

## REVIEW ARTICLE

### ANTHROPOLOGY, MATERIAL CULTURE AND CONSUMERISM

DANIEL MILLER, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1987. viii, 217pp., References, Index. £25.00.

Daniel Miller's new book is excellent and deserves to be widely read not only by specialists in material culture, but also by all anthropologists and social scientists who are concerned with the cultural characteristics of 'modern' society.

Miller's basic problem is this: we have inherited a tradition of cultural critique which decries the consumer society, seeing our headlong pursuit of the material embodiments of an affluent life-style as a profound cultural sickness, for which capitalism is ultimately responsible. Because this critique is from the left, it incorporates the standard leftist humanism. Under socialism, according to this brand of humanism, soulless materialism will vanish, and, no longer bemused by consumerist fetishes, human beings will relate to their world, and one another, in a new and truly 'natural' way ('not through a glass darkly'). But Miller correctly sees that leftist humanism is an anti-humanism in disguise, since it is based on a systematic contempt for the man in the street, who is regarded as a zombie, a dumb creature whose brain has been removed and replaced by advertising imagery. He will only be saved once he learns to switch off the T.V., stops dreaming of a fitted kitchen and spends his time in adult education classes or, failing that, engaging in approved varieties of working-class 'popular' culture (pigeon-fancying, cultivation of enormous, inedible marrows on allotments and so on).

Miller wants to reconcile socialism, as a programme for social justice, with an unsnobbish and essentially sympathetic appreciation of the struggles and triumphs of the people who live in advanced capitalist societies. Such people, like it or not, formulate their life-goals and mediate their personal relations in a

symbolic language of 'objectifications' which is intrinsically linked to the expanded possibilities of consumption provided for in advanced industrial societies.

Miller's defence of consumerism is based on a Hegelian precedent, since, in Hegel - but not in Marx - 'alienation' is regarded positively, as an expansion of the self into the world, and is only a precursor to 'sublation', the reincorporation (i.e. consumption) of the expanded and 'alienated' part of the self. Hegelian 'alienation' can be translated also as 'objectification', but 'objectified' culture - that is to say, 'modern' culture which manifests itself, as no previous culture has, in a vast mass of products - is not 'alienating' in the Marxist sense because the 'meaning' of the product is accomplished not in its status as a 'produced' thing, but only, following purchase, as an element, brought in from the outside, which expands and develops the social person of the consumer.

This argument is the core of Miller's book, but there is a great deal more to it. In the first chapter he outlines the Hegelian theory of alienation/objectification, which he goes on to contrast in the second with the more familiar Marxian ideas of alienation, fetishism and reification. Miller argues that the 'estrangement' of the subject in the (alienated) object is intrinsic to Marx's social critique, but even if one accepts the terms of this critique, the original Hegelian idea still has validity as an element in a cultural interpretation of objectification and consumption, whereas Marx concentrates exclusively on production and exchange. Baudrillard's attack on Marx's 'productionism' is cited at this point, although Baudrillard is prey to romantic illusions of his own. Next, using Munn's work, Miller introduces the idea of objectification as a cultural process, and the first part of the book concludes with a discussion of Simmel's analysis of 'modern' objectification via the mass of consumer goods and the all-pervading role of money power as the means of rendering desire in objectified form.

This might sound rather tough going, but the author has gone to considerable pains to ease the reader's burden. Miller has the ability to deal with complicated ideas in a direct and unfussy way. He needs all his expository wits about him in the ensuing chapters, which attempt to construct a programme for present-day material culture studies.

