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| **[The Conversion of the American Dream](https://go.madmimi.com/redirects/1373678038-4f9ca0c8fa4090117fb3f395adb4f99a-1e553f6?pa=483095956429579052" \t "_blank)** |
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| **The American Dream is a vision of individual and family happiness and security based on the ability to have and consume more of everything. Its social vision is of people with equal opportunity competing for these things and thereby expanding the prosperity of all.****Of course, it doesn’t quite work that way.****First:** This American Dream requires unlimited supplies of cheap and free resources to keep going. Pursuing these supplies has resulted in massive exploitation of nature and of people unfortunate enough to be outside the structures of success.**Second:** This American Dream requires vast physical and psychological emptiness into which we can send things we don’t want to deal with (from garbage and sewage to homelessness and climate change). This has resulted in gross pollution of our natural and cultural environments.**Third:** This American Dream enables certain individuals to accumulate colossal amounts of (usually financial) power. These elites limit the power and opportunity of other people (for whom the system then doesn’t work).**Fourth:** The American Dream supposes all this can go on forever. It is becoming increasingly obvious, however, that there are limits to how far we can push it. As we approach those limits, people are getting worried the American Dream may turn into an American Nightmare.Around the world, people are coveting American-style prosperity, often blind to the exploitation, alienation and pollution that go with it. That it won’t be possible for all people to experience the American Dream doesn’t stop transnational corporations and their related elites from pushing it. This effort to globalize American consumerism is not peaceful. It is a growing disaster for the environment and most of the world’s people, who face increasing violence and suffering as they are drawn into the futile struggle first for affluence, and then, failing that, for survival and order.But we can’t just tell the world “Don’t try to have what America has,” and tell Americans, “Tighten your belts.” This doesn’t speak to people’s needs.What is needed is a new Dream – one not so riddled with contradictions, violence and alienation. One that replaces [*The Poverty of Affluence*](https://go.madmimi.com/redirects/1373678038-31b16a272a5a0c106023669901f6f891-1e553f6?pa=483095956429579052) with a rich life of community, deep connection with ourselves and others, and real fullness of living.The New Dream we need should \* end the Old Dream’s destructiveness \* provide deep satisfaction \* interest other countries who’ve been attracted to the Old Dream and \* support a just, peaceful global society.Peace activists advocate converting military production into the production of socially useful things – swords into ploughshares, tank factories into bus factories. Environmental and justice activists advocate converting polluting industries into green jobs for all. I’d like to extend these ideas to personal economic conversion, about conversion of our lives, and about the conversion of values necessary to take us from the Old American Dream to this new one. As a first step, I’d like to look at our role in the Old American Dream, and what it’s done to us and the world.**ACTIVISTS AS CONSUMERS**What does it mean to be both an activist and a consumer in a society whose remarkable affluence depends on the often violent exploitation of people and nature?Even as activists, most of us are choreographed into roles in the dance of consumer culture: we buy – often, new, better, different – limited more by our pocketbooks than by contemplation of what we truly need or the consequences of our buying.We buy cars and electronics designed to break down or become unfashionable. We buy razors and diapers designed to be thrown away. We buy mobile phones and book club “special offers” that tempt us into expanding orgies of related purchases. And we like buying: Our culture has taught us that having certain things makes us whole, happy, sane, special, admirable. We find ourselves measuring our success and our quality of life by our ability to “have what we have always wanted.”We’re told that the more we buy, the more the economy grows and the healthier our country is. We know our buying gives people jobs. That’s important to us.So we try not to get too caught up in how our personal consumption fuels the oppression of poorer peoples, the burgeoning power of mega-corporations, the massive destruction of ecosystems, and a creeping, pervasive alienation in ourselves and our communities. But we can’t keep this dark side at bay forever. The daily news plays a crescendo of floods, droughts, and violent storms ravaging whole cities and landscapes to sate our ever-rising hunger for energy; rainforests destroyed for fast-food hamburgers and biofuels; land reform stymied to give us cheap pineapples and bananas; wars fought for oil; family farms being crushed by competition from automated, chemicalized factory farms so we can enjoy cheap meals from tortured animals and land...It has to stop. We are activists. We seek peace, justice, and a healthy, sustainable world...**PATTERNS OF CONSUMPTION**I have observed eight basic patterns of consumption. Although we each generally specialize in one or two, we probably exhibit them all at different times.Here are three patterns at the unconscious end of the spectrum of consumerism. Notice that I introduce each one with the phrase "to the extent that" to invite us to be conscious of the role each pattern plays in our lives, rather than deciding whether we're inside or outside of any particular "box".