Western political thought (and so at the physical center of this book), constituting him as a sort of Great Divide between the natural justice tradition of antiquity and the immorality of the modern world; a certain preoccupation with numerology, as in the counting of the number of instances of the verb “to execute” in Machiavelli’s Discourses and noting their distribution, or again in the attachment of significance to the “thirty-ninth example” of “being alone” (essere solo) in the chapter on conspiracies (one recalls Strauss’ advice to heed multiples of eleven and thirteen in deciphering Machiavelli); the general theme of deception and so of the necessity to unmask—perhaps the central methodological precept in Straussian interpretation generally and especially important for Machiavelli; the general lack of attention to recent scholarly literature (perhaps pursuing Strauss’ advice that the most effective way for the wise man to show his disapproval of common opinion is to remain silent); the apparent political conservatism, holding Reagan to be exemplary of the virtuous president and the “Reagan Revolution” to illustrate the principle of responsible government; and the bizarre and often tortured interpretations of earlier political philosophers, particularly Aristotle.

But in the end the book fails not for its Straussian bent but for an inadequacy in the argument itself. Mansfield’s hypothesis turns out to be not shocking after all; rather, it is simply not believable. When seventeenth century contract theorists took up the task of inventing constitutions, they did not tame Machiavelli’s shocking prince; rather they turned their backs on him and went their own way without him.

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The past decade or so has produced a growing body of research and literature on mass consumption which attempts to achieve two ends relatively new to the critical tradition. On the one hand, this literature has radically reexamined some of the basic assumptions on which previous critical analysis of mass consumption has been based; on the other, this literature has opened a series of new perspectives on the social, cultural, economic and political implications of the growth of material culture and consumer practices in both “developed” and “developing” societies. Daniel Miller’s Material Culture and Mass Consumption offers a provocative contribution to this body of inquiry as well as to the social sciences in general and theories of market-industrial culture in particular. At times difficult, but never obscure, Miller’s analysis of material culture, mass consumption and the theoretical bases by which both are understood, promises to spark some lively and potentially fruitful debate.

Miller’s project involves a strategy in three moves: the construction of a philosophically based but anthropologically coherent theory of culture and material culture; the application of this theoretical model to what is currently understood about the nature of the vast proliferation of goods; and, finally, an assessment of the current nature and future of consumer society. His analysis renders two, at first paradoxical, results.
Miller announces that his account of mass consumption is based on the desire to deal with the positive aspects of the growth of mass consumption. But, while he emphasizes the positive aspects, his deeper intent is to enrich or correct current critical perspectives on the relationship between mass consumption, culture and society in free-market or state-planned systems. Whether he is successful will remain a topic for further research and debate as, at times, it deeply challenges the received wisdom that has dominated critical thought for over a century.

What lends credence to Miller's account is his movement between two polarities: the "heights" and "abstractions" of Western philisophy and critical social theory, and the "mundane" world of ethnographies of everyday life in the contemporary world. It is this combination that enables Miller to avoid falling into the nihilism, Romanticism, dogmatism or relativism which has characterized so many "studies" of consumer society in the past.

To develop his project Miller first develops a theory of culture which he derives from Hegel, Marx, Simmel and the anthropologist Munn. This theory which reworks our common understanding of "objectification" into a positive formulation, generates a dynamic construct of culture which follows a dialectical model. In a sense this is not news: what is news is the positive application of this model in explaining consumption and the capacity of consumption to engender an "inalienable material culture" which is both an appropriation by society of its culture and potentially a source of liberation and personal and social development.

The second section of the book, while the shortest, is perhaps the most courageous, problematic and suggestive of much fertile ground for further research. In this section the author tries to come to terms with material culture and the artifact in personal and social development. Quite correctly, the author points out that our understanding of material culture is "rudimentary in the extreme". Turning to the work of Piaget and Melanie Klein, Miller sets out to expand on this rudimentary understanding. In the process of his discussion he challenges some well-established notions of the relation of artifacts to language and the place of the artifact with respect to the language, consciousness and the unconscious. His observations on the nature of the artifact as a medium of communication and on the role of material culture in social communication are particularly useful and urge a rethinking of the value of an unreflective use of concepts such as fetishism and reification.

The third section of the book centers on an analysis of current consumer practices and strategies by which an "inalienable material culture" has been successfully appropriated and in integrated by individuals and groups. While maintaining his "positive" agenda, Miller demonstrates the effectiveness of his account to critical perspectives on the political economy and social relations. This section is likely to generate debate: not only because of Miller's "unorthodox" assessment of consumption as a cultural strategy, but also because of the implications of his account for social theory, planning and any future discussion of the morality of consumer society, the dynamics which drive market-industrial society and the culture which consumption produces.

Miller's contribution will be of interest to anyone genuinely interested in contemporary culture, even if this contribution actively challenges assumptions about "authenticity" and "spurious" features of market-industrial culture, fetishism, alienation and the function of the market at the level of everyday life. The work is not without its problems, to be sure. But, consistent with Miller's own insistence on the open-endedness of modernity, debates over the problematic aspects of the book are