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The Perils of Consumption and the Gift Economy as the Solution Daniel Miller's 'Consumption and Its Consequences'

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Abstract

Ethnographic research challenges the view that consumerism is driven by false needs. At the same time, there is no doubt of the environmental damage caused by consumerism. A recent book by anthropologist Daniel Miller (*Consumption and its consequences*) provides a starting point for a broader discussion of this conundrum. Given the anchoring of consumption in culturally produced needs, there is little chance of reigning in consumption with campaigns for moral reform. Miller favours regulation by a so-called neutral science. Whether this is any more politically palatable than moral reform is debatable. While Miller certainly points to some of the factors driving consumption, he does not sufficiently emphasize the role of alienated labour. For Miller, alienated labour is inevitable. However, the gift economy could alleviate pressures for consumption by abolishing alienated labour. Miller's ethnographies appear to show that every consumed product is much wanted. The critique of market failures explains the problems with this conclusion. A complete replacement of the market with the gift economy could be the best option for avoiding problems with consumption.

Introduction

A common perspective of some sections of the environmentalist movement has been to argue that consumerism is driven by false needs (Humphery, 2009). Ethnographic research, such as that carried out by Daniel Miller (2008; 2010) makes this most unlikely. People consume for a variety of reasons. For example, women shoppers consider the needs of their families, Londoners buy clothes to avoid standing out in the crowd, and people of Trinidad favour extreme ostentation to compensate for oppression at work. All this makes consumer behaviour hard to shift. Daniel Miller's recent book, *Consumption and Its Consequences* (2012) continues his ethnographic work on the reasons why people consume, but also looks at these issues in relation to the environmental problems of consumption. His conclusion is that we need a neutral scientific regulation of decisions at the point of production. This is the only way to prevent environmental damage. This approach is not without its problems. The political issues that make it difficult to persuade people to make voluntary changes to their consumer behaviour also undermine attempts to regulate through the process of government.

A major axis of Miller's approach is his view of alienated labour. Miller does mention the issue in connection with the consumerism observed in Trinidad but fails to generalize this analysis to consumerism in general. Yet, the understanding that alienated labour is a key to consumerist behaviour provides a way to reduce consumerism that is quite different to that suggested by Miller. What is needed is a new kind of economic structure, an economy based upon voluntary collectives that allows people to produce and distribute their work as gifts. This would abolish alienated labour. It seems unlikely that Miller would find this solution palatable. He sees social democracy as the limit of what is actually possible in modern industrial societies.

A typical view of the media and everyday common sense is that what people buy is what they want most and environmentalists are positioned as interfering with individual freedom of expression. The view is that the free market translates personal wishes into production decisions in the most efficient way possible. An ethnographic approach of the kind used by Miller tends to back up this view. People are being asked to explain why it is that they buy various commodities. What this approach fails to consider are the reasons why the market systematically pursues some kinds of individual wishes and has difficulty translating others into commodity production. These issues are explored by ecological economists. An examination of their critique can lead us to think about what kinds of ethnography could unearth these unmet desires of modernity. We are also led to consider the ways in which a proposed gift economy might equal some of the flexible efficiency of the market system without ignoring these unmet needs.

Miller's book is arranged in three parts. The first part is a fictionalized debate between three positions – an environmentalist who argues that consumerism is excessive and must be cut back; a socialist who argues that consumerism expresses various tensions within the market economy; an anthropologist who argues, like Miller, that people's consumption is understandable and that as far as the third world is concerned, people need to consume more, not less. The middle part of the book considers a number of Miller's previous studies to show why people consume. This leads to the last part of the book which recalls the previous panel of discussants for a final round in which they try to arrive at a convincing solution to the problems of consumerism and environmental damage.

Miller's Reply to Anti-Consumerism

Miller provides an ethnographic answer to "anti-consumerist" claims that consumerism is driven by individualistic greed and false needs (Humphery, 2009). In doing this, he also argues against the viability of solutions based on a moral reformation of people's consumer conduct to achieve environmental outcomes.

