Why we walk the dog

eoffrey Miller is well known for his book *The Mating Mind* (2001), which argued that sexual selection has been more important than adaptation to our natural environment in driving the evolution of the human brain. Women find intelligence sexy (which explains the adaptive pressure on men) and women need intelligence to discriminate among intellectually pretentious men, which explains the adaptive pressure on women. Gullible females end up with articulate con men, so they're worse off on both counts. In Spent, Miller broadens the theme to signalling, which is not just sexual, ample though the catalogue of sexual signals may be. He focuses on the kinds of signals we send through the consumer products we buy and display – and in particular those that signal our personality characteristics, which for him means the "Central Six" that psychologists have categorized: general intelligence, openness to experience, conscientiousness, that - you wouldn't necessarily want to tiousness, because it's just too hard for a low- United States are large and thirsty cars? Dolagreeableness, stability and extraversion. spend time with someone who was a lot more conscientiousness type like you to do? Or lar for dollar, diamonds are so much greener. Being able to signal our characteristics is conscientious than you, though that might that you're positively signalling intelligence, Thoughts like these can easily prompt the important because the perception by others of depend on whether you wanted them to be because you want people to think you can do reflection that it ought to be easy to find ways

intellectual, sexual. But signals have to be credible, which means that they need to be too costly for someone to fake. Sometimes, when what matters is just matching up with others who are like you, they're costly for the faker without wouldn't sport an Obama bumper sticker if in fact you were a McCain supporter, nor vice versa; otherwise you'd end up associating with the wrong crowd. Ditto a whole panoply of signals, from football supporters' kit to the way cruising homosexuals hang their keys.

to join us in all of the encounters and partner-

ships we undertake: social, professional,

But at other times, the wrong types may indeed want the bumper sticker, as it were; so, in order to be too costly for the faker, the bumper sticker has to be costly for the genuine signaller too. Given how attractive the rich are to potential mates, many would like to pretend to be richer than they are. So to send a credible signal about their vast earning power, the truly rich have to waste money on baubles whose only merit is their being unaffordable to the poor. To signal their intelligence the brainy may likewise have to do some really pointless and wasteful things (like write sonnets or compose symphonies) that are just too difficult for the unintelligent person to do. That said, natural selection has, over vast stretches of time, trained us to want to do these things, so that sonnets and symphonies (or at least the best of them) cease to seem so pointless and wasteful. But they are

they are effective when what matters is something more credible as well. Six personality characteristics is often like amount of time and effort they require, and ally important for the message. The signal ucts might also make you safer, more com-

PAUL SEABRIGHT

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.

choose rare breeds that by temperament or you may pay her more attention if you're not fragile health require almost constant atten- sure whether she is really giving you the eye tion. Why do they do it? Miller tells us that than if you're certain that she is. And the the time and effort are not an incidental cost; background culture matters too: exchanged they are the whole point. Owning such a pet glances that would be regarded as harassment is a credible signal (because a costly one) that in Pittsburgh can be interpreted as flattering you score high on conscientiousness, which on the streets of Paris. is what you may need if you want to hook up But signalling can be really costly too, with others (including romantic partners) because both parties to a partnership are who are on the look out for that kind of spending energy, time and other psychologipersonality. No such person would take a cal and material resources which, if not bumper sticker's word for it. That explains devoted to signalling, could have done good why the easiest opportunities for a single to them both. How many marriages have man to strike up a conversation with a single foundered because of the frown-and-sigh woman in the street arise if each of them is trap, both parties signalling continually how walking a dog.

tions for signalling to coexist, making interalso brings them delight? How much will it pretation difficult. Does having an untidy cost the planet that the culturally approved desk mean that you aren't signalling consciences that signal success in the those characteristics affects their willingness your sexual partner or your tax accountant. brilliant work without the benefit of the to signal so much less wastefully than we



