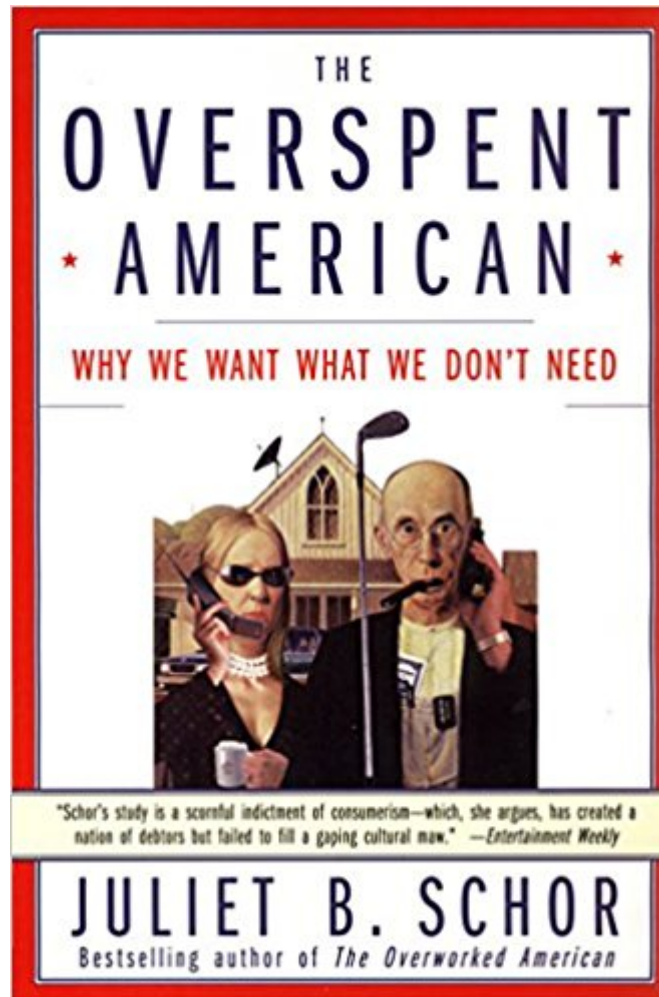


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The Overspent American: Why We Want What We Don't Need



Synopsis

The Overspent American explores why so many of us feel materially dissatisfied, why we work staggeringly long hours and yet walk around with ever-present mental "wish lists" of things to buy or get, and why Americans save less than virtually anyone in the world. Unlike many experts, Harvard economist Juliet B. Schor does not blame consumers' lack of self-discipline. Nor does she blame advertisers. Instead she analyzes the crisis of the American consumer in a culture where spending has become the ultimate social art.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This book is an exploration into our motivations for acquiring mountains of stuff. The book also includes brief descriptions of some groups of people who have managed to get off the acquisitions bandwagon. Schor takes us through some of the classic literature on class and consumption patterns, noting that we make use of lifestyles as a form of social communication. We show our status or place in the hierarchy of society by the goods we own and display. Others may judge us according to our display of goods, or they may choose to challenge our status by some acquisitive one-ups-manship. As an example of such social communication, Schor cites some research she did on cosmetic brands. Of all the types of cosmetics, lipstick is the one most likely to be applied in public. Schor found that women will often choose an expensive brand of lipstick to carry in their purses, especially if they are going to apply it in public where others will see and recognize the tube. But in blind tests, it was found that lipsticks are all more or less equivalent in quality, so women pay

extra just for the visible tube. In contrast, facial cleansers are almost always used in private, and women make their choices between facial cleansers based on what works best, not brand name. This brand consciousness pervades all of our purchasing behavior, whether we are aware of it or not. Think of your living room- -are there furniture brands or types of furniture some people display in their living rooms, but you would not even consider putting in yours because of what it would say about your taste? What statement does your wrist watch say about you?

As a young professional who is lucky enough to make more than most people my age, I was perpetually frustrated by my inability to save. When I whine about the vicious work-and-spend way I was living my life, most of my friends would tell me to just shut the hell up because they simply don't understand how someone with my income could have a difficult time "just keeping up." And then I read "the Overspent American." Now everything is starting to come together. I'm no different than most people in my situation. Apparently, the more you make, the more you spend (because those with money are generally more status-oriented, and "status" requires money...lots and lots of money). Couple this with one's general dissatisfaction in the workplace, and spending goes even higher because people with means buy more things to distract themselves from the general unhappiness that is their life. Lest you think this is a "bleeding heart" book that doesn't put the blame squarely on the shoulders of the irresponsible consumer, let me assure you that this book makes no excuses for our society's poor consumer choices. Like any well-documented social science project, this book merely explains the new consumerism, based on Schor's studies and interviews with downshifters and overspent consumers. It passes no judgment, but it does not give irresponsible consumers an easy scapegoat for their problems either. On the contrary, I felt like this book was a wake-up call. First, it made me feel better simply to know I wasn't the lone idiot who couldn't get my finances together. But second, and more importantly, this book gave me hope. It talks about downshifters and other individuals who have successfully managed to get their consumerism under control.

...Harvard professor Juliet Schor has written a timely and convincing work. Schor's argument is that people are actually happier when they are not obsessed with craving material luxuries. Schor's perspective is balanced, realistic, and moderate. Unlike books that offer advice on money management, Schor cuts to the quick and goes to the heart of the problem: we buy not because we need but because we attempt to find identity, status, or security through our purchases. The volume is divided into seven chapters. The first is titled, "Introduction," but is not really merely an

introduction. It is a chapter in the fullest sense and might better be titled, "overview." Let me share one of numerous quotables from this section: "American consumers are often not conscious of being motivated by social status and are far more likely to attribute such motives to others than to themselves. We live with high levels of psychological denial about the connection between our buying habits and the social statements they make."The second chapter, "Communicating With Commodities" discusses how people crave the standard of living portrayed by television sitcoms. The American majority is frustrated (and sometimes desperate to attain such a standard) because they compare themselves to these fictitious upper middle classed lifestyles. Shcor illustrates where this can lead by referring to the "sneaker murders" where people were actually killed for their shoes (of the "proper" brand, of course).The third chapter, "The Visible Lifestyle" emphasizes the sub-conscious quest for status. In her typically well-balanced perspective, she distinguishes between, "the desire [for] social status [and]...trying to avoid social humiliation." This is a GREAT chapter.

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