



THOUGHTS ON THE AMERICAN DREAM AND ITS FUTURE

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In approaching a topic as slippery as the “American Dream,” let alone its future, I will borrow from the famous turn-of-the-century German Sociologist Georg Simmel’s discussion of the relativity of reality. Reality, he said, is a function of distance. If you walk through a forest, for example, the trees are real but the forest is not (because you can see each tree but not the entire forest), but from the air, the forest is real but the individual trees are not. As the American pragmatists would have said, reality is a matter of perspective.

And so it is with the American Dream. It is real, to be sure. It was born of European conceptions of progress, the Enlightenment’s creation of the concept of the individual, and political philosophy’s articulation of individual rights. Those ideas together provided a set of operating rationales for the American Revolution, which, once in place, contributed to an incredible American optimism about our political system that Thomas Jefferson called the world’s “best hope” and Abraham Lincoln regarded as the “last, best hope of earth.”

But, while it is real, it is also permeated by contradiction, confluences of myth and fiction, and self-interested symbolism—all of which provide an image of the future and a distorted, nostalgic version of the past that nonetheless rests at the heart of our culture and simultaneously gives us peace of mind and drives us mad. The American Dream, in a word, is

an “ideograph”—a master symbol that fuses ideology and rhetoric and that, in the hands of authorities, mobilizes collective action, sentiment, and motive. It survives, in other words, in spite of itself. Let me elaborate.

As a master symbol, the idea of the American Dream is to be found in American culture and refers to an optimism and faith about the rights of Americans to quality of life. We have seen expressions of it in the collective strivings of numerous groups. To the African-Americans who migrated from the south to the north just after WWII in search of the higher wages that came with industrial growth, the north was called the “promised land”—a metaphor taken from the Moses trek through the desert and a key phrase in the famous Martin Luther King speech in Washington, D.C. The Mormon migration during the mid-1800’s from Illinois west through Iowa and eventually to Utah was contained within the idea of manifest destiny. And, the metaphor of America as a “melting pot,” originally used in an early 1900’s Broadway play and which referred to Jewish-Gentile intermarriage, came to define the fate of ethnic immigrants as one of full assimilation.

The point, of course, is not whether the North was actually the promised land—in fact, prejudice and discrimination against black Americans has been quite strong in the North—nor whether America really is a melting pot—in fact, the assimilation model seems to apply better to northern Europeans, whereas a pluralist or primordialist model applies better to those groups with darker skin and non-European customs—that is, America really isn’t a melting pot. The point, rather, is that the ideas—the cultural constructs—have been real and pervasive, and they have entered into and helped shape the imaginations of countless thousands if not millions of people as they have made their way through their lives.

If it is true that, even with its contradictions, the idea of the American Dream is real, then it makes sense to inquire into how it came to be real. This question, of course, is a matter of historical analysis, which I already have alluded to in my remarks about the European origins of the American ideal of

individual rights. To this, though, we can add a kind of structural analysis that focuses on the historical and contemporary conditions that have encouraged a collective belief in the American Dream. Consider the following points.

First, the American Revolution was brought about by terrorists, traitors, insurrectionists, and propagandists—people such as Washington, Adams, Madison, Thomas Paine, and so forth—who, of course, are our heroes only because the revolution worked and the United States is still in business. Second, the resulting governmental structure formally empowered individual citizens, states, and secular groups by legally ensuring each a measure of sovereignty. Third, the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 created a huge western frontier of American land that, in a sense, we successfully defended in the war of 1812 with the help of the French. Fourth, we quickly figured out what to do with that landmass under the Presidency of Andrew Jackson in the 1830's. Jackson was a proponent of Indian extermination policies, which were illegal but nonetheless implemented, that coincided with our military take-over of the southwest—Texas, in particular—in the Mexican-American war. Fifth, with the military intervention into western lands came a series of federal legislative acts that induced population settlement. The 37th Congress from 1861-63 chartered the transcontinental railroad, established a system of land grant colleges, and passed the Homestead Act, which, under military protection, was all it took to displace native American populations.