The middle part of the book contains the heart of Miller's argument that no amount of green consumerism is likely to restrain consumption in ways that sufficiently protect the environment. This argument is summarized in the final panel discussion:

At one level most consumption is about basic household provisioning, as in food or clothing. More deeply, it is also about the intensity of relationships with the people you care most about or live with, about status and local symbolic systems. (Miller, 2012, p.158)

One study which informs this position followed shoppers on their trips to the shops in the UK. Miller was mainly looking at housewives. What he found was far from a glorious indulgence in 'materialist' consumerism. Housewives were concerned to save their family's money and careful not to splurge on their own fancies. They were constantly thinking of what they could buy without spending too much, preferably on items that would be appreciated by their family. In this context, green shopping came to seem heartless. Abstract altruism on behalf of a cause amounted to spending the family's money on something other than the needs of those one loved the most. In another of his studies, he looks at the way the people of Trinidad express themselves in showy purchases of clothing or refitting their cars with flash upholstery. He traces this to a situation in which money and dignity is in short supply and local people establish their status through display and a personal expression of their own style. He comments on the fact that they cannot do that in their largely menial employment. Another study looks at the way most people in the UK wear jeans. He argues that jeans are preferred to other options because the

wearer of jeans does not stand out in a crowd and jeans express nothing – they do not make a statement. In that context, jeans create an egalitarian effect but are adopted because people do not want to make a fool of themselves through some personalized expressive statement. Again, it is facile to see these purchases as mindless materialism or hedonistic indulgence. The anthropologist of the panel concludes as follows:

Consumption will continue to be about these things, and that will always trump attempts to make it into something else ... everyday consumption is about your nearest and dearest ... If consumption really was all materialistic greed, then the issue of climate change would be heaps easier ... the planet is not more going to be saved by green consumption than by flying pigs. (Miller, 2012, pp. 158-159)

Miller's Solution to Consumer Problems

There is much that makes sense in this approach. I will come back to some caveats in due course. Miller proposes to deal with the environmental crisis we are now facing. In the last panel discussion, the answer is very clear. It is pointless to try to urge people to make different consumer choices. This is the wrong end of the problem to be tackling. We should tackle the production end of things. The way to do this is to engage scientific advice to tell us what kinds of production need to be curtailed for the sake of the environment:

We need those intergovernmental panels on climate change to expand into intergovernmental panels on the precise consequences of particular acts of consumption. Because it seems to me that the solutions have to come from regulation, but regulation that goes way back to the sources of consumption itself – in other words, to production ... you have to go to international regulation, based not on the authority of consumers or voters, but on that professional authority that comes with science. (Miller, 2012, p.168)

He suggests we could have a ban on gas guzzlers that will restrict engines to 1.6 litres. We could specify maximum food miles, abolish bottled water, set air conditioning to 23 degrees, specify plastics that can be recycled or biodegrade, and decide on industrial processes.

This is a good argument and makes much sense in the context of capitalist economies. It is very difficult to control consumption through the moral regulation of consumers. For all the reasons he specifies, that is unlikely. Given this, some kind of regulation of production seems sensible. As he says, there are certainly precedents. Air traffic systems are regulated by a set of international conventions designed to prevent accidents. Why not extend such a system to industrial processes of production which produces environmental accidents as their outcome?

What Miller does not really take into account here are the vested interests of a capitalist economy that make this kind of solution difficult. At the heart of this is Miller's failure to recognize the extent of environmental restraint which has to be enforced. For example if we take the IPCC report as gospel, then the absolutely least we can get away with to avoid more than a 2 degree rise in temperature is to cut CO2 emissions by 50% by 2050 (IPCC, 2009, p. 67). What they are now is 30 gigatonnes per year, meaning half of this would be 15 gigatonnes per year. Cutting by half by 2050 may not seem that difficult until you work it out on a per capita basis. If you take typical estimates, there will be 9 billion people on the earth by 2050. The allowable per capita ration of CO2 emissions around the world would be 1.66 tonnes per annum. The emissions we were actually producing in 2007, to take a recent year, were 26 tonnes per capita in Australia, 23 tonnes in USA, 12 tonnes in the UK, 11 tonnes in Germany, 4.6 tonnes in China, and 3.5 tonnes in India (Giddens, 2009, pp.183-189). There is no way to get reductions to 1.66 tonnes per capita without massive investment in alternative energy and in new transport infrastructure. Countries would have to cut emissions year by year to reach that

target per capita figure of 1.66 tonnes by 2050. After that point, emissions would have to remain at this low level despite the normal yearly growth of the economy within capitalism. This would be well and truly scientifically rational. But the impact of cutting back energy use or moving away from fossil fuels to sustainable alternatives would be considerable. The reality is that it would have a huge and detrimental effect on what we now think of as the economy in terms of people's wages and jobs (see Trainer, 2007 for this argument in detail). It is this political hurdle which has prevented the solutions which Miller suggests from having been implemented already.

