

ALUMINIUM AND MATERIALISM

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Thud. The advent of Kindle and the iPad are making us re-consider the materiality of books but sometimes the only word to associate with the traditional form is thud. Thud is what you feel in the presence of certain 750 page hardbacks, when it is not just their weight but the impression that is made on your brain by their contents. A case in point is the book 'Out of This Earth; East Indian Adivasis and the Aluminium Cartel by Felix Padel and Samarendra Das (Orient BlackSwan). The thud effect derives from a mixture of scholarship best translated as relentless documentation combined with passion best translated as relentless exposure.

Different people came into material culture studies through different routes. For many of my generation it was a close association with materialism and behind that with Marxism. A tradition which (sufficiently vulgarised) said that we cannot ignore the material foundations of the world, and the impact of the worlds materiality upon people. Much of my own earlier work was a systematic critique of the domination of this tradition with its bias towards production and failure to acknowledge or theorise consumption. Later on, when the pendulum swung the other way, there were attempts to create approaches such as the commodity chain that linked the study of production with consumption. But there is something bigger than this, that was forged out of that Marxist fire and takes shape within the spirit of an anthropological holism that wants to be comprehensive about the human impact of some material form. This is what drives anthropologists to write 750 pages of relentlessly documented work about all and every aspect of their subject. Because one of the most powerful legacies of this tradition that surely has to remain one of the key legs upon which the edifice of material culture stands is that of materialism as critique.

In this particular case I didn't even mean to buy or read the book. I have a student living in Guyana and studying aluminium who asked me to find her a copy. I started reading it on the tube train back, and that's when it went thud. It overwhelmed me with its indignation, its insistence upon the contemporary necessity of informed critique about the sometimes extraordinarily savage consequences of material culture.

Specifically this is a book about the implications of Aluminium as a material substance. It documents the ubiquitous presence of the metal, not just in our kitchens but equally in our armaments. We couldn't fight a sausage these days without it, or cook one. It then documents the convolutions of the aluminium industry, in its terms the Cartel, and its political economy. Real political economy: that explains all those links between the companies and high finance in London and thence why British development aid, so far from being charitable to the impoverished, is largely charitable to the interests of this Cartel. Mostly the book is concerned with painstaking documentation of the impact upon the indigenous tribal peoples of the state of Odish (previously Orissa) in Eastern India. There are hopefully not too many places where our desire for specific materials can be directly linked to murder and death by starvation. But this is one of them. It is also an exemplifying case of unsustainable ecological destruction.

As anthropologists they delve into the social structure of the industry and the cosmology of the

exploited. The holistic nature of anthropology here translated into the passion to produce a book that is comprehensive seems to be the only way we can ensure that it is impossible to escape from its conclusions - that the present system of political economy means that we derive these goods at these costs. I am not a revolutionary, I don't think we have to overthrow 'the system' in order to prevent this, and I don't want to wait around until someone works out a feasible alternative. Nor do I share the ascetic anti-consumption views of these authors. But I do think that we owe the preservation of our souls to the activists who insist on exposing the darkest recesses of our system and on galvanising action against those responsible. I often get accused of 'claiming' all sorts of studies for the perspective of material culture irrespective of the intentions of the authors. In this case I merely want to point out how hollow and heartless is this thing called material culture studies if it does not make claims to this kind of book.