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Sommario/riassunto	Credit and debt appear to be natural, permanent facets of Americans' lives, but a debt-based economy and debt-financed lifestyles are actually recent inventions. In 1951 Diners Club issued a plastic card that enabled patrons to pay for their meals at select New York City restaurants at the end of each month. Soon other "charge cards" (as they were then known) offered the convenience for travelers throughout the United States to pay for hotels, food, and entertainment on credit. In the 1970's the advent of computers and the deregulation of banking created an explosion in credit card use-and consumer debt. With gigantic national banks and computer systems that allowed variable interest rates, consumer screening, mass mailings, and methods to discipline slow payers with penalties and fees, middle-class Americans experienced a sea change in their lives. Given the enormous profits from issuing credit, banks and chain stores used aggressive marketing to reach Americans experiencing such crises as divorce or unemployment, to help them make ends meet or to persuade them that

they could live beyond their means. After banks exhausted the profits from this group of people, they moved into the market for college credit cards and student loans and then into predatory lending (through check-cashing stores and pawnshops) to the poor. In 2003, Americans owed nearly
