The Culture of Consumption and the Consumed American Dream

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"And so what we call a consumer society seems more to resemble a *consumed* one."
– Bill Livant, *The Imperial Cannibal*

This paper investigates the shift from the individualist ethos formerly cherished by Americans to a mass culture typical of late capitalist America. This shift has been accompanied by an unrelenting decline in the American dream and the emergence of a new culture of material abundance. The theme of consumption within popular culture may be considered the major site of the altering American myth. At the same time, anxiety and the "sense of an ending" or loss permeate American studies and literature, as well as popular imagination (Lasch, 1991: 3). In this context, I will explore several examples in an attempt to trace individualism and other older values giving in to mass culture myths. My conjecture is that the Dream has engendered its own deconstruction, as the conditions of its success paved the way to its consequent alteration and failure.

The degeneration of the American Dream since the beginning of the twentieth century triggered the dissolution of the vulnerable American myth. The new arrangement advanced by mass culture facilitates consumerism, greed and a relentless chase for material abundance. Thus, the classical "pursuit of happiness" has been perverted to become a pursuit of wealth as utter bliss. While the hope for self-enhancement gave way to new consumer temptations, the American dream also appears to have been consumed by the "culture of consumption". Therefore, it is the myth of the "American Dream" that has ultimately been subverted by what American cultural critics call "consumerism".

Lasch has argued that capitalism and the ensuing excess of abundance have engendered a consumption-oriented mass culture, which reaches its climax as a culture of "narcissism" (1991). This new cultural arrangement has been labeled the "media culture" because it surfaces mainly in the media, but it further impinges upon all aspects of life. Thus, it is apparent that the function of this type of culture is both to reflect and to shape the national ethos. It is undeniably a reflection of American society, as it displays the values and identity of a people through the items they consume, but more than that, it also

constructs national identity, as it enforces enduring myths and role-models. In this sense, critics of American mass-mediated society invoke cultural ills such as dehumanization and the assault against the individual, pointing to the alarming condition of modern-day cities (Lazere, 1987: 3-5).

Other cultural critics have argued that the media have shifted from merely representing to constituting social reality, especially in the form of contemporary commodification of culture (Angus, 1989:3). Angus and Jhally (1989) point to the control of the cultural realm by a perilous concentration of media ownership. If ever fewer companies own ever more media outlets, there remain few independent voices in America to ensure a democratic dialogue. What is more, the media as cultural institutions are deconstructed on the basis of their treatment as commodities that are consumed like everything else in the market (Angus, 1989: 1-2). However, the effects of representations upon the formation of social identity become more evident and homogenous in the dimension of mediated cultural experience. The media have decidedly become central to the constitution of social identity as the main site where people seek and arguably also create meaning through cultural practices. If identity is formed through mass-mediated images in postmodern society, the consumption of images decides what people choose or accept to become.

Moreover, studies of American national character reveal aspects of the new man emerging as a representative type of American identity. If the early colonist was a "new" man who colonized the New World, the new individual becomes colonized by the mass consumer culture. As demonstrated by Cohen (2003: 122) in *A Consumers' Republic*, the national middle class has come to be defined around consumption, rather than citizenship, which reduces social identity to the notion of citizenship *as* consumption. This new arrangement has triggered the changing character of America by producing a new type of individual.

Other consequential deviations accompanying the new culture are analyzed by Stanley Aronowitz in his essay "Mass Culture and the Eclipse of Reason" (1987: 465). Like Horkheimer and other cultural critics, he exposes the alteration of the individual within capitalist society. In this view, the most pernicious aspect of consumer culture is that it compromises the critical stance. The consumer becomes vulnerable and dependent

upon a system that sets the rules of access to commodities. Thus, consumption of mass culture ultimately results in a hidden threat to the democratic order. Finally, the consciousness of this new "individual" is surreptitiously colonized by the mass culture industry in a subtler sense of the word.

Reflection upon the changing American Dream should start with an inquiry into the roots of this dispiriting phenomenon. In *Consuming Life*, Bauman (2007) distinguishes between consumption and consumerism, the former being as old as humankind, while the latter is seen as its degeneration. The consumer revolution is a breakpoint marking the passage from simple consumption to "consumerism", which comes to underpin the entire experience of "human togetherness" and becomes its propelling force (Bauman, 2007: 26). As a major effect in terms of identity building, since consumers inhabit the same space defined as "market", they themselves become commodities subject to consumption. Living through media constructed images triggers a sense of fragmentation and disintegration. For this reason, it may be argued that individuals become "consumed" themselves by their own illimitable dreams and, in a sense, even "colonized" by a soft power.

