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The American Dream: A Theoretical Approach to Understanding Consumer Capitalism

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INTRODUCTION

The American dream is a dream of the everyman of a land of opportunity, the opportunity to climb one's way to middle-class comfort. The term 'American dream' was coined by James Truslow Adams in *The Epic of America* (1931). Adams (1931:404), writing of Americanism as embodied in the founders, stated that "it is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position". This definition implies that attainment of material goods (motor cars and high wages) forms at least part of the dream. It further implies that historically men and women had been limited in opportunity based on their social class. Finally, it implies that each person should succeed or fail based on his inborn abilities or lack thereof. This gives rise to the two-fold notion that 1) people are born with natural indwelling traits which will garner them success in a social world, and 2) that people can draw upon these traits at will given the chance to do so. The significance of this definition is that an individual has the power over his own material destiny in spite of prior social position or the workings of the economic and cultural structures. Using various contemporary theories as a framework through which to view the concept of the American dream (and by extension the Canadian dream), I will argue that the American dream represents the ideological identity of a nation that is based on and is maintained by rational economic and cultural structures and that its main purpose is to keep the worker producing and consuming. Through Horkheimer, I will develop the idea of how the American dream became the guiding ethos of an entire country. I will move onto Berger and Luckmann as well as Bourdieu to discuss how the dream became rooted in social life and its reproduction and evolution. Finally, I will turn to Baudrillard for his insights on

how the dream is communicated through media.

HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

New England was initially settled by the Puritans in the mid-17th century. The 13 colonies lived relatively peaceably until about the late 18th century when Britain set out to tax the colonies without representation in parliament. One of the most influential men of that era was Benjamin Franklin. His Puritan/capitalist values were quoted verbatim in Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904). Franklin's words were not just a call to a means of earning a living, but the pronouncement of an ethos that would thereafter guide America (Weber, 1904). Contained within his words were instructions for modern capitalism.

In the midst of the Revolutionary war, America officially declared its independence from Britain with the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, which guaranteed inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. In 1789, the United States Constitution was signed into effect. Franklin was a signatory to the Declaration and the Constitution. His popularity was evident at his funeral shortly afterward, where some 20,000 people were in attendance (Net 1). Weber theorized that the Protestant work ethic and the religious pursuit of asceticism espoused by Franklin were carried into the economic affairs of Americans, which unleashed a process of rationalization creating an "iron cage" from which there was little chance of escape (Weber, 1904). Thus, the combination of capitalism and bureaucratic forms of organization helped to determine one's employment prospect, rather than one's innate abilities. The legitimation of working for work's sake resulted from the secularization of the Protestant work ethic (Weber, 1904). The mantra of hard work and earning spread like wildfire.

LATE MODERNITY AND THE MOVE TO CONSUMERISM

Any discussion of socioeconomic phenomena must include the critical perspective. In *Eclipse of Reason* (1947a), Horkheimer laments the loss of individualistic pursuit of business to the grasp of corporate America. The family was once the seat of earning through individual enterprise and competition, and family businesses were passed down to the next generation. A man worked for not only his own future but for that of his children and grandchildren (Horkheimer, 1947a). According to Horkheimer, that changed with modern capitalism. Future economic stability of the family now depended on the economic structure. Jobs could be lost through automation or market irregularities. Horkheimer was saying that a man had lost his ability to choose his economic pursuits and that he had become merely a tool in the economic structure. He further argued that people did not speak out against this repression because it was traditional for social order to be maintained by pressures from without in the form of norms and mores. However, now that pressure was labour-related (Horkheimer, 1947a). In his observation “[t]he machine has dropped the driver; it is racing blindly into space (Horkheimer, 1947b:128),” Horkheimer conveyed the message that advances in technology were such that society was preoccupied with what it could accomplish rather than with whether it should. Therein lay the eclipse of reason, which refers to the lack of agency or individuality of man. I contend that through post-Industrial Revolution capitalism, the need to earn ever-increasing amounts of money to buy the goods produced by him was determinative of people’s economic choices and stability of future earnings. The machine had not only dropped the driver, it had dominion over him. Horkheimer argued that an individual’s ability to negate the status quo had been lost. Accordingly, he was helpless to change his material existence. Bourgeois liberalism promoted conformity through self-interested success in the free market (Horkheimer, 1947a). This means

that 'individuality', in the liberal bourgeois sense, had only the pursuit of material wellbeing as its goal. (Horkheimer, 1947b:139). In other words, the economy shifted from competing true individual interests to a collective chase of wealth through commerce. So, individuality gave way to conformity in the face of mass industrialism and the American dream was born.

