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Corruptions of the American Dream: Wealth, Power and Fame

There are many people who fervently believe that the American Dream is endangered because of the United States' current dilemmas. America continues to struggle with a stagnant economy, massive job losses and thousands of home foreclosures that have caused people to question the validity of "the Dream." An April 27, 2009 Time article entitled "The New Frugality," cites that 57% of those interviewed in an online survey believed that the American Dream will be harder to achieve in next decade.ⁱ These survey results lead to asking the question: Why are so many citizens pessimistic about their ability to live out "the Dream?" They live in a country that offers personal liberties such as freedom of speech, religion, press and assembly unmatched by any other nation. In his book Epic of America, author John Truslow Adams defines "the Dream" as, "the social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others..." (317). Adams's statement suggests that these individual freedoms allow Americans to achieve personal success in their lives. In the context of this chapter, success is a person's ability to define their own goals and achievements. Advertising, the power elite and the media, however, have diluted people's ideas about success, making them believe that wealth, power and fame are the only paths to the American Dream. As a result of their corruption, these entities have successfully clouded people's minds to the point where they measure prosperity, contentment and personal fulfillment based on these superficial benchmarks.

Jim Rubensⁱⁱ, author of OverSuccess: Healing the American Obsession with Wealth, Fame, Power, and Perfection, provides insight into why the United States is obsessed with these superficial attributes. He believes that, “[Wealth, power and fame have been] embedded into our brains and behavior by evolution, our pursuit of success... is the central motivator of humankind’s most horrific excrescences and celestial achievements” (3). He classifies this type of behavior “OverSuccess.” Rubens elaborates that this attitude is exhibited when individuals set lofty goals that are primarily motivated by a combination of achievement and recognition. He clarifies the difference between “OverSuccess” and “healthy” success. The term “healthy” success is attaining a personal goal based on the balance between learning and recognition. In this chapter, I plan to use Rubens’s methodology to show how the superficial values of “OverSuccess” (wealth, power and fame) are a byproduct of advertising, the power elite and the media and how they have corrupted “the Dream.”

Wealth and Advertising

Based on Rubens’s epistemology of OverSuccess, wealth has become the new method for measuring prosperity. Today’s Americans live in a materialistic culture where they expect the everyday luxuries of a Viking stove and a weekend home as “necessities” (260). Rubens asserts that, “Our OverSuccess culture has taught us to covet the homes and lifestyles of the very rich...not those of our neighbors and peers” (115). His approach indicates that Americans look up to the wealthy class as role models, which is a fairly new development in United States. During the 1960s, Rubens mentions that Americans aspired to have a comfortable, middle-class life by owning one car, one home and one

barbecue grill. Fast forward to 2009, people's aspirations have evolved from modest living to a decadent lifestyle. This phenomenon is best described by J. Walker Smith President of Yankelovich Partners, "There's no aspiration to be middle class. Everyone wants to be at the top" (114). This lofty goal has greatly improved the quality of life in this country. However, the deeper question is: What is the driving motivator behind Americans' need to attain material wealth?

The answer to this question lies in President Franklin Roosevelt's remark, "The general raising [of] the standard of modern civilization... would have been impossible without the spreading of the knowledge of higher standards by means of advertising" (Advertising the American Dream 2008). Roosevelt's claim shows that advertising helped educate people about better standards of living. Through advertising, people became aware of new home innovations such as an electric stove. During this transitional period from an industrial to a leisure society, Americans were able to purchase these products to complete their daily chores. In exchange they were able to have more time for their personal lives. Roosevelt, however, did not fathom the negative ramifications of how these advertising campaigns have invoked feelings of inadequacy amongst Americans. From glossy billboards to television commercials, Americans are constantly bombarded with thousands of advertisements on a daily basis. Rubens states that, "The ocean of advertising in which we are compelled to swim has shifted our nation's priorities from the future to the present, in essence making us more like children and unable to delay gratification" (254). His statement shows that advertising has taught Americans to embrace material excess as part of the American Dream. This notion is evident in the

documentary, Advertising the American Dream, Professors from Chapman and New York University as well as advertising gurus shed light on how advertising helped perpetuate material consumption as forefront to the “Dream.” According to Dr. Bernard McGrane from Chapman University,

On a fundamental level, advertising [disconnects] us from reality...The American Dream is presented [for Americans] to purchase it. The American Dream itself is already a commercial aspiration, which people ought to aspire to, ought to desire. [People] want this dream, so the logic of advertising psychology is already present in the very form of the American Dream (Advertising the American Dream 2008).

