**What is the American Dream?**

The idea of an American Dream is older than the United States, dating back to the 1600s, when people began to come up with all sorts of hopes and aspirations for the new and largely unexplored continent. Many of these dreams focused on owning land and establishing prosperous businesses which would theoretically generate happiness, and some people also incorporated ideals of religious freedom into their American Dreams. During the Great Depression, several people wrote about an American Dream, codifying the concept and entrenching it in American society.

For people who believe in the American dream, anything is attainable through hard work. The concept plays on the idea that American is a classless society, although it is obviously not, as any honest examination of the United States will reveal. The idealistic vision of the American Dream also assumes that people are not discriminated against on the basis of race, religion, gender, and national origin, another thing which is unfortunately not true in the United States.

Critics of the American dream also point out that many versions of the dream equate prosperity with happiness, and that happiness may not always be that simple. These critics suggest that the American Dream may always remain tantalizingly out of reach for some Americans, making it more like a cruel joke than a genuine dream.

People with a more skeptical view of the American Dream sometimes say that the American Dream represents the possibility of living better than your parents did, and a desire among parents for their children to lead happy lives. This is especially true in the immigrant community, as many immigrants have come from extremely difficult circumstances.

S.E. Smith, “What is the American Dream?” WiseGEEK, 02 January 2010 , 22 January 22, < http://www.wisegeek.com/ >

**The So-Called American Dream**

The term "American Dream" has come to mean both less and more than the sum of its words. For some, the simple pursuit of the Dream has lead to excesses. Others see it as unattainable.

For the few who have reached the goal, this shining beacon has meant little but disappointment.

The previous connotation of the phrase, owning your home, living securely, and giving your children a better life than your parents left you, has faded and been replaced by a fierce and ravenous appetite for Goods. We are no longer "citizens of a free society"; rather, we are primarily rampant consumers, determined to make the Jonses keep up with us. We constantly and futilely chase after things: things we do not need, things that don't work properly, things that

make us oblivious to the pain of others, and things that cost too much and are obsolete or broken before we can use them. From magical elixirs and misanthropic 8-tracks to innumerable, bad movie sequels and five thousand dollar barbecue grills, we have been sold on the concept that new or more or better means success and accomplishment and achievement.

Our children, who join us in front of our new 55-inch, flat-screen, picture-in-picture, plasma, digital, remote-controlled TV/home theater/entertainment center, progressively slide into the same swirling vortex of buying, disappointment, discarding, and upgrading. Commercials bombard kids' minds (and ours) with so many images designed to make us feel inadequate, imbecilic, and impotent that we (and they) seem to have no choice but to outspend our less-fortunate neighbors. What, however, happens to the kids across town, those, with out-of-luck parents, without computers with, simply put, less. Where is their luminescent American Dream?

Consumerism forces them into a life of envy, lust, and lowered expectations. It is difficult to stand outside the candy store, mall, or car dealership year after year if all the fantastic, fabricated goodies inside are unavailable to us. The two-story Colonial in the suburbs becomes less and less a Dream and more a Nightmare. What will happen, though, when the sleepers awaken?

**Redefining the American Dream**

**Our Consuming Desires and the Quest for a More Sustainable Society**

To have and have not: that is the essence of consumerism in America and the engine of Western capitalism- to experience a moment when the acquisition of what George Carlin calls “stuff” brings you to an epiphany of sobbing because its very being, and the act of acquiring itself, reminds you off the stuff you do not have, or do not have yet. The thrill of the present drags you into the want of the past and then propels you into prayers for the future. The stuff is there and not there.

Consider the followings:

1. In a recent survey, 15% of American consumers surveyed responded that they would be happy “living a comfortable life,” while 35% sought to reach the top 6oh of the income distribution, and another 49oh aspired to the next l2%.
2. The level of income needed to “fulfill one's dreams” doubled between 1986 and 1994 and now totals over twice the U.S. median income.
3. Since 1980, American household savings has declined, and there has been an increase in credit card debt, shoplifting, and violent crime carried out to obtain status goods such as athletic shoes, leather jackets, and designer sunglasses.
4. Working hours in the U.S. have increased over the past 20 years.
5. The 1997 household savings rate was the lowest in 60 years.
6. By mid- 1997, the total debt of all American households had reached 89% of total household income.
7. TV viewing hours have increased 50% since the mid-60s and currently constitute up to 40% of adults ' free time.
8. The average North American requires about 5 hectares of land to support food, housing, transportation, and other consumer needs.
9. China, a rapidly industrializing nation, currently has 680 people per car and 1.2 billion citizens, while the U.S. has 1.7 people per car.
10. Ecologists estimate that it would take three planets Earth to provide an American standard of living to the entire world. Yet it is that standard of living to which the whole world aspires.

These statistics illustrate a striking paradox: that during this time of virtually unparalleled prosperity, American culture is slowly being consumed by its own consumptive impulses. As described in *Consuming Desires*, the American pursuit of happiness is defined by a seemingly insatiable desire to consume, and as in the Greek myth of Tantalus, the act of consuming, and of yearning for more, is destined to lead only to greater unhappiness. Further, our patterns of consumption, and the justifiable emulation of these patterns by citizens around the world, pose a host of global environmental threats that raise daunting issues of equity economics, and interanational security, among others.

*Consuming Desires* edited by Roger Rosenblatt, offers a rich and varied dialogue on the underlying roots of consumer culture and its pervasive impact on the world around us; essays by Jane Smiley, William Greider, Alex Kotlowitz, Bill McKibben, David Orr, and others provide a cohesive range of thoughtful perspectives. In addition to these essays, *Eco-Compass* has uncovered a thought-provoking cornucopia of columns, articles, pape6, and online resources that examine western consumption habits in the context of demographic and economic trends, global population, and the pursuit of happiness.