Horkheimer (1947a) theorized that groups now shaped the individual identity. The individual learned to rely on his labour groups (employers and unions) and his cultural groups (advertising and entertainment), which duplicated the "surface of reality (p. 100)." So lifelike are the reproductions of the structure that we fail to see the false consciousness being instilled within us (Horkheimer, 1947a). Horkheimer stated that "[a]s religious and moral ideologies fade...the ideas of workers tend to be molded [sic] by the business ideology of their leaders (Horkheimer, 1947b1, p. 149)." I would argue that the business ideology is growth and prosperity of the business through consumerism. Labour was an end in itself because it no longer held any meaning to the worker but merely furthered the owner's financial success. Horkheimer had no problem with hard work per se, especially out of necessity. What he found problematic was the pursuit of these things for their own sake. America had taken the worship of God and turned it into the worship of work. The economic structure informed the economic ideals of the nation. It is important that Horkheimer notes the formation of nationhood. I submit that the formation of a sense of national pride was an important factor in the development of the American dream. I will further explore groups below with Bourdieu.

Essentially, Horkheimer tells us that the economic and cultural mechanisms driving America in the early part of the 20th century dwindled away individual thinking and resistance producing mass culture (Horkheimer, 1947b; 104). Mass culture superficially supports the notion of individualism so prevalent in American culture, but I have shown through Horkheimer how it

actually undermines individuality by removing choice and installing overarching structures. I argue that in order for mass culture to flourish, the American dream had to simultaneously flourish. Mass culture thus conveniently hides its ulterior motive in the cloak of the American dream. The dream drummed into the American consciousness the idea that hard work will produce success and happiness. Life. Liberty. The pursuit of happiness.

THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

Phenomenology is concerned with the social production of everyday life, or how we “do” everyday life. In *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), Berger and Luckmann theorize that people suspend doubt about the reality of everyday life and engage in routinized, taken-for-granted participation in it. For example, one does not question the functioning of the traffic lights in the city, nor does he challenge his basic routine of getting up and going to work every day, or attending university, or getting married. We all accept that the social world, with all its attendant organizing principles, is *real*. This objectivation serves to institutionalize aspects of everyday life. Institutions exert control via predefined patterns of conduct (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The recurring pattern in America is go to school, get a job, strive to earn a living, get married, buy a house, have children, take vacation, retire at age 65 with a gold watch, collect pension, and try to live out one’s remaining years in health while feeling relevant to others in one’s community. Accordingly, the American dream can be seen as an institution. Even death is institutionalized, with standardization and wide acceptance of how to conduct a burial service and even how to grieve.

In *The Social Construction*, Berger and Luckmann synthesize the subjective and objective perspectives of the social and expound upon the dual character of society. The objective and subjective work together through a reflexive process which we experience as reality. The

lifestyle which Americans seek out in fulfillment of the dream is reflected back at them by the structure of society, which they internalize as a personal desire. This reflexive process serves to further objectivate, or reify, the social world. The reified world is experienced as a strange facticity whereby institutions are given ontological status and thereby become “natural” (Berger & Luckmann, 1967).

I submit that the pursuit of the American dream comes to be seen as natural. This natural phenomenon is passed down from generation to generation and is transmitted throughout society through intersubjectivity, or a shared consciousness. Berger and Luckmann theorize that language is the key to the development of a shared consciousness. The lifestyle preached from the pulpit of mass culture is collectively understood through the ideology of the American dream. The lifestyle is typified in advertisements by the use of language and signs. The American dream is thus communicated by mass culture. Questions as to what household products, what music, what clothing, what home, what attitude, and what beliefs one *must* have are answered by advertisers, conveyed to all and reaffirmed among all.