Indicative of Miller's failure to come to grips with these issues are some of his examples. If we have to cut to about 5% of emissions per capita by 2050 in rich countries, what we are looking at is engines that have a capacity of 150 cc, not 1.6 litres. Even 150 cc could be too much if car owning was to be extended to a growing middle class in the developing countries. Miller suggests a limit on air conditioning so that it is set at 23 degrees. In fact, following the guidelines of the IPCC, we could have air conditioning but only if it was to be powered by solar and wind power. These kinds of power source are much more expensive than current fossil fuel energy supplies. We will not be able to afford to produce anything like the amount of energy we now use. Beyond a basic minimum every bit of extra energy will only come at the cost of running down some other part of the economy. So air conditioning powered by electricity is unlikely to be possible, regardless of the temperature setting. We are probably likely to need all of the alternative energy we do produce for things that will be much more urgent such as basic industrial power, lighting, communication, hospitals, and public transport (Trainer, 2007).

It is people voting as consumers who have made effective environmental regulation very difficult politically. Promoting regulations as deemed necessary by a neutral scientific panel is likely to do little to remove this political objection – as people see their standard of living and consumption options deteriorate with each new tightening of regulations. In other words, Miller is certainly right in thinking that the current situation makes it difficult to reign in environmental damage through moral campaigns directed at consumer habits. But this same situation makes it equally difficult to adopt the solution he recommends (Leahy, Bowden & Threadgold, 2010).

Consumerism and Alienated Work

A key to Miller's solution is that he does not believe any major change away from capitalism is possible or desirable. He writes of himself as a "Norwegian social democrat". This orientation has an impact in terms of what solutions to consumerism are available. It is in this context that regulation of a capitalist economy seems like an attractive solution because a complete overthrow of capitalism is not envisaged as likely or desirable. This acceptance of the inevitability of capitalism also affects the way he explains people's consumer behaviour. So let us look at a key explanation of people's environmentally damaging over consumption that does not get sufficient attention in Miller's explanations of consumption.

Miller does not highlight the fact that people express themselves in consumption because they are alienated in their work. But he certainly does mention and discuss this topic, mainly in reference to consumer behaviour in Trinidad (Miller, 2012, pp. 52-58). The people of Trinidad express themselves through personally elaborated consumption and style preferences. They do this, he suggests, because their daily experience of work is alienating. Consequently "consumption, not labour is the primary point for their creation of an inalienable life" (Miller, 2012: 56). Or, as he says earlier, why would anyone choose to express themselves through "wage labour that someone else makes you do over the acts of consumption that one does for oneself" (Miller, 2012, p. 47). What is amazing about this discussion is that it is so specific.

Miller writes about this as though it is an issue unique to Trinidad. In fact, it is a central aspect of consumerist pressure in every country that relies on wage labour, including the Soviet style economies. People seek compensation for a life of labour done under the control of others. They seek expression and social connection through their consumption because they get little of either at work. Ultimately, what they produce at work is distributed by those who own the enterprise. How they are to organize their work is decided by this elite as well. This is a key reason why the pressure for consumption is so hard to resist politically or morally and it is this which most fundamentally explains why green consumerism is such a damp squib.

Instead of seeing this as a problem of *capitalism*, as one variety of economy based on wage labour, Miller treats it as an example of a general problem of *modernity*, something which no modern economy can avoid. Modernity implies impersonality and bureaucracy. For him, the alienation of labour is just one example of a general problem of alienation which is caused by the bureaucracy necessary to modernity. For Miller, this is not a specifically capitalist problem but lies in the inevitability of a bureaucratic system of distribution within modernity. He uses the example of Soviet state factories to make this point. The consumers of these goods would have equally felt alienated from their everyday experience of the bureaucracy. The problem is that whether goods are provided by the market or by the state, the provision of goods has to be impersonal and bureaucratic. The state is required to ensure efficiency and fairness but it has to be impersonal or it becomes corrupt. The market is an efficient system of distribution but its impersonality is an inevitable down side which can also allow exploitation and inequality. Science is also part of this modern package with its good side coming with inevitable negatives; science is necessary for our affluent modernity but it can also produce atomic bombs:

