THE AMERICAN DREAM OR THE QUEST

FOR THE AMERICAN UTOPIA

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Abstract

The apper approaches the concept of the American Drem as an integral part of the American myth of exceptionalism. The idea of „dream" is seen from the perspective of the multiple possibilites of interpretation based on a commonality of elements. The paper also contains an analysis of the ideology that the American Dream is founded upon.

Keywords: utopia, America, dreaming, imaginary, mythology

The present paper addresses the cultural concept of the American Dream as a constant and essential element in the definition of the American spirit by focusing on some particular aspects related to it. The perspective from which it is approached constantly reflects the double nature of dreaming, or rather its special position reflecting the imagined, the utopian, the unreal, on the one hand, and a desired projection of reality on the other hand. By its perpetual balance between what is real and what *might* become real, the American dream mixes historical facts with a romantic, fairy-tale - like aura, which has rendered the American experience mysterious, adventurous and heroic at its best.

America is, undoubtedly, a dream country, and has been one ever since the first pilgrims set foot on American soil. What attracted them to the New World was a sort of irresistible attraction, a blend of ardent religious motivation. Never in the history of humankind has any country exerted a stronger appeal to people all over the world, luring them with a set of aspects which may or may not have had a real support. In order to exert its magnetic attraction upon such huge masses of people, America needed to have a more idealistic, fairy-tale-like side, beside its down-to-earth, practical aspect. It was the dream which made the thousands of people leave their homes in old Europe and embark on the adventure of their life in the newly discovered continent; it was the promise of a better life for them and their children. But this "promise of a better life" was by no means new. All forms of government and religious dogmas had anticipated this, either in people's own lifetime or in the future one. So the mere promise of an improvement in the living standards would never have gone beyond its dogmatic stage had it not been doubled by the dream, by

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the illusion. People's wellbeing was not simply promised to them; it was guaranteed to be achieved during their lifetime regardless of any prior conditions. Whoever you were, wherever you came from, the dream was there for you provided you worked hard enough for this. This was earthly paradise in comparison with traditional, conventional Europe in which success was the privilege of the rich, of the aristocrats, of the noble descendants, of the educated.

Connoting the terms 'Dream" and "America' seems justified by a dual approach. Firstly, the concept of the American dream has gained general currency not only within the territory of the United States, but equally worldwide. This concept is so popular that it has transgressed national or ethnic barriers. Anyone can now have an "American dream", without necessarily being an American, or even wanting to be one in the near future. Cultural globalization, the dissemination of common cultural patterns of western inspiration has made people all over the world adopt similar behavioral manners, conceptions and conduct, which is primarily due to the universality of the principles that the dream implies. It is a cultural concept with which people identify besides the constraints of the American territory and cultural history, as it has come to represent essentially human aspirations to prosperity and self-fulfillment.

Secondly, the challenges of the contemporary world, its implications in all people's everyday lives, have turned 'dreaming' in a valve against the threats of reality, in a means of coping with them. Finding a substitute for reality is a condition for survival, a refuge against aspects of life which seem unbearable at certain times and a well deserved break from all the frustrations and pressures of the real world. The genuine danger of 'dreaming', that of falling into a state of prostration, of self-delusion, of pure imagery, has to be counteracted by an active urge. By pushing people forward, by fueling the engine towards accomplishment, by providing an impetus, a reason and a purpose, the American dream adds energy and vitality to an otherwise stagnant state of imagination. This entrepreneurial impulse is the one aspect which gives American dreaming its legitimacy and status of provider of identity. "More than any other feature of the complex psychological, social, political and theological construct of the psyche and consciousness of the American people", says Franklin Stanley, "the American Dream has been the dominant motive force in shaping the cultural, social and national image and identity of the country" (3).

The concept of the American Dream is one of the most popular products that the United States is exporting to the rest of the world. Highly popularized at all levels – including international politics, economy, literature, sports and many other domains – it finds its best means of expression and dissemination in Hollywood movies, whose producers seem inexhaustible in finding more and more success stories about America. The American Dream is, first and foremost, the dream of success. In whatever aspects it might be

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conceived and whatever forms it might embrace. Broadly speaking, achieving the dream means achieving success.

The universality of this appeal to success makes the "dream" a unifying element. Despite the enormous differences in terms of ethnicity, race and ideologies there is this set of values labeled as the American Dream, which seem to be the common element for the extremely heterogeneous feature of the American nation as a whole. The foundation of this concept is the idea of success in life and its availability for each person, regardless of social background, ethnic origin or religious affiliation. This central idea of the American Dream was clearly stated by President Clinton: "The American Dream that we were all raised on is a simple but powerful one – if you work hard and play by the rules you should be given a chance to go as far as your God-given ability will take you" (quoted in Hochschild 18).

This dream, or hope, which accompanied the American nation throughout its historical transformation, has acquired a multitude of interpretations, growing into a national motto, a slogan with which all Americans seem to identify. What all these aspects have in common is the idea of welfare, of wellbeing, which is a highly subjective concept, subject both to a person's own outlook on life and to the historical circumstances of different epochs.

