

# The American Dream as the Cultural Expression of North American Identity

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**Key-words:** *American dream, cultural narrative, immigrant experience, identity, racial segregation*

The mythic meaning of America as an embodiment of a new paradise on earth that would fulfill all human aspirations and dreams existed before Columbus and, after Columbus discovered the New World, the vision of America materialized with the journeys of the first explorers, settlers and colonizers. The discovery of America gave substance to an old belief, whose earlier versions placed it in Eden, Arcadia or Utopia, or in some country of the imagination where the religious prophecies of Isaiah and Plato's Republic might be real

Originally a creation of the European thought, the concept of *the American dream* defies any coercive definition in the field of American cultural studies. According to Frederic Carpenter, the American dream "has never been defined exactly, and probably never can be. It is both too various and too vague" (Carpenter 1968: 3). However vague and undefined it has proved to be, the dream has had an unconscious influence in American mentality, crystallizing a specific *forma mentis* and, at the same time, differentiating it from the European tradition. From the Puritan enterprise and their dream of religious freedom and a good life to present day American dreams of home ownership and attaining success, or the Hollywood fame and glory, the American dream, born in the collective imagination, lays the foundation of American culture and literature. Carpenter furthermore observes that "American literature has differed from English because of the constant and omnipresent influence of the American dream upon it" (Carpenter 1968: 3).

Although the American dream had long existed before, the term was coined by James Truslow Adams, in *The Epic of America*, published in 1931. Adams extensively defines the American dream as:

that dream of a land in which life should be better and fuller and richer for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a

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This work was supported by the European Social Fund in Romania, under the responsibility of the Managing Authority for the Sectoral Operational Programme for Human Resources Development 2007–2013 [grant POSDRU/88/1.5/S/47646].

difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position (Adams 1931: 404).

Adams's definition of the dream idealistically encompasses the elements of a functional democracy: social order, opportunity for everyone irrespective of the social rank, financial comfort, and public recognition. J.T. Adams referred to the American dream in the period of the Great Depression, when American identity was in crisis, and since then it has become a catch phrase in American public discourse, but its definition and significance are often taken for granted.

The American dream is the cultural expression of North American identity and, even if it was occasionally transformed into the American nightmare, it remains one of the most motivating forces of American civilization and a still viable token of American exceptionalism. The American dream cannot be interpreted as a myth in the traditional sense of the word, but as a *metaphor of translation* of the diasporic subject from an old cultural space to a new cultural space. This metaphorical translation can be considered at the individual's level (the immigrant) or, in a larger sense, at the collective level, as a sort of *translatio imperii*, that is the succession of power or the shift of meaning from Europe to America, the modification of the old European values and their distillation in order to found a new (perfectible) society, the American one. Moreover, it constitutes a *cultural narrative* with manifold implications in the multiple and distinct immigrant stories that created America. Cultural narratives are to be understood as stories from a collective memory that tell us what happened in a particular culture, explaining cultural occurrences and everyday phenomena. They develop from a common understanding of what is worth remembering and what should be forgotten or omitted. They help structure and explain the world by mapping cultural, social and political spaces and by constructing mental framework. Arguing along postmodern lines that language does not reflect but actually constructs reality, cultural narratives are seen as stories that constitute of "truth" in a particular culture in that they shape beliefs, values and concepts of *self* and *other*. A cultural narrative establishes the patterns of a specific culture and forges a figurative space in which an ordinary story makes sense. Thus a cultural narrative is not totalizing and is not directly told, but it is embedded in a specific cultural formation.

As a cultural narrative, the American dream was born and transmitted through stories. The American dream is a narrative of a collective or individual experience that shapes and distinguishes the American nation. Besides coining the term in *The Epic of America*, J. T. Adams made the important remark that "the epic loses all its glory without the dream" (Adams 1931: 412). In this way, the concept has become part of the cultural identity of the United States, the creed of all immigrants that came to the New World and a sort of moving force that symbolically holds together several nations in "the Nation". The American dream, a phrase reached for most often, has existed to remind the Americans that they should be doing better when they have failed to live up to the ideal it describes.

Starting from the premises that events build up history and history builds up culture, the origins of the American dream can be easily traced in American history.

The American dream was first a creation of the European imagination. Peter Freese argues that America appeared in the world imagination first as a vision and a dream, then as a continent and then as a country. Thus, before Americans began to speak about the American dream as their national motto, Europeans of all origins envisaged an America of the mind, and later an America that slowly took shape from the narratives of the first explorers and settlers. Christopher Columbus strongly believed that he had discovered a terrestrial paradise and people of all races dreamt of an imagined America, a land projected into myth, a space of all possibilities, comparable to the New Canaan, El Dorado, Mecca, and Arcadia. Thus the New World was invented before it was actually seen.