These are necessary contradictions of the modern world: the positive and negative consequences are two sides of the same coins. (Miller, 2012, p.56)

These passages assume that all these different kinds of alienation from impersonal modernity are a package and they are inevitable by products of a system which also produces democratic equality and fairness (through impartial government), increased affluence for all (through competition on costs and the market allocation of goods to those who want them most) and efficiency (through science). What gets sidelined in this is the idea that it is alienation *at work* which is central in understanding consumerism. The term “impersonality” is a very vague way of describing this. To be more precise, we are alienated in our work because we do not express ourselves in our work and because we do not have any control over the distribution of the things which we produce. We have to get money through alienated work to live. Consumerism is the compensation for alienated labour. The promise of increasing consumer affluence damps down demands for democratic control at work or for less inequality in distribution.

Although Miller grasps this in practice, as he is describing the situation in Trinidad, it is elided in theory. Any modern system of production and distribution takes control out of the hands of producers and gives it to some third party. That could be the state, the market, particular capitalist employers, scientific technical elite, or some combination. It really does not matter. Without this control from above, no modernity – meaning affluence, would be possible. No wealth could be created.

Is Alienation Inevitable?

The only reason to insist on the centrality of this issue is in the context of a solution to the problem. What kind of organization of society could still produce modernity and affluence without alienated work? How would any equality be possible without bureaucratic control of distribution? How would the allocation of working time to what people want to consume be possible without a market?

Clearly the Soviet solution to these problems is not particularly attractive, even if we assume that a democratic government does the central planning. In capitalism, we work for others and receive goods from an impersonal market. Miller argues that the Soviet style economy is no better. There is a gap between the work of producing, which is alienated labour, and the experience of consuming, which is to be on the receiving end of the distribution meted out by some impersonal bureaucracy. What is worse, as Miller implies and Sayer (1995) argues thoroughly, the planning of labour, the use of resources and the allocation of products is not handled well by a state bureaucracy. These decisions are much too complex to be managed from a central decision making point. They argue that these decisions are done better by a market.

This is where the idea of the “gift economy”, the “compact economy” or “non-market socialism” comes in (Nelson & Timmerman, 2011a). It is a third alternative for modernity – not capitalism and not a centralized state based socialism. It is really a package of ideas for organizing production and consumption that gets beyond the impasse Miller describes.

This is how it works (Leahy, 2011). People organize production through collectives of producers. In each collective, the workers democratically organize their own production and decide how to allocate what they produce. They allocate what they produce to members of their own community or distribute it as gifts to other collectives or communities. At all points in the chain of production this operates. For example, a group of people who are making train carriages depend on gifts of steel and aluminium from the groups producing those products. In turn they give their carriages to the groups that are running the train system. Those who are running the train system offer their train services to the public at large, also as a gift. This is the basic economic format.

The gift economy also depends on various cultural norms to function as intended. People are motivated by a hegemonic cultural package connected to the gift economy. The model of ethical behaviour, which is to become normalized in the gift economy, is for people to look after the well being of others and to ensure an equality of outcomes. The population at large has also decided that they want the gift economy system to continue to be popular and effective. They know that this can only happen if it continues to provide well for people’s needs. They choose work that they are keen to do and seem interesting. But they also do work which they think is necessary to make the system function and work which looks after the interests of particular recipients for their gifts.

How would such a system allow the kinds of coordination and efficient allocation of work and resources that the market now achieves? Clearly the attack on non-market coordination is most often couched in terms of the possibilities of an ex ante coordination of production carried out by an elected socialist government (see e.g. Sayer, 1995). The history of the Soviet economies gives many examples of how ex-ante centralized coordination can go wrong. But the gift economy does not operate like this.

Some of the coordination of the gift economy is through information being provided by media and scientific collectives that tell the community what is needed and where shortages are taking place. In addition, there is prestige in being part of a chain of production that is making a real difference and giving specific people what they want most. This is the key mechanism which replaces the hidden hand of markets. What markets do is to allocate to those who are prepared to express their desires by putting money on the table. Instead, in the gift economy what consumers put on the table is their appreciation, their praise and their thanks. It is an

understanding of this and a desire to receive this acclamation which helps producers to allocate time and resources to what people need. Just like in the market economy, there is no attempt to oversee and control all of these transactions of information and goods from some central point. What stabilizes this system? How can people be sure about what they are going to get and that what they need for their own projects will become available? This is done through what Anitra Nelson and Frans Timmerman describe as “compacts” (Nelson & Timmerman, 2011b). These are promises between groups about what will be supplied and when. They are formally enacted in front of third parties and enforceable in the court of public opinion.

