



# A theory of a theory of the smartphone

**Daniel Miller**

University College London, UK

## Abstract

This article addresses the consequences of theory in social science. It suggests that theory has become fetishized and contributes to class differentiation as most people are excluded from its increasingly obfuscating form. Fetishism implies that what used to be a means for clarifying and explaining the world has become an end in itself. This article presents an alternative approach to theory as de-fetishized, using as an example a recent attempt to theorize the smartphone. In this approach the processes of abstraction, generalization and de-contextualization that are required to create theory are negated through simultaneous illustration, re-contextualization and forms of highly accessible dissemination. Two examples are provided from our recent theorization of the smartphone, first as the Transportal Home and, second, as Beyond Anthropomorphism.

## Keywords

class, digital anthropology, ethnography, smartphones, theory

## The consequences of theory

There are multitudes of books and articles that discuss social science theory as employed in disciplines such as anthropology and cultural studies. These include many reviews of older theorists (e.g. Beilharz, 1991) and more recent theorists (e.g. Seidman and Alexander, 2001) It is quite easy to find discussions of Michel Foucault, Clifford Geertz or Stuart Hall. By contrast, it is surprisingly hard to find a clear definition of what a theory in social science actually is or should be. It is probably fair to say that there is neither an agreed nor a standard definition of theory in social science. Though there may be more explicit discussions of particular approaches, such as grounded theory (Glaser

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## Corresponding author:

Daniel Miller, University College London, 14 Taviton Street, London, WC1E 0BW, UK.

Email: [d.miller@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:d.miller@ucl.ac.uk)

and Strauss, 1967; Chamaz and Belgrave, 2007). One influential contribution was entitled *What Theory Is Not* (Sutton and Staw, 1995), because as the authors suggest: 'There is little agreement about what constitutes strong versus weak theory in the social sciences, but there is more consensus that references, data, variables, diagrams, and hypotheses are not theory' (1995: 371). Though even on these points Weick (1995) then suggested that these five are essential to theorizing, if not to theory.

The same authors also provide quite a useful guide, when they suggest:

that theory is the answer to queries of why. Theory is about the connections among phenomena, a story about why acts, events, structure, and thoughts occur. Theory emphasizes the nature of causal relationships, identifying what comes first as well as the timing of such events. Strong theory, in our view, delves into underlying processes so as to understand the systematic reasons for a particular occurrence or non occurrence. (Sutton and Staw, 1995: 378)

If this can be accepted as a reasonable summary of what many would regard as theory, then this article will not attempt to improve upon it. Instead the premise here is that taking responsibility for the consequences of theory may be more important than developing consensus around what a theory is. The lack of agreed definition has proved no barrier to the insistence that academic work should include theory or pay homage to theory. A critique of contemporary theory is essential in order to clear a path for promoting a very different approach to theory. Given this emphasis upon consequences, the article will examine how theory should be presented and disseminated, rather than what theory is or where it is derived from. I will attempt to develop this alternative approach through reflecting upon a recent exercise in which, along with a team of anthropologists, we applied this alternative approach to theory through the task of creating theory about the smartphone.

Academics in social science and domains such as cultural studies generally share a commitment to exposing asymmetries of power, both of the past and the present. It is perhaps the single most commonly shared purpose within these spheres of academic study. If that is the case, then it certainly ought to follow that the practitioners of such studies would have an equally clear commitment to exposing any such asymmetries of power that they themselves might be contributing to. It would seem both hypocritical and deeply disturbing if, at the same time as condemning power asymmetries, we are creating them: if the very appeal to critical thinking is somehow itself becoming a component part of the creation of oppressive and exclusive elites. If that were the case could we then envisage an alternative that helps us instead to facilitate the inclusivity and equality we espouse?

The theorist who most clearly presented the case for the prosecution (though I would also consider him as a perpetrator of the crime) was Pierre Bourdieu (1979) through his writings on education and class. His arguments are well known so they will only be briefly reprised here. Bourdieu argued that higher education, alongside modern art, had the direct effect of creating, as his book title suggests, *Distinction*. A means for distinguishing between the elite and the *hoi-poloï* that results in higher education becoming a major contributor to class formation and reproduction. This is achieved through creating bodies of abstraction and obfuscation. His primary example was the way modern art had

shifted from a form of representation based on traditional aesthetic criteria, such as beauty, to become a quite esoteric practice which eschewed these earlier values. As a result modern art takes forms that the elite can claim to interpret, while the rest of the population can no longer understand why this stuff is even regarded as art. The creation of subsequent class distinctions is facilitated by higher education which teaches the keys (competences) to unlock these passages to high status, while ensuring that everyone else is left outside, bewildered and demeaned by their incapacity to understand what was going on. Education thereby produces what he calls an 'aristocracy of culture' through this dual process of ennobling and stigmatizing (Bourdieu, 1979: 23–6)

Although Bourdieu focused on the relationship between education and modern art, there is an equally obvious candidate still closer to home, which is the form taken by some contemporary theory. The concern here is not with all social science theory, which is far too vast and diverse a field to be included within any specific generalization. But there is a dominant tranche which fits the purposes of higher education because, simply by virtue of its obfuscating nature, it is difficult to interpret. It may thereby help to differentiate those who can be regarded as particularly clever from the rest. Higher education is quite overtly dedicated to grading students on a scale of how clever they appear to be. Creating difficult theory is a natural corollary of this task. To characterize this process, a social science paper that cites Deleuze and Guattari (1972) or Lacan (1977) or Bhabha (1994) is thereby incorporating language that is at least as intimidating as the most obscure example of modern art.

