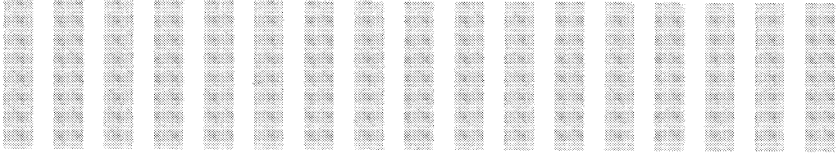


*A Theory of*  
**SHOPPING**



**DANIEL MILLER**

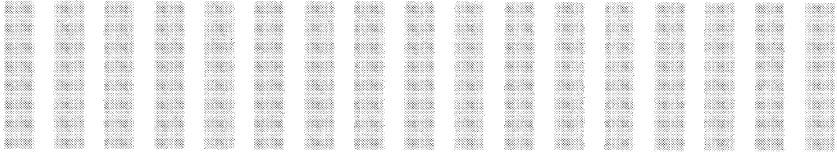




# A Theory of Shopping







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Daniel Miller

Polity Press

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To Berenice





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# Acknowledgements

Writing this book has put me in debt to a great many people. Most of them cannot be named since they are my informants and I have tried as far as possible to retain the anonymity which I promised them. The experience of this research was quite different from any previous fieldwork that I have attempted. Working in other countries I always felt extremely welcome and that I could trade on the 'exotic' nature of my own presence, against the time and information I was asking from others. In North London I am much more likely to be regarded as a mere nuisance requesting time from people who inevitably regard themselves as already extremely busy. I am the more grateful therefore to many people who suffered my presence and attention and gave of their time in a manner I cannot feel sure I would have granted if the roles had been reversed.

The fieldwork would have been a great deal more difficult (and also far less enjoyable) without the companionship of Alison Clarke, especially during the period of initial introduction to each household. Alison is proceeding with her own studies based on this fieldwork, but I can already attest to her abilities as an ethnographer. Her relaxed informality which helped me to deal

with the frustrations of fieldwork was also the key to providing access to and in some cases developing friendships with the households we were studying.

This book was not an intended outcome of the ethnography, but developed its own momentum. Quite unlike anything else I have worked on, the manuscript seemed to write itself during the midsummer of 1996. The ideas had been swirling around in my head during and after the fieldwork, but there was one definite catalyst that precipitated crystallization into its present form. This was some conversations with the anthropologist Laura Rival. It was Laura who insisted that I take another look at Bataille, whose work I had previously seen as of little interest, and that I concentrate, in particular, on the way Bataille linked consumption to sacrifice. I am very grateful to her and would note that it was her conversations and inspiration as much as actually reading Bataille that were instrumental in conceiving of this book. I would also acknowledge the value of having the work of DeVault drawn to my attention by Pat Berhu.

Although this essay was conceived outside the larger project, the ethnography upon which it is based was funded as part of my contribution to a research study on Consumption and Identity funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. Finally, several people went out of their way to provide detailed comments on the draft manuscript which have proved very helpful in rewriting this work. These are Colin Campbell, Caroline Humphrey, Laura Rival, Michael Rowlands, Don Slater, Charles Stewart, Nigel Thrift and the anonymous reader for Polity Press, to all of whom I am very grateful. Other useful comments were provided by the postgraduates who form our regular 'drinking' group.



# Introduction

This is an essay about shopping. It also an essay about love and devotion within families in North London and it is an essay about the nature of sacrificial ritual. In recent months when people have asked me about the work I am engaged in I have replied that I have written an essay with these three themes. The response has tended to be defensive, often expressing incredulity that an essay could possibly rest secure on the foundations of such an odd trilogy. In return I have been tempted to say that if only they could read the essay they would see why these three topics create a structure with integrity but that I can't hope to be at all convincing while standing chatting with them at a street corner. Here at the start of the essay we – the author and reader – have to begin with the brevity of the street corner. Although my overall case is made in the essay as a whole, an initial argument may be made in a small compass.

