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BODY:

"I CAN stand here and look at this for hours," said James B. Twitchell as he parked himself in front of the bottled water section in City Market, just past the jars of \$30-per-pound teas and behind the eight-foot display of imported olive oils.

Mr. Twitchell, a professor of English at the University of Florida in Gainesville, specializes in the Romantic poets, but his real obsession is shopping. Given the choice of reading literary theorists like Foucault or gazing at shelves stacked with artfully shaped bottles of water piled up like Jay Gatsby's beautifully tailored shirts, he would quickly choose the latter. "There is more that I can sustain myself with at the water aisle than in all of modern criticism," he said.

In a series of books, the latest of which is "Living It Up: Our Love Affair With Luxury" (Columbia University Press), Mr. Twitchell has detailed the consumption habits of Americans with all the scholarly delight of a field anthropologist who has discovered the secret courting rituals of a remote tribe. He is exquisitely attuned to the subtle gradations of status conferred by the labels on what people wear, eat, drink, drive and freeze ice cubes in.

And he is not alone. Whether prompted by the 90's spendathon or the endless fascination not only with shopping, but with reading about shopping, a new title by an academic or journalist on the subject appears practically every week. Burlington, where Mr. Twitchell grew up and where he now spends summers, was singled out by David Brooks in his wickedly funny "Bobos in Paradise" as a model Latte Town, a city that has perfectly reconciled the mercenary instincts of the bourgeoisie with the artistic spirit of the bohemians to create an upscale consumer culture.

What distinguishes Mr. Twitchell's study of excessive consumerism, though, is that he applauds it. To him, Evian and Pellegrino, Vermont Pure and Dasani are evidence of what could be called his trickledown theory of luxury: that the defining characteristic of today's society is the average person's embrace of unnecessary consumption, superficial indulgence, wretched excess and endless status-seeking. Oh, earthly paradise!

Once defined by exclusiveness, luxury is now available -- whether in the form of limited-edition coffee at Starbucks or Michael Graves tea kettles at Target -- to all. And that, Mr. Twitchell maintains, is a good thing. Sure, he argues in his book, buying essentially useless luxury items "is one-dimensional, shallow, ahistorical, without memory and expendable. But it is also strangely democratic and unifying. If what you want is peace on earth, a unifying system that transcends religious, cultural and caste differences, well, whoops!, here it is. The Global Village is not the City on the Hill, not quite the Emerald City, and certainly not quite what millennial utopians had in mind, but it is closer to equitable distribution of rank than what other systems have provided."

That is, to say the least, a minority report. For centuries, philosophers, artists and clerics railed against luxury. Ecclesiastical courts forbade most people from eating chocolate, drinking coffee or wearing colors like Prussian blue and royal purple -- "luxuria" that signaled living above one's God-ordered place.

Thorstein Veblen offered the first modern critique of "conspicuous consumption" in his 1899 treatise "The Theory of the Leisure Class." Post-World War II social critics and economists extended Veblen's critique to the expanding middle class. John Kenneth Galbraith warned in "The Affluent Society" of the binge afflicting the postwar generation. Unwitting consumers, he said, were essentially suckered by admen and salesmen into spending money on things they didn't need.

In his 1970 study "The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism" Daniel Bell argued that "the culture was no longer concerned with how to work and achieve, but with how to spend and enjoy." This trend, he warned, could end up undermining the very work ethic that made capitalism function.

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That, obviously, did not happen. If anything people worked more so they could spend more. In "The Overspent American," Juliet B. Schor noted that people no longer compared themselves with others in the same income bracket, but with the richer and more famous they saw on television, propelling them to spend more than they could afford.

To Mr. Twitchell, the naysayers are scolds and spoilsports. Indoor plumbing, sewing machines, dishwashers, college educations, microwaves, coronary bypasses, birth control and air travel all began as luxury items for the wealthy.

Nor are buyers mindlessly duped by canny advertisers into buying items they don't really want, he said. Quite the opposite. They enjoy the sensual feel of an Hermes silk tie, the briny delicacy of Petrossian caviar or simply the sensation of indulging themselves. These things may not bring happiness, but neither does their absence from the lives of people too poor to afford them.

It may seem an odd moment to champion luxury. The spectacular boom of the 90's now looks as if it was partly built on spectacular sleight of hand, with Enron, Global Crossing, Adelphia and WorldCom all recently admitting that billions in reported profits were nonexistent. The moment seems ripe for a chastened culture to repent its indulgences. Reassessing the get-and-spend ethic -- not defending consumerism -- might well be the defining current of the next few years.

The problem with Mr. Twitchell's view, said Robert H. Frank, author of "Luxury Fever," is that our sense of what we need to live comfortably keeps spiraling upward. It is not that luxury spending isn't good for particular individuals, but that it is bad for society overall. "It's like when everybody stands up for a better view, you don't see better than before," Mr. Frank said from his home in Ithaca. There's a lot of waste in luxury spending. Instead of building safer roads or providing better health care, we are spending that money on bigger diamonds and faster cars.