In contemporary society, the idea of wellbeing is mostly connected with financial prosperity and material possessions, but also with personal satisfaction. Owning a house, a car, having a compatible partner and a pet is the contemporary recipe of achieving the American dream. However, it would be wrong to assume that there is any established definition of this concept. By no means is there a single version of the American dream, because "success" does not exclusively imply "financial success", despite the cultural habits of consumerist America. There are millions of versions of dreams, belonging to millions of people's own ideas of success. Success may imply finding the perfect career, climbing up the social ladder, sending one's children to a better school, attending a university, affording to buy a better car than the make that one's parents used to own, spending one's holiday in Europe. Equally, success may imply winning the local sports contest or, proportionally, the Olympic Games, having a book published, providing medical insurance for one's family, but it may also mean finding a warm place to spend the night or earning just enough money to buy dinner for one's children.

All these different success stories have in common the desire to acquire status and material wealth, despite the different degrees and the particular sets of facts related to becoming successful.

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Nowadays world, in its ever expanding pragmatism, tends to envisage success in material terms. Financial stability, a prosperous condition, decent living standards, a fructuous career – these things are the essential components of what is generally understood by an accomplished American dream. Accomplishing it is an essentially individualistic endeavor, hence the multitude of aspects that the dream can take. Individualism, this distinctively American trait, is the sine-qua-non condition of success.

The origin of the term is elusive and attributed to different source, including the writings of Jefferson and Madison, or Alexis de Toqueville's *Democracy in America* (1835). Other sources establish the origin of the term much later, in historian James Truslow Adams's book *The Epic of America* (1935), where he notes: "If, as I have said, the things already listed were all we had to contribute, America would have made no distinctive and unique gift to mankind. But there has been also the *American dream*, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement. It is a 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" (174). He equally speaks of "that American dream of a better, richer and happier life for all our citizens of every rank, which is the greatest contribution we have made to the thought and welfare of the world. That dream or hope has been present from the start. Ever since we became an independent nation, each generation has seen an uprising of ordinary Americans to save that dream from the forces which appeared to be overwhelming it" (Adams 174).

What is obvious from Adams's definition of the American Dream is that at that time, more than being a dream of prosperity – but without neglecting this aspect – it was more connected with the ideal of equal opportunity, beyond the restraints imposed by social classes and hierarchy. It is important to note that this availability of chances for all the people willing to set their minds to accomplishing their ideas of success is, in the author's view, America's "distinctive and unique gift to mankind", its mark of exceptionalism.

However, despite the lack of terminology, the Dream finds its written expression much earlier, in the nation's most cherished official document, in the Declaration of Independence: "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". At its turn, this famous quotation emerges from a practice of liberal thought that the people of those times, and those who lived before them, considered best suited for the lifestyle they imagined for themselves in America. John

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Callahan considers that the essence of what is going to be known as the American dream is to be found as early as the formation of the nation, in the writings of the founding fathers: "Framed as an unalienable right by Thomas Jefferson and espoused by the other founders of this revolutionary nation, the pursuit of happiness magnified the American dream into an abiding, almost sacred promise" (374).

One needs to add that "the pursuit of happiness" that the Declaration of Independence clearly instates as an unalienable right and a condition to fulfill the dream has always been accompanied by a pursuit of material wellbeing. The 'happiness' referred to is not a spiritual trance-like state similar to religions exaltation, but rather, it is an earthly kind of happiness which includes material prosperity as a condition for achievement. This is what Alexis de Tocqueville observed: "In America, the passion for material prosperity is not always exclusive, but it is general; if everyone's experience of it is different, nevertheless it is felt by all. All men are preoccupied with the need to satisfy the slightest of their bodily needs and to provide for the little conveniences of life" (616).

Material goals are among the first constituents of the contemporary version of the American dream, or, at any rate, this is the cliché promoted by all media in our consumerist society. However, material prosperity is not the only aspect that the concept of the Dream embraces. Throughout its existence as a national myth, the Dream has implied religious transformations, political reform, attaining education, sexual expression, gaining social status, fight against discrimination of all kinds and so on. The multiple facets of the dream make it elusive and difficult to grasp.

The very evasiveness of the concept, the impossibility to scientifically demonstrate achievement or failure of the dream, its continuous transformations according to the moods, fashions, tastes and needs of society is the source of its force, of its power of representation. In *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation* (2003), Jim Cullen argues that "ambiguity is the very source of its mythic power, nowhere more so than among those striving for, but unsure whether they will reach their goals" (6). Similarly, "The myth of America, if it persists at all, has always rested on a precarious foundation. In *The Puritan Ordeal* (1989) Andrew Delbanco agrees that "it is precisely its fragility, not its audacity – the perpetual worry of its believers, not their arrogance – that has made it something different (dare we say something better?) than just another version of nationalist pomp" (quoted in Cullen 13).