The Gift Economy and Consumerism

How would a gift economy avoid the problems that modern economies now experience with consumption?

A key issue in Miller’s discussion is the problem of over consumption which plagues market economies. The daily experience of work in a gift economy is engaging and meaningful. At the end of the day, you also have control of the distribution of what you produce. Working harder does not produce an increase in your own personal consumption and working is not necessary to survive. Your standard of living and your survival comes from multiple gifts from a variety of producers. They do not and indeed could not require specific compensations in return that is proportional to your work. There are fewer motives to consume because the pleasures of social connection and self expression are also a strong feature of work. You do not just rely on consumer goods and leisure to fulfil these needs. Secondly, there are fewer motives to produce because you are not required to produce in order to consume and you cannot consume more by producing more. These mechanisms solve the problem of over consumption.

Then there is the problem of the production of environmental damage in current economies. In a gift economy, there is no government so there is no possibility for environmental regulation by government. But there is no need for environmental regulation to prevent damage. Producers control the methods of production that are being used where they work. They are concerned about their own health and the environmental well being of their own community. They know that their prestige is based on the production of gifts that do not harm the environment, so they are also concerned about the global commons. Unlike workers and companies in capitalism today, they are not motivated to produce despite environmental damage, because they do not depend on their production to survive.

Finally, there is the issue of fairness and just distribution – a problem that market economies also fail to solve adequately. In a gift economy, producers create equality as a by-product as they strive to gain the appreciation of those who need goods and service the most. They work on this as well as producing for the people who are their own friends and relatives. There is no ultimate danger of insularity because they depend on people outside of their immediate community for new and stimulating entertainment, ideas, media and the arts, as well as for more prosaic goods and services.

The Desirable Commodity and Market Failure

In the first chapter of Miller’s book, a theme that is articulated best by the fictional “Grace” is that the goods and services that are provided by capitalism satisfy real desires. The people who now own these goods would be worse off without them. Nothing that environmentalists want to cut out is in fact “excessive”; it is all wanted. At one point she attacks environmentalists with the statement:

You rely on the claim that everyone in their daily behaviour contradicts, which is that a reduction in consumption is good for people. It's not good for people, except to the degree it's good for the planet. (Miller, 2012, p.18)

She earlier points out that a large amount of energy use goes in providing the basic infrastructure that we in the rich countries take for granted: schools, hospitals, good roads and bus services. Beyond that, families in the developing countries want the goods which have become "basic human rights" in the rich countries (Miller, 2012, p.16) – such as a nice house, a bathroom, gardens, air conditioning, a car, fridge, washing machine, an annual holiday, mobile phones and computers, concluding:

... almost everything we would need to cut out is actually of direct benefit to human welfare or has symbolic value and is desperately required for the entirely noble aim of reducing poverty or the sense of inequality. (Miller, 2012, p.19)

Miller makes similar claims later in the book in his own name, considering how the people of Trinidad use consumer items to create their social identities and how mothers shop for their families by buying the things their families need and like.

While there is a mix of issues here, Miller lends support to market-knows-best economics, the view that the market is a mechanism which "successfully harnesses individual desires to the social purposes of using scarce productive resources efficiently" (Hahnel, 2011, p. 55). Miller's ethnographies appear to demonstrate that every purchased object satisfies some desire of the person who bought it and that the purchase was a rational use of that consumers' money. One way of responding to this is through an economic critique of market-knows-best economics (Hahnel, 2011; McLaughlin, 1993). This critique argues that while each purchase may indeed represent a satisfied desire on the part of some consumer, the total effect of the market is not in fact to efficiently translate people's desires into effective demand. The basic reason is that there are desires which people have which are not registered as demand by the market.

One problem is that in a market there is no incentive for buyers or sellers to take into account the consequences of their transactions for third parties. These become an "externality". That means that all of us, as third parties to most economic transactions, are shut out from having an impact on what is being produced and purchased. There is in fact a perverse incentive in market economies to externalize the social costs of production and consumption. For example the seller and buyer of a car are not paying for air pollution, smog, greenhouse gases, noises, accidents and the like. "Those who pay these costs, thereby enlarging carmaker profits and car consumer benefits, are easy 'marks' for car sellers and buyers because they are geographically and chronologically dispersed and because the magnitude of the effect on each of them is small" (Hahnel, 2011, p. 57). Yet, the sum total of the interests of all of these third parties added together can be very considerable.