Based on McGrane’s claim, this disconnect gives advertisers the opportunity to present a fantasy world to their target audience. For instance, advertisers have set out to brainwash today’s youth into believing that their prosperity is determined by their material wealth. In Branded: The Buying and Selling of Teenagers, Alissa Quart explores how America’s marketing firms have targeted teens as their new buying power. Her startling findings about corporate branding show the negative consequences of selling products to Generation Y.ⁱⁱⁱ She defines “branding” as a way for teens to claim their identity through corporate logos. Quart states that, “The standard ‘pretty and popular’ refrain has changed. Now[,] teens judge one another more for the brands they wear and how much money they or their families have” (14). As a result, many teens have gone to great lengths to assure that they are meeting the status quo set by their contemporaries.

The consequences of this materialistic philosophy are highlighted in the New York Magazine article, “The Fashion Thief.” Jessica Lustig reports about the tragic fate of 17-year old Queens native Kevahn Thorpe, who has a materialistic obsession over corporate labels such as Gucci and Prada that drove him to commit a series of major retail thefts.

Thorpe claims that, “[I felt] high-class [in these designer clothes] – like nobody can tell me anything” (54). His obsession began when he found himself at the corner of Fifth Avenue and 57th Street in New York. At that moment, he entered an advertising epicenter of high end clothing. He realized that these brands could help him distinguish himself from his classmates. Thorpe says, “If you’re walking down the street with average clothes, people won’t pay attention to you. But then you walk down the street wearing a thousand-dollar outfit, people gonna look at you a certain way” (56). Thorpe’s statement demonstrates he wanted to leap out of his modest social standing and into the higher sectors of society. By stealing designer clothes, he was able to attain this false perception of success. As a consequence of his thefts, he was arrested. Currently, he is being tried as an adult in the New York Court System. This is Thorpe’s first misdemeanor. If he is found guilty, he faces up to three years in prison. More importantly, if convicted, Thorpe will become a prime example of the consequences of materialism.

Quart’s and Lustig’s research shows how Americans have fallen prey to advertising propaganda and have lost sight on their most important asset - their youth. Marketers have targeted today’s generation as their sacrificial lamb for America’s financial bottom line. Rubens asserts, “Our acquisition binge is a better reflection of our deficit in social capital than it is of our need for more material goods” (260). His statement proves that advertising has created a void in people’s consciousness. Americans have not realized that this void is an illusion brought on by marketing campaigns. Therefore, people

continue to fall into the vicious cycle of consumption and remain unaware of the damaging toll it has taken on them and their offspring.

Power and the Power Elite

Today's Americans believe that contentment can be measured by their level of power. Rubens claims that Americans find joy when they are able to make their own decisions in life because they achieve a sense of "visible success" (22). His term "visible success" is defined as a person receiving recognition from their peers based on their decisions or actions, albeit positive or negative. Through their decision making, people are able to exercise their personal power. He cautions his readers that they need to be mindful of their "true" intentions for wanting power. Often, people set high expectations for themselves. People need to realize that power is about being responsible for one's well-being and those of others as well.

In his book, The Power Elite, C. Wright Mills offers a glimpse into the inner circle of these power players and how their intentions are solely to serve their own self-interests. Published in 1956, his findings about the elite remain relevant now more than ever. Mills's book presents an in-depth analysis of a power struggle in the United States. He explains that, "[the power elite] is composed of men whose positions enable them to transcend the ordinary environment of ordinary men and women; they are in positions to make decisions having major consequences" (3-4). Despite Mills's statement, the fact is that women have a greater opportunity to attain these powerful positions now than they have in the past. He believes there are three powerful parties in the America: political,

corporate and military. Mills refers to them as “the power elite” (3). These groups struggle to obtain supreme power over America’s well-being. Mills explains that, “The power elite [are] composed of political, economic, and military men, but this [institutional] elite is frequently in some tension: [they] come together on certain coinciding points and only on certain occasions of ‘crisis’ (276). His statement shows that these groups do not work together to contribute to the greater good. Instead, these groups strive to make their own dreams come to fruition. These intentions illustrate that their decisions and actions are made for their own benefit.

