' preoccupation with a 'more is better' ideology, on the one hand, and the dramatic lack of basic goods, health and public services in developing countries, on the other.

Miller turns this fierce debate into a simultaneous critique of [primarily] environmentalists' and critical sociologists' reluctance to study and embrace the contribution of anthropology to the cross-cultural study of material culture and symbolic consumption, implying that both perspectives repeat, recycle and perpetuate the same universalistic and generic arguments and critiques regarding consumerism, green commodities, moral values and mass consumption. Chris, the sociologist, righteously acknowledges that Grace's personal disposition and emotional involvement has overshadowed her accounts of the importance of anthropological research and so responds to her polemic with his own long monologue. For Chris, the critique of consumption is tied to a concern with the display of social position - references to Veblen, Bourdieu and Mary Douglas abound throughout. The dialogue reaches its zenith with a humorous argument about whether Bourdieu can be classified as an anthropologist or a sociologist. Skilfully, Miller changes the parameters of the debate and directs the discussion towards the interrelationships between national and cultural differences regarding happiness, health, well-being and quantifiable aspects of welfare.

With only two surface references to the 2011 welfare cut of the UK coalition government and the 2007/2008 global financial crisis, the discussion fluctuates between the global connections and contradictions amongst affluence, consumption, poverty and underdevelopment. Grace dominates the discussion,

highlighting that instead of galvanizing a thorough and one-dimensional critique of capitalism, the welfare and market-driven social democratic regimes of Scandinavian countries can represent good examples of providing high standards of living together with increased levels of consumption. The three protagonists agree to read a draft of a forthcoming book that summarizes ethnographic research on consumption – the following five chapters – and in the next meeting (staged during the book's final chapter) they will further elaborate on the consequences of consumption from a suitably enlightened perspective. Such is the set-up.

The all-important first chapter, then, is enjoyable, intellectually stimulating and even entertaining. At the same time it is somewhat biased towards the author's own political and professional background. The environmentalist perspective is quickly marginalized by the posturing debate between the anthropological tradition and critical sociology. This argument paves the way, in turn, towards the mutual recognition of the possibility of a synthesis of a market-driven economy with an egalitarian social welfare system. The reader can easily self-identify with one of the characters – as the author does – however Miller has already set the directions for the search for a pragmatic and ideal political solution prescribed and defined by specific economic beliefs and particular/regional-based social values.

Chapter 2, 'Consumer Society', as already mentioned, is a summary of Miller's previous ethnographic work which he has published throughout the last fifteen years (Miller, 1987; 1994; 1997). Examining the cultural, economic and social aspects of Trinidad's metamorphosis into a consumer society, Miller highlights the importance of symbolic consumption as a means of displaying the values of a society and the spread of metropolitan consumer culture icons (the case study focuses on the Coca Cola brand) into vehicles of global homogenization. It also discusses how the citizens of Trinidad reacted to the erosion of their culture by the emergent materialist consumer culture. Attempting to compress, present and discuss rich ethnographic data into a single chapter, however, Miller ends up referring to so many themes and concepts - from labour and alienation to education and from time and the sacralisation of consumption to the concept of objectification - without offering the essential depth that will demonstrate their interconnectedness and importance for the structuring of consumption practices and actions.

Chapter 3, then, is heavily based on Miller's own reflections on more of his earlier work: *Dialectics of shopping* (2001) and a *Theory of shopping* (1998). Travelling from Trinidad to the streets of North London, the author spent a year observing and interpreting shopping as a social and active process, offering an

alternative angle to representations of consumption as individualistic, hedonistic and materialistic. The analysis draws from cultural anthropology and focuses on household, paternal and family relationships, as well as issues and discussions around gender, ethnicity and social class. Miller oscillates between the normative and actual dimensions of purchasing decisions, underlining the role of expectations, conformity and compromise in justifying how material culture objectifies norms. The chapter could have done with more references to sociological, consumer research and psychological literatures.

Chapter 4 revisits the 'Global Denim Project' which sought to focus on one particular consumer object - denim blue jeans - and account for why so many people around the world wear them. Themes around globalization and ubiquity, anxiety and maintenance of individual personhood come into play here as Miller brings the reader from socialist Hungary to Brazil and back again to London. Placing less emphasis on theories of social, status-driven and cultural differentiation through consumption, Miller instead elaborates on a post-semiotic perspective by highlighting the ordinary, mundane and comfort-related aspects of wearing a pair of jeans as a means of escaping from, rather than embracing and conforming to, a particular identity or consumption lifestyle. The methodological challenges of ethnographic data collection and interpretation here overshadow the underlying debate over whether connotations of assimilation, distinction or the pursuit of the objectification of a state of ordinariness drive the purchase and public display of jeans. References to Veblen, Bourdieu, Barthes and Baudrillard, which appear in the concluding paragraph, could have been further discussed and better integrated across the chapter.

