

The Greatest Scam: Network Marketing and the Neoliberal Economization of Everyday Life in the
United States of America

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Abstract

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This thesis examines how neoliberalism has penetrated the everyday life of middle-class Americans, leading to new forms of living and new collective understandings of the capitalist economic order. In order to understand how neoliberalism has penetrated the everyday life of middle-class Americans, I conducted one year of ethnographic fieldwork among people participating in network marketing, a form of sales that also includes the recruitment of additional salespeople – what is known as building a network. Network marketers do not receive a salary or direct commission; they generate income through recruitment of customers and salespeople. This structure encourages network marketers to rethink their social relationships in financial terms, reframing their personal connections as opportunities to earn money. Network marketing is a particularly strong case to illustrate neoliberalism in the United States because it epitomizes core tenets of neoliberalism like individual responsibility and entrepreneurialism, while also illuminating how a financial logic has replaced employment as the ideal pathway to middle-class life. This is emerging as part of the large-scale economic transformation from post-war regulated capitalism to neoliberal capitalism which has created intense economic insecurity and inequality for many people in the United States. I introduce a framework called the neoliberal economization of everyday life to analyze how mundane aspects of daily life – social encounters, routines, and modes of self-representation – become saturated with a capitalist economic logic. I demonstrate how the economization of everyday life naturalizes economic inequality and fosters social relationships dictated by a capitalist logic, which limits other non-economic aspects of human life that bind people together.

Keywords: neoliberalism, economization, independent contracting, economic anthropology, capitalism, The United States, network marketing