This epistemology correlates to the ideas in John Mill’s essay, “Utilitarianism.” He defines this approach as, “all action is for the sake of some end, and the rules of action, it seems natural to suppose, must take their whole character and color from the end to which they are subservient” (223). His assertion illustrates that an individual’s decisions and actions are justifiable regardless of their potentially negative ramifications. His methodology directly parallels the power elite’s tactics for control in society. These groups have created a sense of exclusivity that appears to be unattainable to the outsider. Mills believes that this exclusivity creates, “class consciousness” where a person accepts only those within their social circle (283). This protective measure is designed to keep the lines of power within these three groups. This notion leads to asking the question: During America’s economic crisis, are there repercussions for being the power elite?

In the New York article, “The Wall of the 1%,” Gabriel Sherman writes about how New York’s elite consisting of business, political and security executives have lost their

privileges during this social and economic meltdown. Sherman explains, “For the privileged, it was more comfortable when things remained unspoken. Almost more than the loss of money, they are concerned with the loss of status and pride” (25). Sherman’s claim indicates that the power elite are no longer able to maintain their power in Manhattan. One of the prevalent symbols of status and pride in New York is one’s ability to own a vacation home in the Hamptons. In the July 2009 Vanity Fair article, “The Hamptons Stress Test,” Michael Shnayerson reports that the power elite are scrambling to keep their summer estates from the brink of selling below market value or being repossessed by a bank. Shnayerson states that, “Titans have been brought low, fortunes lost, a world transformed. And through that muck, curling around one Hampton estate after another, is the slither of [investment chairman] Bernie Madoff” (101). Living in America’s wealthiest zip code is a privilege for the power elite because they are able to surround themselves with their close circle of family and friends. Although this exclusive community was not heavily shaken by the national economic crisis, a majority of the elite were affected by the poor financial handlings of Bernard Madoff’s investment firm. For thirty years, Madoff and his team practiced a Ponzi scheme^{iv} where they lured many of the power elite to invest into their falsified financial products.

By 2008, the Federal Bureau of Investigations found that Madoff’s firm embezzled over \$170 billion of their clients’ finances. Madoff’s wrongdoings have greatly impacted the elite’s main source of power, their financial portfolio and real estate holdings, where they forced to prioritize what’s important in their lives. For example, Robert Halio and his wife Stephanie ran a successful process-serving agency for 30 years and invested 90% of

their life's savings into Madoff's company, intended to enjoy an early retirement and spend the latter part of their lives in the Hamptons. After finding out about Madoff's fraudulent dealings, Halio and his wife have come out of their retirement. Stephanie states that, "I will just work for the rest of my life" (102). In addition to their family-owned agency, they assist family and friends to earn extra income such as driving them to the airport or doing their grocery shopping in order to keep their home. Halio's circumstances offer a glimpse into the power elite's struggle to sustain their power and remain at the top.

In OverSuccess, Rubens explains that the country has forgotten the importance of each other's well-being. He says that, "As the [Founding Fathers] so frequently reminded their new nation, the premise of our freedom and prosperity lies, not only in our exquisite constitution, but also in our widespread personal commitment to the voluntary norms of self-restraint and civic generosity" (382). In contrast to Rubens' assertions, the power elite have exploited their individual freedoms and sought to obtain more privileges for their own personal and financial gain rather than for the good of the community and nation.

Fame and the Media

Many Americans view fame as the barometer for personal fulfillment. Rubens describes this obsession as, "You are nobody unless your face is painted in LCD on a building in Times Square. [America's] constant diet of supersized junk celebrities and million watt success icons has [deprived] us..." (326). In last two decades, celebrity coverage has

increasingly replaced hard news. Hard news is defined as local and national coverage that affects the community at large. According to Rubens's findings, hard news has dropped from 65% to 50% of all media coverage. Furthermore, he explains that these percentages break down to Americans receiving two minutes of celebrity news, six minutes on local and national criminal reporting and twenty-five seconds on scientific innovations (195). This drastic change in journalism illustrates that fame has corrupted people's perceptions. Americans have the false construct that notoriety is newsworthy. This fallacy about fame has caused many people to seek fame as a means of attaining personal fulfillment.

