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The American Dream

“America has been something of a schizophrenic personality, tragically divided against herself. On the one hand we have proudly professed the great principles of democracy. On the other hand we have sadly practiced the very antithesis of those principles.” Martin Luther King Jr.

As far back as the 1500s, America itself was a dream. It was a paradise just out of reach, the far off planet of magic and mystery. Upon America’s invasion by European settlers, the stories that came back to the old world were fairy tales of exotic riches. A case could be made that the dream of America goes so far back it is written in the western Europeans’ DNA. It has been Europe’s escape plan and its pot at the end of the rainbow all at once.

The idea of the American Dream is easily derived from the Declaration of Independence, what Cal Jillson calls the “the American Creed*”: that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.* This creed lays the groundwork for the essence of the American agenda. Its fallacy was evident to all those it excluded from the outset but nonetheless, its worthiness, as an ideal, and eloquence of its simple point, transcends the fact that it was written with an asterisk. The schizophrenia Martin Luther King Jr. alluded to in his The American Dream speech, quoted above, was not a late onset condition. Along side the Magna Carta, the Declaration’s Enlightenment age proposition makes it one of the great documents in our long journey toward a just world. But from America’s inception, the Dark Age construct of the Empire has informed its development.

The American Dream, it could be said, was elaborated on, by Whitman, Alger, and Thoreau, among others, before actually being coined. It wasn’t until the 20th Century that the notion gained steam. First penned by Walter Lippmann then bared to fruition and popularized by James Truslow Adams, the most popular historian of his time, in his book *Epic of America* (his editor convincing him away from using The American Dream as the title.) After Adams’ book and frequent articles in the New York Times on the subject, the American Dream quickly took hold in the vernacular. From the beginning the term was manipulated and commandeered for whatever purpose. The New Deal was for some an attack on the American Dream while for others it was its salvation. It is telling that at nearly the same time the cultural mammoth of a board game *Monopoly* came out. For some the game perfectly describes the American Dream.

Birthed out of the Great Depression, The American Dream reflected the ideals of the Creed, inward on the American persons soul. Within each of us we possessed some intangible that lead us to the promised land. Michael C. Kimmage deftly wrote, “The American Dream could be defined as the spiritualization of property and consumption, the investment of joy and dignity in consumption and property ownership.” (Hanson 2014) It could be that in reality what solidifies the American Dream is the simple fact that US property rights laws are so well formed coupled with an immense lending structure. Famed development economist Hernando de Soto Polar points to lack of property rights in developing nations as the major obstacle to progress. This could be one of the key draws for those immigrants coming to the US from such places. But in James Truslow Adams own words:

The dream is a vision of a better, deeper, richer life for every individual, regardless of the position in society that he or she may occupy by the accident of birth. It has been a dream of a chance to rise in the economic scale, but quite as much, or more than that, of a chance to develop our capacities to the full, unhampered by unjust restrictions of caste or custom. With this has gone the hope of bettering the physical conditions of living, of lessening the toil and anxieties of daily life.

Adams’ dream was importantly, inclusionary. Through the years, as the Dream has changed meaning, this point has in most cases stuck with it.

The struggle for the American Dream between those with differing political viewpoints is age old. As Lawrence R. Samuel points out in his book *The American Dream: A Cultural History:* “the American Dream was commonly believed to be on the ropes, crushed by either big government or big business.” (Samuel 2012) The left views radicalism in step with all the tenets of the American Dream. The government for them is the only structure in place where their voice can impose the actions they fight for. While the right looks upon the government as tyranny coming down upon the individualistic spirit America was built upon. But when big business is at the helm the government is the only institution that can be reigned in to take on such industry. Kimmage again makes the astute observation that through history the party most in touch with the American Dream is more likely to win power. (Hanson 2014)

The curse of upward mobility creates an anxious populace. James Baldwin noted upon his travels to Europe that the long entrenched class system freed the Europeans from the American’s “social paranoia”. Baldwin himself found himself more at ease in Paris where through the class system people knew their place and as a result feel steadied to go about their lives. He felt freer of class. The promise that all have a chance in effect to rise to the top of the heap keeps us looking over our shoulder.