Having looked at the psychology of early object experience in the work of Klein and Piaget, he turns to anthropological studies of symbolic transactions in objects (Mauss, Weiner) and ultimately to the history and sociology of consumer taste. Here the presiding big name is Bourdieu, which is only natural, but Miller also finds opportunities to deal with an extensive and scattered historical and sociological literature which has never been brought together in this way before. There are sections dealing with the social history of suburban housing, the evolution of the motor-scooter as a symbol of the aspirations of 'mod' youth culture and the tortuous history of 'calico' cloth, produced originally as part of a drive towards import substitution before becoming a mainstay of the

export economy of Britain during its manufacturing heyday. Other subjects dealt with in passing are the rise of the 'industrial designer', the nature of the fashion system and the results of surveys of the contents of middle-class Chicago homes.

The result of this conducted tour through the byways of economic history, design studies and the new literature on consumption is not only an interesting series of chapters to read, but a big bibliography at the end of the book, one of the greatest possible scholarly utility. In the final part, Miller seeks to construct a new 'positive' theory of consumption, opposed to the anti-consumerist left humanism, which can be used to interpret the symbolic dimensions of 'the work of consumption' (i.e. self-construction via consumer choice) in modern society.

Miller's book is part of a general movement to reinstate consumption as a legitimate activity and a serious subject for academic inquiry and social theorising, after a prolonged period during which the emphasis has been placed almost wholly on production. It is particularly welcome because it succeeds in formulating this new perception of the relationship between political economy and culture in an organised and lucid way, virtues which most of the other contributions to this subject conspicuously lack. Even if it were not an original contribution to ideas (which it is) Miller's book would be a monument to heroic patience in the exegesis of texts which often hardly deserve such scholarly forbearance.

But possibly Miller has gone too far in effacing himself and conducting his argument in terms of a series of commentaries on other peoples' ideas. There is the possibility that readers will read Miller (who is not famous or trendy yet) in order to get the goods on writers who, rightly or wrongly, have acquired droppable names, such as Baudrillard, or who are notoriously stodgy, not to say boring, such as Hegel or Simmel. One has to get to page 190 of a book which is only 217 pages in all before encountering two whole pages on which there are no citations. Those two pages, dealing with modern consumption, are among the best in the book, and I would have preferred more like them. The impact of Miller's argument is substantially lessened by his determination (bred, no doubt, from his experience as a university lecturer) to cram in the whole of the 'syllabus' before allowing himself a moment to speak to us directly. In particular, it seems to me that the analysis of the 'work of consumption' remains sketchy and that a deeper phenomenological analysis of the phases and modalities of object-sublation are urgently needed.

What kind of critical response will this work evoke? While I would like to give it an unequivocal welcome as it stands, there is no doubt that if one considers some of the issues raised in it from a more general point of view, some difficult questions seem to emerge which are not answered in the text.

One such question was raised by a friend of mine with whom I was discussing the book over dinner. He denounced 'objectification' theory as a casuistical apology for private property. The coincidence in time between the appearance of Miller's book and the current rethink which is occurring in British Labour Party circles

on such subjects as the 'right' to house purchase or share-ownership in private companies seems too neat to be put down to coincidence alone. Is Miller really on about 'material culture' as a purely academic problem, or is he playing a political game, along with Gould, Kinnock and their ilk? My view is that it is possible to read Miller's text in an academic spirit and that it would be unfair to conclude that this is no more than a political tract for the times masquerading as something else. But it must be admitted that the book is open to a very definite, and occasionally obtrusive, political reading as well.

It is also rather disquieting that Miller's defence of consumerism in its expanded 'modern' form rather skates over the global north-south issue, since our consumption is supported (so it is often claimed) by inadequately rewarded production elsewhere, and also over the obvious ecological or 'green' issues of pollution, depletion of non-renewable resources, and so on, all patently problems which can be traced to the environmental impact of the consumerist life-style. We could objectify ourselves to death, one day.

Even if one should take the view that the prosperity on which consumer society rests is not actually 'paid for' by exploiting the Third World and that there is, moreover, no unequal north-south distribution of scarce resources, the fact would remain that this is *perceived* to be the case, so much so that the residual hostility between the advanced capitalist and high-consumption societies of the 'free world' and their socialist and Third-World antagonists may ultimately be based on the resentment of the poor against the rich and the fear which that resentment provokes in the hearts of the rich themselves.