A Louis Vuitton store in Omotesando, Tokyo, 2007

But even so, it is often tempting to claim to bureaucratic tidyness that propels lesser ing problems than for cases where there are Miller entertainingly decodes the signals score a little higher on each of these scales minds to success? The confusions that can be real incentives to fake, which the internet we all send every day and the signals advertistion than you actually do, so an element of costly generated by such multiple interpretations makes joyously easy on occasion. At other ers send us in return, as they try to persuade signalling is important for keeping exaggera- are sometimes comic, sometimes really dan- times, he sounds a predominantly angry note us that their wares are the best signals for us tion on a leash. A bumper sticker is fine to gerous (see Woody Allen's entire oeuvre for about the ingenuity with which firms turn our to deploy. He's particularly amusing on indicate roughly which crowd you want to the former, and Diego Gambetta's excellent urge to signal into an extravagant demand for bumper stickers, which are cheap signals of hang out with, but for a more ambitious objective recent book Codes of the Underworld: How their goods and services. Either way, the con-

matching with people who are like you. Like getting a dog. Many people are put and the latter). Matching according to most of the Central off from owning household pets by the Sometimes a degree of ambiguity is actu- belonging. The fact that some consumer prod-

personality type. Because they are cheap, tive (like a sexual partnership) you may need criminals communicate - to be reviewed in a sumer in Miller's universe lives in a permafuture issue of the TLS – for both the former nently anxious state, obsessed with status,

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 find it all the more baffling that some owners sharpens our sensitivity enjoyably to the task:

much it costs them to contribute to the rela-It's common for different possible motivationship, at the expense of signalling that it

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 some-

thing 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 waste-

fully, but many of us are mighty glad he did.

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 characteris-

tics, though that seems easier for pure match-

At times, Miller comes across as broadly optimistic about the future of consumer

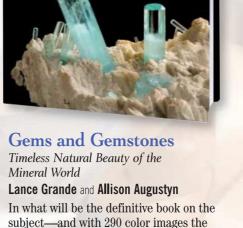
Noel Kingsbury "In Hybrid we learn that there was a green revolution in eleventh-century actually do. Miller indulges in various fanta-China when a visionary emperor imported new strains of rice from Indochina; how sies along these lines (your IO score or your working men in nineteenth-century DNA profile tattooed on your forehead), together with some more practical consumerberry breeding, and how a German doctor friendly suggestions about how to signal our discovered hybrid vigor in plants. Hybrid personalities and our talents at lower than the book displays, like hybrids themselves, usual expense (buy things second-hand, all the marvelous fruit of miscellany." make them yourself, commission a local arti-—Jonathan Silvertown, author of san to make one, and so forth). Though this is An Orchard Invisible mostly sound advice, these suggestions do raise a profound question about whether



The History and Science of Plant Breeding

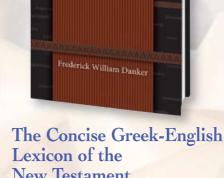
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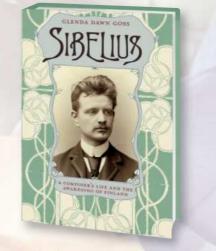


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The Idea of Communism Tarig Ali

November 9, 2009 marked 20 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the nonumental event that signaled the beginning of the end of Communism in the former Soviet Union. Yet, why was this collapse of Communism considered final, while the many failures of capitalism are considered temporary and episodic? In The Idea of Communism, Tariq Ali addresses this very question.



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fortable or save you time for more worth- without musical company if she doesn't want which energy, labour and raw materials were

ing agreeably but blandly and never going ously) with traditional heavy industries in Radical transparency [which] converts the markets so spectacularly to our attention.

ne night in the 1890s, PC Tom Divall was on duty near Deptford's Foreign

roughs singing and shouting" in the street but

one "wouldn't budge, so, being aroused, I

gave him a good open-handed smack on the

side of his face". The man duly budged. But

his inspector had secretly watched the

encounter, crept up behind Divall, gave him

"an awful bang on the head, which stunned

me for some seconds" and told him, "'I'll

teach you better than to hit a man under a

street lamp!"".