The argument of the previous paragraph implies that there is no need to suggest that social scientists have deliberately fostered a regime for the purpose of intimidating and excluding the wider population. It is reasonable to see this as an unfortunate side effect of something that is more germane to higher education, which is creating a mechanism for the internal grading of its practitioners. But whatever the intention, the consequences would be the same – a significant contribution to class differentiation. The other aspect that turns theory into a device of oppression is through a classic moment of fetishism. Theory started in anthropology, for example, as a way of helping to understand, explain, and give clarity to empirical findings. Something closer to the definition of theory with which this article began. This was common from the time of Malinowski through to the period of the early Geertz or Sahlins. Debates about structural-functionalism may not have been of particular interest outside academia, but the language and argument could be comprehended.

Today, by contrast, much of the most influential theory no longer provides clear explanations for what we observe in the world. From being a means to that end, it has become instead an end in itself. We now exploit other societies as ethnographers in order to bring gifts to the theory deity. This fetishism is most evident in our everyday uses of the term, as when teachers say to their students, 'your essay is insufficient because it doesn't have enough theory'. Theory being used almost as a kind of quantitative measure of the requisite components of an essay. This usually means that the essay doesn't cite or debate with enough theorists. Telling students to add more theory may well help their career prospects in demonstrating their prowess in this increasingly difficult task. There is no clear boundary to suggest what proportion of contemporary theory is fetishistic. But I doubt it would be controversial to suggest this type of theory has grown in importance as compared to the social science of the 1970s.

It is the use of fetishized theory I wish to dethrone, because the problem is not theory itself. De-fetishized theory is both essential and welcome. We surely would support procedures which help us to understand, explain and bring clarity to empirical findings, and help lift social science beyond the parochialism of specific studies, a particular danger for a anthropology, a subject whose primary mechanism is ethnography. Theory certainly helps us to balance this parochialism. The examples given later in this article show how using comparative studies to develop theory that can be clearly exemplified, for example, as analogies, can achieve the aims of theory without the same degree of obfuscation. This is then used to characterize de-fetishized theory, theory that no longer facilitates class differentiation. Ideally, we want theory that does the precise opposite to fetishized theory. Theory that makes our findings so clear and interesting to the general public that as many people learn as much as possible from social science and cultural studies and feel included within global education.

Ethnographic reportage, which is my own field of research, is usually fascinating, itself a revelation. When well-presented it can possess a humanism, immediacy and often poignancy that should be easy to share. This is a reflection of what the philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1984–8) saw as the common humanity in narratives about the struggles of life. But we lock the door and make all this inaccessible when we frame the results in theory where the level of generality, de-contextualization and cold abstraction betrays the nuance, sensitivity and accessibility of ethnographic reportage. This is particularly unfortunate when the subjects of study, as is often the case in both cultural studies and the area of digital anthropology in which I currently work, are topics of common interest, such as the effects of the media or, in this case, trying to understand the smartphone.

## **Cultural studies and grounded theory**

Cultural studies is neither static nor homogeneous. My own work was much influenced by Stuart Hall (e.g. Hall and Jefferson, 1976), and the initial monographs of the Birmingham School, which were highly ethnographic (e.g. Hebdige, 1979; Willis, 1978). This opening ethnographic gambit subsequently declined as a foundation for cultural studies, but remains the basis of the work described in this article. As Slack (1996) noted, Hall wanted theory to be part of the process rather than an end in itself. Often a detour that would facilitate changing perspectives. Very different from the formal tool that theory had become for many of his contemporaries who were strongly influenced by the writings of Althusser. A similar point was made by Alasuutari (1996), who viewed theory in cultural studies as a framework of enquiry that guides our perspective. Hall's writings were generally highly readable and aimed at inclusivity, rather than exclusivity.

The approach taken in this article remains closer to Hall and the subsequent interest in the UK in the cultural economy but with a greater emphasis on the consequences of theory. The contrast would be with works such as Hall and Birchall (2006) that promoted theory in its own right and feared for the decline of theory in cultural studies. I am not claiming this re-direction of theory must include the entirety of social science and cultural research. All the researchers I work with also write journal articles which may deal with esoteric topics using terms specific to a sub-field. There is room for many kinds of theory. Sometimes difficult writing is necessary and appropriate (see Culler and Lamb,

2003). De-fetishized theory matters most when dealing with topics such as smartphones that are of considerable interest to general public education. It might not be relevant to, for example, a study of historical kinship, or the precise linguistic changes in a sub-genre of Manga comics. In addition, as an anthropologist, I am concerned that our work is accessible within regions where incomes may be lower and there is less access to higher education – the same regions where we often carry out our fieldwork and to which we therefore have a particular responsibility

There is a clear overlap between the points being made here and the traditions of grounded theory or empirical theory (Chamaz and Belgrave, 2007; Glaser and Strauss, 1967), as well as to more general appeals for the grounding of cultural studies (Woo, 2020). The most important element in those traditions is that theory should be derived from evidence. This is the grounding of grounded theory and the empirical in empirical theory. The theoretical propositions derived from the projects documented in this article are supported by each author carrying out 16 months of ethnographic work. There is then no critique implied here of grounded theory, rather the article builds upon that tradition.