The defence of the consumerist life-style is a key element in global political confrontation and cannot be treated adequately as an outgrowth of the individual consumer's free act of self-objectification through the mediation of material objects. And moreover, the international, inter-regional and ideological tensions which constitute the political dimensions of contemporary mass consumption are recapitulated in miniature within advanced countries themselves. Envy and resentment are widely expressed by deprived groups in Britain and similar countries, whose lack of access to material symbols of personal achievement and self-realization is a deeply felt affront.

For every consummated act of self-objectification through symbolic consumption, there are myriad frustrating episodes of *coitus interruptus* through the impenetrable shields of plate-glass windows and expensive packaging. The down-side of consumerism derives directly from the way in which consumerism creates symbolic value, as Simmel correctly pointed out, through the 'resistance factor' which has to be overcome before an act of consumption can take place. Consumers consume up to the marginal limits imposed by their purchasing power; every consumption decision therefore becomes at the same time an acceptance of limitations, a compromise with relative failure. Miller pays insufficient attention, it seems to me, to the dialectical relationship between consumption as a means of self-realization and incorporation of symbolic value,

and the simultaneous creation of a 'negative' self whose contours are defined by the economically imposed limits on increasing personal consumption indefinitely. There is no simple solution to this - redistributing income more equally, for instance - because the basic fact of economic limitation on this particular mode of self-objectification is intrinsic to any pattern of income distribution whatever.

I would suggest that consumption as a satisfactory form of objectification can only be realised in conjunction with a second process which is the elaboration of symbolic culture in a non-objective, internal mode of pure imagination. This elaboration thrives in conditions of restricted access to material goods, as the record of anthropological enquiry shows.

The archetypal image of such an internal elaboration of culture has been provided by Hesse in *The Glass Bead Game*. This kind of parsimony with objects, reducing them finally to patterns of imaginary glass beads, stands at the opposite extreme from the anti-elitist consumption ethos promoted by Miller. But elitist or not, Hesse's image of cultural consumption and objectification on a plane of purely imaginary structures (whose limitations are set only by the fertility of the human imagination, and not by purchasing power or the productivity of the material economy) indicate the only available pathway towards the liquidation of the social dilemmas of consumerist societies and their inherent injustices which haunt Miller's concluding pages.

In this connection, it is a notable fact that Miller identifies only three examples of a truly accomplished 'objectification' - and that two of the three (Hagen body art and Gawa canoes) come from non-industrialised societies, only one from the industrialised world (women's fashion sub-cultures). Although the emphasis throughout Miller's book is on objectification through material culture as a phenomenon of 'modern' societies, it is clear that the notion of 'modernity' is, in the final analysis, unhelpful. The existence of the 'mass of goods' signalled by Simmel and celebrated, if anything, by Miller has not resulted in highly differentiated, nuanced and symbolically elaborated consumption practices but rather the reverse, i.e. the dull and repetitious recourse, by the majority of consumers, to a restricted spectrum of heavily advertised 'brand-name' goods. These, much as Baudrillard suggested, function for the most part as pure signifiers signifying only themselves and their taken-for-granted (but never focalised) characteristics. One does not need to follow Baudrillard in his romantic speculations about primitive men and their awesome powers of authentic symbolic intercourse to find merit in the idea that restricted consumption possibilities enhance the likelihood that whatever consumption does take place is likely to be invested with complex meaning and to be utilised in the process of self-construction in a symbolically charged social setting.

Meanwhile it would be sheer hypocrisy for most people to claim to be indifferent to the material abundance which is available to the wage-earning members of our affluent society and others like it.

This inescapable fact is the firm rock on which Miller's book is founded, and it provides the basis for a searching re-examination of orthodox thinking about consumption.

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