

# Why we walk the dog

<b>PAUL SEABRIGHT</b>
Geoffrey Miller
SPENT Sex, evolution and the secrets of consumerism 384pp. Heinemann. £20. 978 0 434 01013 4
Tyler Cowen
CREATE YOUR OWN ECONOMY The path to prosperity in a disordered world 272pp. Dutton. £18.99. 978 0 525 95123 0
Daniel Goleman
ECOLOGICAL INTELLIGENCE Knowing the hidden impacts of what we buy 288pp. Allen Lane. £16.99. 978 1 84614 180 5

that – you wouldn't necessarily want to spend time with someone who was a lot more conscientious than you, though that might depend on whether you wanted them to be your sexual partner or your tax accountant.



A Louis Vuitton store in Omotesando, Tokyo, 2007

But even so, it is often tempting to claim to score a little higher on each of these scales than you actually do, so an element of costly signalling is important for keeping exaggeration on a leash. A bumper sticker is fine to indicate roughly which crowd you want to hang out with, but for a more ambitious objective (like a sexual partnership) you may need something more credible as well.

Like getting a dog. Many people are put off from owning household pets by the amount of time and effort they require, and

find it all the more baffling that some owners choose rare breeds that by temperament or fragile health require almost constant attention. Why do they do it? Miller tells us that the time and effort are not an incidental cost: they are the whole point. Owning such a pet is a credible signal (because a costly one) that you score high on conscientiousness, which is what you may need if you want to hook up with others (including romantic partners) who are on the look out for that kind of personality. No such person would take a bumper sticker's word for it. That explains why the easiest opportunities for a single man to strike up a conversation with a single woman in the street arise if each of them is walking a dog.

It's common for different possible motivations for signalling to coexist, making interpretation difficult. Does having an untidy desk mean that you aren't signalling conscientiousness, because it's just too hard for a low-conscientiousness type like you to do? Or that you're positively signalling intelligence, because you want people to think you can do brilliant work without the benefit of the

may work best if the person sending it can avoid being seen to try too hard. True sophistication hints that you could do so much more if you really tried. Sometimes the ambiguity just contributes to the playfulness which sharpens our sensitivity enjoyably to the task: you may pay her more attention if you're not sure whether she is really giving you the eye than if you're certain that she is. And the background culture matters too: exchanged glances that would be regarded as harassment in Pittsburgh can be interpreted as flattering on the streets of Paris.

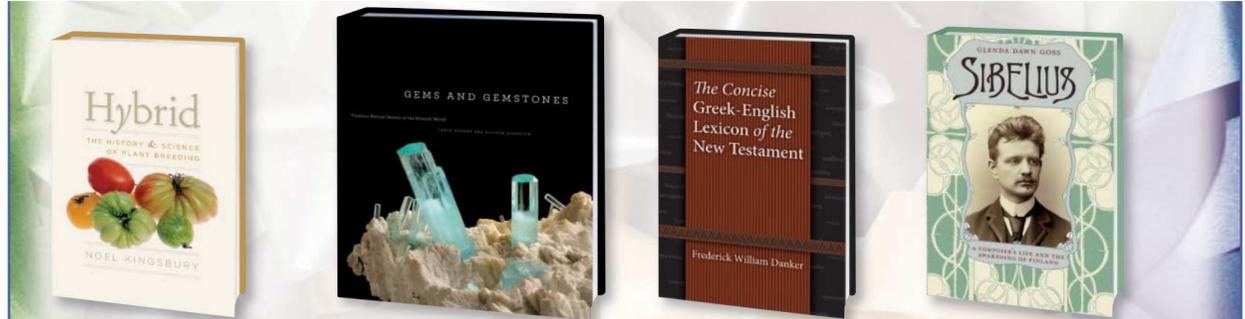
But signalling can be really costly too, because both parties to a partnership are spending energy, time and other psychological and material resources which, if not devoted to signalling, could have done good to them both. How many marriages have foundered because of the frown-and-sigh trap, both parties signalling continually how much it costs them to contribute to the relationship, at the expense of signalling that it also brings them delight? How much will it cost the planet that the culturally approved costly baubles that signal success in the United States are large and thirsty cars? Dollar for dollar, diamonds are so much greener.