**1) To the extent that we feel we must consume or have "things" we’re being ADDICTED CONSUMERS**. In this mode we’re driven by inner emptiness. Shopping and consuming are our primary essential, predominant activities – and our first resort in the face of anxiety. We feel compelled to buy or consume, and are only briefly satisfied. In the back of our minds we’re into our next “fix” – our next purchase, our next spree, our next consuming entertainment.**2) To the extent that we do what advertisements and the media tell us to, we’re being ROBOTIC CONSUMERS.** We’re almost hypnotically motivated by the power of advertising and PR to purchase specific products or accept certain ideas without question.**3) To the extent that we buy things to “be someone,” we are being STATUS-DRIVEN CONSUMERS.** We try to be cool or to “keep up with (or ahead of) the Joneses.” We believe that our validity and importance - especially in the eyes of others - depend on what we have and consume.Addicted, robotic and status-driven consumption lie at the bleak, alienated end of the spectrum of consumerism. They leave in their wake a haunting sense of pointlessness, of disconnection and frustration. We may feel satisfied because we’ve been conditioned to experience consumption as satisfying – but no warm joy bubbles from our hearts. We’ve been incorporated into an artificial reality, made dependent on manipulated appetites, controlled perceptions, pre-designed frames of reference. When confronted with real life – intimacy, self-awareness, community, wilderness, silence, death, pain – we get confused and uncomfortable, and try to turn away into the security of the manufactured reality.Individually and collectively, we have given up enormous power to economic elites who manipulate the marketable culture in which we live. When we follow the directions of large corporations on what to buy, we empower them to define how we think and how our society will function. They addict us to Things and Services and we, delighted, give them our production and consumption – from which they harvest the money and collaboration they need to direct the evolution of social policy and mass behavior.**BEING CONSCIOUS AND SELECTIVE**Most activists are only occasionally caught in such compulsive modes. Usually we’re more conscious, selective consumers:**4) To the extent that we go out of our way for a “good deal,” we’re being SMART SHOPPERS.** We hunt for bargains: we head for sales and flea markets. We read "Consumer Reports" and online reviews. We pride ourselves on beating the system, on living well for less, on getting the best quality for the price. We hate rip-offs.**5) To the extent that we are out to buy “just the right thing,” we’re being APPRECIATIVE CONSUMERS.** We are motivated by the love of special things. We relish objects that satisfy our appetites and preferences. We have “taste” and “style.” Our possessions tend to have aesthetic quality, beauty, or craftsmanship or to characteristically reflect who we are.**6) To the extent that we’re guided by an awareness of how products will affect us and ours, we’re being SELF-CONCERNED CONSUMERS.** We buy what’s good for us. We try to learn how things can help or harm our - and our family’s - health, safety, or welfare. Often we’re willing to pay more to feel secure – and companies that sell dangerous products make us very angry.In “smart,” appreciative and self-concerned modes we are being selective in our consumption and are not so easily controlled. Our self-motivated decisions affect the marketplace: our tastes have to be taken into account by businesses. Some of us have even worked with “consumer advocates” to challenge corporate practices that endanger and defraud customers. And yet, even as we moderate specific abuses of corporate power, we identify ourselves as consumers and reinforce the culture of mass consumerism.Our focus on getting “the perfect item” or “a real deal” can leave our days preoccupied with Things and short on Soul. Our beautiful things may also have a dark side: Japanese connoisseurs are stripping the rainforests in search of fine hardwoods (mahogany, teak, etc.) for their beautifully crafted homes, furniture, statuary and utensils. And our electronics and fruit bargains are often cheap because workers in less developed countries were paid slave wages to produce them – their attempts to unionize having been broken by local police, somtimes financed with our dollars. With so much suffering and destruction involved in the creation of things we buy, acquiring even the best bargains and beautiful artifacts can make us unknowing accomplices to evil. Meanwhile, corporate PR people, government officials, the consumerist media, and even our own psyches conspire to hide from us the bloody sources of our comfort and joy.Is it worth it? Is this really happiness?**MAKING A DIFFERENCE**There are two other modes that offer a way out of all this into the New Dream: socially responsible consumption and engagement with life.**7) To the extent that our social consciousness and the impacts of our choices guide us, we are being SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE CONSUMERS.** We are motivated by the effect our consumption has on other people and the environment. We try to make sure the products we purchase are produced in an ethical manner. We recycle, buy from businesses that are worker owned (or fair trade, or B-corporations), join boycotts, invest in low-income housing, avoid packaging we know was designed to be thrown away when it’s finished getting us to buy it. Sometimes we even boycott products of specific companies associated with harmful economic, social or political activities.With socially responsible consumption, we redirect our support from things we consider evil to things we consider good. But it’s not as easy as it sounds: so much of our economic system is rooted in exploitation and violence that it’s difficult, if not impossible, to live a truly “pure” life. And, to the extent our social responsibility is motivated by guilt and anger, we may find we have little room left for joy.Socially responsible consumption is something we need to evolve toward with our economy, step by step. Each time we shop with our social and environmental impacts in mind, we increase market demand for ethical businesses. That, in turn, helps more socially-conscious companies get set up and thrive. Which then makes it easier for us to shop responsibly.Beyond that, some of us actively support regulations, subsidies, taxes, and other government policies that reshape the market away from harmful products and toward products and services that promote the health and sustainability of people and nature, or are at least benign.While all this is evolving, we can grow into an adventure beyond consumerism – where our concerns for ourselves and the world arise not out of guilt, but out of being in tune with life.