Departing from Marx and borrowing from Durkheim, Berger and Luckmann view objectivation and reification as natural social facts which serve to reaffirm the collective ideas and identity of society. The American dream, while pursued by individuals, accomplishes the function of unifying people, which serves to uphold feelings of nationhood and the notion that ‘we are all in this together’. This feeling lends credence to the ideological tenets of the dream. The feeling is reaffirmed in the sentiments of the nation, in assemblies, political rallies and even churches. Martin Luther King said, ‘I have a dream’. In his speech from the Lincoln Memorial, King proclaimed the dream and elevated it to reified status - “And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the

American dream (King, 1963).” King’s unifying and emotional call to freedom, justice and equality is powerful indeed. The American dream is an ideology unto itself. King’s notion of equality is very prevalent in the American dream. This is an interesting point because it is so prevalent in the discussion but it is so unheard of in practice. I submit that we are not equally yoked in our pursuit of the dream. We are, however, equally committed to the pursuit.

In elaborating on how people accept and perpetuate institutions, Berger and Luckmann discuss the way in which institutions are legitimated. To that end, they created the concept of the symbolic universe, which can be defined as common explanations which legitimate the institution by making it appear plausible. Through the use of language, people create stories, maxims and universal truths about how the world works, its history and its future (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). I argue that legitimate institutions, which include media, government, entertainment, and education, seek to sell the American dream. Through recurring themes in advertising, celebrity endorsement, and Presidential calls to buy American, the purveyors of cultural and economic goods inculcate society with the message of the American dream, which is “this will make you happy.” I would argue that the underpinnings of the American dream are located in the economy’s need for consumers, without whom the whole apparatus would grind to a halt. Furthermore, that attainment of economic goals has the benefit of achieving other social goals, such as status and power. The approval by others in society of our accomplishments is a powerful mechanism which reinforces our pursuit of economic goals. Thus, the concept of the American dream becomes part of the national psyche through institutionalization and legitimation.

CAPITAL BEGETS CAPITAL

Bourdieu’s core concept of habitus informs the process of the development of groups. Individuals develop a particular perspective or worldview (habitus) based on the socialization they

receive, initially from parents, and later from friends or other influential people (Bourdieu, 1982). Socialization is largely determined by the amount of capital one possesses. Poor people are less likely to have many material goods and take family vacations to exotic places. Accordingly, they will be less worldly (Bourdieu, 1982). The various forms of capital discussed by Bourdieu all play a role in defining one's position in social space. Bourdieu theorized that individuals who are similarly positioned in social space in terms of wealth (economic capital) and status (cultural capital) develop similarity of habitus. Bourdieu's concept of habitus thus provides a basis for the formation of working-class America. I submit that the working class identifies most strongly with the American dream and its concepts of equality, freedom and hard work because those things are inherently missing from the lives of ordinary people. The class then forms a collective consciousness, or rather a "class unconsciousness (Bourdieu, 1985: 728)." For example, the child of a poor single parent of little education is unlikely to see opportunities for something more than her family provided and she will further view her situation as normal. The feeling of normalcy implies acceptance and thus reinforces the structure.

In his attempt to bridge the objective and the subjective, Bourdieu conceived of the notion of the internalization of externality (Bourdieu, 1982). Field, which he defines as the objective structures in society such as the education system or the economy, together with habitus work through a dialectic process. Fields exist only insofar as social agents have internalized a perspective which allows for the construction of the structure and can imbue it with meaning. Concurrently, participation in the said structure informs the agent's habitus in the continued reproduction of the field. Individuals are situated in fields according to the amount and composition of capital they possess (Bourdieu, 1982). Bourdieu argued that mobility within social space is limited by work, effort and time (Bourdieu, 1985). Those who are closest to each

other in social space have a greater probability of mobilizing as a group. Accordingly, the so-called 'working class' is likely comprised of individuals who share similar social space. They are also more likely to be united in purpose and act as a group. I argue that this group is the target market of the American dream, which is targeted by the wealthy by virtue of their dominant positions in social space. The American dream inspires the worker to social mobility, but it is a mobility that he is not supposed to achieve. The function of the American dream is to instill a sense of hope and purpose in the American working class, a hope for social mobility. The members' continued participation and belief in the dream serves to perpetuate the dream, thereby perpetuating stratification of a class system.

