

BOOK REVIEW SERIES

To: The Book Reviews Editor,
OAC Press

Paris, 10th October, 2010

Dear Stacy,

MILLER, DANIEL. *Stuff*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009. viii + 169 pp. Paperback £15.99.

I have never written a book review in the form of a letter before, so why now? First, we have the freedom to experiment here. Many people seem to believe that it is enough to bring new ideas to the new media, but ideas are cheap. What we need are new social forms better suited to the expression of progressive ideas; and all too often we remain trapped unconsciously in forms that prevent us from thinking, never mind doing something new. I have always believed that the act of writing itself offers us a chance to explore new social possibilities. Jean-Jacques Rousseau revolutionized our thinking about politics, education, sex and the self in four books written during the 1760s (*The Social Contract*, *Émile*, *The New Héloïse* and *The Confessions*), but he had to come up with a new genre of writing every time.

I have a more specific reason in this instance. Daniel Miller has written a very personal book, whose humanity I will consider below. I have found that, when we write for an anonymous public, as academics do most of the time, this can weigh down on the writer, inducing block. When I get stuck while immersed in such a piece, I often write an email message to someone about the topic. Usually, it unblocks me because it feels different writing to an actual person, as opposed to 'the world'. It is more personal. The impersonal norms of professional writing constitute a huge impediment to self-expression. I have embraced writing for the internet because the social pressure to conform to 'objective' standards is relaxed somewhat. So I try to cultivate a writing voice that is closer to my oral style; but this in turn was already formed by the schoolmen who caught me at an impressionable age! Email suits me because it is an oral/written hybrid, somewhere between a phone call and a letter. I always say that you should treat whatever you write in an email message as being already published, since you no longer have any control over it once it's sent. Now I am taking that impulse to what is a new form for me, the published letter (but not entirely new: <http://thememorybank.co.uk/other/letter-to-hadrien/>).

At first, I thought of writing this letter to the author directly. But I soon realized that this would impose constraints of its own, even though when we write a review we know that the author will be a highly interested reader. So I choose to triangulate by writing to you instead, keeping you personally in mind as my first audience and relegating Danny to a secondary level of awareness, while my true aim is to capture the attention of readers unknown to me. Dialectics come in threes, not twos. I have long been interested in biographies and autobiographies for their ability to humanize the impersonal world we live in; but also in forms like letters and diaries, dialogues, polemical diatribes and of course plays, novels and movies. Shakespeare is my favourite social thinker ever because he had a more suitable medium – a personal way of expressing human movement – than did the philosophers and social theorists we normally celebrate.

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I skimmed *Stuff* at first and only really read the last chapter, 'A matter of life and death'. Well, who wouldn't with a catchy title like that, plus the pun on the book's subject, material culture? I was taken aback by the sheer chutzpah of the writing. A paraphrase goes something like this: I don't know much about psychoanalysis even though I am a North London Jew and some of my best friends are shrinks (joke!), but I definitely don't buy it. In its vulgar forms (there are others?), psychoanalysts universalize prematurely, deal in essentialisms and abstract individuals from social relations. Worst of all (for the cultural study of things), they seem to think that the only 'objects' are persons. There is irony in all this and Daniel Miller definitely knows a lot more than he is letting onto here; but it is easy to take it the wrong way and I did. I felt he was pushing his luck too far for my taste. I put the book to one side and didn't return to it. This was a mistake.

I should say that I know quite a lot of Miller's work. His *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (1987) is a *tour de force* for its synthesis of Hegel, Marx and Simmel into a coherent anthropological approach to consumption; *A Theory of Shopping* (1998) is profound and delightful at once, improbably applying Hegel to a North London street; as an ersatz Caribbeanist, I have followed his Trinidad monographs and actually played a part as reader, for example, in the writing of *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach* (with Don Slater 2000); his exchange with the French sociologist Michel Callon on what makes the economy was a big hit in my circle; only this year, we both published articles placing Kant in the history of anthropology (a rarity in itself) and I drew on his to make a point of contrast. It turns out that I know a lot less than I thought about his work, since Daniel Miller has published going on for thirty books and the gaps between them diminish all the time.

