

## Evolutionary Psychology

www.epjournal.net – 2008.6(1): 125-128

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### Book Review

#### A Better Metaphor

A Review of Gad Saad, *The Evolutionary Bases of Consumption*. LEA/Psychology Press: Mahwah, N.J., 2007. US\$110(hardback), US\$33.90 (paperback). 339 pp. ISBN 978-0-8058-5149-6

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What is a good metaphor for the word “synthesis?” In classroom lectures, E.O. Wilson would invoke the image of a theoretical skeleton upon which one can hang the facts. For Wilson, the bones were the five agents of microevolution and the flesh, disparate empirical findings. Although vivid, the metaphor fails to capture the sociology of scientific discovery: calculated risk-taking with its own Darwinian process of winnowing hypotheses that fail to meet the accepted threshold of evidence. Wilson’s metaphor would not do justice to the feat achieved in *The Evolutionary Bases of Consumption*. The author, Gad Saad, has done more than just hang the facts of consumer behavior onto the skeleton of evolutionary psychology. He has given us a map of the literature where the curious reader is encouraged to probe the hinterlands.

So, in answer to my own question, I would invoke the cover design of *ECONOMICS* 17<sup>th</sup> edition (Samuelson and Nordhaus, 2002): a jigsaw puzzle of the world globe fragmented into amoeba shaped pieces. In my metaphor, the pieces are human anatomy, morphology, physiology, *and* behavior. Some have snapped into place and generated a continuous region (e.g., Saad’s analysis of status and consumer behavior is brilliant) while others remain elusive (some 40 years after *The Naked Ape* and no one has really explained body hair). Unlike Wilson’s skeleton and flesh, my metaphor implies the dynamics of discovery: a piece that fits into a periphery of conjoined pieces does not necessarily mean that it belongs there. Does compulsive buying really belong to the reproduction module (status signaling), or to survival (hoarding)? Is voluntary unemployment “sloth” or resistance to *low* status jobs? Saad argues for the former in both cases (p. 263, 221), but as any jigsaw junkie knows, two or more pieces may have isomorphic protrusions. Precisely because Saad recognizes that future research streams will elucidate emerging patterns, a puzzle is indeed a better metaphor than a skeleton. Pieces belonging to the continent “behavior” may even turn out to be land bridges in explaining the evolution of human anatomy, morphology, and physiology.

Saad begins the book relating what he felt when he first confronted human evolution: epiphany (p. xiii). He prefaces the remark by saying many accomplished scholars have expressed the same feeling. Critics may deride such commentary as “vaulting

ambition,” but Saad is really being quite modest. What he has synthesized in a mere 264 pages of text is much more than *The Evolutionary Bases of Consumption*. As an economist, I would say that Saad has achieved “The Evolution of Human Preferences” [disclosure if this review seems overly enthusiastic: I wrote the first dissertation on the economic implications of sociobiology (Vogel, 1987)].

As Saad makes perfectly clear, context is everything in any such synthesis: “evolutionary psychology proposes that the human mind is equipped with domain-specific modules that have evolved to solve specific and recurring survival problems” [p. 33]. He then methodically examines, *inter alia*, information search in mating; appearance-enhancing products and services, conspicuous consumption, gift-giving and philanthropy, depictions of masculinity and femininity, cultural products (e.g., television; soap operas; songs and videos), and the cleverly labeled “‘dark-side’ consumption” illustrated through the seven deadly sins. By synthesizing so many research streams, *The Evolutionary Bases of Consumption* can become a complement to economics textbooks in a way that is intellectually liberating. But why settle for a peripheral add-on? With the word “transdisciplinary” so often bandied about in mission statements, Saad’s book could easily become the core text for “The Evolution of Human Preferences,” attracting students from just about any faculty.

My enthusiasm arises from Saad’s *tour de force* of the literature. The text is rich in citations (some 783 to be exact) and extremely current (more than half published in the last ten years). I found myself re-reading many concise sentences but patience is also richly rewarded. Each of the seven chapters offers a handsome return on even a minimal investment. Nothing persuades like an example and so I ask myself, how did the book help me define my own research stream? My expertise is in the economics of intellectual property rights and access to genetic resources, which I have recently extended to geographic indications (Vogel, Robles, Gomides, and Muñiz, in press). The only two rubrics of intangible property with which man evolved are trade secrets and geographic indications. Hence, an evolutionary hypothesis emerges: respect for trade secrets and geographic indications should be easier to cultivate than respect for patents, copyrights, and all the other new-fangled *sui generis* legislations (e.g., US Digital Millennium Copyright Act). In other words, *Homo sapiens sapiens* simply did not evolve in the context of the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) much less the WEB. As E.O. Wilson constantly reminds us, we did evolve with gossip (secrets) and a sense of place (geographic indications).

