

Epilogue

James Truslow Adams

The Epic of America, 1931

THE American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.

We no longer have the [western] frontier to divert us or to absorb our energies. We shall become a more densely populated country in which our social ideals will have to be such as to give us civilized contentment. To clear the muddle in which our education is at present, we shall obviously have to define our values. Unless we can agree on what the values in life are, we clearly can have no goal in education, and if we have no goal, the discussion of methods is merely futile.

Once the frontier stage has passed – the acquisition of a bare living, and the setting up of a fair economic base – the American Dream itself opens all sorts of questions as to values. It is easy to say a better and richer life for all men, but what *is* better and what *is* richer?

In this respect, as in many others, the great business leaders are likely to lead us astray rather than to guide us. For example, as promulgated by them, there is a danger in the present popular theory of the high wage scale. The danger lies in the fact that the theory is advanced not for the purpose of creating a better type of man by increasing his leisure and the opportunity for making wise use of it, but for the sole and avowed purpose of increasing his powers as a “consumer.”

He is, therefore, goaded by every possible method of pressure or cajolery to spend his wages in consuming goods. He is warned that if he does not consume to the limit, instead of indulging in pleasures which do not cost money, he may be deprived not only of his high wages but of any at all. He, like the rest of us, thus appears to be getting into a treadmill in which he earns, not that he may enjoy, but that he may spend, in order that

the owners of the factories may grow richer.

If we are to regard man merely as a producer and consumer, then the more ruthlessly efficient big business is, the nearer we reach the goal. Many of the goods consumed doubtless make man healthier, happier, and better even on the basis of a high scale of human values. But if we think of him as a human being primarily, and only incidentally as a consumer, then we have to consider what values are best or most satisfying for him as a human being. We can attempt to regulate business for him not as a consumer but as a man, with many needs and desires with which he has nothing to do as a consumer. Our point of view will shift from efficiency and statistics to human nature. We shall not create a high wage scale in order that the receiver will consume more, but that he may, in one way or another, live more abundantly, whether by enjoying those things which are factory produced or those which are not.