The early Americans created a specific Weltanschauung or vision, based on a dichotomy between a sinful Europe and an innocent America. This is visible in the writings of one of the founders of The Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop, who arrived in 1630 aboard the flagship Arbella, where he prepared and delivered his famous sermon, "A Model of Christian Charity," in which he introduces the concept of *Manifest Destiny*. Winthrop prophesied that America should be "a city upon a Hill" with the eyes of all people directed towards it (Winthrop apud Boorstin 1958: 3). The Puritans compared themselves with the children of Israel and separated themselves clearly from the European tradition, trying to restore the old Jerusalem on American land. This sense of destiny was an important part in the self-consciousness of a people who tried to define itself through the re-invention of history. The Puritans resisted the temptation of utopia; they were less interested in theology itself than in its applicability to society; they were keener on building institutions that functioned than running after illusions that glittered. Therefore, the Puritan sermon developed among the colonists a strong sense of community and communion and the first accomplished American dream was the Puritan one.

After the Puritans' ideas, another root of the American Dream was the *Declaration of Independence* (1776), which, after the Revolution, took on the aura of a sacred scripture, and which engrained into the American consciousness a series of life principles that later laid the foundations for sweeping social movements such as the struggle to end slavery or the civil rights movement and thus created a recognizably modern United States. The most significant part that still survives in the cultural memory and which underpins the American dream is the opening clauses of the second paragraph:

We hold these truths to be self-evident 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 (apud Carpenter 1968: 8).

This represents an embodiment of the highest political expressions of humanity and it also emphasizes America's creative destiny: happiness is not conceived as something already existent in nature, nor is it to be found somewhere, but it should be made. For the Founding Fathers, "the pursuit of happiness" meant action in the public and private spheres in order to create a better society. Any dream of achievement requires action and the American dreamer has been unique,

from the beginning, among other dreamers for he has often been a doer, by necessity, ambition or compulsion. American dreams have been materialized in facts: the discovery and exploration, the settlement of the frontier, the invention of the steam engine, the building of railroads and bridges, the motion picture camera, the perfection of space rockets, etc.

The transcendentalist doctrine as postulated by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Margaret Fuller was a faith inherited from the Puritan past and it also shaped the American dream. As a pragmatic philosophy and a form of spirituality, transcendentalism was based on the belief that the individual is the spiritual center of the universe, on the idea that individual virtue and happiness depend upon self-realization, and on the concern for this life rather than the after life. Moreover, it laid emphasis on human thinking and on the belief that power is to be obtained by defying fate or predestination. Ralph Waldo Emerson clearly stated that any individual can become great through thinking, action, spiritual, and moral strength. Revolting against past tradition and especially against the “courtly” or “feudal” history of Europe, Emerson highlighted the need for intuition and self-reliance for the New World people. In *Walden*, Thoreau expressed his idea of the self-made man:

I learned this, at least, by my experiment: that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours (Thoreau apud Werner 1970: 72).

Throughout the centuries, the United States has become a place for immigrants of all nations, it has been referred to as a *melting pot*, a *salad bowl*, a *kaleidoscope* or a *mosaic*. However, not all narratives of the American dream are stories of success. The immigrant experience sometimes becomes metaphorical for the individual’s sense of placelessness, of finding oneself socially and intellectually, as well as physically in a hostile environment and feeling a great discomfort arising from a sense of discrepancy between one’s insufficient resources and the abundance of goods just beyond reach.

As the cultural expression of North American identity, the American dream cannot be fixed into a single signifier, but it undergoes various historical mutations. For the European or Asian immigrant, the American dream might mean something completely different than for the Afro-American deprived of his freedom and individual rights, for the Red Indian deprived of his land, or the Mexican-American with a long heritage of racial discrimination, restricted ideals and a long struggle for cultural survival in the southern borderlands. Peter Freese argues:

The American dream is nothing but an ‘image’ because as a combination of national foundation myths and collective hopes and aspirations, it is supposed to express peculiarly American traits (Freese 1994: 14).