If readers are rational, *The Evolutionary Bases of Consumption* should suggest similar hypotheses in their own research streams. Alas, the rub is in the premise of my prior sentence. The domain-specific modules that underpin evolutionary psychology may also militate against such curiosity. My fear is that the book will trigger dismissal due to the “reciprocation” and “survival” modules. For example, economists are catechized that “individual preferences are to count” [Paul Samuelson’s linchpin assumption in his seminal *The Foundations of Economic Analysis*, 1947, p. 233], *ergo*, the ultimate causation of behavior is not *terra incognita* as my metaphor would imply---it is simply *VERBOTEN*. From Economics 101 onward, professors instruct students not to ask “why” certain goods and services are preferred---every last neuron must be reserved for “what,” “how” and “for

whom” goods and services are produced (see Chapter Two, Samuelson and Nordhaus, 2002). Complementing the suppressed “why” question is the suppressed “where” question. Where do all the wastes go? And from where have we extracted the inputs of those goods and services? Alfred North Whitehead (1929) identified the illogic of such suppression as “the fallacy of misplaced concreteness” and the fallacy has become foundational to the critique of neoclassical economics, known as “ecological economics” (see Daly and Foley, 2003). If and when university administrators combine ecological economics with evolutionary psychology into a truly transdisciplinary curriculum, I sincerely hope Saad’s text will be a required reading.

No review would be complete if the reviewer did not also elaborate the perceived deficiencies of a book. They are largely ones of omission and, in all fairness to both the author and editor, undoubtedly reflect the typical tradeoffs of authorship and publishing. On the publishing side, missing is a glossary: many biological terms are likely to be unfamiliar to the reader who hails from the social sciences and vice versa (the humanities student would be totally frustrated). For the book to be used as a textbook, a glossary is essential and perhaps could be uploaded on the Internet. On the authorship side, absent is what Wilson saw as a key quadrant in *Consilience: environmental policy* (1998, p. 10). Where is the biophilia hypothesis? Surely, with tourism accounting for 11% of the global economy (UNEP, 2005), biophilia has much to do with tourist spending (ask any lucky Costa Rican or unlucky Haitian). Related is the “Tragedy of the Commons” (Hardin, 1968) which is never brooked in the context of the collapse of resources bases. “The Tragedy” is mentioned only once in an explanation of The Prisoner’s Dilemma, i.e., everyone would be better off not to partake in wasteful status signaling (p. 94) *if and only if* everyone else cooperated in not partaking. But “The Tragedy” is so much more than that! Given climate change, mass extinction, depleting aquifers, and so on, the collapse of resource bases has everything to do with consumption (e.g., the impact of lavish lifestyles on climate, etc.). Had Saad addressed environmental policy, he would have taken some of the wind out of the sails of the “just-so” critics who set up straw men while totally ignoring the costs of *not* exploring the evolutionary bases of collapse. Knowledge of how we are inclined “to do the wrong thing” as Hardin perceived long ago, can help us embrace the solution of limits through “mutual coercion, mutually agreed upon.”

All this brings me to what I most wanted to see in the book---an answer to this simple question: Why do some people who have the economic means, choose *not* to consume? For example, university professors are often ascetic and many have even transcended the quest for status (OK, maybe not *that* many). Wilson ended his tumultuous Chapter 27 of *Sociobiology* with a fitting comment from Albert Camus---existentialist *par excellence* (1975, p. 575). So, missing in Saad’s book is the evolutionary bases of transcendentalism. In a collapsing world, the hope for humanity will be transcending “dark side consumption” (p. 219) and knowing its Darwinian roots will most certainly help. One can only wish this book much success and anxiously anticipate the next edition which consolidates the multitude of research streams sparked by this one. My abbreviated list of what’s missing is in many ways the greatest compliment. Inasmuch as Saad could synthesize a torrent of information with much grace and wit, he is, mixing metaphors, not just a cartographer but a (bullet) train in motion. I expect his future contributions to be

evermore amazing.

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