In the same line of argument, Riesman (1950) argues that American character has undergone significant changes after the Industrial Revolution. The tradition oriented culture defined by past generations and by revered values shifted into a culture that lost the sense of older values and historical continuity. The new middle class society is defined by a disquieting alienation of the individual within the "lonely crowd" (Riesman, 1950). Christopher Lasch agrees that the devaluation of the past is one of the most striking effects of the cultural crisis, indicating that ideologies have lost their grip on reality. The superficial progressive and optimistic outlook hides "the despair of a society that cannot face the future" (Lasch, 1991: xviii).

Likewise, Lasch (1991) detects an extensive change in values brought about by the accumulation of changes since the beginning of the beginning of the twentieth century and the institutions that reinforce mainstream culture. In this view, despite widespread faith in the beneficence of progress, material progress contained the germ of moral decline (Lears, 1994: 26). The culture of consumption generates not only rampant consumerism, but also a subtler sense of being consumed. Just as the consumer is

consumed by his own appetites, so too has the American dream consumed its own resources. In latter-day American society, it no longer provides meaning, perhaps because it had been exploited in excess. However, in Lasch's view, the current malaise and sense of consumption is not limited to the United States, but is a general crisis of western culture. Therefore, disenchantment is not caused only by an American "failure of nerve" (Lasch, 1991: xiii). It may be argued that it is essentially caused by a failure of the idealistic American dream, being at the same time the logical consequence of this comprehensive myth.

As the Protestant culture of individualism reached decadence, it carried the logic of individualism to the extreme, redefining it as a radically altered, narcissistic pursuit of happiness (Lasch, 1991: xv). Lears also points to the disintegrative effects of individualism, which destabilized the "age of confidence" and gave way to intensifying doubts (1994: xi). The most significant consequence of this shift is the transformation of the American Dream from a "pursuit of happiness" into a pursuit of material plenty. As the American Dream of individual uplift lost its moral capacity to guide the nation, the need for a substitute started to be felt. Closer at hand than any other surrogate, "upward mobility" became the most common cliché used to define the new American Dream narrative.

Furthermore, it has been suggested that the alteration of the American Dream came as a direct result of the Protestant logic that defined it. Decadence was arguably inherent in the Protestant work ethic that had long been a central ideology of American culture. Persevering industry, accompanied by thrift and temperance, were indispensable prerequisites ensuring not only material success, but also personal uplift, as codified by Franklin in his *Poor Richard* almanacs. Paradoxically, Puritans recommended self-improvement and industry only to frown upon the prosperity resulting from these exercised virtues (Lears, 1994: 26). Horowitz (1992) shows that it was precisely the "exemplary life" accompanied by the exercise of Protestant virtues that gave way to hazardous affluence.

It was only a step from the accumulation of opportunities to the disruptive proclivities brought along by wealth (Horowitz, 1992: 2). Similarly, the narrative of opportunity asserted self-improvement, individual worth and virtually unlimited social

mobility. According to this narrative, the self-made man who adhered to the hard work ethic represented the embodiment of the American dream (Lasch, 1991: 52-53). Eventually, this narrative was drained of any meaning beyond material achievement. Social mobility has generated a loss of stability as an unforeseen side effect, followed by a further transformation of the American dream and the values attending it.

The definition of success continued to transform significantly from the individualistic self-reliance to a narcissistic "self-culture". The ethic of pleasure replaced the ethic of achievement, as the pursuit of happiness became a hunt for pleasures and self-improvement was distorted to read as self-advancement. Unlike the nineteenth-century acquisitive individualist, the narcissist is acquisitive beyond limits, in a pursuit of instant gratification of an endless desire (Lasch, 1991: xvi). What is more, the narcissist is not only a consumer, but is also consumed by an insatiable "oral hunger" which exceeds all limits (Lasch, 1991: 202). It appears that complete self-indulgence is the logical though unexpected conclusion of the Protestant work ethic attended and enhanced by unbridled capitalism (Lasch, 1991: 57-69). Thus, what may be called the American Illusion is an insidious disorder taking root with the rise of industrial materialism instilled by deep-seated individualist ideologies turned into an obsession with achievement.

In the struggle to make reality live up to the new form of the American dream, lost hopes were replaced by fantasies meant to re-enchant a disenchanted world (Ritzer, 1999). Hope, which had been central to the Dream narrative, was replaced by desire, which is the driving force of the consumer culture. As Bauman (2007) suggests in *Consuming Life*, desire is the spirit which dominates the new age: "The *spiritus movens* of consumer activity is not a set of articulated, let alone fixed, needs, but *desire* which he describes as an evasive and self-referential, hence "narcissistic" phenomenon which "has itself for its paramount object, and for that reason is bound to stay insatiable" (12). Therefore, the desire of consuming becomes consuming in its own right.