Cattle Market. He moved on "a lot of

to). Cowen then points out that an unforeseen the underlying scarce resources; they also con-Tyler Cowen's new book, Create Your side-effect of such modern technological trast, less obviously, with traditional knowl-Own Economy: The path to prosperity in a developments is to grant new opportunities edge-based industries in which the scarce disordered world, is much more consistently and value to many of the personality traits resource was the effort of skilled people, and optimistic than Miller's, sounding positively that are associated with high-functioning the patient application of trained talent could lyrical about the opportunities that modern autism: organizing, classifying, list-making - normally be relied on to generate reasonable consumer culture opens up. Cowen, imposing structure on an avalanche of infor- economic rewards. In the information induswho teaches economics at George Mason mation, in other words. Far from being defi-University, is one of the two bloggers behind cient, many autists are a great deal better pre- trained talent will not yield any economic marginalrevolution.com, the best of all the pared than the rest of the population to make rewards at all, as the growing accumulation economics blogs known to me (not least the most of the information economy. of unread blogs, remaindered novels, unused about carbon footprints and treatment of because it ranges far and wide beyond eco- Indeed, Cowen's book is a resounding and software and unwatched YouTube clips workers will not help us to decide what to nomics). His contributions to the technology often moving defence of the claims of autists attests. The rewards will be reaped by those buy until we have worked out how to weigh of modern living include the invention of the to be treated without the condescension that who are not just skilled and hard-working but one dimension of concern against the other thirty-six-hour day (the secret of which he so often accompanies public discussions of who have a talent for persuading consumers But he doesn't have much to say about how unfortunately declines to communicate to autism. He notes, for instance, that most edu- of information to grant them a share of their we can do the weighing. No animals were others, except in tantalizing fragments of cation systems spend a lot of time teaching scarce attention. And that talent may turn out harmed in the writing of this book review, advice such as the futility of reading most non-autists the skills that come naturally to to be a lot more unequally distributed than and no child labour was involved, but conbooks to the end, advice I tried but failed to autists (which is why so many autists are were traditional skills; it may also be more siderable amounts of non-shade-grown coffollow with his latest work). He has written bored at school), while doing little to teach resistant to the inequality-reducing effects of fee were drunk. Would it have been better if l stimulatingly about the effects of globaliza- autists the social skills than come more natu- traditional education techniques. tion and the spread of markets on modern cul- rally to non-autists. It's no wonder that Cowen's book is a lot less concerned than kick in the direction of the neighbours' cat, or

Cowen's writing is always stimulating and ling (he takes the abundance of ingredients (I'm not sure I want to know the answer to Cowen first notes that modern consumers sometimes very funny (it is also a little breath- from which we can create our own eco- that last one.) can assemble cultural products to suit their less to read, and would have benefited from nomies to be an almost unmixed blessing). It It is one of the virtues of market mechaown tastes much more easily and cheaply closer editing). A typical passage, discussing would be good to know more about how internisms for dealing with the impacts of shopthan ever before (compare playlists on your how to interpret economic studies of the rate net and other technologies are changing what ping that they simplify the information we iPod with ten-hour performances of Japanese of return to education: "The sorry truth is that experts call the "signal-to-noise ratio" in have to master. If it's set at a reasonable rate, Noh theatre). In that sense they "create their no one has compared modern education to a modern communication. Many enthusiasts a carbon tax means you don't have to worry own economies" inside their heads, in conplacebo. What if we just gave people lots of for the internet underestimate the sheer diffidirectly about your carbon footprint, because trast to the more conventional economies that face-to-face contact and told them they were culty of digesting the vast quantities of infor- it gets factored into the price of the things are assembled for us by traditional manufacbeing educated?". A moment later he has mation that anyone with a broadband connecby ou buy. That avoids bombarding consumers turers. He makes an arresting comparison of second thoughts: "Maybe that's what current tion can now access from anywhere in the with information about the carbon footprint the evolution of culture to the difference methods of education already consist of". world. One such enthusiast is Daniel Gole- of every product, thereby freeing up their between marriage and a long-distance love Cowen's optimism may miss, though, some man, whose new book Ecological Intelli- time to do other things in the supermarket affair (an eighteenth-century music lover of the dangers inherent in the way the infor- gence: Knowing the hidden impacts of what whether it's shuffling the playlists on their could count on occasional sublime experimation industries are evolving. These are we buy is a manifesto for a supercharged conipods or flirting in the aisles. It is one of the ences with long empty stretches in between, a industries in which, in the future, the funda- sumer vigilantism against the damaging side- great virtues of the market mechanism, and modern one can shuffle instantly between mental scarce resource will be access to user effects of consumer spending. In his own one worth emphasizing now that the financial thousands of recordings, mixing and match- attention. They contrast not only (and obvi- words, we are entering an era of