Moreover, he establishes a pattern of the constitutive elements of the American dream, and among these are: “the belief in progress,” “the belief in the general attainability of success,” the idea of Manifest destiny, “the continual challenge of perspective frontiers,” “the belief in the American form of government of the people, by the people and for the people as the sole guarantor of liberty and

equality,” (Freese 1994: 108), the idea that they can live peacefully together without abandoning the culture of origin that is, the belief in cultural pluralism, multi-ethnicity, or multiculturalism.

What does identity mean in the United States and why is it important in a multicultural society? At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the term identity has become a catch-phrase in politics, in the media, in everyday language and also in scholarly discourse. Contemporary American cultural studies are very much interested in questions of cultural identity. Maykel Verkuyten called it “a modern cultural buzzword” in his book, *The Social Psychology of Ethnic Identity* (Verkuyten 2005: 40). This explosion and the different conceptualizations concern the constitution of individual and collective identities, of social categories like race, ancestry, religion, values, ethnicity, class, gender and age, identity politics or crisis. In a period of important social changes, issues of identity are in the spotlight and concepts such as identity crisis and the search for one’s own identity are frequently brought up. According to Maykel Verkuyten, “questions of identity are viewed as the result of a continuing process of construction, choice, and negotiation” (Verkuyten 2005: 12). Identity marks the way in which one is the same as other who shares that position, and the ways in which one is different from those who do not. In this way, it is closely linked to culture. Identity is a cultural expression.

In *Letters from an American Farmer*, Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur answers the question “What is an American?” and states that he is either a European or an American who leaves behind all the old prejudices and customs and embraces a new way of life, the American way: “Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world” (Crèvecoeur apud House 1966: 23). Crèvecoeur’s notion of the *new man* touches upon the Adamic theme, which is the belief that America was paradise on earth and that the American is the new Adam, who must break away with the old European tradition and forge himself a better destiny. For Crèvecoeur, America is inherently Puritanist and Arcadian, for Arcadia is the middle ground between the wilderness (the frontier) and the threatening, corrupt civilization for which Europe stands.

American identity is derived from adherence to particular beliefs and principles, such as constitutionalism, individualism, liberalism, democracy and egalitarianism, which make up an American creed, all having their roots in the Declaration of Independence. The role of individual freedom is a defining characteristic of an American identity and institutionalized forms of oppression and injustice such as slavery or ethnic segregation are considered alien to the American dream.

Contrary to a fixed set of beliefs that immigration represents a threat to the national integrity of the United States and that America loses the sense of belonging moving in a vacuum, there is a continuing faith in the concept of a discernible American identity. The American dream is an issue of “Americanism.” As Samuel Huntington points out:

It is possible to speak of a body of political ideas that constitutes Americanism in a sense which one can never speak of Britishism, Frenchism, Germanism, or Japanism. American is to the American [...] not a tradition or territory, but a doctrine. To reject the central ideas of that doctrine is to be un-American (Huntington 1982: 25).

The Western frontier and the melting pot, two salient “ingredients” of the American dream, have occupied a particular place in American historiography and helped in building up collective memories, attachment to place and a general sense of belonging in America.

Conversely, I would argue that in a postmodern world, conceptualizations of American identity are very protean. American identity is subjected to change in times of globalization and massive migration. Stuart Hall considers that identity is “an artificially imposed self which a people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common.” He accepts that identities are never unified, but “fractured” and “fragmented” (Hall 2008: 4). In the light of this idea I can argue that American identity has an open and inclusive character and, given the patchwork history of the North American continent, the adherence to a set of common values and principles marks the unity and distinction of a nation. The American dream helped form the American nation and it has nourished the aspirations and beliefs of the U.S. citizens for centuries. In this way, it has become the cultural narrative which mirrored the history of the American people.

However, despite the melting pot rhetoric, for many ethnic groups in the United States, the American dream has been a dream deferred. In 1996, political scientist Jennifer Hochschild published the book *Facing Up to the American Dream*, the most important contribution in the field of cultural studies regarding the vision of the American dream versus racial discrimination. Hochschild observes that the ideology of the American dream is not equally distributed among ethnic groups in the United States and it represents a sort of Procrustean bed, an “inchoate fantasy” (Hochschild 1995: xiii) whose realization is entwined with racial antagonisms. Many Americans have seen the dream as “selfish individualism” and believe that success comes only at the expense of others. Since the 1960’s and the civil rights movement, African Americans have started to define their identity in comparison with white middle-class values identity and their rights and opportunities.

Working hard, saving money, acceding to authority, doing well in school, maintaining a stable two-parent family – all those mainstream, Protestant, bourgeois values that are precisely what the ideology of the American dream is about became for some blacks associated with illegitimate white dominance and intolerable black submission (Hochschild 1995: 132).