We can see how this issue could easily slip beyond the attention of a study of consumption of the kind Miller conducts. As Miller goes about his ethnography, interviewing the people who have purchased commodities, he is able easily to verify their delight. As a researcher into consumption, he is not in the business of interviewing third parties about the impacts of consumer choices. He does not weigh those external effects in the balance in assessing the desirability of consumption decisions, the degree to which they satisfy us. This is only partly a fault of the ethnographic method. It is more an effect of the focus on the meaning of consumer items to those who own and use them. So we could certainly do an ethnographic study of the meaning of externalities to people affected by them. We could interview commuters caught in traffic jams, people suffering from an asthma attack caused by air pollution, accident victims and their families. We could go to Africa and talk to farmers whose subsistence crops of maize have been failing as result of global warming. This would give us part of the story of externalities. We

would also want to think about the way current decisions about market transactions will affect people in the future. We might also consider the interests of members of other species affected by our purchasing decisions.

Another problem is that markets do not easily register demands for public goods. A public good “is a good produced by human economic activity that is consumed, to all intents and purposes, by everyone rather than by an individual consumer.” (Hahnel, 2011, p. 59). There is nothing in the structure of a market economy that allows the real strength of consumer demand for public goods to be expressed in purchasing decisions. For example, it may cost you a small amount more to buy a green washing powder. By spending this extra money you are contributing to a public good; thereby, you are indirectly reducing water pollution. Yet, there is no market incentive to spend this extra money to provide a public good for the other people who will benefit from your purchase. In fact, the market only provides you with a very small personal benefit in return: that is, the minimal amount of water quality improvement which your extra spending purchases. The great bulk of your extra purchase price is going to acquire benefits for other people (and other species). There is no market incentive to take this advantage for others into account. The interest of all these other players in this public good does not provide any financial incentive for you, the purchaser. What is worse, you, along with other consumers, will assume that most people will react to this situation by considering only their own benefit. Almost all consumers are likely to assume that no one else will be paying extra and will not pay any extra themselves. So in the unlikely event that you do make an altruistic gesture, you will not be exempted from the deleterious environmental effects of other people’s washing powder purchases. Instead, you are inveigled into paying for their water pollution benefit, something for which they are failing to contribute.

This is the outcome: what makes sense for people as individual shoppers in the market is to spend less on public goods than they would actually prefer. Market-based practices do not show how much extra you would be prepared to pay if you knew that everyone else would be doing the same. They show how much extra you would pay personally, with the likelihood that it will make little difference. These issues affect all kinds of public goods. People’s individual satisfaction with their consumer goods does not imply that all their desires are being satisfied by the market system. Instead, the market systematically discounts their desires for public goods.

Miller’s study, which focuses on the meaning of consumption, is not going to pick up these issues. Another kind of research study could certainly do this. For example, a study in the Hunter region (Gow & Leahy, 2005) found that a large majority of the population were very concerned about environmental issues and believed the government was not doing enough to solve these problems. The same study also found that most people were convinced that an apocalyptic end to current civilisation was a likely outcome in the next fifty years. They regarded this coming disaster as inevitable and blamed business and government. This study demonstrated quite clearly that people believed that their desires for public goods were not being met and indicated the significance of these issues for interviewees.

Another issue is that markets allocate goods to those with money rather than to the different strength of desire. For example, whereas a poor person will be extremely happy to have a \$100 bicycle which he/she may not be able to afford, a rich person will only be mildly satisfied when spending \$100 on a car seat. Yet, it is this demand for the car seat which will be reflected in production. Market decision making persistently rewards the better off by giving them more of what they want while the poor get less. Accordingly, while the items that any particular person has may be perceived as helping the buyer to live well, the allocation of productive effort is skewed to advantage those with more money. Miller mentions this issue mainly to argue that the

environment movement can be negligent where the legitimate demands of the poor are concerned. But the ethnography itself flattens things by demonstrating that rich and poor alike value their commodity purchases for the meaning they bring to their lives. The implication seems to be that all goods are “of direct benefit for human welfare” (Miller, 2012, p.19). But in fact, the allocation of productive effort and the provision of goods and services systematically favour the desires of the rich at the expense of the desires of the poor, something which a different kind of ethnographic study could readily make apparent.

