

**Toby Miller****Cultural Citizenship: Cosmopolitanism, Consumerism and Television in a Neoliberal Age**

Temple University Press, 2006, 248 pp.

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There is a tale, possibly apocryphal, about Toby Miller randomly tossing out copies of this book to audiences at conference presentations, an appropriately populist gesture for a decidedly populist piece of work. This is a book for the people at a time when they most need to read books, especially books that cast a critical light on what commercial media, particularly Anglo-American network television media, do to the possibility of politics. In line with his body of previous work in cultural studies, Miller strives here to cast just such a light. He largely succeeds. The book's jacket endorsements describe it as "informative," "provocative," and "a ride through the mean streets of consumerism, neoliberalism and TV culture." It is certainly all that, but whether these qualities, so sure to grab the attention of readers accustomed to the discursive strategies of the very medium whose political failures are documented in this book, will also satisfy the appetites of scholars versed in media, cultural and citizenship studies, is not so clear.

Miller's primary concern in this book is "citizens' knowledge of US foreign/military policy and corporate/governmental conduct in areas of basic needs and the environment" (17). In short, he is concerned that the great majority of American citizens seem so unaware, unconcerned, and unmoved by the oppressive, unhealthy and destructive character of the regime under which they live and are governed, a pathology he is prepared to assign at least partially to the performance of the country's major TV news and entertainment corporations. This is a story about ideology and hegemony, and the instruments and techniques by which these are reproduced. To his credit, Miller recognizes that it is a story often told, but insists our contemporary situation demands it be told again and again. He is absolutely right about this. Our well-worn knowledge of the political economy of mass media in the context of advanced capitalism is not a license to stop talking about it. Critical media scholars will only be able to afford this luxury when the capitalist media have disappeared for good, and that is not about to happen anytime soon. Indeed, it is arguable that, the internet notwithstanding, we are further away from a democratic media system now than we have ever been, and so voices like Miller's are more important and necessary than ever.

Miller's critique is set apart from standard Left media criticism by his effort to situate it as a work on citizenship. Early on, Miller tries to distinguish his from other work on citizenship by informing us that his will be neither "very theoretical" (in the sense of political theory and philosophy) nor "very empirical" (in the sense of sociology and political science). For Miller, this cashes out in a vaguely Foucaultian promise to "blend theorization with grounded study" (25) but, by the end of the book, scholarly readers may find that this methodological sleight-of-hand serves as a license for the author's less than fulsome attention to rigorous argument and systematically-presented evidence. Such may be concessions to traditions with which Miller may not wish to align himself, but even readers who, like me, are in sympathy with Miller's politics and media critique may be frustrated by "moving rapidly between theory and fact, speculation and setting"(25). Miller's admission — "I know of no other way to write" (25) — is refreshingly honest but, ultimately, not much of an excuse.

As far as citizenship goes, Miller specifies that his concern is with the zone of cultural citizenship ("the right to know and speak") rather than the zones of political ("the right to reside and vote") or

economic (“the right to work and prosper”) citizenship (35). The book’s title would suggest readers might expect a thoroughgoing account of the distinctive substance of cultural citizenship, one that might mark a contribution to theoretical debates on citizenship more generally. Such an account is not given, perhaps owing to Miller’s stated aversion to both the ideal-typical argument favoured by contemporary political theory and the citational hermeneutics of the history of political thought, two disciplines in which the question of citizenship is more than a passing fancy. Miller’s book is perhaps most disappointing in this respect: there is no real attempt to grapple with a theory of cultural citizenship. In the central chapter Miller briefly engages what he sees as the “seven key formations” in which culture has been articulated with citizenship in contemporary academic and public discourse, and to place his own conception in this context, but the treatment is anything but methodical.

It is here that we find the most unfortunate examples of Miller’s tolerance for abbreviation and assertion in place of argument and evidence. Whatever one thinks of the ideas of Robert Putnam, to cite but one example, it is not clear that the discourse is advanced by naming him a “maven of the Right” or reducing his position on social capital to “amateurish meddling in other people’s lives” based on reference to a single op-ed piece (59). And while it might be enough for some to pigeon-hole Will Kymlicka’s theory of multicultural citizenship simply because his “admirers include the *Wall Street Journal*” (67), reading his books and dismantling his arguments might be a better option. In any case, this is all just a set-up for what is finally a rather straightforward triple-punchline: that cultural practice matters as much to citizenship as do political rights and economic status; that understanding culture necessitates engagement with popular mass media, especially television; and that coming to terms with the mass media requires attention to the political economy in which it is situated.

The heart of the book is comprised of an engaging three-chapter romp through the contemporary televisual spectacle and its discursive machinery. There is a chapter on television, terror and war in the wake of the 2001 World Trade Center bombings, a chapter on television and food, and a third on television and weather. Miller really hits his stride here, deftly assembling a broad range of resources from the scholarly literature, activist media and the popular press. The treatment of the contemporary phenomena of food and weather TV are especially original and insightful, and show Miller at his best, as a cagy and wry narrator of how and why the seemingly frivolous is, in fact, deadly serious. Food and weather TV are neither devoid of politics nor tangential to the fortunes of contemporary consumer capitalism. Drawing skillfully on feminist/queer and environmentalist perspectives, Miller demonstrates, in a very lively fashion, precisely the contribution that cultural studies inflected with a dash of political economy can make to the ongoing work of criticism. Especially engaging are his utopian accounts of what food and weather TV could be, if only aligned with purposes better than those which spawned these genres. Imagine, Miller ask us, if the food channels educated citizens about the predations of global fast-food conglomerates, the (un) ethical treatment of food animals, and labour and environmental conditions in the global food industries. Or if the weather channels provided a venue for public engagement with the causes of climate change, the politics of water, and the uneven global distribution of ecological risk. As Miller concludes — and, again, this is especially refreshing in an age when so much possibility is invested in the internet and related media — when it comes to the politics of opposition, “We need to start with television, because that is where Yanquis learn about war, subsistence and the environment” (179).

**Darin Barney**

McGill University

darin.barney@mcgill.ca

Darin Barney is Canada Research Chair in Technology & Citizenship and Associate Professor of Communication Studies at McGill University.

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