

The Comfort of Things (Polity)

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Daniel Miller, University College London

I am not sure about the ethics of using this blog to announce ones own books, but I hope it's excusable to at least use the opportunity to explain what I hope is different about this particular book from others written under the auspices of material culture studies. The most obvious difference when you open this book is that for something that is clearly intended as an academic book there are no references, no citations and no index. Instead there are thirty 'portraits' of individuals and households almost all from a single street in South London. There is a prologue which gives some indication of the academic intention and by far the most evident academic element is the final chapter or appendix which is an explicit discussion of the implications of this work for academic issues. In brief, it suggests that there is a so far unexplored potential legacy of anthropological perspectives on the world. This emerges if we dissolve away our usual dualism between the individual and some larger category of society or culture. Instead the book argues that it is possible to take the kinds of approach that anthropologists have traditionally employed in the study of society and culture and apply it directly to the household or individual. To recognise that these tiny elements of society may have created a cosmology, order and rhythm of life, a pattern of cultural form, sense of morality and many of the other creations normally seen as adhering to larger social wholes.

This might be argued of individuals and households of any time or age, but there is a further argument that it is particularly appropriate for the study of the people of contemporary London. So many of these households fail to fit the kinds of categories that are used to subsume individuals in social science. They may be in some respects working class, or women, or Brazilian, or migrant, or gay or lawyers, but none of these categories really capture what is richest about our encounters with them. The advantage of using a random street as one's unit of enquiry is that you are forced

to deal with whoever opens the door, and not choose them as tokens of social science notions of identity. So there is a fit between the particular methodology employed in this work and the theoretical arguments it makes about how people construct their worlds. But this doesn't itself explain the lack of the usual accoutrements of academia nor its link to material culture. Working on this book was a very different experience from any previous volume I have worked on. On this occasion my aim was to concentrate on the nature of writing itself. To try and create a style that emulated more literary models rather than academic genres of writing. Something which after years of writing in academic modes, I find quite hard to do. The reasoning was that in the same way that historians have managed to make their work far more popular in the last couple of decades with a more general audience, it ought to be possible to do the same for anthropology. True we don't have the advantage of narrative, but on the other hand we can demonstrate an empathetic encounter with people in many different ways that are particular to our discipline. So this is an attempt to create a popular work in material culture, as. In a rather different way, I had previously tried to do this along with Mukulika Banerjee in the earlier book *The Sari*. Though on that occasion through the use of pictures and design, without hopefully losing the academic insight that, rather than academic style, ought to be what we bring to the world as academics. What is it that I am hoping to popularize? It is basically what I have always seen as one of the larger transcendent points of material culture studies. The way that persons and things are mutually constituted, and how the study of relationships cuts across the animate and inanimate. Instead of making this point theoretically, the aim is to convey it in such a manner that it becomes an obvious implication of this reflection upon our private lives. In a subsequent edited collection together with my post-graduate students we are hoping to take the theoretical implication of this work and subject it to critique. But *The Comfort of Things* itself is an attempt to bring material culture studies to a different, wider audience. to Whether I have succeeded, and whether in fact this reaches that wider audience, I shall see. But then failures are often more instructive than successes, at least to authors.