

American Dreams





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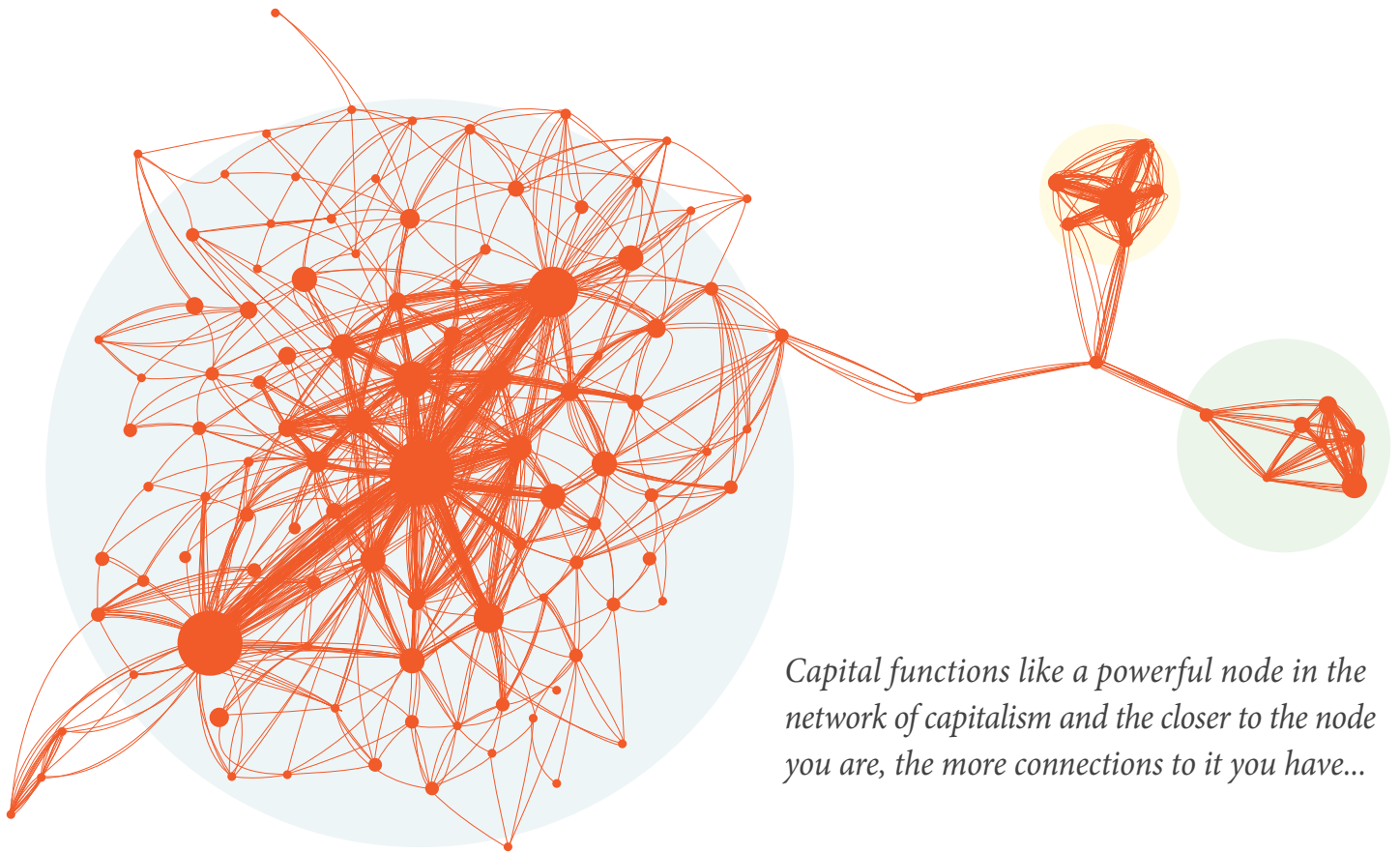
Photo by Gift Habeshaw Cover photo by Andreas Dress

I've been thinking a lot lately about the American Dream. Maybe it's all the time I've spent in the house this year. Isn't that what the dream is all about anyway? Land and houses and the chance to own property? Maybe it's the election and all the visible signs of our democracy at work. Maybe it's the unrest in our streets. Whatever the case it's been on my mind and on the minds of many of my friends and colleagues. Something is happening in America, something really important and it relates to this dream. In the profound uncertainty of these unusual times, the American Dream is in the midst of yet another transfiguration. This dream of ours, which has played such an important role in the destiny of the world and the history of freedom, is facing out against a new frontier and a new challenge. Upon this confrontation rests the very fate and continuity of the America experiment.