Bourdieu (1982) referred to a fourth type of capital, that of symbolic capital. Symbolic capital is capital in any other form as perceived by someone who has fully internalized the structure which defines its distribution (Bourdieu, 1982). More practically, it is seen as prestige or distinction. Bourdieu posits that objective power relations reproduce themselves as symbolic power relations in order to ensure the permanence of the power relations (Bourdieu, 1982). In other words, he who has the most symbolic capital or power has the most ability to legitimate his view of the social world. Agents with symbolic power have the ability to influence others to their way of thinking. We can reason that powerful people and institutions in society influence the thinking of the powerless. Symbolic violence is said to occur when the powerful influence the powerless to the advantage of the powerful and often to the detriment of the powerless (Bourdieu, 1982). Bourdieu states that the powerful, i.e., elected state officials who have the right to their powerful position by virtue of the structure which elected them, have the power to name. Accordingly, those aligned in similar economic conditions are named as a group or class according to the structure in place. The powerful commit symbolic violence by naming or classifying things

and people for their own benefit (Bourdieu, 1982). The title of President of the United States carries with it much clout and sway. The person who adorns the title may not have symbolic capital befitting this title, but the title precedes him. The title is an institution. Naming, then, has the effect of reinforcing stereotypes, class and power relations among groups. The working class as loosely defined by the taxonomy created by the IRS and other economic institutions legitimates the working class as a group and forges its collective identity. Institutions are reproduced from generation to generation. Reproduction of class, education, etc. perpetuates the working class.

THE ADVERTISING GAME

In a leap from socially constructed reality to simulated reality, Baudrillard's post-modern spin on the social reveals a world of increasing meaninglessness. Post-modernism has been criticized by the likes of Chomsky and others for adding nothing to the current scholarship of philosophical thought, while others have called it merely a buzzword (Net 2). Perhaps this is because post-modernism does not seem to explain why things occur, but rather merely observes that they do. But the observations are intriguing. Without delving into the merits of the doctrine, I will say that Baudrillard's concepts of simulacra and the hyperreal ring true in today's world (Baudrillard, 1981). In post-modernistic thought, society is a plastic veneer, a mere representation of itself. It is a place where simulated experiences replace real ones. Baudrillard mourns the loss of reality. By this he refers to the propensity in this era to identify with the signs or representation of things and people rather than with the things or people themselves. Society has moved from simple representation of real things to the creation of simulacra which bear no resemblance to any real thing (Baudrillard, 1981). For example, public relations personnel are charged with disseminating a public image of a celebrity. That image is what we come to know and accept as the person. Hollywood gossip rags tell tales about the lives of celebrities through

hearsay and Photoshopped images, which we come to believe as truth. The antics of celebrities do not even have to have occurred to be published as reality.

Driving the process of the hyperreal is the mass media with its “endless ability to create and reproduce images and signs (Appelrouth & Edles, 2011, p. 417).” Mass media demands its due attention. With the advent of global forms of communication, mass media is unparalleled in its ability to reach untold millions every minute of every day with one singular vision - to sell America the dream. Today’s media proclaims wealth as the new black. Turn on the TV and one can view musical artists sporting extreme examples of wealth known as “bling,” commercials for lotteries urging us to “imagine the freedom,” and reality TV stars living in mansions paid for by some unknown benefactor. I would argue that gone are the days when middle-class comfort was chased by the sweat of one’s brow. Particularly absent are the concepts of equality and liberty. Now the American dream is connoted by ownership of representations of wealth without the sweat. How successful one has been in achieving the dream will be evident by the symbols of success (branded clothing, cars, etc.) she purchases and the leisure time she has to enjoy them. The sign-value of the items has replaced the exchange-value of the commodities system (Baudrillard, 1981). The brands sold to Americans through advertising increasingly depict a lifestyle and attitude which can be purchased. Accordingly, we no longer have to be anything, we can simply represent whatever message we want to convey through the purchase of consumer goods. If life is not real, then a dream is most certainly merely ethereal. The American dream is a dream indeed.