The key difference between grounded theory and the approach taken here comes from the opening argument – that we need to be concerned at least as much with the consequences of theory as with the origins of theory. This is not something foregrounded in these prior approaches. But it is the perspective which leads to the dialectical approach that will be described below, in which it is at the moment where theory is presented that its potential negative consequences are prevented through the use of exemplification. It also explains why so much of this article will be about the dissemination of theory, again a topic not of concern to definitions of grounded or empirical theory. In other words this article shifts the debate from where theory comes from or what it is, towards a concern with what theory does. For a discipline such as cultural studies, with its concern over mediation, a focus on the way we present and communicate theory should make a good deal of sense.

Another reason for being concerned with the consequences of theorization and its tendency to create and sustain elites, has emerged in recent years from critiques that take the perspective of decoloniality (e.g. Mignolo and Escobar, 2010) and feminism (e.g. Thornham, 2000). For example, there is the failure to cite theorists from more marginalized populations and languages. Not surprisingly, given their histories during the colonial period, this also applies to ethnographic and anthropological approaches (e.g. Davis and Craven, 2016 and Schrock, 2013 for the feminist critique; Bejarano et al., 2019 for the critique from decoloniality). These critical perspectives have emphasized the neglect of marginalized populations and their contributions to theory, as well as potential alignments with activism. What this article adds to such arguments is again an emphasis upon the processes of presenting and disseminating theory to a global public. As will be shown in the next section, the projects discussed here have been particularly successful at reaching global populations that have traditionally struggled to access this branch of education.

### *De-fetishizing theory*

For the theory of theory to progress in this article, the next stage has to comprise the creation of a model for de-fetishized theory. The foundation for this process derives ultimately from Hegelian philosophy as contained in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*

(Hegel, 1977) and his *Philosophy of Right* (1967). It follows from an argument I developed some time ago (Miller, 1987). My use of the term ‘fetishism’ refers not to any anthropological characterization, but rather the use of the term in Marxist writings (Marx, 1975) and beyond that in Feuerbach’s (Marx and Engels, 2004), both founded in their authors’ respective interpretations of Hegel. In abstract terms this implies that most cultural forms – such as art, law, but also theory – start by reflecting the reasons we create them. But they then develop a momentum towards distancing and abstraction. This sets up the conditions for alienation, in which these forms become oppressive, rather than serving humanity. As a dialectical process, they therefore require negation through sublation (*Aufhebung*), which brings them back to their original intentions. For example, law is essential, but can evolve into a process that mainly benefits lawyers, unless we return it to its original intention of serving our welfare as law. While previously I applied this perspective to the study of consumption and material culture (Miller, 1987: 19–49), here it will be applied to theory itself. In the spirit of this article, I will explain the arguments of this paragraph through examples.

I have now been involved in two large-scale comparative ethnographic projects: the Why We Post project was directed at the use and consequence of social media, while the Anthropology of Smartphones and Smart Ageing (ASSA) project is concerned with the relationship between smartphones, older people and health. We are now writing up the second project, with 6 of the 11 proposed books completed. One aim of ASSA is to develop theoretical perspectives that help us understand the smartphone. Our primarily comparative publication *The Global Smartphone* (Miller et al., 2021) has either a good deal of, or very little, theory depending on what counts as theory. If theory is citing established academics who are known as theorists, then this book is hardly theoretical at all. Given the need to prioritize the sheer volume of original results derived from 11 researchers each spending 16 months living with communities, references to theorists have been relegated mainly to endnotes. Instead of citing theorists, the focus has been on creating and presenting original insights and perspectives on the smartphone that constitutes our own theorization of the smartphone. These are intended to help us understand, explain and clarify findings about the way people use smartphones as well as the consequences of their usage.

There are discussions within that volume of what we call Screen Ecology, Social Ecology, Beyond Anthropomorphism, Perpetual Opportunism, the Transportal Home and Scalable Functionality. Each of these terms is used in a particular way that constitutes them as neologisms designed to introduce a theoretical perspective on the consequences of smartphones for the lives of our research participants. As neologisms they are not necessarily beholden to past theory, though they might be. For example, we use the term ‘Perpetual Opportunism’ to explain many of the ways people use smartphones as well as many of the consequences of smartphone use. The term ‘Perpetual Opportunism’ is clearly beholden to a prior concept of ‘perpetual contact’, which was already influential in the study of mobile phones (Katz and Aakhus, 2002). It is, however, a significant development since there is a good deal of difference between an emphasis upon opportunism as opposed to merely pointing out that phones allow us to be always in contact with each other. Most of the opportunism we discuss, such as the use of photography or maps, may be completely independent of personal contact.