Throughout Chapter 5, Miller suggests that we can view and potentially discuss political economy more as a consequence than as a cause of consumption. He discusses previous research findings about globalization and localization, as well as the dialectical antagonism or contradiction between the effectiveness of local and culturally constructed adverts versus the success of global brands. However, Miller's generic proposition that the advertising industry is primarily effective only at creating demand to satisfy children's needs, wants and desires sounds limited and one-dimensional. Questioning and refuting the epistemological limitations and assumptions of mainstream and orthodox economic theories around consumer demand and supply, although a high level of overgeneralization is acknowledged, Miller continues to develop an inconspicuous exercise which seems to permeate, characterize and gradually govern his book, chapter by chapter: an attempt to underline the originality and qualities of ethnographic studies of commerce and material culture compared to some limitations of social, cultural and economic readings of consumption.

Some updated references on the contemporary rhetoric and discourse of economics and finance, such as Michael Lewis' classic *Liar's poker* (2006), support Miller's belief on the inherent 'stupidity' of free-market economic doctrines, which turns into a vehicle for re-introducing the author's advocacy for a socially democratic system that embraces capitalism through the retention of strict control upon its social consequences. Miller concludes the chapter with suggestions such as

an education which focuses on examples of how to use economic instruments for securing the welfare of populations (138)

and

a qualitative engagement with the specifics of actual people and their welfare concerns (137)

in order to reinvigorate the implementation and maintenance of combined economic efficiency with welfare state benefits. It is beyond the scope of this review to examine, assess and discuss whether the 'regional' Nordic model constitutes a politico-ideological artefact, a viable gigantic plan, or a provisional utopia. Miller's affiliation with Scandinavian social democracy, for its part, could be supported by highlighting the complexity arising from the amalgamation of norms, institutional status quos and economic processes so as to support the spread of a Nordic style social citizenship and provision of goods across the globe.

The final chapter returns to the conversation about the consequences of consumption. A skilful writer, Miller also here acknowledges some of the limitations in his book – such as its lack of a voice for left-wing critiques of market capitalism and consumerism – and structures the closing discussion around the aspects and potentialities of education as a means of transforming consumers' consciousness, the increase in the consumption of green goods, and government policies for innovative carbon markets. The regulation of industries, the problem of over-production and the critique of mainstream economic theory also come into play here.

For readers interested in anthropological aspects of consumption in general and Miller's previous ethnographic studies in particular, then, this book offers an intriguing introduction which seeks to contextualize the consequences of consumption between debates regarding the wider political economy and climate change. Nevertheless, Miller's hyperbolic emphasis on cultural and anthropological insights of consumption practices, as well as his focus on household provisioning, doesn't justify or sufficiently corroborate his critique of

theorists who have emphasized the role of advertising, status emulation, lifestyle conformity and imitation as some of the driving forces behind materialism, overconsumption, class and social inequality. The hypothesis that the abolition of advertising practices or the reduction of class differences would decrease consumer inequality, for example, is a monstrous theoretical assumption which cannot be tested in a single study. The presentation and discussion of the richness and diversity of cultural consumption practices, and the symbolic function of material things, could also be comprehended in a *synergistic* rather than antithetical relationship with, let's say, Veblenesque interpretations of consumer demand so as to fulfil Miller's call for the alleviation of poverty and deprivation. The need to apply and critically engage with ethnographic methods and techniques to the study of modern commerce, finance and retailing also seems rather indispensable. Miller's invitation to consider a dichotomy between the causes of consumption and the consequences of capitalism(s) (or vice-versa if you want), or to adopt and if possibly emulate the fairness, regulation and virtues of social-democratic politics, however, seems ambiguous.

Keynes' encouragement of higher consumption during times of depression has been met with some degree of contemporary encouragement. As Miller argues, we can't deny consumption's contribution to the advancement of welfare. To stimulate consumption, however, is also to stimulate the complex interplay between banking and government policies for home-ownership and credit – relationships which triggered the global recession and disclosed financial markets' insatiable lust. Concurring with Miller, then, we can say that naïve and unsophisticated thinking on how we can remove the causes of consumption leads nowhere. So, by analysing the adverse causes of competitive consumption: obesity, vanity, compulsive buying and wasteful consumption of natural resources amongst others, we might begin to comprehend how to tackle them. A soft, productive, regulated, flexible and highly dynamic version of capitalism that aims to enhance the civic sphere, welfare provision and human rights might represent the embodiment of universal values and perhaps a pragmatic model of free trading moralism with ecological consciousness. Nevertheless, the internationalization of Protestant missionary zeal and socialist harmony seems inconsistent with the presence of tough militarism, oppression, corrupted economic elites and policy-planning networks which occur away from the boundaries of a Nordic geographic periphery. Miller righteously highlights the centrality of our education system and the potential contribution of heterodox economic theories for the cultivation of ethical concerns and a sustainable environment. Such themes could infuse and update his ethnographic data with newly introduced concepts so as to strike a balance between the consequences of consumption, moral adjudication, and the adoption of a particular political stance.

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