Mr. Twitchell is unpersuaded, however. Walking down Church Street, Burlington's busy pedestrian mall, he pointed out the transformation that the consumer culture has wrought in his hometown. Lean and tanned, with cropped gray hair and rounded tortoise-shell glasses, Mr. Twitchell looks a bit like Dennis the Menace's father after Dennis has grown up, moved across the country and given his old man a few years to recover. "Church Street once serviced needs, now it services desires," Mr. Twitchell said. The optician's shop is gone, and so is Sears and JCPenney. He pointed out the Ann Taylor store, where the Masonic temple used to be. A chic French children's store sits in the old bank.

"The key to modern luxe is that most of us can have a bit of it on the plate," Mr. Twitchell said. "I can't own a Lexus, but I can rent one. I can't go to Bermuda for a winter, but I can have a time share for a weekend. I don't own a yacht but I'm taking a Princess cruise."

The process of democratization is mirrored in Mr. Twitchell's family history. His great-grandfather Andrew A. Buell made his fortune building wooden boxes from Adirondack lumber. Driving up Lodge Road to "the hill," where Mr. Buell built a red stone Romanesque mansion with a copper-topped tower, Mr. Twitchell passed the Burlington Country Club, which his grandfather Marshall Coleman Twitchell helped found. The family's sprawling former home is now a women's dormitory, and the surrounding 66-acre estate serves as the University of Vermont's Redstone campus. A couple of blocks from the hilltop, both in location and status, is the relatively modest white wooden house that Mr. Twitchell, the son of Marshall Coleman Twitchell Jr., an ophthalmologist, and his sisters grew up in.

At that time, said Mr. Twitchell, now 59, one's social place was determined by birth, or "what I call the lucky sperm culture." Today, birth-ordained status has been supplanted by store-bought status. Mr. Twitchell has no regrets about this lost world. "Though I was a beneficiary of it, I'm glad it's over," he said. "There is something refreshing about the material world that downtown Burlington opened up." Compared to the traditional ways of marking status -- race, parentage, accent, private schools -- one's purchases are a preferable way of telling who's up and who's down, he said.

On that point, Mr. Twitchell is not alone. Gary Cross, a historian at Penn State University, said that consumer culture in one sense is "democracy's highest achievement, giving meaning and dignity to people when workplace participation, ethnic solidarity and even representative democracy have failed."

Still, as Mr. Cross argued in 2000 in "An All-Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in Modern America," "most of us, no matter our politics, are repulsed by the absolute identity of society with the market and individual choice with shopping."

True enough, Mr. Twitchell readily conceded. But he maintains the critics are missing the essential characteristic of luxury spending. "Luxury has very little to do with money or things," he said. "Luxury is a story we tell about things," and it's ultimately the story we are after. That is, our purchases are imbued with elaborate narratives about the life we want to live.

It is advertisers and manufacturers who give objects meaning by constructing the stories about them, Mr. Twitchell said, and that meaning is as much a source of desire as the object itself. Think of the elaborate fantasies spun by marketers like Ralph Lauren and Martha Stewart.

It goes for whatever you're buying, whether it's Jimmy Choo, Birkenstock or Payless shoes. When Mr. Twitchell, a dedicated factory outlet shopper, flashes his member's card at Sam's Club, "the allure is not just that I'm saving money," he said, "but that I'm smarter and savvier, that I'm duping the dufer."

Or consider an experiment he performed on his colleagues. He told some English professors that he was going to spend \$6,000 to buy an 1850 copy of Wordsworth's "Prelude." Brilliant idea, everyone said. A few days later, Mr. Twitchell told the same colleagues that he had changed his mind and was going to use the \$6,000 to buy a used BMW. "I

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could have said that I was investing in a collection of Beanie Babies comics or a diamond pinkie ring for the shocked response that I got," he wrote.

Critics of consumption will say they are making a moral argument, Mr. Twitchell said, but "often what is condemned as luxury is really just a matter of taste."

To Mr. Twitchell, as long as human beings crave sensation, they will desire material goods and luxurious ones at that, Wall Street scandals notwithstanding. "If this year it's Enron and WorldCom, then another year it was Long-Term Capital Management," he said.

Recessions may come and go, but consumption is eternal. The ad slogan is right: Diamonds are forever.

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GRAPHIC: Photos: SHOP TALK -- James B. Twitchell, a scholar of shopping, amid the condiments in Burlington, Vt. He defends purchases like, clockwise from the Franck Muller watch, Fendi bags, Manolo Blahnik shoes and Range Rovers, (Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times; center, Nancie Battaglia for The New York Times; top right, Naum Kazhdan/The New York Times; left, Reuters)(pg. 1); WELL WATERED -- James B. Twitchell, with a priceless backdrop: Lake Champlain. (Nancie Battaglia for The New York Times); TRICKLEDOWN -- Sleek tea kettles by Michael Graves are sold at Target. (Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times)(pg. 2)

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