So as not to push this much further, since my point is rather obvious, it is clear that in one century, from 1812 to 1912 when Arizona and New Mexico became the 47th and 48th states, we created the structural conditions in which the American Dream could make sense. And these conditions have continued to persist and thereby nourish the idea of the American Dream. We have not had a war with another country on U.S. soil since 1812, and the wars we have fought on other countries' soil usually have been economically and politically beneficial to us. We have a huge land mass—as big as

that of China—with a comparatively small population and a very large proportion of agriculturally productive land and an abundance of natural resources. Half of our borders are constituted by the open sea, which means we have always had good seaports for trade, and our only two national borders, Mexico and Canada, are with friendly countries.

Put another way, the American Dream occupies a cultural space that, on the one hand, has been created by unearned privilege—the geographical and natural characteristics of the U.S. land mass—and, on the other hand, by political, economic, and military operations that were fueled by 18th century European arrogance, let alone, of course, the enormous benefit that came with cheap labor sources in the forms of slavery and unregulated capitalism (before unions and wage protection laws) that exploited immigrant populations.

I mention these historical conditions because they tend to recede into the recesses of our collective consciousness and appear in our civic discourse in the forms of selective forgetting and self-interested memory. Unearned privilege, for example, whether in terms of that which comes by virtue of race, gender, or social class is typically regarded as a mere circumstance of existence rather than constitutive of it. And, the history of our gaining control over that land is barely remembered by most Americans, and that which is remembered tends to be encased within an ideological discourse that justifies that history as a series of natural, inevitable, if not ordained processes. Put even more succinctly, the American Dream is not only a cultural ideal, but it is an inherently political and ideological one.

But let me move on to take up some additional aspects of this interesting master symbol. First, the idea of the American Dream has been linked in the public consciousness with the idea that the United States is an open society whose rewards are available to those who work hard enough. That linkage between the idea of achievement and hard work is a persistent one, because at least in part most of us have seen it happen in

real cases of real people. It is a linkage that stays alive because it happens often enough. But the American Dream has been achieved through a number of other means, many of which do not inherently involve hard work. Good timing is a mechanism for such accomplishment, for example, as in hitting real estate booms or stock market increases at the right time. Favorable contracts are another, as in those negotiated for workers by powerful unions and include high wages and extensive benefits. Legislative action is a third way, as in those sectors of society that disproportionately benefit from changes in tax laws or zoning ordinances. And, of course, unearned income, which, by definition, does not involve work but can produce substantial returns. The chance of getting a share of the American Dream, in other words, is enhanced if one owns property, is in a position of authority, is protected by a contract, or is favorably positioned by legislative action. All of these conditions underscore the obvious point that the American Dream as a reality coexists with systems of inequality, which also are realities.

Second, not only are there many ways to achieve the American Dream, some of which are done at the expense of others, but once achieved, it may not be what we hoped for. We must be careful, in other words, about what we dream for, which raises the question of how do we realize what we have or do not have. Here I speak of the American Dream as an oxymoron—as a blessing and a curse and as something that can hide its nature from us.

Examples abound, but in considering the American Dream as an oxymoron, we should consider the enormous affluence in the U.S. and that in differing degrees nearly all of us have shared in it. Even the poor in the U.S. would be regarded as affluent by worldwide standards considering that 80% of the world's population lives on less than \$1,000(US) per year. We enjoy unparalleled material comfort that includes more average square feet of living space per person than nearly everyone else in the world. To us, of course, this is normal, and it has even entered our attitudes regarding normal and healthy child development. How can American children grow up properly,

we think, if they do not have their own rooms, closets, beds, and dresser drawers, perhaps a desk to do their homework on, and, if we are to believe media advertisements, their own phones, computers, stereos, and when they are 16, their own cars to drive to school? The underlying consumerism that drives such conceptions of the right to autonomy, of course, comes right out of the hides of family incomes.

In the context of such affluence, we can observe problems that only the affluent can have and that the majority of the world cannot understand. Anorexia, for instance, is an illness of middle class, white, young women, who have access to food but refuse to eat because of distorted body image. Bulimia is a similar case, but entails the actual eating of food that is then purged through vomiting. Bulimia is an expensive illness—food bills in the hundreds of dollars—and is facilitated by the availability of privacy so that the actual vomiting can be hidden. Research has shown that anorexia and bulimia are unknown outside the United States and some of the affluent European nations.