He is immensely social in his methods, building up a large following and collaborating with a good proportion of them. But I didn't stay with *Stuff* long enough to find out what it adds to this picture. All that changed when I wrote to Danny asking if he was interested in presenting a seminar paper online at the Open Anthropology Cooperative. He accepted almost instantly and proposed the topic that will animate our network in early November: 'An extreme reading of Facebook'! I had only just caught up with his work on denim in North London (the article featuring Kant is called 'Anthropology in blue jeans' which gives some sense of the range he aspires to span). I didn't know that he had carried out field research on Facebook in Trinidad. Not only that, he proposed a reading that juxtaposes Facebook with social science (as its nemesis), God (as our inscrutable daily witness) and *Kula* (as more or less the same cultural system). I could hardly contain my excitement, so I thought that I had better read *Stuff* properly first. I did. I saw that it is a remarkable and important book, but then my new social link to the author predisposed me to think that. I wrote to you, Stacy, asking if I could review it for the OAC Press; and so here we are.

It is worth adding a footnote. When I told Danny that I intended to review *Stuff* as a warm-up for our double act in the seminar, he was quick to tell me that its unpublished companion volume, *Consumed by Doubt*, addresses the political economy side of his project including serious environmental issues like waste. It is true that he has carved out material culture as his bailiwick and I economic anthropology, but we overlap quite a lot. I guess I do make more of a song and dance about political relevance, while he sometimes claims to be 'just' an ethnographer who loves anthropology for the joy of it all. But, as we will see, this book by itself contains plenty for us to share and to argue over.

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The aim of *Stuff* is to provide an account of Daniel Miller's personal journey in pursuit of the ethnographic study of material culture as a serious branch of anthropology. By 'material culture' he means studying artefacts, the world of things that human beings have made. People not only make things, but things make people, that is, we are unconsciously shaped by the artefacts that surround us. I will return to this. 'Ethnography' means going out there to study the others, but increasingly ourselves too, with a view to discovering what people do with things and how they think (or often don't think) about them. Miller is quite sure that this is a central task of anthropology, but he is equally open to a wide range of cognate disciplines, such as archaeology, museums, marketing, architecture and design. In fact, he started out as an archaeologist, which is why he became interested in the social significance of artefacts in the first place. He was recently approached by a publisher to produce a retrospective of his own greatest hits, but he

declined, choosing rather to write something new that draws on his previous work. This is important.

'Stuff' comes from a medieval French term for equipment, but nowadays it is closer in its ambiguity to the word *truc*. The book's title (and its lack of a subtitle) is thus a challenge to those who believe that precise definition is indispensable to scholarship. After all, ethnographers discover ideas in messy field sites, not in dictionaries. It consists of six more or less independent essays. The short introduction addresses the author's life as 'an extremist'. Then a chapter on clothing makes the case for taking outward appearances seriously. The 'theory' chapter traces Daniel Miller's trajectory from ethno-archaeologist through social philosopher of materiality to practising dialectician and material culture guru. This is followed by a chapter, 'Houses', which emphasizes how constraining the built environment can be, if we aspire to self-determination. The chapter on the media moves us towards the immateriality of some things, plunging us into the world of the internet and mobile phones. Finally, we are invited to consider the centrality of objects in the critical life transitions of birth and death.

Anthropologists have always traded on surprises, on our ability to excavate the unfamiliar; but Daniel Miller means more than this by claiming to cultivate extremes. The social sciences are generally preoccupied with a middle range of phenomena whose familiarity accounts for why what they have to say is often so boring. As a result, both the most inclusive aspects of our collective existence and the mundane details of individual lives disappear from view. Unusually, he traces his own method to Hegel, rightly identifying him as the most influential philosopher of the modern age, who sought to show how human universals move in history through their dialectical manifestation as particulars. If we are to bring the universal and the particular back into an active relationship, Miller argues, we have to push the argument to extremes in both directions. I have reached similar conclusions, taking Gandhi as a more recent mentor who suggests that our humanity consists in being at once unique personalities and part of the species as a whole. A focus on the plethora of intermediate social relations that link these extremes misses the importance of keeping them both in view at once. Here I part company with Danny, but the common ground is still substantial. Before getting carried away by anthropology's special mission, we should recall that the idea of reaching universal truths by delving deeply into particulars is the hallmark of great literature, history and law, not just ethnography.

I have mentioned how strikingly humane this book is. It is time to be more explicit. Most social or cultural anthropologists emphasize what real people do, so that their work is human in that sense. But they also, especially in recent decades, often take refuge in an impenetrable writing style that is only suitable for the students they force to read their books. It is a paradox that the findings of a discipline that is so open to the world should usually be closed to the general public. Kate Fox,

who has no formal training in anthropology, but whose father is a famous anthropologist, sold a quarter million copies of her book, *Watching the English* (2004), provoking studied indifference from academic anthropologists. I felt this was unfair to her and wrote a letter to the editor about it (<http://thememorybank.co.uk/2006/05/11/kate-foxs-watching-the-english/>). Apart from the fact that her method was serious, even if her style was often facetious, I pointed out that

She makes no claim to a collective or impersonal authority derived from membership of a professional guild, attributing her competences, if any, to a life-time of idiosyncratic personal engagement. This leaves her free to indulge in irony, humour and self-deprecation, thereby allowing for a more egalitarian and humane relationship with her readers than most academic anthropologists can manage.