Contrary to phenomenology, post-structuralist thought denies the existence of universally shared meaning (Appelrouth & Edles, 2011). With the loss of concrete meaning behind signifiers used in communication, Baudrillard argues that signifiers today often point to more than one

signified object and in many cases can mean nothing (Baudrillard, 1981). They can be a representation of a representation, a copy of a copy. Baudrillard (1981) argues that beginning in the late 20th century the meaning of a signifier became rooted in its relationship to the structure. Signifiers are interpreted in relation to one another as viewed through the lens of a code from which we derive meaning. A code can be thought of as a language of sorts. For example, algebra is the language of that type of mathematics and its equations are the signs. The code or language of advertising is the lens through which we interpret logos and advertisements. We understand advertising as a mean of selling a product, but we also feel the emotional connection to the product by the images depicted therein. For example, a recent TV commercial in Canada for Tim Horton's uses a combination of words and images to engender a sense of national pride and unity. By using national symbols and ideals, such as hockey, politeness, etc., the Canadian wells with pride. Just at that moment, the product being sold is revealed and the connection made between the emotion and the product. Advertising works. Everyone, even the simplest of folk, understand that they are being sold something when they see or hear ads. The tobacco industry exemplifies how advertising works. Their ads got people to ingest poison and continue to do so for decades even after they became aware that it was, in fact, poison. Take for instance the Marlboro man - he is rugged, handsome and represents freedom and all that is America. The ladies want him and the men want to be him. The problem is that it is impossible to distinguish between reality and hyperreality (Baudrillard, 1981). Accordingly, we still want whatever is being sold because we want to exhibit the sign-value associated with the item. We buy Marlboro cigarettes in order to be that guy.

However, when signifiers and signified objects are arbitrarily linked, meaning is confused (Baudrillard, 1981). One could argue that all interaction is representation, even our understanding

of language as spoken in conversations by individuals. We learn language in order to communicate. When a child learns the word which represents a concrete thing, i.e. chair, there is little margin for error regarding its meaning. However, when he learns the word which represents a concept, such as 'bad', his subjective interpretation defines and redefines the word in a given circumstance. For instance, if his mother chastises him for taking a cookie and calls him bad, he understands that taking a cookie was bad. As he gets older, he learns to extrapolate that to a more general principle against stealing. So too do adults interpret words (signs) differently depending on their position in society. To the working class individual the logos and expensive consumer goods, such as Mercedes or Gucci, represent things he will never be able to afford, but still desires to have. I argue that his desire is not rooted in need or even satisfaction of owning a well-made product, but arises from a desire to have what he is told he wants and to show his success as an American and even as a person by the ownership of those items. The disparity between the classes still exists, but perhaps stratification is glossed over with an appearance of classlessness. Teenagers have the latest expensive consumer goods that they did not pay for. Working class folk accumulate astronomical consumer debt in their efforts to obtain the goods and services proffered by advertisement of the American dream. The pursuit of happiness now resides in the simulacrum of reality.

DISCUSSION

I have shown how the American dream was established in the collective consciousness of America through the capitalistic pursuit of happiness, which pursuit was constitutionally guaranteed. I have shown how the notion of the dream has remained embedded in the social fabric over the generations. Finally, I have shown how the conceptualization and communication of the American dream have changed over the years, while maintaining symbolic power and

singular purpose of capitalist greed.

A century of pursuit of the American dream has not rendered America a happy place. I conclude that this vehicle of mass culture is a factor in the misery among people today. The unfriendly cashier at the grocery store, haggard from long hours, and the rude receptionist who would rather be anywhere but at work, exemplify the drudgery of work for work's sake. Even university graduates today can only hope to obtain a mundane job with the primary goal of paying off their student loans. Worshipping at the altar of the economy, they are blind to the irony.

Americans labour under a misapprehension that industry serves them, when in fact it serves itself. The fact that the American dream has as its central theme the equality of the citizenry and its ability to achieve the dream based on hard work shows that it is based in rugged individualism and agency without any reference to any kind of structure. The concept of agency not only implies choice of action but also knowledge of the available choices. Our social structures are so deeply rooted that we see agency in our actions where none really exists, which is not to say that actors do not possess agency. However, to live outside of the influence of structure would be to live on the fringes of society. To illustrate this point, we only need look to academia. When students, who having been accepted by two or three universities to which they have applied, inevitably choose "the best" schools, they are reinforcing the system. In an effort to act as an autonomous agent, the student will rationalize her decision to choose Yale over a state school by extolling the virtues of tradition, accreditation, etc., which things can only increase her chances of success after graduation. What is really taking place is the reproduction of the structure.