But what then makes this extravagant display of theorization an example of self-consciously de-fetishized theory? To theorize usually requires abstraction, generalization and de-contextualization. It means we must always be aware that theory contains the potential to destroy what was described above, based on Ricoeur, as the humanistic capacity of narrative to develop the empathetic retelling of how people around the world cope with life and create culture.

The approach that is being advocated here, in order to construct de-fetishized theory, is based on conceiving of theory as a dialectical process that requires its own negation, preferably at the same moment in which a theory is presented and explicated. This is best done through the use of constant exemplification of that theory as the very means of its presentation. This is the process that will now be described, through exploring two cases taken from our book *The Global Smartphone* (Miller et al., 2021). The first is called the ‘Transportal Home’ and the second is called ‘Beyond Anthropomorphism’. The aim is to return theory from becoming an end in itself, and turn it back into a means for better understanding clarifying and explaining evidence: theory that helps us understand the world, rather than academics exploiting the world in order to contribute to the theory deity.

### *The ‘Transportal Home’*

What happens when we call the smartphone the Transportal Home? The essence of this theory is a radical change in perspective. It states that we should regard the smartphone less as a device we use, than as a place within which we now live. It also implies that the smartphone, as a home, has other properties, such as the ability to portal to other people’s smartphones as their transportal homes in a manner that would obviously not be true of a bricks and mortar home. The first task then is to provide evidence that the smartphone is indeed considered and experienced as sufficiently analogous to the home to make the claim plausible and insightful. The initial presentation is therefore made through presenting supportive evidence for ways in which people in our fieldsites themselves seem to treat smartphones as a domestic space. There is Susana in Santiago, Chile, who tells us about how she keeps her phone tidy (*mantener el teléfono*): ‘once a month I download the photos from the phone. I erase photos, I erase videos. Every day I clean it. E-ve-ry-day . . .!’ Ernestina likes the Outlook app since she can easily erase emails. Having something called ‘the recycle bin’ helps sustain the domestic analogy. When she says ‘I like to keep the phone tidy’, the ethnographer Alfonso Otaegui cannot help but notice how tidy the living room of her apartment is.

People in Shanghai now use a term *duan-she-li* meaning ‘refusal-disposal-separation’. To keep a home tidy, one needs to refuse to buy more stuff and give up what they don’t need. Yet in this fieldwork, Xinyuan Wang found the phrase was most commonly used in reference to tidying up and sorting out smartphones. Guanghua reports the following: ‘Since 2016, I would do “duan-she-li” regularly on my WeChat. I usually feel good after deleting a couple of unnecessary contacts.’ In Yaoundé, Patrick Awondo found that the appropriate expression is *faire le ménage*, meaning housework, but which is now extended to *faire le ménage dans mes contacts* (cleaning my contacts), and *faire le ménage sur mon écran* (cleaning my screen). Even more telling, people use the phrase *il*

*y'a des gens que je ne veux plus laisser entrer chez moi* (there are people that I won't allow to enter my home again); but regarding their smartphone, not the home where they sleep.

In the preceding paragraph, examples from three different fieldsites are used to reinforce each other in order to make the same basic point. Similarly, we can see an analogy to a house with rooms, as separate places for entertainment, looking up information for homework, socializing with friends or organizing one's financial affairs. Having established these analogies, the next stage is to consider how they help explain the consequences of the smartphone. For example, we argue that while we have become used to the idea of the internet as the *death of distance* (Cairncross, 1997), the smartphone seems to implicate a parallel *death of proximity*. Wherever a person apparently is, they can actually be back at their Transportal Home. The effect is to radically disrupt what were conventional notions of public and private, which in turn leads to protest at this flagrant rupture of conventional etiquette. The problem is that the proximate individual has in effect gone home. They can use this portal to zone out from the place they are sitting in and return to a home where they can carry out many familiar activities, ranging from finding entertainment to organizing their schedule, or messaging friends or relatives through text and visual media. It is disturbing when someone who appears to be sitting next to us has, for all intents and purposes, retreated to some other place, from which we are excluded, even though they remain in our physical company.

Having established the way the smartphone has properties analogous to the physical home we then acknowledge some of the differences. The house is immobile and limited in this capacity to interact with that wider world, short of leaving home to meet people, since the home lacks the crucial mobility of the body. By contrast, the Transportal Home provides an easy and instant connection to another world: Skyping or Zooming to other countries, shopping in a virtual mall, or gaming in an alternate universe, all without leaving our smartphones. We might also compare the affective dimension of the physical home. For example, the home may provide a sense of possession, or privacy or security. All of which are different from the affective dimension of smartphones. This includes knowing that the Transportal Home lies snug in the pocket, or, the sense of loss when people without their smartphones feel temporarily bereft of even the possibility of social encounters or temporarily locked out from part of one's own memory. The theory is clearly not claiming that the smartphone is the same as a traditional home. It argues that the smartphone is a form of home that has never previously existed.