In Fame Junkies: The Hidden Truths Behind America's Favorite Addiction, Jake Halpern examines how the media has perpetuated fame as the ultimate means to personal fulfillment. One of the driving forces that propelled fame to unprecedented heights was the emergence of cable television. In 1983, over 31 million American households had cable subscriptions. These numbers soared to 73 million subscribers by 2005. The increase in viewership gave media networks the opportunity to expand their programming and distribution on a national level. In addition, this expansion allowed for increased programming. Halpern states that,

The upshot of all this [new programming] is that the networks on cable – and satellite as well - need a steady supply of telegenic actors, singers, cooks, talk-show hosts, and meteorologists to fill the increasing number of celebrity slots...All of this creates a perception, and to some extent a reality, that it is now much easier to become famous (xxi).

These new programming developments give Americans the impression that they have a greater opportunity to be on cable television and become famous. The primary reason for their pursuit is to gain recognition. Robert Thompson, Director of the Center for the

Study of Popular Television at Syracuse University, is a leading consultant in the evolution of the fame culture. He asserts, “Any kid who is watching [television] or just paying attention to the world around him, has got to come to the conclusion that being famous brings an awful a lot of things that make your life better” (xxii). Thompson’s insight shows that fame provides them with instant recognition.

For example, Thompson explains that his television interviews raised his profile on campus. The university has given him an executive office with a dressing room. He quickly explains that these interviews were motivated to educate people about fame’s discourse. However, Thompson is vulnerable because he often craves the attention from the cable shows and the positive feedback from his community. He states, “I haven’t had a television interview since the seventeenth of March, when I was on Good Morning America for a taped interview and since then there have been moments when I’ve gotten worried that my career is over” (xxiii). Thompson’s statement shows that anyone is susceptible to the glamour of fame.

In addition, the media often spotlights a number of celebrities with troubled backgrounds. These efforts also show that fame is achievable for all Americans. This notion is best described by Pop artist Andy Warhol’s motto, “[Everyone will be] famous for 15 minutes” which has become part of America’s vernacular (Honnef 8). This motto continues to encourage Americans to pursue the celebrity life. Halpern claims, “In all likelihood[,] many other famous Americans have also viewed fame – at least partly – as a way to fill the void or ease the pain of a shoddy childhood” (34). From Hip Hop moguls

Sean Combs to actress Jennifer Lopez, the disclosure of these celebrities' private lives gives Americans the opportunity to learn how they too can attain notoriety. They are able to use these success stories as roadmaps to garner fame for themselves. Halpern's research shows how the media creates the false perception that fame is a worthy and attainable goal. This perception leads to asking the important question: What is the price of fame?

Rubens explains that Americans' affinity for fame does not lead to personal fulfillment. He states that, "We pay for fame fixation in personal emptiness and withered community" (170). His claim highlights that people's obsession with celebrity is unfulfilling because people do not realize that the media creates an illusion of bringing people together through the medium of television. Americans are able to reach a large audience, but they are unable to create a "real" relationship with them.

In summary, the driving forces of advertising, the power elite and the media have perpetuated the myth that the trinity of the American Dream is wealth, power and fame. Through their relentless efforts, these superficial values have been embedded in the American consciousness. As the nation strives to resolve its national dilemmas, Americans need to be mindful of how they reached these breaking points.

ⁱ This online survey is based on 1,000 respondents.

ⁱⁱ Jim Rubens's OverSuccess methodology derives from his personal experiences. As an undergraduate at Dartmouth, he wrestled with how to achieve wealth, power and fame in his own life. After dropping out of Dartmouth, he joined a New England commune and later started one of his many business ventures – recycling center. By the 1990s, Rubens ran for political office in New Hampshire and served two terms in the state senate.

ⁱⁱⁱ Generation Y are those born between 1979 and 1995.

^{iv} Ponzi scheme is a false investment operation that provides a financial return to investors by using other client's funds. This system creates a financial pyramid where the firm needs to constantly gain new clients to cover their financial mishandlings.

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