Thoughts like these can easily prompt the reflection that it ought to be easy to find ways to signal so much less wastefully than we actually do. Miller indulges in various fantasies along these lines (your IQ score or your DNA profile tattooed on your forehead), together with some more practical consumer-friendly suggestions about how to signal our personalities and our talents at lower than usual expense (buy things second-hand, make them yourself, commission a local artisan to make one, and so forth). Though this is mostly sound advice, these suggestions do raise a profound question about whether signalling is really all that we are doing when we signal. Characteristics that seem sexy in a potential partner don't become less sexy when we reflect that they originally attracted our ancestors because they signalled something else, such as fertility. The knowledge that someone is vasectomized or on the pill need not diminish their sex appeal one bit. Conversely, the DNA profile tattooed on your forehead will not evolve to look sexy on less than a geological timescale, which is longer than most people are prepared to wait to find a sexual partner. What is wasteful on a geological timescale may have come to be, on a more human timescale, the whole point. Maybe Miles Davis was just signalling wastefully, but many of us are mighty glad he did.

At times, Miller comes across as broadly optimistic about the future of consumer society; for instance, he believes that the new forms of communication made possible by the internet may provide future citizens with less wasteful ways to signal their characteristics, though that seems easier for pure matching problems than for cases where there are real incentives to fake, which the internet makes joyously easy on occasion. At other times, he sounds a predominantly angry note about the ingenuity with which firms turn our urge to signal into an extravagant demand for their goods and services. Either way, the consumer in Miller's universe lives in a permanently anxious state, obsessed with status, with finding approval from peer groups, with belonging. The fact that some consumer products might also make you safer, more com-

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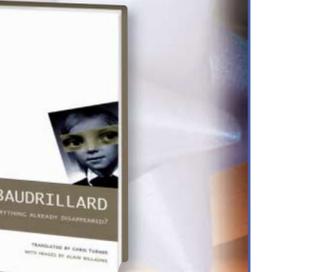
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portable or save you time for more worthwhile activities barely figures.

Tyler Cowen's new book, *Create Your Own Economy: The path to prosperity in a disordered world*, is much more consistently optimistic than Miller's, sounding positively lyrical about the opportunities that modern consumer culture opens up. Cowen, who teaches economics at George Mason University, is one of the two bloggers behind marginalrevolution.com, the best of all the economics blogs known to me (not least because it ranges far and wide beyond economics). His contributions to the technology of modern living include the invention of the thirty-six-hour day (the secret of which he unfortunately declines to communicate to others, except in tantalizing fragments of advice such as the futility of reading most books to the end, advice I tried but failed to follow with his latest work). He has written stimulatingly about the effects of globalization and the spread of markets on modern culture. And in this book he does something very original.

Cowen first notes that modern consumers can assemble cultural products to suit their own tastes much more easily and cheaply than ever before (compare playlists on your iPod with ten-hour performances of Japanese Noh theatre). In that sense they "create their own economies" inside their heads, in contrast to the more conventional economies that are assembled for us by traditional manufacturers. He makes an arresting comparison of the evolution of culture to the difference between marriage and a long-distance love affair (an eighteenth-century music lover could count on occasional sublime experiences with long empty stretches in between, a modern one can shuffle instantly between thousands of recordings, mixing and matching agreeably but blandly and never going

without musical company if she doesn't want to). Cowen then points out that an unforeseen side-effect of such modern technological developments is to grant new opportunities and value to many of the personality traits that are associated with high-functioning autism: organizing, classifying, list-making – imposing structure on an avalanche of information, in other words. Far from being deficient, many autists are a great deal better prepared than the rest of the population to make the most of the information economy. Indeed, Cowen's book is a resounding and often moving defence of the claims of autists to be treated without the condescension that so often accompanies public discussions of autism. He notes, for instance, that most education systems spend a lot of time teaching non-autists the skills that come naturally to autists (which is why so many autists are bored at school), while doing little to teach autists the social skills that come more naturally to non-autists. It's no wonder that autists come out looking disadvantaged.

Cowen's writing is always stimulating and sometimes very funny (it is also a little breathless to read, and would have benefited from closer editing). A typical passage, discussing how to interpret economic studies of the rate of return to education: "The sorry truth is that no one has compared modern education to a placebo. What if we just gave people lots of face-to-face contact and told them they were being educated?". A moment later he has second thoughts: "Maybe that's what current methods of education already consist of". Cowen's optimism may miss, though, some of the dangers inherent in the way the information industries are evolving. These are industries in which, in the future, the fundamental scarce resource will be access to user attention. They contrast not only (and obviously) with traditional heavy industries in

which energy, labour and raw materials were the underlying scarce resources; they also contrast, less obviously, with traditional knowledge-based industries in which the scarce resource was the effort of skilled people, and the patient application of trained talent could normally be relied on to generate reasonable economic rewards. In the information industries of the future, much patient application of trained talent will not yield any economic rewards at all, as the growing accumulation of unread blogs, remaindered novels, unused software and unwatched YouTube clips awaits. The rewards will be reaped by those who are not just skilled and hard-working but who have a talent for persuading consumers of information to grant them a share of their scarce attention. And that talent may turn out to be a lot more unequally distributed than were traditional skills; it may also be more resistant to the inequality-reducing effects of traditional education techniques.