*The Global Smartphone*, then, examines the relationship between these two versions of the home. It employs another term, 'Screen Ecology', which considers the relationship between the various screens people use around the home. For example, a retired couple in Shanghai studied by Xinyuan Wang use eight different screens in three locations within a single hour. At one moment an iPad, resting on a kitchen surface, rings. "It must be Xiaotao!", Mrs Huang cries with joy. She fetches the iPad and places it on the dining table so they can speak to their grandson in Beijing, where her son-in-law works. They are only visited once a quarter, but her daughter gave Mrs Huang the iPad so they could WeChat on a bigger portable screen. From time to time, Mr Huang takes photos of Mrs Huang happily talking with Xiaotao and sends them to the family WeChat group. While they are still talking, Xiaotao's *Nainai* (grandmother on father's side) has replied to these



photos with WeChat cute stickers saying ‘nice shot’. Since she was visiting Xiatao, she can then post photos of the video call from the other end. Mrs Huang, in turn, shares the photos with her WeChat group ‘Sisters’, which includes her three good female friends. All the while the couple move between different screens and locations around their own household, but still pivoted around the equal mobility of the smartphone.

This example, alongside others, brings the focus onto one of the key components of the home as domestic space. While the traditional home has increasingly narrowed the family to the nuclear form, smartphones, in combination with other screens, reverse this historical change and bring back the extended family into something closer to household membership. Previously, contact had become quite formal when the extended family met mainly on ceremonial occasions, but constant communication through WeChat, or in other regions LINE and WhatsApp, recreates the informality of the household. But not entirely; *The Global Smartphone* argues that the new extended family may be more acceptable because people are not actually co-present all the time. Our evidence was that this is experienced as a kind of less burdensome compromise than the traditional family. In a recent volume Hjorth et al. (2020) examine a wide range of ways in which smartphone use has impacted upon the family and intergenerational relations.

This material is intended to show the way the potentially problematic consequences of theory can be negated even as it is presented. This can be considered to have two component parts. The first has just been exemplified. Presenting theory through many examples from our various fieldsites prevents theory from becoming overly abstract or obfuscating. The reader can see more precisely what is meant through the immediacy of its illustration. In this way the problem of abstraction is negated through the medium of its presentation. The second component deals with a further consequence of abstraction and generalization which is de-contextualization. This is important for approaches such as anthropology or cultural studies, where culture itself is a crucial component of scholarship. So far the diverse fieldsites have been used to make common arguments that establish the theory. But equally important is the recognition that theory is always over-generalized with respect to culture. Precisely because it is based on an analogy with the home, the meaning of the Transportal Home will always be contingent on the diversity of the meaning of ‘home’ across these various fieldsites. So, the next stage is to break down the idea of the Transportal Home from a series of universalistic generalizations to an understanding of how this perspective means different things according to context. Three examples demonstrate this strategy: the situation of migrants, the elderly and the young.

Our fieldsite in NoLo in Milan, Italy, includes a high proportion of migrants from other parts of Italy, as well as from abroad. Shireen Walton, found that these people have already seen limitations to the traditional concept of home as a single physical location, which would separate them from much of their family and their cultural upbringing. For Sicilians living in Milan, the smartphone helps them accept that Milan is the place they reside because they can simultaneously also remain in ‘their land’ (*mia terra*) of Sicily, the place of their memories and dreams. Similarly, for migrants from Peru or Egypt the smartphone has made a profound difference in that they no longer have to choose between identification with their original family, still living in their place of origin, or their new family, living in their current place of residence. Both can now equally co-reside within

their Transportal Home. This makes the concept of the Transportal Home especially significant for that group.

Laura Haapio-Kirk worked in Japan, a country with a particularly high proportion of elderly people. Several features of the Transportal Home may be especially relevant to older people. As they become more immobile, the smartphone becomes even more important as a home they can portal *from*, as opposed to the one they are merely constrained to stay *within*. They see increasing value in the support of friends through the messaging app LINE as they age and become physically restricted. As Komatsu san, a Kyoto woman in her sixties, explained: 'I think when we are elderly, it doesn't mean that we have friends right next to us. So the smartphone might feel more precious to us [as we age] because it allows us to stay sociable.'

For the Palestinian community studied by Laila Abed Rabho and Maya de Vries, the smartphone becomes an important tool of inclusivity, as those who are able to go on a trip send back images and receive back comments that help include those who are now too frail to join them. In the Shanghai fieldsite, it is common to find older people who have moved to Shanghai to take care of their grandchildren. They may find it difficult to fit in with the new life in Shanghai, having been uprooted from their previous social networks and from the social support back in their hometown. They now cling on to that which gives them an experience of a home they feel secure in and which, they hope, will be a home thereafter,