Such consuming appetites represent an older theme described by analysts of earlier American culture. Before the Civil War, Henry David Thoreau denounced the growing desire for "more", initiating a critique of the ambivalent American dream. He argued in *Walden* (1906) that the materialist penchant was debilitating, as it weakened individualism and corrupted vitality. For the idealistic dissenter, "true wealth" came out

of the austerity of keeping to the basic needs, removing "superfluities" and minimizing labor at the same time. For that reason, Thoreau dismissed Puritanical values that would indubitably generate dangerous affluence. He exposed the irony that his contemporaries preferred to minimize the quality of life by struggling to maximize their living standard (Horowitz, 1992: 3). On the contrary, his project envisioned a true American dream of the good life conducted in nature and simplicity and unspoiled by acquisitive passions.

Other observers in the first half of the nineteenth century also anticipated the approaching consumer society. As early as 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville described "why the Americans are so restless in the midst of their prosperity" in terms very similar to present-day consumerism:

> It is strange to see with what feverish ardor the Americans pursue their own welfare … A native of the United States clings to this world's goods as if he were certain never to die; and he is so hasty in grasping at all within his reach that one would suppose he was constantly afraid of not living long enough to enjoy them. He clutches everything, he holds nothing fast, but soon loosens his grasp to pursue fresh gratifications. . . Besides the good things that he possesses, he every instant fancies a thousand others that death will prevent him from trying if he does not try them soon. This thought fills him with anxiety, fear, and regret and keeps his mind in ceaseless trepidation, which leads him perpetually to change his plans and his abode (de Tocqueville, 1981: 430-431).

Moreover, de Tocqueville's observations further support the conjecture that it was the American Dream itself that prompted the culture of consumption. Having rejected all constraints, Americans embark upon an uncontrollable competition that consumes them. The same idea of opportunity that allows Americans to harbor lofty hopes instigates unquenchable desires. Thereby, the greater the enjoyments offered, "hopes and desires are oftener blasted, the soul is more stricken and perturbed" (Tocqueville, 1981: 432). If American culture had once promoted an ethic of self-discipline, it later allowed and even encouraged unrestrained consumerism. Increasing prosperity, together with the American Dream mystique, enhanced desire and then consumption in order to quench it. By this logic, the sinfulness of consumer desire is equated to a loss of earlier innocence.

This is the fundamental cultural transformation that T. J. Jackson Lears (1983) thought had occurred by the turn of the past century. In his view, the moralistic American Dream expanded to include the theme of "consumption and leisure". The earlier variant of the American Dream involving compulsive work, saving, and self-discipline gave way to a new set of values that preferred compulsive spending and self-fulfillment through leisure. Lears argues that the older culture corresponded to a production-oriented society, whereas the new one epitomized a consumption-oriented society (1983: 1-39). However, McCracken argues that culture and consumption were essentially interconnected as early as 1800 (1988: 17). Other scholars endorse the existence of a "culture of consumption", as the two terms have come to be virtually one and the same (Lears, 1983; Lasch, 1984).

The new culture is globally implemented through mass-mediated images and public discourse. These enforce media-metaphors which "classify the world for us, sequence it, frame it, enlarge it, reduce it, color it, argue a case for what the world is like" (Postman, 1986: 10). For this reason, culture watchers alert us to the dangers facing contemporary American culture in an ever more condemnatory tone. American public discourse of late appears to be patently downgraded, menacing the American myth itself. This hazard has been lurking since the graphic revolution and the emergence of the telegraph and thereafter continued by the media revolution. Ironically, Postman refers to the telegraph as the device which initiated the possibility of "a unified American discourse… but at a considerable cost" (1986: 65). Henry David Thoreau remarked in Walden that "We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate…" (Postman, 1986: 65). The breakdown of meaning had been foreseen even as the mass media began to expand throughout America.

The great revolution is thus attended by a parallel transformation in the realm of public discourse and meaning. Information was transferred spectacularly quickly, notwithstanding that it answered no question, nor did it allow the right of reply. This phase is only the beginning of a world of "fragments and discontinuities" (Postman, 1986: 68-70). Mechanically reproduced imagery spread throughout American culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from prints to advertisements. Instead of functioning as a supplement to language, the new imagery started to replace it as the

dominant means of grasping reality (Postman, 1986: 74). Twentieth century America was assaulted by electronic techniques, introducing a "peek-a-boo world" where images pop into view for a moment only to soon evaporate. Though it is compared to the child's game of peek-a-boo, the reality is far less innocent.