Moreover, affluence itself, under some circumstances, is not only a problem but even a clinical condition. There is a new clinical category known as “affluenza,” which is a conflation of two words, “affluence” and “influenza,” and strikes people who have become unexpectedly wealthy; for example, through inheritance or winning the lottery. Affluenza is a form of identity trauma that afflicts people, and who, accordingly, seek out professional therapists so they can be helped through their misfortune and emotional angst. Only in America, as they say.

There are numerous other examples such as these, including the rise in middle class teenage suicides in the 1980’s, stemming from affluent teenagers’ perceptions of their rights being denied. And, perhaps we are torn in cases such as these, because, on the one hand suffering is an existential matter. After all, suffering is suffering regardless of the reason. But on the other hand, these instances invite, if not our contempt, then certainly that of the rest of the world.

So, the American Dream can dupe us, or at least we may not fully understand what happens to us when we get our dream. The so-called sexual revolution and its liberation of the 1960's and 1970's is an interesting case in point, for while the rate of pre-marital sexual intercourse increased for both males and females, we now understand that it was really a young man's sexual dream come true. Indeed, the rhetoric and vocabularies of legitimization that were used, in effect, to talk both men and women into bed simply increased the chances that young men could engage in uncommitted sex without love. As such, it merely reproduced a form of male advantage in the name of liberation of all.

So, we must be watchful of our specific dreams that might come true, because they usually come with a price. One of the most clear cut cases of the American Dream that came with a price is what in the popular feminist literature is called the "Cinderella Complex," which refers to the idea, probably more so for white than minority young women, that they will find the right man, their prince, marry him and live happily ever after. This is not merely a fairy tale, but in different versions and to different degrees is a cultural image of the genderization of the American Dream. If one doubts its reality, consider the research in social psychology that shows that the vast majority of girls by age 10–12 have completely incorporated the norms and values that exalt romance and love: the ideas that girls ought to be in love, that this love would be heterosexual, that they should be in love with only one boy at a time, and that if they are not in love that there is something slightly deficient about them.

What both research and life experiences of adult women show, of course, is that while occasionally the Cinderella story does come true, it usually does not. In fact, it did not even come true when our nostalgic version of the past told us it did, namely, in the 1950's. Stephanie Coontz has written a fascinating book called *The Way We Never Were* that contains some very interesting data about the history of American families. For example, about one-third of marriages formed in the 1950's

ended in divorce; during the 50's, about 2 million legally married couples lived apart from each other; polls from that era showed that about 40% of couples said their marriages were less than happy, and less than a third of working class couples said they were happily married. These levels of unhappiness carried a greater cost for wives than for husbands. They were ambivalent about their domestic roles, and the 1950's began to see an increase in drug and alcohol use among suburban housewives. Tranquilizers, for example, were virtually non-existent in 1955, but consumption reached 462,000 pounds in 1957 and 1.2 million pounds in 1958. The housewife of the 50's was typified by the "four b's:" booze, bowling, bridge, and boredom. And women's magazines began addressing this issue; for example, a 1956 issue of *Ladies Home Journal* was devoted to "The Plight of the Young Mother," and by 1960, almost every major news journal was using the word "trapped" to describe the feelings of the American housewife.

I therefore see little reason to engage in the now fashionable speculation about the demise of the American Dream, because there is no indication that it is going to disappear. What is important to understand, I think, is not its future but its nature. As a form of optimism and a conception of individual rights, the American Dream rests squarely in a market-oriented, capitalistic social structure, which means that the dream will always be tied to self-interest rather than to community responsibility. That is the primary reason why this particular master symbol is inherently risky, why we will pay costs if we are duped too badly, and why, as I stated earlier, it simultaneously gives us a sense of peace and drives us mad.

The solution to this cultural contradiction, if there is one, is to understand it and develop a flexible perspective that is appreciative of American affluence and relatively immune to political ideology. It is only that way that we can make sense out of oppositions that we observe from time to time, in which affluent Americans are seen to grumble about the very structures of their affluence and the immigrant who materially has less but experiences the joy of being able to participate at all.