I hope to persuade you to read this work from a position of empathy, rather than defensive scepticism, through asking for a little introspection on your part. This is not an essay about what people say about shopping, nor about the journalism, conversations at parties or jibes and condescending remarks people constantly

make about this topic. It is not about your longing for that coveted object or about holiday browsing. It is about the activity you undertake nearly every day in order to obtain goods for those people for whom you are responsible – the goods you and they eat, wear and employ in a multitude of tasks. So reflect for a few moments on the shopping you have undertaken in the last week. Routine shopping that is the subject of this essay is rarely exciting and usually soon forgotten. It is largely unreflective. But what does it look like? Although this is of course a hugely diverse activity, what are the typical acts of shopping whose observation led me to create this tripartite edifice?

For present purposes I am hoping you have some experiences in common with people in North London – a strong possibility given the diversity of North London people. You are, however, more likely to be an academic or a student. Perhaps you are a junior male lecturer and last week you went shopping for clothes. You went to three shops: two chain stores (C&A and Marks & Spencer) and a small independent, more fashionable outlet. Your girlfriend was complaining about your wearing things she felt you shouldn't be seen dead in. The relationship between the two of you was not such that you were going to admit how attached you had become to the admittedly now well-worn jeans you had on at the time. You are not in the habit of changing during the day, and you tend to meet up after work, so whatever you buy has to do for work also. At work there are two colleagues on the staff who are better at withering sarcasm than writing papers and don't share the same taste as your girlfriend. You can see a couple of pairs in the independent shop that she might approve, but you can just imagine the response at work. But then anyway would she actually like them – she might hate them. Maybe you should go with her, but then she isn't going to give a toss for your workmates' opinions. OK, it shouldn't really matter very much, and yet it was this that made you spend over an hour between the three shops. And anyway what about yourself – your own taste – shouldn't you have some say? There was a pair you liked, but to be honest it was just the same as those you were out shopping in order to replace. You got really fed up: why are you wasting time when you could be on line looking at that new

website? But you really do care about her, and you know this is just the kind of gesture that could make the difference, show her you really are willing to compromise, to make some commitment to the future sharing of taste. In the end you find a pair in C&A that is a more sober (and frankly a whole lot cheaper) version of the independent shop's pair, and just hope she won't notice the label.

Or maybe you are a single mother living on a student grant, who was in a supermarket looking at babybath products. You had a choice of a well-known brand and the supermarket's own brand. The latter was a good deal cheaper and you are in more debt than you care to admit to yourself. But nothing is more important than that child, the mere thought of her sends waves of emotion through you. But then who is to say the brand name is better? Someone once told you it's simply more expensive because they spend money on advertising, and the money saved will help towards the baby carrier you really need, the one that lets you carry her on your front, which would be so much better than having her behind where you can't see her gazing up at you. In the back of your head is a darker thought: a resentment that starts from knowing what else this money could be spent on, like so much else that your daughter has in some sense taken from you. There is that totally unwarranted but much desired expensive pair of shoes that your sister the lawyer was wearing and that hovers guiltily somewhere in your head, but remains well suppressed by your sense of love.

I am suggesting these could be you, or at least you could imagine being them. They are not especially profound thoughts, they may cast you as stereotypes, but I for one will admit that my own shopping thoughts are not very profound and tend to the conventional. Thankfully they are backed up by a mass of routine shopping that simply repeats previous experience so these concerns only come to the surface in a few instances. In both these cases your shopping is dominated by your imagination of others, of what they desire of you and their response to you; it is about relationship to those who require something of you. Often these are relationships of devotion, mainly routine devotion, that may be deep or may be superficial, and are mainly

taken for granted, except where the choice becomes a sign that you have shown some concern.

