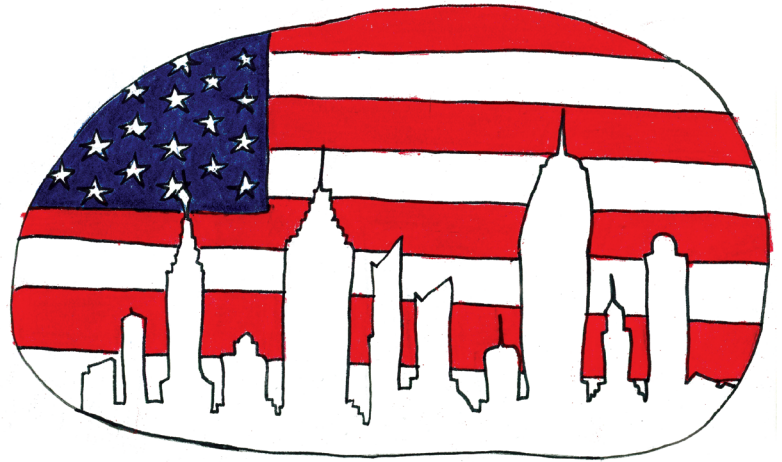
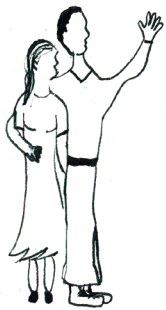


FAMILY TIES AND AMERICAN LIES

Grappling with capitalism, personal responsibility, and
the American Dream

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A not-so-fun fact about me: my relationship with my family is centered around my achievements. Or, rather, the lack thereof—at least that's my perception of *their* perception of me. From where they seem to stand, I'm nothing special: I attend an okay college and have a roughly average range of interests; I don't put nearly enough pressure on myself, and thus underperform academically. I am more interested in the world of emotional experience and personal pleasure than I am in money or success.

If you think the above paragraph paints my family as jerks, you should know that they grew up in the Soviet Union. Food was not always a given, and the education people received from the state was, for the large majority, skill-oriented. If you ever saw a mental health professional of any kind (though the ones in the USSR were unlikely to

resemble anyone you're familiar with), your chances of getting a job were close to none. My family's upbringing placed them an ocean away from the West and its values. An ocean is a long way to swim.

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Still, their perception has motivated me to advance myself with as little help from them as possible, to become financially and socially independent in order to reject a set of cultural values I find conflicting. My desire to achieve without them is hypocritical: they have already helped me by being white, wealthy, and willing to invest in my education—or, rather, invest in *me* as a sort of business, which they eventually hope to get returns on. Their expectation of me is that I'll earn enough money to support *them*, and anybody else in our family's "in-group." Those on the outside—meaning those who aren't already wealthy, secure, and well-connected—are not their concern. For my family, capitalism is the only functional system, which is understandable since they were forced to live through perhaps the most well-known failure of socialism. Even within this socialist system, the underground

market flourished, and it's their familial privilege that has continued to allow them to become financially successful—a fact that they fail to acknowledge.

I can't help but fixate on this, but at the same time I want to resist it: it feels unfair to have my birth predetermine my success. Capitalism teaches me to use my circumstance to my advantage, while everything I've learned since beginning to deconstruct the values I inherited from my family teaches me to hate capitalism. If I don't take advantage of my social position, capitalist ideology tells me I will end up broke and unfulfilled, since I won't have the resources that I'll need to do the work I love. It's an ethical double bind, one I can't seem to find a way out of yet.

The high school me thought that college might help find other routes to self-fulfillment, so off to Colorado College I went. Back then, I imagined college as a career guarantee; by my senior year, I thought I'd know exactly what I'd want to do with the rest of my life. I'd walk into the Career Center one day, show them my resume full of various mostly-unpaid internships—hypocrite me, yet again, since I can afford to not get paid because of my family's support—and walk out with multiple job offers.

Fast forward to now: I'm nervously biting my nails on the couch, scouring Handshake (CC's job-search platform) for post-graduate job opportunities, desperately hoping to find a company that might at least read my application. I know that this is most likely a complete waste of time: according to a recent survey, over 85 percent of jobs are filled through networking. Companies within the creative industry don't exactly cruise around colleges looking for potential hires. Instead, they get thousands of applications online and in person, most of which they likely don't read, unless they already know your name.

The rational part of my brain tells me I should be asking everyone I know and their mother about potential opportunities, politely and over coffee. That's the path any career-finding

resource emphasizes to the extreme. But since I'm 22 and haven't exactly acquired a wealth of useful connections of my own (in this regard, my college experience has been less helpful than I'd hoped), I will most likely have to rely on my parents' network.

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The reality that I will probably have to leverage my unfair privilege feels uncomfortable, but the fact is, it's not about me, or the 68 percent of CC's population that pay full tuition. Rather, it's about those to whom the shimmering American Dream still beckons. Those are the people who spend months traveling over 2,000 miles north, only to be tear-gassed steps away from their destination; the people who spend hours in detention centers and embassies, or who walk across miles of desert in the hopes of crossing the border. The Dream—the idea of becoming anyone you want to be with hard work—guides their path like a lighthouse, but the few

who make it to the end find themselves in front of a simple house lamp, which turns off when the electricity bill gets too high. This Dream—also known as America's favorite invention and its founding ethos—is also what encourages people to bleed themselves dry to pay for their children's college degrees, since the presumption is that their sacrifices will pay off.