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 As Goleman realizes, having information

had drunk less coffee but taken an occasional ture. And in this book he does something autists come out looking disadvantaged. Miller's about the wasteful effects of signal- had got my son to write the review for me

crisis has brought the failings of certain

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

Divall's career – though not this particular smack – is one of many that feature in Clive Great British Bobby: A history of British history archive, Emsley balances out the quo-Emsley's new study of English policing over policing from the eighteenth century to the tidian with the sensational. And he is always improved. He does not venture to explain why three centuries. Emsley, of course, is on a present addresses a wider audience. At first alert to the misdemeanours of constabulary much British policing – uniquely, I think well-trodden beat. His The English Police: A glance the title might indicate a return to the life – the drunkenness, the "open-handed within the public service – allowed itself to political and social history (1991) has sort of uncritical celebration that Emsley has smacks", the forced confessions, the petty become so profoundly racist, apparently from become a classic university text. It marked a worked tirelessly to correct. To that extent venality, that dark side of the force that he top to bottom. Nor does he reflect here on the refreshing departure from a long Whiggish the title misleads. Despite the odd twee refer- weighs in the balance against a more compla- future direction of policing in Britain. Yet if tradition of police studies casting the creation ence to "Bobby at war" or "Bobby served on cent view of the British police. of the Metropolitan Police in 1829, and suc- the front line", it is in fact a judicious and At times Emsley has been too ambitious. here, and in such a book addressed to the intelcessive provincial understudies, as a triumph scholarly popular history of ambitious scope. He has followed "Bobby" far and wide, ligent general reader, who is?

from strength to strength. Emsley redrew that brilliantly. He sets out to put the individual recognize. The peculiar difficulties involved his whole career has to some extent been picture. He emphasized the good points of police officer, particularly the constable, in policing Ireland in the nineteenth and paying respect to the policeman father he loss the parish system that went before and the centre stage. The Great British Bobby is a twentieth centuries established an alternative during the Second World War, and whom he bad points of the force that emerged from signally well-peopled history from below, semi-militarized tradition to that on the main-never knew. It was brave of him to say so. Peel's reforms, and paid as much regard to almost a collective biography. We read of land. Colonial policing tended to follow the This book, so lively, enjoyable and hugely the vulnerabilities of the men and women in Robert Hunter, for instance, a Westminster Royal Irish Constabulary's example, itself of knowledgeable, is one further eloquent act of watchman who in 1782 disturbed three bur- course colonial, though many hankered after homage. It deserves, and will surely get, a As the title of his new book suggests, The glars armed with cutlasses: stabbed in the domesticated version as established in very wide audience indeed.

desperados near Lowestoft in 1844 and died Emsley had kept closer to home. men who, bible in hand, were furiously effacing to the point of self-denial. I'm sure assaulting anyone who dared trespass on his readers would love to know what he thinks their route; and of dozens more. Through skil- about that enduring canker of British policing. ful use of the Open University's police oral the detective branch or "force within a force";

of modernity that had subsequently gone In his main ambition, Emsley succeeds indeed so very far that he has become hard to As he points out in the introduction.

colonial forces, in the limited space available to him, can only be skimpy and unsatisfying Even the Scottish dimension receives scant stomach, he still managed to give chase and attention for what, one imagines, are numerarrest one of them. We also read of PC James ous cultural, legal and historical particulari-McFadden, who was shot and beaten by three ties. It would have been better, I think, if of his wounds; of Eric Royden in 1950s Liver- And in one area perhaps he has not been pool, having to deal with marching Orange- ambitious enough. He has been self-

London. Emsley's coverage of the Irish and

Emsley isn't qualified to offer some guidance