

# The Consumer's "Dream World": The Global Shopping Mall

Sequesters To Trim Government Debt; Malls Raise Consumer Debt for The "Sheeple"

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Region: [sub-Saharan Africa](#), [USA](#)

Theme: [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

*Back in 2002, South Africa hosted a UN environmental Summit on sustainability. It drew a rag tag army of green activists from all over the world, many excited to visit the now free South Africa that they fought for through the apartheid years, and hoping to meet members of the liberation movement led by Nelson Mandela*

The closest to Nelson Mandela they got was to gather in front of a giant statue, created by a Swedish artist, in a commercial Square named after the South African icon. When they pictured the new South Africa, they probably saw the townships where tens of thousands of people marched for justice.

Instead, they found themselves in Sandton, a "township" that only capitalists could imagine, an upscale enclave within the city of Johannesburg devoted to corporation, banks and giant malls even more opulent than similar temples of consumption in other countries. Many wandered around in front of the luxury shops safeguarded by a security army, wondering what that had to do with saving the planet.

South Africa has become a Mall country. There's even one now in Soweto.

In the old days, empires colonized countries; now their economic combines colonize consumers into market segments who depend on modern malls to organize the shopping that drives economic life.

The mall is for the modern economy what the factory was for the old one, until consumption trumped production as the engine of economic activity. We no longer make many goods; we just generate demand and sell goods others produce in a transaction based culture where whole societies are organized around venues for routinized and regimented shopping that is masqueraded through advertising as "fun."

Durban's giant Gateway Mall, with its food stores, restaurants, game parlors and movie theaters, calls itself a "theater of shopping." It claims to be the largest in the Southern Hemisphere.

The academic, Christopher McElligot sees the mall as a "consumer dreamworld for the constantly moving "happiness machine." Another professor, Dr Arzu Seri, goes further and locates malls in the structure of how our modern economies operate, noting, "In shopping malls, the material culture of capitalism creates an appearance of variety, a colorful surface, which hide the uniformity of capitalist relations and the resulting inequality and poverty."

These institutions are now referred to as pillars of a “consumer democracy” by analysts writing in the Globalist who say there is showdown coming between China’s economy and our own.

Write Nicolas Berggruen and Nathan Gardels,

“The United States has turned into a borrower and consumer-driven economy dominated by the financial sector and services industry and a country where inequality has grown dramatically. In contrast, China is an investor and export-driven economy that is still industrializing, still largely impoverished and sharply unequal.

This contrasting dynamic between two clashing systems has generated an imbalance in the global economy that, if not corrected, threatens the peace and prosperity that has so far been achieved through globalization.”

Julian Delasantellis speaks in Asia Times about malls as key to American survival but they are now also a global phenomenon as you can experience every day in South Africa:

“In what is, according to some media reports, the bleakest time in finance history since the moneychangers were driven from the Temple, Americans keep spending. How can they not? ... No matter what the politicians bleat on in the Iowa cornfields about the centrality of Jesus in American life, the country’s real unifying faith, affirmed no matter what race, color, creed, gender, or sexual orientation, is mindless consumerism.

In this, the nation’s 1,100 enclosed shopping malls are temples to this national faith, with the 500-store Mall of America, in Bloomington, Minnesota, the faith’s new Vatican, its shining food court on a hill.”

My friend, the late Alexander Cockburn, saw the Mall a mirror of an economic culture in crisis, writing, “The left, by and large, never much cared for malls. They represented privatized space, the collapse of the public realm, and the freedoms — of association and public protest — protected in public space. Malls, whether in strip or covered form, symbolized a conversion of people from citizens to consumers, the death of Main Street, architecture reduced to utter banality Today, mirroring the distress in the mother ship of capitalism, its colonies and settlements are in decay”

In short, as we shop until we drop, it is our society that is dropping too under the weight of the debts we have been encouraged to accumulate. What many don’t see is that even as the cash registers churn, so do the credit card machines. Our acquisition habit is being funded by lenders who tack on interest while taking their cut when shoppers inevitably fall behind in paying their bills, as they know they will.

In this age of the Sequester, government debts are on the agenda, in part because many of the debts to be repaid are owed to foreign governments and big banks who have the clout to lobby the political system to get their money with interest!

But the enormous debt load strangling families as consumers who have no choice but to continue running it up if they want to feed and cloth themselves is much less visible.

That debt is rising. MarketWatch reports: “American consumers increased their debt in the final three months of 2012 for the first time since the fourth quarter of 2008...Consumer credit rose \$31 billion to break a four-year downtrend.”

The ultra-modern Malls, with their vast parking lots, are, like Casinos, magnets for “the sheeple” looking for bargains but ultimately seduced into spending more than they have. The high real estate expense adds to sales costs for upscale retailers insuring that only chain stores can afford to sell there. Overall, prices are unaffordable to South Africa’s poor black majority that trades in an informal economy of unhealthier food and cheaper goods.

Meanwhile, as Patrick Chalmers, a former Reuters journalist turned critic of financial reporting and the creator of Fraudcast News notes, the financial solutions being proposed in no way respond to the real economy problems squeezing the public.

“Our leaders’ feeble attempts at regulating banks, international finance and global markets have totally failed, leading to ongoing financial crises since the global meltdown of 2007-2008, “ he writes.

“The false debates created with regard to conventional economics, and our policymakers’ fixation with a sterile definition of prosperity as determined by economic growth, are major barriers to change.”

And so, once again, as governments look out for themselves, allegedly to deal with debts and deficit and pay off vast military expenditures, often fueled by corruption, their austerity-driven massive lay-offs will force the newly unemployed to go on to unemployment doles, and into deeper personal debt. Around and around we go: where it stops, nobody knows?

*News Dissector **Danny Schechter** made the film *In Debt We Trust* in 2006 that warned of the financial crisis. He edits [mediachannel.org](http://mediachannel.org). Comments to*

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