If the Transportal Home is particularly significant for older people because of their immobility, it is also of increasing significance to young people. In places such as Milan or Dublin, a major source of anxiety is that the previous generation was able to afford ownership of their own home, at least when they wanted to start a family. But no longer. The problem is that there has been an expansion of life expectancy, coupled with the failure to build sufficient additional homes to cope with the consequential lack of houses. As a result, many young people see little prospect of being able to buy a property prior to raising a family and wonder when they will ever be able to make this move. It is not surprising that they too develop a commensurate attachment to the one home that they can afford and that at least gives them a place they can always be at, an address that is fixed and belongs to them. When young people are criticized by older people for their attachment to their smartphone screens, it would be reasonable for them to point out, in turn, that the people making these criticisms generally possess or rent a house of their own, while they are being condemned for their attention to the one little home they actually do have, their smartphones. It may also be that one reason younger people remain in their parents' house is that, thanks to their Transportal Home, they already have their own space for privacy without having to leave. Each of these three examples: migrants, older people and young people, negates the de-contextualizing effect of theorizing by immediately demonstrating how the meaning of this general concept of the Transportal Home will vary according to these diverse circumstances.

Finally, theory is contextualized by acknowledging what might be termed its horizontal and vertical associations. Horizontal refers to other similar arguments. An example that has already been cited is the recent volume *Digital Media Practices* (Hjorth et al., 2020), which explores quite similar terrain, especially with regard to other arguments we make in *The Global Smartphone* book regarding the relationship between care and

surveillance. There are similar parallels with work on older adults as transnational in the ‘digital kinning’ approach of Baldassar and Wilding (2019), Wilding et al. (2020) and no doubt many other contemporary studies.

The vertical dimension refers to the precedents upon which theory is built: for example, as suggested earlier, through showing how Perpetual Opportunism builds upon the prior idea of perpetual contact. In this case there are many uses of the analogy with home. For example, a book by sociologist Greshke (2012) has the title *Is There a Home in Cyberspace?*, which considers whether the online world, in general, has some of the qualities of home. But there are many specific components to these arguments about the smartphone as a Transportal Home which did not apply to the internet prior to smartphones when it was accessed from other devices. Similarly, our perspective could be compared with the suggestion that the smartphone means that we now live in a version of what Augé (2008) regarded as an increasingly common experience of placelessness. This was recently argued by Bogost (2020). The concept of the Transportal Home turns this argument upside down. Rather than regarding ourselves as placeless, we can always know where we live, and how the various components of the home may converge, as long as we are prepared to regard the smartphone as that stable location. What matters is the way the mobile phone is actually immobile, in the sense of remaining constantly in our presence. There would be countless other examples of this re-contextualizing of theory horizontally in debate with other contemporary researchers or vertically as a re-engagement with past theorists.

### *Beyond Anthropomorphism*

The second example can be more briefly described since it is largely intended to make the same points. The argument is that for more than a century humanity has been fascinated by the development of the robot and its potential to realize our imagination of the anthropomorphic machine that closely resembles a human being. This may have led us to neglect a more profound and more advanced trajectory that lies beyond the anthropomorphic machine – and is established in the smartphone. A smartphone doesn’t look one iota like a human being: intimacy is advanced through processes such as complementarity and prosthetics, as well as its ability to transform the individual it belongs to.

In chapter 6 of *The Global Smartphone*, evidence is presented as to how individuals have transformed their smartphones into a device that corresponds closely to their own personality and sense of who they are. Using the Dublin fieldwork conducted by myself and Pauline Garvey, a contrast is drawn between a woman who sees herself as a consummate professional and turned her iPhone into a kind of life manual with detailed instructions on every task, such as paying a particular bill. The opposite extreme is a descendant of gruff fishermen, who turns off Skype as soon as his daughter is no longer living in Australia in order to retain a pure minimalist functionalism that only deploys the smartphone for what he regards as strictly necessary. We argue that the ability of users to transform their phones through refusing to use apps, downloading new apps, changing settings and supplying content is a vastly more significant contribution to this process of personalization than the much touted ability of algorithms and artificial intelligence built into the smartphone in order to enable it to learn from the user’s behaviour.

The smartphone is capable of achieving an extraordinary depth of intimacy through this crafting by users. In an excellent book called *Smarter Than You Think*, Clive Thompson (2013) documents the way that human beings become more intelligent by incorporating such devices. Not having to memorize ‘facts’ but instead memorizing the way we use the smartphone to find facts, is making us cleverer. The best analogy for the rise of smartphones is the invention of printing and then the book, which consigned many previous memory functions to the ‘hard rectangle’ of the book, which we can consider the precursor to the hard disc. Few people would have a problem with the suggestion that books made humanity cleverer because people were prepared to cede so much of memory to the written word (Ong, 1982). Many of the older people in this volume see the smartphone as a literal *aide-mémoire*. For example, Marilia Duque (in press) worked with people in São Paulo who had considerable anxiety about dementia and memory loss and saw the smartphone as an important device, not just for finding and storing information but also for brain training exercises that they hoped would delay the onset of dementia.