According to the definition that people currently give to the American dream, it is seen as the belief that all Americans can achieve their goals in life through hard work and determination. It is the promise that a beautiful reward, under the form of material belongings and spiritual fulfillment, is the consequence of a life lived in the spirit of work,

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commitment to one's ideas and principles. At the same time, it is also the promise that the state organization will work for the individual's sake and provide a frame which should favor sustained activity, energetic and goal-oriented approaches. This is one possible contemporary definition of what the American dream means: "The package of beliefs, assumptions, and action patterns that social scientists have labeled the American Dream has always been a fragile agglomeration of individual freedom of choice in life styles, equal access to economic abundance, and the pursuit of shared objectives mutually advantageous to the individual and society" (Zangrando and Zangrando 141). Freedom, individualist endeavors, equality of opportunities, are all put to work in a circular system in which the individual, in order to succeed, needs an appropriate societal organization which should foster these ideals and provide a nurturing soil for the dream to flourish, and the other way round, the organization of society is made meaningful by the multitude of individualistic attempts to succeed.

Generally associated with the immigrant experience, the American dream reflects these people's expectations from the new continent, expectations which have been summed up by George Samuel Scouten (2002) into three essential myths which characterize the American national experience: the myth of America as a Land of Plenty, of America as a Land of Opportunity and that of America as a Land of Destiny.

Seeing America as a land of plenty refers to material plenitude, abundance and easy profit, a place where money can be made easily and an affluent life can be achieved without much difficulty.

The myth of America as a land of opportunity appeared chronologically later than the one accounting for the New World's immense riches, when the reality began to overcome the illusion of the immense riches that it had to offer. The promise of the opportunity came in addition to this first myth: *you* have the chance to achieve these riches on your own, starting from nothing. Instead of stumbling across mountains of gold and an Eden of plenitude, you have this exceptional opportunity of creating your own Eden.

The third myth included by Scouten as essential part of the American dream sees America as a land of destiny. Plenty and opportunity are intricately connected by a religiousness which has been a pervasive presence throughout history. The Biblical references as to the fate of the Americans and their privileged position of God's elected people to accomplish His kingdom on Earth have been constant since the colonial times until the contemporary political ideologies.

Another attempt to define the components of the Dream revolves around the idea of success, which is inherent in pursuing the ideal of a better life. In her book: *Facing Up to the*

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American Dream: Race, Class and the Soul of the Nation (1996), Jennifer Hochschild makes a thorough analysis of the concept of success, identifying different types of success and establishing their inherent flaws, which account for the unaccomplished pursuits of the dream. Accordingly, there are three types of success: absolute success, competitive and relative success.

Similarly, the four tenets of success within which the author places the ideology of success also make place for the flaws of the concepts of the American dream, which are indicators of the fact that the theory of the dream is unitary and solid, based upon principles whose value is beyond question; however, the practice proves to be something else, showing that many times the dream cannot stand the reality check:

Question: Who may pursue success?

Answer: "everyone regardless of ascriptive traits, family background or personal history" (Hochschild). Flaws fail to account for aspects of inequality such as race and sex discrimination.

Question**:** What does one pursue?

Answer**:** "the reasonable anticipation, though not the promise of success" (ibid.). Flaws fail to acknowledge the shortage of resources and opportunities which prevent everyone from having a reasonable chance of having their expectations met.

Question: How does one pursue success?

Answer: "through actions and traits under one's own control" (ibid.). Flaws ignore the fact that if one may claim responsibility for success one must accept responsibility for failure. Therefore people who fail are presumed to lack talent or will.

Question: Why is success worth pursuing?

Answer: "True success is associated with virtue" (ibid.). Flaws: failure implies sin. Also devaluing losers allows people to believe the world is just even when it is not.

What is important to note from Jennifer Hochschild's categorization of success and from the flaws that accompany each tenet of success is a lucid awareness of the difference between the way the American dream is mentally constructed and the general framework of the society, which is a higher structure accounting for the causal explanation for social orderings, rather than the individual people's behavior.

A delusional component of the dream is identified in this line of thought. While promising endless opportunity and immense riches with the only condition of working hard

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and being determined enough to get it, the dream ideology is utopian insofar as it does not acknowledge the role of the state institutions in the instauration of social orderings. By focusing exclusively on the individual's aspirations and energetic resources, the dream neglects the power of the state organization to ensure that some individuals win while others inevitably fail, regardless of all other ideological considerations. The dream deludes insofar as "the myth of the individual mini-stated of nature is just that – a fantasy to be sought but never achieved" (Hochschild).

Being too elusive and too complex to encapsulate in a definition, however elaborate it may be, the dream is a concept which appeals more to emotions and to mythical interpretations than to reason. However, there are persistent aspects which are recognizable at all times, whose power of significance has turned the concept of the Dream into the iconic symbol of the American culture.

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