When the suburban house with a car in the driveway is just as unattainable as the famous millionaire people get lost tin the popular culture myth of the dream, - paralyzed- living through celebrity and now reality TV.

James Baldwin famously debated William F. Buckley the question, “Is the American Dream at the expense of the American Negro?" Their responses illuminate a stark difference of their basic understanding of reality. Baldwin uses his exquisite oratory skills to describe the ways in which the very fundamental existence of blacks living in America is at odds with any possibility of the American Dream. While Buckley looks upon the notion of the American Dream as some sort of true to life entity that in effect will lead negroes to salvation. Cal Jillson perfectly elaborates the uneven floor Americans stand on: “when immigrants, minorities, and women achieved new rights, these usually amounted to the right to compete against well-entrenched white men in a matrix of established law and policy that they had developed to protect their current interests and future prospects.” (Jillson 2004)

In fact recently the idea that Americans are in fact more upwardly mobile than the rest of the world has been debunked. In an essay timely published in *The New Yorker* with respect to this essay, James Surowiecki enlightens us that our the growing US economy in the middle of the 20th Century in fact made all Americans more wealthy rather than upwardly mobile. What we see now as people having less upward mobility is rather just the effect of the economy as a whole slowing down. We are not in fact less upwardly mobile because we were in fact never that mobile in the first place. Those born poor are likely to stay poor and those born rich continue to be rich. All the while American economic productivity has continued its meteoric rise with little of the benefit reaching the American people. (Greenhouse 2013)

Where does the American Dream reside? Now it lives in the cult of celebrity. The American Dream is now a spectator sport. With the equation of the American dream to that of the impossibility of making to the top we are left with no choice but to watch. No longer is the Dream about self-reliance and ingenuity, people are paralyzed and subdued. The Dream is only attainable for the chosen few and we sit back and watch them enjoy living vicariously through them. But even the wealthiest of people are not satisfied. Most enriched by the financial sector do little to enjoy their riches. They work more hours.

In fact a study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* came to conclusions “that not all goals are equivalent in terms of their relationship to well-being. When goals for financial success exceeded those for affiliation, self-acceptance, and community feeling, worse psychological adjustment was found.” (Kasser 1993)

What should we make of the American Dream when looking to the future? Is it useful? Can it bring us together or will it isolate us in competition? The up from your bootstraps mentality is generally applied to the singular. It has been made clear since the dawn of the US that no one does it alone. (Beard 1931) The nation as a whole has shown its mettle in the past. But it seems now that the American Dream in its current incarnation stands in the way of the nation uniting in common effort to tackle the 21st Century. After penning the *Epic of America,* James Truslow Adams was compelled on numerous occasions to insert himself back in the national dialogue when he felt the Dream he elaborated was being ill portrayed. Now might be a time for such a re-evaluation. The American Dream as “a vision of a better, deeper, richer life for every individual” sounds much sweeter than the dream I hear of today. It’s as if we get caught on the word “individual.” The individual does continually pop up in all our revered American charters. But respect for the individual must not be confused with the resignation of the individual to an island. If we are to respect individuality, it is in fact essential that the individual is indeed *embraced* by the social whole. If we put it in terms of how we typically regard how men and women relate, we may help to illuminate where we are. When I think of respect in the popular American male or paternal sense, respect is shown with a firm handshake, few words, a how do you do and you’re on your way. Respect entails leaving one to their own devices. When I think of the respect from a maternal position, a warm embrace comes to mind, a welcoming into the home. It would be no stretch to say that a thoughtful reinterpretation of the American Dream from a non-white-male perspective would serve the world some good.

In fact, there is a lot to reinterpret in America. There is a lot to learn and unlearn. There will have to be a lot of sweeping up along the way, and a lot of digging up old dirt.

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