Just as the argument for the Transportal Home starts with generalized observations that apply in many regions, so too these points about the potential transformation of smartphones to become expressions of the individual, or the complement to cognitive functions, can be generalized to all of our fieldsites. The difference between this example and the Transportal Home comes in the relationship between two stages of negation. Because in the case of Beyond Anthropomorphism the emphasis is on each specific individual. In disciplines such as anthropology and cultural studies, individuals are always regarded as situated within normative culture (Miller, 2009). When describing an individual in a publication the researcher has to indicate whether that individual is being used to exemplify typicality or at the other extreme eccentricity. So in this case, the second part of negation that is the re-contextualization of theory in diverse cultural contexts, follows immediately from the first.

On the one hand *The Global Smartphone* describes particular individuals from Ireland. For example, a man who always carried five phones in his pockets mainly to record music. Or a woman who also has several phones and chargers because she regards Instagram as a bit like mindfulness, demonstrating her ability to appreciate the aesthetic potential of the moment she is within. Both would be regarded by their peers as eccentric. More commonly the individual is employed as an example within a monograph to manifest typicality, as was the case with the figure of the gruff pragmatic Irishman who stands for a traditional ideal of rugged and practical masculinity in this Irish setting. Whether viewed as typical or eccentric, each example helps to clarify and illustrate what the term ‘Beyond Anthropomorphism’ is intended to mean. By simultaneously implicating cultural diversity, these examples also help to negate the de-contextualization that is otherwise a consequence of theorization.

The method of exemplification should not be viewed as merely a passive reflection of prior cultural values. Earlier on, examples were given of how the smartphone changes our relationship to the extended family. Similarly, in Yaoundé, Patrick Awondo found evidence for the way the smartphone helps facilitate a new public sphere among the middle class in contemporary Cameroon, engaged with politics through their smartphones. This argument is quite specific to Cameroon. There is no suggestion of a similar transformation

of politics in Ireland, for example. Other cases may be partial generalizations. There were findings by Charlotte Hawkins in her work in Kampala on rotating credit schemes and mobile money that are similar to the evidence from Yaoundé, implying generalizations within Africa more widely, which would not, however, extend to other regions. There is a spectrum in these examples that allows for the way a theory may apply more generally, show greater diversity in its application, or be inappropriate to some regions.

The *Why We Post* and ASSA projects are unusual in being based on multiple simultaneous ethnographies. It may be that single ethnographies have tended, in the past, to resort quickly to pre-existing or 'grand theory' to compensate for their inevitable parochialism. By contrast, the multiple sites for these projects provide a more confident base for asserting new theoretical perspectives. It would be wrong to conclude, however, that individual ethnographies cannot contribute in this manner. The main solution is for them to embrace comparative studies as a vehicle for developing the same kind of broad-based theorization that has been found in these multi-sited projects.

### *Dissemination as the further de-fetishizing of theory*

The process of de-fetishizing has been discussed both as and through the deployment of examples. But if the primary concern is with the consequences of theory, then the task needs to be continued beyond the writing of papers and monographs. Because the ultimate aim is to replace the creation and reproduction of class differences with output that contributes to global inclusive and accessible education. The reason this return of theory to the diversity of global contexts is so important is that in both projects we felt committed to a global anthropology that aimed at inclusivity for world populations. This meant writing anthropology of a form that would be equally and easily accessible to people all around the world. A consumer of theory could not undertake these tasks if theory was in any way unintelligible or inaccessible to them. For the same reasons, it was important that the 11 volumes of *Why We Post* were written in clear English and in many cases translated into the local language of the fieldsites, as well as available for free as Open Access. We have written short blogs at least weekly over the past seven years, to help people feel engaged with the research. We also created over a hundred short films as well as the free Open Access university course (MOOC – massive online open course) on the FutureLearn platform just referred to. An innovation of the ASSA project is that short films are incorporated into the current book series, as well as the more conventional still photographs and infographs. Finally, the *Why We Post* project also produced workbooks for schools so that the findings could be tailored to the educational curriculum.

The result is not just that the *Why We Post* book series achieved over a million downloads. More important was the global reach, with, for example, over 20,000 downloads in the Philippines and Brazil, over 10,000 in Nigeria and Indonesia and over 5000 from Ethiopia and Hong Kong. A figure of 1 million may be set against what had become the standard for the ethnographic monograph which were typically sales of around 600 copies per volume. The effect is to shift these claimed theoretical insights from merely the internal circulation of metropolitan universities to a form of education that was opened up to a general public. The authors of these two book series are also global, including anthropologists from Latin America, Africa, India and China, as well as from Europe, West Asia and North America.

Currently we are running a MOOC, or free university course, on the FutureLearn platform. This is based on the Why We Post project. A second MOOC will be created for the ASSA project. The main context for the consumption of academic theory is university teaching. A concern with the consequences of theory should then pay particular attention to university teaching. The current pandemic has resulted in a precipitous and vast shift to online teaching, but the direction of travel was already evident. One of the potentials created by online teaching and publication, is that academic publication in the future may become less finite. It may be subject to continual change in the light of its reception, something that is already present in the extensive comments that are found attached to texts such as blogs. This goes beyond accessibility to the incorporation of theory consumers into theory refinement.