While not disguising the high seriousness of his intellectual mission, Daniel Miller goes out of his way to attempt – and achieve -- something similar. This is not just a trick of popularizing style. It is absolutely fundamental if anthropology is to escape from the academic straitjacket it got locked up in during the second half of the twentieth century; and Miller is leading the way. Thomas Hylland Eriksen (*Engaging Anthropology*) has taken this project even further.

I have long been astonished by the contrast between the idiosyncratic lives that most anthropologists lead and the dull quality of their teaching and writing. They take mind-altering drugs, learn to fly planes, keep snakes and then insist on their students reading Radcliffe-Brown. Daniel Miller won't have any of this. He wants as many people as possible, not least his own students, to share his enjoyment of a life of discovery as an anthropologist. He makes a half-hearted gesture here to being concerned about the welfare of the world's poor (mobile phones and poverty in Jamaica) and I am sure there will be more of it in the second book; but this one celebrates human creativity, as well as the author's undiluted pleasure in having been able to write so fully about it.

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We all have guilty secrets, anthropologists more than most. One of mine is that I once took an article of Danny's in vain. I built up a satirical fantasy on the basis of 'Appropriating the state on a council estate' (*Man* 23, 1988), an essay that I have pigeonholed in my memory as 'Kitchens in North London'. I was living in South London at the time (the contrast between scruffy mixed race South and posh white North London is part of the satire). I hung out with a deserter from the British army in Cyprus called Kelvin. He was a Millwall supporter (they used to sing 'Nobody likes us, but we don't care') and we went together to home matches at 'The Den', swigging from cans of Tennent's Strong Lager, in my case as camouflage ('Don't open your mouth, Keith [marf Keef]; if they find

out you're from Manchester, they'll kill ya'). Kelvin was also a plumber, so one day I told him about Danny's article.

It was based on a study of kitchens in an estate of rented flats built in the modernist style. The idea was that people made them their own despite the obstacles imposed by the initial decor and their inability to profit from the results by selling their flats. 'So how many flats did he see?' asked Kelvin. '34, I think'. '34! I've seen thousands [farsands]. What was he looking for?' 'To see how people expressed themselves in their choice of fittings.' 'We choose the fittings, the plumbers. They always buy what we recommend and we push what we have in stock. So what styles did he find?' 'Oh, white and metal at one end and country-style woodwork at the other, but most of them in between.' 'Well, they would pick the middle stuff, wouldn't they, because that's the cheapest.' A possible critical analysis leapt to mind: How big was the statistical sample and how much can you learn from drinking tea with people in their kitchens? At what point do 'consumers' exercise genuine agency in their choice of decor, given their dependence on commercial operators like Kelvin? In the weeks that followed, over numerous pints, Kelvin and I worked on a scenario for a follow-up article called 'Bathrooms [barrooms] in South [Sarf] London'. The key theme here would be the recent fad for installing bidets ('they call them bidgets'). What do people think they are for? For kids to pee in was popular, also for washing smalls and other uses far from the original one which would no doubt have horrified the proud owners if they ever found out. I contemplated submitting the article to *Man* in Kelvin's name, but with a fake academic affiliation such as 'Associate Professor of Interior Design, Ohio State University'. But I didn't have the time or bottled out or both. Well, you gotta larf.

All of this came back to me while reading the chapter on houses in *Stuff*. I realized that his use of the same material here was a vindication of Daniel Miller's rationale for writing this book. I really can't recall whether my lampooning of the original article was justified; but I am sure that the use made of these arguments over two decades later within the architecture of a short book is a vast improvement on republishing the article. In keeping with his extremist manifesto, Danny here considers the ubiquity of modernism in the post-war period as in some ways the negation of the polarities of the Cold War. Just as the vast Soviet bureaucracy was ultimately undermined by all the small tactics ordinary people brought to the pursuit of their own everyday interests, so too the welfare state and its neoliberal successor have failed to contain our mundane efforts to 'appropriate' the world we live in and make it our own through home decoration and the clothes we wear.