The idea of the American Dream is something that we all take for granted here in the United States. It's like one of those words or phrases that you cannot really define but somehow you just know it when you see it like "leadership" or "justice" or "love." While the dream itself has changed and evolved through time, it has retained one core thematic element—something about the chance to do better in life.

As I've been thinking about what this means and why it has been so powerful in our history, it occurred to me that because the dream is operating on our collective consciousness—it's a dream that we all share—it might be a

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reflection of a broader truth about the nature of our society. And as I went back through our history, I discovered that there was indeed a recurrent pattern amidst the changing manifestation of the dream. This pattern was about the relationship between the established orders of society and the frontier.

A feature of capitalism that appears to be true is this: in a closed system, capital (and the owners of capital) tend to do better and better. Something like what Thomas Piketty was arguing about in his book is true. There is this natural tendency toward wealth inequality. Thinking about it from a practical and historical standpoint, what seems to be at play here is a network effect. Capital functions like a powerful node in the network of capitalism and the closer to the node you are, the more connections to it you have, the better off you become. It's like an influencer in a social network. As time goes on, as connections grow, it becomes naturally more and more valuable. It is because of this natural tendency that early capitalist societies inclined to geographic expansion. The magnetic power of capital produces a stultifying effect on society and when there is just no chance to make a better life, people become restless and more willing to take on big risks. This is how you end up with a Columbus sailing west across the Atlantic without any real good intelligence about what was out there. This is how you end up with colonies.

The frontier of America offered the opportunity for individuals to believe that there was a chance of breaking out of the established order. It does not matter whether they actually had a chance only whether they believed they did. For what is important about the frontier as a motivating force is the extent to which it serves as a release valve for the otherwise stultifying forces of increasing inequality of opportunity. Capitalism operating without a viable frontier for too long produces either war or revolution and sometimes both.

Our history here in America has been driven by movement towards a changing frontier. At first there was a clear geographical direction to our migration—Go West! But as we expanded as a nation and exhausted the limits of our geography, the migratory patterns changed to reflect the evolution of the frontier of opportunity. The question has always been the same: Where can I go where I actually have a chance of a better life? The frontier is really just a metaphor for any force powerful enough to actually reverse the trend toward naturally occurring inequality.

In this way, the frontier is the fountainhead of the American Dream. Without it and the opportunity it provided, this part of the American ethos could never have formed. What's remarkable about the American story is that even though the actual physical, geographic frontier has long been gone, we



Photo by Giorgio Trovato

have been able to continually recreate a believable frontier of opportunity. This is the genius of America.

It is important to remember though is that the American Dream has been just that—a dream. It has never really been true. It's been true only in the sense that a dream is true. Enough to wake you up perhaps or inspire you or scare you but still just a dream. And for many it has been a nightmare. There are great crimes against humanity in our history.

In the pre-COVID world the dying waves of the most recent manifestation of the American Dream--the perceived opportunity of the new urban lifestyle—were lapping up against traffic-filled, over-expensive cities. Yes, there were jobs and opportunity. But it was becoming increasingly clear to everyone that there was something just not true to this dream. There was too much of a sense that it was only for the lucky few, akin to the lottery-like nature of achieving celebrity. People

could ignore no longer the apparent lies of this dream like the growing specter of the humanitarian crisis of homelessness. “Something was” indeed “rotten in” America. People were starting to lose their faith in this frontier of opportunity and the American Dream itself. Then the COVID crisis came with lockdowns, fights over toilet paper at the grocery stores, furloughs and jobs losses, fear and suffering. Then the protests, the looting and destruction, all the frustrations of the crisis, the dream dying upon the truth of its own lies.

What we are seeing today is really an acceleration of a historical process that started long before the crisis. It is a recasting of the American Dream, an attempted reformation of the meaning of the frontier of opportunity. The great question before us is whether this reformation will continue the miracle of the dream or whether we will fall into a “new dark age.” The fate of our nation hangs in the balance once again.

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