**8) To the extent that we prefer engagement with life to consumerist short-cuts and quick fixes, we’re being LIFE-ENGAGED.** We’re motivated by our natural inclinations to relate to other people, connect with life, and take part in the processes of our community or nature. We don’t bother to buy things we don’t need. Our consumption is marked by involvement – by recycling, sharing and gifting, gardening, engaging store clerks in conversations, doing things with friends, learning, enjoying sensuality, spirituality, meaning, and beauty.As life-engagers, we only buy what we need to live fully – because more than that gets in the way. We find ourselves needing less money and thus working less for big companies and more for ourselves, our friends, and our communities. We turn more often to our neighbors than to the advertisements. We share with them the purchase of big-ticket items that are only occasionally used – vehicles, equipment, appliances, tools - and much else, food, books, clothes. We don’t want to spend our lives earning money for fancy unnecessary personal Stuff. A life free of object-oriented consumerism has more time available for living.**PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER**Ultimately, we’re talking about a change in values – about asking: "How well could I do without this product or service? Does it help me connect with what's real and important and meaningful, or does it get in the way? How proud can I be of how it was produced and marketed, of how I will use it, of what will happen when I’m done with it?"This is a very different set of questions from: "How much do I want it? Is it a good deal? Does it make my life easier and more fun? Will it make me liked or admired? Is it the latest? The best?"To the extent this change in values actually occurs, it will transform our society. Small businesses and communities will be empowered. The mass-marketers will find themselves ignored. Economic power – upon which the oppressive power of America and many multinational corporations is based – will decentralize, flowing back into people’s hands, so they can mold their own lives.It will take time, but any motion we make in this direction is important social change work - justice work, environmental work, peace work – part of the Conversion of the American Dream. We serve the world, our fellows, and future generations each time we turn our backs on the latest and the best, the prettiest and most entertaining, the fastest and most efficient commodity to spend time with friends; prepare a meal with fresh, locally-grown produce; walk, bike or join in the community of a bus or train; make, fix, borrow, or share clothes and gadgets; act on our deepest feelings; learn, debate, share questions, information, wisdom and fun. This is the rich new economy of life, the New American Dream that everyone in the world could share.Compare doing these things to spending an evening in front of the TV; buying the latest fashions; clipping coupons; commuting in gridlock; rushing through the news with a pre-packaged, microwaved meal - all the while obliviously degrading the lives of people and natural systems in other places and times.**THE THOUSAND MILE JOURNEY**The first step doesn’t necessitate doing anything. It involves being aware - aware of where we are in the spectrum of consumer modes as we go through our daily lives. Watching how we respond to advertisements, packaging and displays. Feeling what it’s really like (deep down inside) to shop, to consume, to throw things away, to fix them, to find out where they came from – and where they go. Watching what our minds do, our hearts, our bodies, our consciences. We may find our lives want to move in certain directions. If so, we might move with that and feel what it’s like. It may help to get together with others who are also trying to be more conscious of their consumer habits. (We could start local chapters of Consumers Anonymous.)The Conversion of the American Dream will take years. Even while the Old Dream seems to be consolidating its hold, the Conversion is already trying to happen – in bursts, in waves, in slow erosions and tiny seismic shifts. Many cracks are appearing in the foundations of corporate power, and some are widening each time the whole system shakes. Workers, managers, investors and consumers are, one by one and group by group, defecting from destructive consumption-oriented economics to piece together a value-oriented, life-enhancing economy linking communities of life-engagers. Exploitation of nature is being replaced by care and "stewardship of the commons". Oppressive military, economic and cultural domination is wavering, sometimes shifting towards collaboration as the winning mode. And an international community is evolving within and beyond the economic and political structures of transnational power.How all this evolves has a lot to do with us. As each new dawn brings more news of remarkable changes in the world, I feel how ready – even desperate – people are for new dreams.There are many options. But of this I feel certain:A peaceful, just and joyful society will be built by people who have traded consumerism for caring, meaningful connection with themselves, with other people, and with their world. Because we are already connected; we always have been; and we always will be. That's life. |