Fulfillment of the American dream cannot be achieved under the current system because it is not supposed to be. The dream is perpetuated to repress the worker, who in reality is working to line the pockets of others all the while believing that he is working to achieve the noble ends of the

dream. This is the false consciousness that Marx and his students spoke of. So powerful is the dream that in spite of all the hardship and poverty and whatever transpires in America, they still cling to it. It serves as a unifying force of American in her troubled times. The notion that success is on the horizon if one just works for it is what keeps the whole system going. With everyone striving for the same goal, that goal must be held out as the best or only goal. But who said that? Who is perpetuating the dream? The perpetuation of repression through the institutional economic and cultural structures ensures the continued operation of the apparatus. When a person is thought of as only a worker and a consumer, his interpersonal relationships are situated in his possessions. Have a listen to people chatting today, or better yet log on to any social media site, and you will be graced with discussion and photos of all the latest items purchased. (Not to mention the barrage of advertisements on any site.) Hence, the American dream permeates every aspect of a person's life.

Those who doggedly work to eke out a living and feel they are not achieving the dream only need look as far as their nearest television or radio to hear the ads which reinforce the mantra of consumption. With their commitment renewed, they head back out into the world. It is really quite amazing how we can be so easily swayed! As noted above, the lottery advertisements tell us to dream big. Chances of winning the lottery are slim to none but people buy tickets every week because they believe winning is inevitable. Berger and Luckmann would say that this is routinization of activity. It has become "natural" for us to live this way and we accept it. Not unlike Marx's notion of the cog in the machines of production, so are consumers in the machine of consumption. So, the American dream continues today to be instilled in us through mass media, the most powerful tool of the economic and cultural structures.

The average person left to his own devices would say 'this is crap, why do I continue to

bust my hump at this horrible job for nothing?' He would then realize where his true interests and talents lay and work at those tasks which bring him joy and fulfillment. In society as it exists today, that is nearly impossible. How does one break free from the system and work at something they love, which may or may not pay them enough to keep the house and feed their families. There's the rub.

Living in a false society in which an individual's only function is to serve the apparatus is the stuff of science fiction, isn't it? The implications of such a world from a social perspective are that people will be left with no sense of self and no meaningful purpose in life. Domination of people by the system is dehumanizing. When people are devalued to the point of becoming servants to the apparatus they lose all uniqueness and individuality. In our fight to be equal, we have instead become the same. When we are a faceless mass of workers (people), the individual components (person) are infinitely replaceable.

Another implication of the "total institution (Goffman, 1961)" of consumerism is the lack of concern or even awareness of the plight of citizens of other countries. Their problems are brought to North America in the form of sound bites and headlines dotted between the constant din of advertisement. We can hear of a gang rape in India in one moment and in the next how Dentyne's new gum will freshen your breath. There is little time for contemplation of the serious issues.

The environment also takes a backseat. Much of the production of the *stuff* we consume takes place in other countries so that we do not have to see it. It takes place in countries with lax environmental regulations and virtually non-existent child labour laws. We do not bear witness to the effects on our physical world or to the suffering of children. Our *stuff* takes on the appearance of having been dropped from the heavens like manna.

Theoretical rhetoric does not offer concrete ways to change the social world. It would seem that all significant change over history has been incremental and began with a small step in the direction. To that end, it may be useful for individuals to stop the cycle of extreme consumerism. Each of us needs to consider whether we really need that new phone when the one we have works just fine. By turning off and tuning out, perhaps we can teach the next generation to focus on enjoyment of real lived experiences, such as chatting with others face to face.

In the meantime, as we get up tomorrow morning and set about our daily lives, let us reflect upon the impact of our continued participation in the greatest deception ever perpetrated, the deception that we are autonomous individual actors living our lives upon our chosen paths. The American Dream is alive and well and is coming to a mall near you.

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