In this essay, as in most of the studies that take place within that sub-discipline called material culture studies, shopping is not just approached as a thing in itself. It is found to be a means to uncover, through the close observation of people's practices, something about their relationships. Indeed it is premised on the idea that this may be a better way of uncovering what is called the lived experience of these relationships than a study that was officially supposed to be about relationships. In other words I could have tried to study these things by more direct enquiry, such as asking the man about his girlfriend or the mother about her daughter. I do not assume that the replies received would lead to the same conclusion as that which emerges from the observation of the purchases that relate to them. Shopping may be a vicarious entry into social relations but, I submit, it may lead much further towards understanding contemporary social relations and their nuances than might have been expected.

In another age or another place, a family is preparing to make a sacrifice to a god, not some special grand sacrifice, just one of the routine sacrifices that mark the new moon. The father has charged his son to select the best of the fruit that has recently come to ripen, that without any blemish. The son collects some, the gods demand it, and without their favours the tree may not produce so well next year. He knows that before they consume these fruits of their labour they should demonstrate their care for the gods who care for them. But the best peaches are so tempting that he simply can't but eat one or two which he manages to convince himself have some token blemish that makes them ineligible. Actually he is quite looking forward to the sacrifice. He is proud of what they have grown that year, he knows full well that his two best friends' families have been less fortunate, and he believes that he has played a key role, since he is convinced that he paid more attention to getting the sacrifices right and that he has said his prayers with that much more devotion. He senses the god's gaze on him, as he grows into a devotee. It is his efforts to please that particular god that helped bless the whole family, and he is not going to let them down. So there is real happiness



when he finds a peach that seems entirely perfect and that can be placed at the apex of the sacrificial pile. He also is well aware that at the end of the sacrifice he will present the peach to the priest, and that a well-fed priest is much less inclined to beat him when he gets his prayers wrong.

In this essay a projection onto people undertaking sacrificial rituals such as this one will be used to deepen that understanding which we might gain through mere introspection about what is going on when we go shopping. I have suggested such introspection should not be hard; it should be easy enough to relate to the kinds of shopping discussed here. I suspect also that we are highly resistant to such introspection, that we almost all wish to reject such images of our own shopping activity in favour of a model of shopping as hedonistic materialism that we enjoy abusing. A vicarious journey through sacrifice may therefore be needed to convince ourselves that this is not actually what much of our shopping is about.

### ■ ■ ■ Summary of the Argument ■ ■ ■

The essay is divided into three parts. The first part is a descriptive account of four aspects of shopping derived almost entirely from a year's study of shopping on a street in North London. Chapter 1 begins with ethnographic descriptions of shopping. These demonstrate how shoppers develop and imagine those social relationships which they most care about through the medium of selecting goods. After representing a variety of the relationships that may be developed through the medium of shopping, the remainder of the chapter isolates three characteristics of these shopping expeditions. Though not universal they were common to most of the households observed in the ethnography.

The first of these was the concept of 'the treat'. This was the designation given to any special purchase made with respect to a particular individual or group, often including the shopper. It is argued that this category helps define the rest of the shopping as other than the purchasing of treats. The next observation is of

the centrality of thrift, that is the strategies by which shoppers attempt to save money while shopping. Evidence is given for the extraordinary range of opportunities which exist for experiencing shopping as saving money and the alacrity with which shoppers make use of these facilities. While these two characteristics are derived mainly from the observation of shopping, the final category is based entirely upon what people say about shopping in general. This will be termed the discourse of shopping in that it generalizes the normative statements that are made about shopping in the abstract.

The second chapter of this essay starts by completely ignoring the first, in that it makes no mention of shopping. Instead it turns to what at first may appear an unrelated topic: it reviews the various theories which anthropologists have brought to bear on the ritual of sacrifice. The rites discussed include a wide range of ancient and contemporary practices, including those of Africa, the Middle East, Greece and Hawaii which have inspired some of the more important studies. The approach taken here follows the classic study of sacrifice by Hubert and Mauss (1964) in insisting that the ritual of sacrifice is best treated as divided into a number of stages, but that for any of these stages to be properly understood, the ritual must be considered as a whole.