Unsurprisingly, this Dream is just what it calls itself: a dream, as far from reality as a bus ride to the moon, your online data being private, or the U.S. government caring about the planet. The U.S. is currently one of the most unequal Western countries in terms of wealth distribution, far behind most of Europe, New Zealand and Australia, and trailing behind even places as historically unequal as Turkey. Now, get ready for some upsetting statistics: in 2013, the top 0.1 percent of the U.S. population owned the same percentage of assets as the bottom 90 percent. We're told that we'll have the opportunity to become richer than we were to begin with, but social mobility has drastically decreased since the 1970s. In many cases, people even fall down the socioeconomic ladder—in 2016, almost half of American 30-year-olds earned less than their parents did when they were the same age. The average U.S. income grew by 77 percent between 1970 and 2014, which, at first, might give some weight to this capitalism-is-nailing-it idea, except for the fact that almost all of that growth went to the top one percent of earners. This, combined with the lack of social mobility, keeps the upper classes incredibly insular.

In our competitive world, putting family before anyone else makes perfect sense. They are our biologically-determined in-group. In America, the love for family extends significantly into the job sphere: according to data from the last U.S. census, by age 30, roughly 22 percent of men will be working at the same company at the same time as their fathers. A total of 28 percent work for an employer that their father had recently worked for, but left (unsurprisingly,

historical data on nepotistic mothers is pretty much nonexistent). In total, that's over a quarter of the U.S. male population. Still, as with almost everything else concerning American existence, the statistics vary drastically between income groups; if your father is in the top 10 percent of earners, you are 150 percent more likely to work for the same employer as he does, than if your father is in the bottom 10 percent.

In general, the idea of working with (or for) your family doesn't seem inherently unfair. In my own choices as a consumer, I often gravitate towards products made by family businesses, because this label leads me to believe my dollars are going to actual people, people who hopefully need them, rather than into the 0.1 percent abyss.

I would undoubtedly have less of an emotional problem with nepotism if I had a closer relationship with my parents. I'd also have less of a problem with it if the "family first" rhetoric didn't hinder people whom we as a society have repeatedly left out—people whose families don't have food security, or access to good education and health care. It's impossible to blame people for looking out for their families. Capitalism requires competition, and we are biologically and socially inclined to define ourselves as "inside" a group. Since we mostly still exist within binaries, if there's an "in," there must be an "out."

The American Dream promises the people on the "out" a way in. If you work hard *enough*, it whispers, you can achieve anything. It's this *enough*, though, that looks entirely different for someone like myself—someone who has access to an incredible education and a wealth of cultural and social capital purely through being born into it—versus someone whose upbringing didn't allow the space to even think about that kind of capital because their basic survival was not guaranteed. Unsurprisingly, the countries with the smallest wealth distribution gap are Scandinavian; the same countries that are famous for having extremely high

taxes and for using those to create successful systems of social welfare. Those nations essentially guarantee each of their citizens the same baseline access to food, shelter, and education, which allows everybody at least a similar chance at success.

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Supporters of capitalism say that social welfare de-motivates people from working; for a very small number of people, that may be true, but when your circumstances are stacked against your survival, I imagine that getting basic needs met is what's really at stake. That kind of thinking, though, to me further underscores a huge problem within the capitalist framework: it assumes that we are, or *should be*, driven to work in order to *consume*, rather than for any sort of fulfillment.

This is the framework that my family wants me to internalize. Any time I've voiced my interest in a purely creative sphere (in my case, mostly writing), they dismiss it by telling me that I don't have the talent. To mitigate the harshness of the comment, they follow it up with something about the extreme rarity of talent in general, something along the lines of, "There's only a single Dostoevsky in each generation." I cannot blame them; after experiencing the Soviet Union's version of communism, it makes sense for them to throw themselves as far as they can towards the other end of the spectrum. Still, their values are in a never-ending headlock with mine. I have been in the

West long enough to see that money alone does little to make you happy. But as I've gotten closer to entering a career, I've noticed myself gravitate away from the spheres I find endlessly fulfilling but less lucrative, and towards the kinds of careers that provide a slightly larger (though by no means definite) guarantee of employment. I disagree with the values my family holds, but they still seem inescapable. If I ask my family for help in finding a job, which seems more and more inevitable the closer graduation looms, I will be validating the free-market impetus to "do anything to get ahead."

In one way, my awareness of just how flawed the system is has been liberating. My parents tend to call my perception of institutional injustice "radically leftist." But shockingly significant statistics back me up. Acknowledging these truths means I have to make real-life choices. To whom do I owe my loyalty: to my family, who have done everything in their power to ensure my survival and success, or to the people whose network the system subjugates? The question of my personal responsibility, though, I can't answer in one sweeping sentence, because it asks me to make an impossible choice. ▼