In this way, for many African Americans, the fulfillment of the American Dream meant the successful attempt to overcome individual and institutional racism, as well as other forms of segregation (class, religion, gender, etc.). In 1963, at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, Martin Luther King Jr. expressed his personal vision of the Dream, highlighting the Black-American struggle for liberation and the potentially friendly coexistence of people of all nationalities and races in the melting pot:

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia some sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character (King apud Werner 1970: 150).

The racial segregation of such minorities, an old struggle in the American society, has made of America a sort of schizophrenic personality, tragically divided against herself.

For Mexican-Americans, the achievement of the American dream has also been hindered by racial prejudice and talks of underclass, as well as by socioeconomic cleavages. Between 1519 and 1821, Mexico held the territory which is now the American southwest. With the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 after the U.S.-Mexican war, Mexicans in the southwest became Mexican-Americans overnight. The United States had illegally crossed its own borders. By recognizing their mestizo heritage, both Indian and Spanish, Mexican-Americans had to put up with racism and discrimination in the American public life. After 1960, they created institutions and organizations to secure their civic rights and began using the name *Chicano*. Chicano literature, the most objective manifestation of the Mexican-American difficulties of assimilation in the U.S. society, reflects mostly failures of the American dream and it also represents a challenge of the contemporary discussion of cultural heritage, race, hybridity, miscegenation, and blurred boundaries.

Richard Rodriguez, considered nowadays America's best essayist, argues that the multicultural heritage of the United States should be interpreted as strength and not as weakness and asserts that his personal vision of the American dream is that of a common language and culture. Rodriguez explores the dilemmas of American ethnicity and cultural identity in *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*, and coins the concept of the *browning of America* in order to undermine the notion of race. *Brown* celebrates mixed blood, impurity, confusion and contradiction. America started browning as the Indian, the African, and the European met and dwelt on the continent.

I think brown marks a reunion of people, an end to ancient wanderings. Rival cultures and creeds conspire with Spring to create children of beauty, perhaps of a harmony, previously unknown (Rodriguez 2002: xiii).

If "history is a coat cut only to the European" (Rodriguez 2002: 2), the browning of America diminishes this unilateral perspective, eliminates paradoxes and makes up a mixed consciousness of identity. As a man who has an Indian complexion, a Spanish surname and an English name, the Chicano writer moves metaphorically between cultures. Brown has offered the American individual the possibility to disregard the tragic dialectic of race, the black and white conversation, to integrate oneself into the melting pot and to dream of a common (brown) language and culture.

Despite these "racial failures," the American dream has still survived and has made American identity able to coexist with an almost unbounded range of cultural traditions and expressions of ethnic diversity. The American experience has produced both dreams and nightmares but, between these polar conceptions, as a cultural narrative, it has given coherence and substance to the immigrant experience, and it still persists as an ideal in mass media, or in the popular notion of the American democracy. The American dream has accompanied the ancient American tradition of conquering frontiers, from Europe to America, from the east coast to the Wild West, from nature to civilization, giving the common man the chance to

become exceptional through transcending his own boundaries. James Truslow Adams asserts that the American dream, as a belief in the value of the ordinary man, “was not a logical concept of thought,” but “a religious emotion, a great act of faith, a courageous leap into the dark unknown” (Adams 1931: 198).

After the terrorist attacks from September, 11, 2001, and after the economic crisis of 2008, the American dream was transformed from a simple token of national identity into a powerful means of national and social revitalization. The multiple experiences and avatars of the dream of the immigrant, stretched and developed across time and space, make up the cultural narrative of the American dream, a concept that historically articulated the American nation. The symbolic access of the individual to American identity through the American dream implies a metaphorical translation at the level of consciousness from the Old World culture to the New World culture, as a process of recognition, acceptance, and symbiosis of *self* and *other* in the great melting pot.

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### Abstract

The concept of the *American dream* was first used in 1931 by James Truslow Adams in *The Epic of America*. Later, Martin Luther King Jr. spoke about a dream of freedom, equality, and justice and Peter Freese about a society in which people had control over their lives. This paper analyses the American dream, as a cultural narrative that founded and shaped the American mentality. Moreover, it starts from the hypothesis that the American dream is the cultural expression of North American identity and develops the multiple avatars that constitute this collective American identity from a Cultural Studies perspective. There is no unique American dream, but different immigrant stories, developed in time, and space, revealing the cultural complexity of the United States, being regarded as meaning in movement, always in search for its originality.