

Book Review

Spent: Sex, Evolution, and Consumer Behavior. Edited by Geoffrey Miller. 374 pp. New York, NY: Penguin Group (Viking). 2009. \$26.95 (cloth).

More than a century after Thorstein Veblen (1899) chronicled the absurdities of American consumerism in his *Theory of the Leisure Class*, science-based theories of consumerism remain frustratingly unsettled. Veblen's treatment was packed with deep insights that have served to inspire generations of social scientists, but—even by the standards of the time—his treatment was overly reliant on the colorful anecdote, and today his efforts at placing consumer behavior in the context of natural history seem quaint (human foibles, in his view, were the product of three “primitive” “habits of life”: emulation, domination, and animism). In the time since Veblen, modern capitalism has been transformed by the marketing revolution, costly signaling theory has begun to make sense of previously unfathomable quirks of biology (from the peacock's tail to the Hummer H1), and the behavioral sciences have—with the help of the “modern synthesis” in evolutionary biology—generated deep new insights into human nature. Given the predominance of marketing—that is, the explicit coordination of market research, product design, and brand promotion—in modern Western economies, it would seem a worthwhile exercise to revisit Veblen's subject, to take a closer look at what it is consumers seek when they purchase that McMansion, or that Toyota Prius, or that Stanford MBA. This is the aim of *Spent*.

The book is built around the insight that consumers buy “conspicuous” products to advertise not only just (as simple signaling models might suggest) wealth or purchasing power but also what Geoffrey Miller refers to as the “Central Six”: five key personality traits, plus general intelligence. Miller introduces these traits (which represent a quasi-consensus of decades of personality research) in typically wry fashion (while underscoring his point about the human desire to advertise such traits to friends and potential mates) by providing lists of actual bumper stickers that might serve to advertise the corresponding trait. The five traits are as follows: openness (“My karma ran over your dogma,” p. 147), conscientiousness (“Jesus would have used his turn signals,” p. 148), agreeableness (“Live simply that others may simply live,” p. 150), stability (“If at first you don't succeed, redefine success,” p. 151), and extraversion (“If it weren't for physics and law enforcement, I'd be unstoppable,” p. 152). Miller devotes a chapter to each, discussing in each case the evolutionary costs and benefits of having more or less of said trait, and the various products modern marketing provides to help us convey our unique blends of traits to others. This interaction of popular consumer culture with personality research—all viewed in evolutionary perspective—makes for a compelling read.

Perhaps the most unsettling thing about the book is the author's determinedly ambivalent stance on the normative implications of his subject matter. In a delightfully playful reflection upon the questionable benefits of modern life, the book opens with the tale of a time traveler from the present day traveling back 30,000 years to prehistoric France, where he attempts to convince a pair of

skeptical Cro-Magnons (“Gérard” and “Giselle”) of the many advantages of life in the 21st century. The episode ends in abject failure when the defender of modernity is forced to concede that in addition to the enduring persistence of spousal infidelity, teenage rebellion, and homicidal violence, life in the future will require 16 years of training in counterintuitive skills followed by 40 years working in “tedious jobs for amoral corporations, far away from relatives and friends, without any decent child care, sense of community, political empowerment, or contact with nature” (pp. 5–6). But Miller remains emphatically—even stubbornly—unwilling to criticize the “supply side” of the retail world, noting instead that modern marketing makes dreams come true in ways never before possible.

Even Veblen, with his 19th-century understanding of evolutionary theory, recognized that problems arise when culture outstrips biology. Miller clearly does too, as he chronicles the many ways in which today's flashy new retail products fail to provide the signaling value we think we're buying. But his reluctance to zero in on the possibility that unfettered marketing might take unfair advantage of our evolved predilections leads him, in the closing pages of *Spent*, to a curious series of libertarian-leaning solutions to an ill-defined problem. In the realm of personal advice (Chapter 15), Miller advises the reader to avoid “new, branded, mass-produced products from stores at the full manufacturer's suggested retail price,” (p. 257) but he fails to mention that turning off the television (thus avoiding ill-advised advertising messages) might serve the same purpose. When it comes to public policy, Miller would (i) reduce the cost of signaling personal traits, by establishing credible third-party standards and facilitating the formation of closed social enclaves in which common social norms are shared (and enforced) (Chapter 16) and (ii) institute a consumption tax that accounts for the external costs of consumption (Chapter 17). Both prescriptions enjoy the advantages of being provocative and reasonably well grounded in economic theory. But neither acknowledges the possibility that the consumer might benefit from defensive measures in a world saturated with advertising messages designed to take advantage of our Stone Age minds. Most countries restrict the use of heroin by adults, and most parents restrict the intake of refined sugar by their children, because uncontrolled use of these products leads, more often than not, to a regrettable outcome for the user.

Economists have long known that when (product) information is shared unequally (“asymmetric”) between buyer and seller, fraud can become profitable, causing markets to break down (Akerlof, 1970, Darby and Karny, 1973). There is a strong parallel—especially when viewed in evolutionary perspective—between the economic definition of “fraud” and what social psychologists might call “manipulation” (Smith, 2004). In either case, there can be good cause for government to step in with rules about the form in which “information” about products is transmitted. It would have been refreshing to see Miller—an evolutionary psychologist with a good intuitive grasp of economics—take this issue on directly.

The modern incarnation of consumerist capitalism remains a mysterious beast. Although *Spent* is written in an entertaining and informative style that is likely to attract a wide readership, it will also make delicious fodder for the curious scholar hoping for a deeper understanding of “conspicuous consumption” in the modern

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marketplace. And having it under your arm just might win you a few points with the opposite sex.

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