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My appreciation of this book and of Daniel Miller's enterprise as a whole has to struggle with two

metaphysical points on which we appear to be opposed. The first is the concept of 'material' and the second is the collapse of the subject/object pair. I have always thought that Marx made a mistake by opposing idealism to materialism after Feuerbach. To me it makes more sense to follow Kant in opposing ideas to experience, whereas trying to identify the material as a level of reality is itself a sort of idealism (but then Kant and Hegel are often unjustly reduced to the same label). Miller's approach is not dogmatic, possibly heuristic, and certainly not materialistic. He is not too bothered to draw a firm line around materiality and, in studying virtualism, for example, quite openly embraces its opposite. No wonder he is impatient with philosophical pedantry; but this is a problem that I can only flag here without quickly becoming a bore myself.

The other issue goes to the heart of what I find the most disturbing trend in contemporary anthropology and much else, something I wrote about in *The Hit Man's Dilemma* (<http://thememorybank.co.uk/2009/05/09/the-hit-mans-dilemma-lite/>). We know that modernity is based on conceptual separations that became for a time too rigid: individual/society, subject/object, culture/nature, agency/structure and so on. This has led some writers to advocate collapsing these distinctions, by granting agency to non-human actors (including ideas and things as well as animals), not just human beings. This position is prominently associated with Bruno Latour and with Actor Network Theory more generally. In anthropology Marilyn Strathern, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and others have led the way in deconstructing the subject/object pair. Briefly, I argue that this plays into the hands of the corporations who benefit in political, legal and economic terms from the abolition of the distinction between artificial and real persons in law. When we can no longer distinguish between the human rights of Walmart and those of individual citizens, our thinking about political options for greater democracy is irremediably confused.

Daniel Miller has by no means signed up for the ANT camp. It seems pretty clear to me that he is capable of distinguishing between the agency of a Trinidadian and that of a teapot. Indeed, his whole dialectical approach is at odds with this particular version of extremism. But to say 'Things make people as much as people make things' can lead to confusion in its own right. Moreover, apart from its rhetorical value, Miller doesn't need it, any more than he needs a strong concept of the material. Latour is quite explicit in his aim to dethrone the tradition of great scientists by claiming that the molecules in a fermentation process deserve as much credit as Louis Pasteur. Miller wants to say that we are conditioned by our material environment in ways that we should become more conscious about. I doubt if he would assert, with Callon and Latour, that the development of a new car by Renault is no different in principle from the action of a telephone operator in switching a call.

Some of this comes up in the last chapter, 'A matter of life and death'. The section where Daniel Miller writes about psychoanalysis concerns birth, babies and parent-child relations. He is at pains to deconstruct the transitive ideologies that we bring to parenting, insisting that children can bring up their parents, just as social relations between them in either direction are substantially mediated by material objects. I can buy into both premises (I once knew an American self-help group for grown-ups who as children did exactly that for parents made incompetent by drink or worse). I also agree with Engels when he said 'My dog is rational'. It is self-defeating to insist on a strong separation of the qualities of children and animals from those of adult human beings. But still I balk at the idea of things making people, since, if we are to assume responsibility for our actions, we need to be able to tell the difference between them and ourselves. We need better intellectual tools for fighting the corporations than slogans that reproduce their hegemony. As always with metaphysical arguments, the value of this one lies in what you might use it for; and it no doubt trespasses on the subject matter of the second volume in Daniel Miller's project. I can't wait to see it.

Thanks for the opportunity, Stacy.

As ever,

Keith

[Keith Hart is a founding member of the Open Anthropology Cooperative]

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To: Keith Hart

London, 13th October 2010

Dear Keith,

Thank you for your bold review of Danny Miller's *Stuff*. Needless to say, I am putting my order in now for what seems a thought-provoking and provocative study of material culture, as he has always been known for producing.

In regards to the format in which you have written this review, I do applaud you. From the onset, the stage on which you presented this review has captured the substance, the texture, the expression of progressiveness that the Book Review Series hopes to establish. Using a style that promotes your own dispositions allows a sort of mesmerisation. I say this, as one becomes engrossed by the intellectualism and poeticism of your review, accompanied by your, rightfully addressed, political

proclivities. Hence, I encourage future reviewers to write to their strengths, in whatever style that may be. It is because of this that we not only know about the contents of the book, but also about the reviewer, and why criticisms and praise were passed where they were.

I thank you again for this insightfully stimulating review, and will be presumptuous enough as to suggest a follow-up once Danny Miller's second volume, *Consumed by Doubt*, is published.

Best Regards,

Stacy Hope

Book Reviews Editor
OAC Press

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