In the current course, presentations are made of theoretical ideas such as Polymedia and Scalable Sociality that were used in Why We Post. The people taking this course, who may be from Argentina or Vietnam, then discuss these propositions in their comments, mainly by reference to local usage. The other students then compare these comments with the circumstances of their own region. Theory is no longer the possession of the theorist, it is relinquished and returned to people who could have been research participants but here become consumers of theory, of which they thereby take possession. They further the task of de-contextualization through providing their own regional input. They are then free to transform theory through their applications of it to their own circumstances. Sometimes, when they find that the theory is not appropriate – and these propositions are rarely universalistic – they can reject its relevance to their own population. Those involved in teaching can take this evidence into account when revising their theories. Similarly, alongside the Centre for Digital Anthropology at UCL (University College London) we recently developed a website called [anthrocvd.com](http://anthrocvd.com), where anthropologists all around the world could describe the responses to Covid-19 in their region – material which I am in turn using to write an article on the balance between care and surveillance in the response to Covid-19.

It follows that the strategies of negation through exemplification are essential, but not sufficient, for the achievement of the primary aim of this article, which is to transform theory from a vehicle of exclusivity into one of inclusivity. This requires additional changes, which include ensuring that those examples are laid out clearly in ordinary language, so a person with quite limited education can follow the arguments and critique them or contribute to them if they so wish. It is a mechanism for bringing higher level consideration and reflection on an ubiquitous object – in the case of the ASSA project, the smartphone – to what we hope will once again be a million interlocutors. The ultimate aim is that, through theory, they gain a better understanding, explanation and clarity in regard to their smartphones and the consequences of smartphones for their daily lives. As noted earlier, it is because understanding the smartphone is a topic of such general interest that the strictures advocated in this article are particularly pertinent in a way that would not be the case for a more esoteric topic of scholarly enquiry.

## **Conclusion**

This article began by suggesting that our main concern should not be with defining what theory is, but rather taking responsibility for the consequences of the theorization we



ourselves construct. The problem is that over the last forty years there has been a trajectory towards forms of theorization that create class distinctions between academic elites fronting a knowledge class as against the general population, who are excluded since they are not given the means for decoding theory. Criticisms from feminist and decolonizing perspectives have shown how the contributions of marginalized populations have been neglected. This article has added an emphasis on the dissemination of theory to these same populations. The process of class distinction builds on the increasing fetishizing of theory. What started as a means towards understanding, clarifying and explaining empirical findings was transformed into becoming itself the ultimate goal and purpose of academic work, a task with which every student essay must be explicitly engaged. This article is certainly not anti-theory. If anything, it argues for more theory in social science, not less. We all want to explain and understand the world, not just to describe it. For this we need theory. But where academics do bring original insight and clarity through theory, this should be to everyone's benefit not just their own.

The theory of the theory presented in this article has argued that there could be an alternative de-fetishized version of theory. For this purpose, theory should be considered as a dialectical process in the sense proposed by Hegelian philosophy. The proposition is that theory could incorporate its own strategies of negation. Abstraction, generalization and de-contextualization are intrinsic properties of theorization. These properties are essential for the most commonly agreed purpose of theorization, which is to explain observed phenomenon. But these same properties can lead to obfuscation and a radical de-contextualization that makes the concepts and propositions intelligible only at the level of theory itself. At this point, theory becomes fetishized and oppressive, with the main consequence being that higher education becomes a primary contributor to class differentiation, as unintelligibility is itself a component of differentiation between those who claim to understand theory and those who feel bewildered and excluded.

It follows that we need to tame the theory beast and return it to its more inclusive potential as clarification and understanding the world. The article proposed that this aim can be accomplished through three stages of negation. The first stage is that theory is immediately presented through exemplification, so that from the start it clear what is meant by this theory as applied to some concrete instances, and also how one can envisage using that theory in other instances. The second strategic negation is through using examples that re-contextualize theory, by showing how it will mean different things and have different implications depending upon the precise context in which it is being applied. These strategies help negate the abstraction, generalization and de-contextualization that are required by theory. Having either a foundation in multi-sited projects as described in this article, or, alternatively, for single-sited qualitative studies, working initially through comparison, helps to develop original theory, arising from empirical observations, rather than relying on pre-existing grand theory.

The third stage is that theory and its exemplification is presented in various forms of dissemination with sufficient clarity that it remains intelligible, and thereby accessible, to people at various educational levels. A major contribution to this third stage will be the further development of Open Access so that there are no financial barriers to accessibility, as well as the use of colloquial language and translations where possible. If these conditions are met, then it is possible for theory to become a contribution to global education rather than an instrument of class differentiation.

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### Author biography

Daniel Miller is Professor of Anthropology at University College London. He is director of the Anthropology of Smartphones and Smart Ageing (ASSA) project and was director of the Why We Post project. He is author/editor/co-author of 41 books including *Ageing with Smartphones in Ireland* (with P. Garvey), *How the World Changed Social Media* (with eight others), *The Comfort of People*, *Social Media in an English Village*, *Tales from Facebook*, *Digital Anthropology* (ed. with H. Horst), *The Comfort of Things, Stuff, A Theory of Shopping*, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*.