While this instance represents the installation of irrelevance, the phenomenon developed to inestimable proportions in the ensuing mass-mediated culture. The media, especially through "the news of the day", manipulates decontextualized information as tokens of fragmentation (Postman, 1986: 8). Television shows, especially the news, are framed according to a theory of anti-communication, using abrupt juxtapositions which destabilize the image of a commonsense world. Consumers become accustomed to the discontinuities of this theatrical type of discourse that abandons logical sequence (Postman, 1986: 99-105). As a result, with the emergence of television, the content of public discourse was relegated to the verge of nonsense (Postman, 1986: 31). Modern media can radically alter the sense of coherence and weaken fixed perceptions of time and space, exceeding reality.

Cultural critics no longer ask whether television shapes or merely reflects culture, since "television has gradually become our culture" (Postman, 1986: 79). The new definitions of truth and reality advanced by the television revolution have been accepted as normal, despite the high level of unreality it stage-manages. Without the least suspicion, credibility replaces reality, provided that it creates a sense of verisimilitude, or "truthiness", a term coined by Stephen Colbert. Thus, television promotes incoherence and irrelevance, transforming culture into an arena for show business (Postman, 1986: 80). The consequences are disquieting, amounting to a loss of coherence and sense. What is more, the loss of the sense of the bizarre indicates adjustment to this anomalous world, which further suggests that America has radically changed. Ultimately, television is not only the media, but also a metaphor for American culture.

In this context, Boorstin complains of the increase of untruthfulness that led to the "reshaping of the very concept of truth" (1962: 180-205). Mass media circulates untruths or prefers credibility, which results in blurring "the distinction between truth and falsehood in a fog of plausibility" (Lasch, 1991: 74-75). The fact that reality has become an "unstable environment of flickering images" makes it increasingly difficult to sustain a

sense of continuity and permanence (Lasch, 1991: 248-249). Viewers are exposed to the menace of unreality as they have come to believe in their own images, enhanced by the whole experience of modernity. Thus, the experience of consumption is characterized by a pervasive sense of unreality that undermines the consumed individual's perception of selfhood.

Finally, America is engulfed in general disorientation and has become "a culture evaporating into unreality" (Lears, 1994: 32). Consumers develop an interest in what is comfortable or convenient to believe, rather than factuality. As a result, Americans have developed a new complex, while being "the most illusioned people on earth" (Boorstin, 1962: 227). In an attempt to find an explanation and a remedy for contemporary malaise, Carey (1987) appeals to the title "holders of pragmatism". The tradition of American pragmatism starting with Franklin through William James and John Dewey maintained that beliefs had no intrinsic truth, depending solely on their appearance and profitability. Carey's argument focuses on the fantastic coincidence in the attitude to truth assumed by pragmatists and propagandists (1987: 35). The former justify the circulation of false but profitable beliefs, while the latter promote "useful deceptions".

This explains America's accommodation to an illusory scale of values since the beginning of the twentieth century. New truths were advanced according to the convenience of pragmatic logics amounting to exploitation. A new specialist, the public relations executive, developed skills of persuasion and delusion in the exercise of mythmaking. For instance, the First World War was sold to unenthusiastic Americans through the propaganda of a noble "national cause". The "engineers of consent" believed that democracies needed propaganda just as dictatorships needed coercion, the former being cheaper than violence (Carey, 1987: 37-39). In this sense, mass culture may be seen as a new type of dictatorship.

While fabricating these images as illusions, America also strives to construct a "favorable image", and yearns to maintain prestige. Boorstin traces the etymology of this notion from the Latin "prestigium" which, significantly, meant "illusion" (1962: 246). That is why American mythmakers appear in the guise of prestidigitators or tricksters who juggle with images or rather illusions. Consequently, Boorstin admits that America's prestige has diminished, as the nation built on ideals has gained a reputation of

materialism (Boorstin, 1962: 244, 248). For all these reasons, the American Dream appears to have consumed its possibilities in mass consumption culture.

In order to understand why it is that America's prestige in the world has diminished, it is necessary to finally revise the mythmaking rhetoric and imagery Americans use to define their dream reality. On the one hand, the Statue of Liberty long held a promise to the world, and the Declaration of Independence professed a "litany of adulation" for universal freedom and democracy. Yet, on the other hand, realities dominating mass culture seem to break this dream image, triggering the deterioration of the founding ideals (Carey, 1987: 34). This conflict between the dreams America stood for and the illusions that have replaced them accounts for the declining prestige of the American myth.

Analysis of mass or consumer culture helps explain the breakdown of the American dream. Eventually, mass culture appears to have triggered the demise of the most potent American myth. The dream myth has succumbed to the new creed of "a culture of desire that confuses the good life with goods" (Leach, 1993: 143). The paradox of this culture is that consumers have come to be "consumed" by goods in the sense that they are exhausted by pursuing them instead of, or as if it were, the "pursuit of happiness".

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