These are just a few examples of the very complex sets of arguments developed by environmental, ecological and heterodox economics. Although what people want is certainly a part of what is produced, commodities in the market is not an accurate reflection of what people actually want. So it can be true, as Miller argues, that everything we use and buy is wanted and that we would be worse off without it. At the same time, what we have bought with our money is not what we would have chosen if we had an open democratic choice about the direction of productive effort and the use of resources. What we have in fact is a choice delimited by what will also make a successful commodity in the market. A difference between what people want and what they end up buying is what economists sometimes called a “market failure”. Market failures are not in fact an anomaly. In relation to poverty and the environment, they are far from insignificant (Hahnel, 2011).

The Gift Economy as a Solution to Market Failures

Social democrats try to solve these problems by retrospectively engineering the capitalist system via the redistribution of income and regulation of environmental effects. These are Miller’s solutions. Although social democracy is preferred over a Soviet-style national ownership model of production, it is not without weaknesses such as bungled coordination and inefficient allocation of work and resources. But at the same time, we would have to say that social democracy has been tried before. While it certainly improved things to some extent, it did not prevent environmental damage, create equality between nations, or succeed in gaining unequivocal and irreversible popular support. We are now living with the failure of labour parties in all countries. They were unable to translate their victories after the Second World War into a long term solution. Given the current environmental crisis and continuing poverty in the developing world, alternative solutions need to be sought.

Within the gift economy, production is not for the market but for use. In that context, there is no such thing as an “externality” since all production is about bestowing a full complement of benefits to those affected by the productive act and not about selectively treating productive decisions in terms of the likely responses of a “purchasing consumer” to price signals. Instead of a range of beneficiaries to be considered, there is no purchasing consumer in the current sense. Decisions about what to produce, and for whom, are made by a vast and complex set of decision makers (just as in market economies). The aim of producers is to produce and allocate goods that are most likely to give pleasure. By doing this, they will be most rewarded with status and will do their part in maintaining support for the gift economy as an economic system. Such a structure for making decisions would certainly do a lot better than the market in terms of redistribution and environmental outcomes. It would probably do just as well in terms of efficiency in production and in allocation of goods and resources.

The Green shopper, who, Miller finds, is seen by all and sundry as a cold hearted fish that puts abstract environmental goals in front of their own family. How does the gift economy deal with the trade off between altruism and localism? In the gift economy, the producer looks after their own community and family by making sure that what they are doing as producers is not

damaging their community and its environment. This control at the point of production reconciles the supposedly abstract environmental issues with the local and family issues. What about the needs of people outside of their immediate community? People do not just work to provide for their own community but achieve affluence through a division of labour which requires exchange with producers in other parts of the world. In this work, they provide gifts for people who are not local intimates. However, rather than to perform a sacrifice which implements impersonal ideals, the intention of this work is to bring other people closer and to extend the arena of intimacy to concrete others,. They are making friends and extending the affluence of all parties at the same time. They can do this best by helping to look after the environments in which other people live – the global commons.

Conclusions

The importance of ethnographic research on consumerism cannot be understated. Miller's detailed studies certainly show that it is not simple thoughtless greed and selfishness which drives people's environmental decisions. At the same time, environmentalists are absolutely correct in arguing that excessive consumption of material resources and manufactured commodities has to be wound back not only in the rich countries, but also in many developing countries. As environmentalists are well aware, this is not easy to achieve. Miller's solution is a neutral scientific regulation which curtails environmental damage at the point of production. But people are no more likely to vote for measures which will drastically curtail their consumption than they are to reign in their consumption voluntarily. This article has suggested another way out of this conundrum. As Miller himself is aware, one of the reasons why people consume is to compensate for a life of forced labour. This analysis should be taken to be more central. A gift or compact economic structure would completely remove the use of commodities to find freedom, sociability and excitement that is lacking in daily working life. Daily working life would itself be a creative and sociable pleasure. Another effect of this proposed structure would be to remove the skewing of production to goods which are privately appropriated by rich consumers. Instead, the other desires which motivate the population at large would come into play to determine production decisions – desires for a safer environment, the desires of the poor for a sensible standard of living, and desires for more leisure and for public goods like education and health. Ultimately Miller's analysis of consumerism and his recommendations for change are constrained by the straightjacket of social democracy, a kind of leftism which appears sadly dated in the current crisis.

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