This section will end with a consideration of the French philosopher Georges Bataille's analysis of sacrifice as the key precedent for the current essay in as much as Bataille first suggested that sacrifice and consumption were closely connected and that both could only be understood through a general theory of expenditure. Although I come to disagree fundamentally with Bataille's premisses and conclusions, the reasons why I believe him to be wrong play a central role in my argument.

The second half of chapter 2 represents the crux of the essay as a whole. All the previous elements of shopping and sacrifice that have been drawn out in the essay up to that point, are there brought to bear as pieces in a jigsaw which must now be used to create a clear picture. The theory of shopping as sacrifice is presented through a division of both shopping and sacrifice into three stages. The first stage comprises a vision of excess which is found primarily in the discourse rather than in the practice of

shopping and has many parallels with writings about violence and the constitutive role of violent expenditure in recent discussions of sacrifice. It is argued that both the discourse of shopping and that of sacrifice represent a fantasy of extreme expenditure and consumption as dissipation.

The second stage consists of the central rites of shopping and sacrifice, whose importance lies in their ability to negate these same discourses. The ritual is thereby turned instead towards the constitution of, and obeisance before, an image of transcendence. The core to this ritual is a splitting of the objects of sacrifice between that which is given to the deity and that which is retained for human consumption. An equivalent central ritual to shopping expeditions is found to be that which transforms a vision of spending into an experience of apparent saving. Subsequently there is a similar split in the forms of transcendence evoked during shopping. That which is implicated in a general sense of thrift becomes the second stage, while that which is directed to an expression of love and other relationships becomes the third stage.

During the third stage the emphasis moves to the dissemination of that which has been sanctified through its having passed through the rites of sacrifice, but which now returns to the sphere of the profane. The recent work of Detienne and Vernant on the importance of eating the sacrifice in such a manner as to affirm the primary social categories of society is placed against a literature on feeding the family by DeVault and other feminist writers on the domestic world in consumer societies. While the second stage was directed towards a general transcendent goal of life established through thrift, in this final stage the social orders of this world are re-established.

The third chapter is concerned to elucidate the consequences of having created this juxtaposition between shopping and sacrifice. It starts by considering the possible levels of the analogy that has been drawn, ranging from mere metaphor to much stronger statements of association or continuity between the two spheres. It then starts to build bridges between the two distinct practices through an examination of changing subjects and objects of devotion. This begins with a consideration of love itself and its

relation to sacrificial traditions. It is argued that under the pressure of secularization the romantic ideal of love comes to substitute for religious devotion. Today, under the pressure of feminism, there is growing evidence that romantic love is being in turn replaced by a cult of the infant. The implication is that there remains a sacrificial 'habitus'<sup>1</sup> that transcends the particular subjects of devotion. These findings are compared with other recent writings on love in the sociology of Beck and Beck-Gernsheim and of Giddens.

The focus then turns to objects of devotion starting with the concept of 'inalienable possessions' as developed by the anthropologist Annette Weiner. This is used to demonstrate the potential of material culture within devotional rites. It also leads to a discussion of a duality in modern feminism, between the radical deconstruction of gender and the attempt to uncover and learn from the role played by women in specific cultural contexts. The next object of concern is the house and its relationship to thrift. A summary is provided of anthropological theories that have attempted to explain thrift in peasant, tribal and bourgeois societies respectively. This then is turned back to the problem of thrift as encountered in shopping.

Having examined the development of various subjects and objects of devotion, the final section returns to commodities as the material culture of love. Evidence is presented to suggest that alienable goods in our society have come to occupy a niche comparable to inalienable goods in other societies. This returns to the argument that commodities are used to constitute the complexity of contemporary social relations. In the conclusion a final parallel is drawn between shopping and sacrifice in that both are found to be practices whose primary goal is the creation of a desiring subject. The presence of gods is made manifest by the sense that they desire or demand sacrifice. The shopper is not merely buying goods for others, but hoping to influence these others into becoming the kind of people who would be the appropriate recipients for that which is being bought.

My hope is that much of this ethnography will 'ring true' for you as a reader. Where it does not, I hope I have provided sufficient evidence that it was at least the case for many of the