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Spent: Sex, Evolution, and Consumer Behavior is an ambitious book that presents the latest research on sexual selection from evolutionary psychology while also critiquing consumer capitalism and marketers’ attempts to seduce people into purchasing goods that conspicuously showcase wealth, status, and taste. Geoffrey Miller has a couple of goals in this book: first, to describe human culture within a biological context using the research from evolutionary psychology to shed light on consumer culture and behavior; and, second, to provide prescriptions for making human cultures happier by combining the best of our evolutionary past with modern technology. As Miller readily admits, the evidence and arguments in this book frequently shift from “is” to “ought,” leading to questions and concerns about his recommendations for political and societal change.

In attempting to achieve his goals, Miller covers a lot of ground—evolutionary theory, marketing, economics, sociology, and politics—with varying degrees of success. While he certainly has mastery over evolutionary theory and evolutionary psychology, those in marketing may take issue with his analysis and, as a political scientist, I take issue with his presentation of politics, government, and ideology. Nonetheless, this book is written for a general audience, and the theories presented are very accessible to the intelligent, non-academic reader. In fact, as Miller explicitly states, the less readers know about the social sciences and humanities the better, since they will not have been exposed to criticisms of evolutionary psychology and will therefore be more open to his argument and perspective.

One concern I had while reading Spent is that the author did not seem open to the “critical” consumption of ideas. Indeed, Miller at times tries to be entertaining, with plenty of contemporary and “cool” examples of conspicuous consumption and the latest behaviors designed to display one’s goods (sometimes too many, which begs the question of whether the author is as hip as he thinks). While Spent provides an evolutionary analysis of marketing and consumer behavior that is quite interesting, the book overreaches when the author proposes various political and economic steps to encourage those behaviors that he considers more accurate displays of biological fitness.

A warning for those interested in the underlying research that went into the book—academic readers will be disappointed to see no citations and an incomplete and topically organized bibliography. If readers want to see a reference that is not listed in the book, they are directed to a website for it. Upon checking, I found that the Web address the author provides is not in service, conveniently leaving more critical readers with no complete bibliography and no access to citations. Astonishingly, Miller states that “whenever facts, books, people, products, or organizations are not specifically noted, details can be easily accessed from the Web by searching the relevant name through Google.com or Wikipedia.org” (p. 336). This does not make Spent a “user friendly” resource and demonstrates a certain laziness and arrogance on the author’s (and publisher’s) behalf to think that either no one would want to check the sources of these arguments or that anyone who dare question them could just dredge through the Internet and non-peer reviewed sources for answers.

With these caveats in mind, an overview of the book will provide a broader view of Miller’s argument. The first several chapters discuss consumer capitalism, how modern marketing works, and the impact that marketing and advertising have on people’s lives. For Miller, the problem with marketing is not that it promotes materialism, but that it advances a “narcissistic pseudospiritualism based on subjective pleasure, social status, romance, and lifestyle, as a product’s mental associations become more important than its actual physical qualities” (p. 43). We buy things for ourselves for our own pleasure, or to send fitness signals to others in terms of good genes, good health, social intelligence, or general intelligence.

According to Miller, the problem with consumer capitalism is that chasing and displaying fitness cues can take over our lives at the expense of family, friends, and community. He also illustrates how many products are marketed as fitness indicators, that is, as signals of an