Cowen's book is a lot less concerned than Miller's about the wasteful effects of signalling (he takes the abundance of ingredients from which we can create our own economies to be an almost unmixed blessing). It would be good to know more about how interesting to interpret economic studies of the rate of return to education: "The sorry truth is that no one has compared modern education to a placebo. What if we just gave people lots of face-to-face contact and told them they were being educated?". A moment later he has second thoughts: "Maybe that's what current methods of education already consist of". Cowen's optimism may miss, though, some of the dangers inherent in the way the information industries are evolving. These are industries in which, in the future, the fundamental scarce resource will be access to user attention. They contrast not only (and obviously) with traditional heavy industries in

chains that link every product and its multiple impacts – carbon footprints, chemicals of concern, treatment of workers, and the like – into systematic forces that count in sales . . . software [will] manipulate massive collections of data and display them as a simple readout for making decisions. Once we know the true impacts of our shopping choices, we can use that information to accelerate incremental changes for the better.

As Goleman realizes, having information about carbon footprints and treatment of workers will not help us to decide what to buy until we have worked out how to weigh one dimension of concern against the other. But he doesn't have much to say about how we can do the weighing. No animals were harmed in the writing of this book review, and no child labour was involved, but considerable amounts of non-shade-grown coffee were drunk. Would it have been better if I had drunk less coffee but taken an occasional kick in the direction of the neighbours' cat, or had got my son to write the review for me? (I'm not sure I want to know the answer to that last one.)

It is one of the virtues of market mechanisms for dealing with the impacts of shopping that they simplify the information we have to master. If it's set at a reasonable rate, a carbon tax means you don't have to worry directly about your carbon footprint, because it gets factored into the price of the things you buy. That avoids bombarding consumers with information about the carbon footprint of every product, thereby freeing up their time to do other things in the supermarket, whether it's shuffling the playlists on their iPods or flirting in the aisles. It is one of the great virtues of the market mechanism, and one worth emphasizing now that the financial crisis has brought the failings of certain markets so spectacularly to our attention.

## Evening all

JERRY WHITE  
Clive Emsley  
THE GREAT BRITISH BOBBY  
A history of British policing from the eighteenth century to the present  
324pp. Quercus. £20.  
978 1 84724 947 0

*Great British Bobby: A history of British policing from the eighteenth century to the present* addresses a wider audience. At first glance the title might indicate a return to the sort of uncritical celebration that Emsley has worked tirelessly to correct. To that extent the title misleads. Despite the odd twee reference to "Bobby at war" or "Bobby served on the front line", it is in fact a judicious and scholarly popular history of ambitious scope. In his main ambition, Emsley succeeds brilliantly. He sets out to put the individual police officer, particularly the constable, centre stage. *The Great British Bobby* is a signally well-people history from below, almost a collective biography. We read of Robert Hunter, for instance, a Westminster watchman who in 1782 disturbed three burglars armed with cutlasses: stabbed in the

stomach, he still managed to give chase and arrest one of them. We also read of PC James McFadden, who was shot and beaten by three desperados near Lowestoft in 1844 and died of his wounds; of Eric Royden in 1950s Liverpool, having to deal with marching Orangemen who, bible in hand, were furiously assaulting anyone who dared trespass on their route; and of dozens more. Through skilful use of the Open University's police oral history archive, Emsley balances out the quotidian with the sensational. And he is always alert to the misdemeanours of constabulary life – the drunkenness, the "open-handed smacks", the forced confessions, the petty venality, that dark side of the force that he weighs in the balance against a more complacent view of the British police.

At times Emsley has been too ambitious. He has followed "Bobby" far and wide, indeed so very far that he has become hard to recognize. The peculiar difficulties involved in policing Ireland in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries established an alternative semi-militarized tradition to that on the mainland. Colonial policing tended to follow the Royal Irish Constabulary's example, itself of course colonial, though many hankered after the domesticated version as established in