

CONSIDERATIONS ON THE CONTEMPORARY REVISIONING OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

Gabriela MIHĂILĂ LICĂ

“Nicolae Bălcescu” Land Forces Academy, Sibiu, Romania
mihailag2001@yahoo.com

Abstract: *The present paper aims to analyze the manner in which the American Dream, a quintessential element of the American ethos, has undergone a significant re-evaluation in contemporary discourse. We focus on the origins of the concept, the way in which it has evolved, and how the people nowadays resonate to it. The article highlights the changing paradigms of success, social mobility, and opportunity, exploring the economic forces, the social dynamics, and the cultural transformations that have all had a profound impact on the perceptions regarding the American Dream. Furthermore, the paper explores the American society's reaction to pressing issues such as economic inequality, environmental sustainability, and social justice and its responses that favour equity, inclusivity, and common well-being. The revisioning of the American Dream implies a reconsideration of one's values and priorities, challenging the meaning of success defined only by material wealth and individual achievement. The new concept is about communities that are able to resist adversity due to social cohesion, about the well-being of their members who struggle to obtain a more just and sustainable society, about empathy and human dignity.*

Keywords: American Dream, contemporaneity

1. Introduction

In the recent years the concept of the American Dream has undergone a profound reevaluation that reflects the evolving aspirations, values and also the challenges of the American society. The American Dream is as old as the American people. As Eva Bod states: “Before it was a dream of wealth, the American Dream was an ethos” [1]. The defining of the American Dream is a complex task due to the multifaceted tapestry of American society and to the continuous evolution of the term under the influence of historical, cultural, and socioeconomic factors.

2. Origin of the Term

Historian James Truslow Adams is considered to be the one who coined the

phrase *The American Dream* in a book he published in 1931, “The Epic of America”: “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement” [2]. As one can easily see, it is a term that comprises in a nutshell the philosophy of the United States — a country where people who work hard and with determination, regardless of their origin, can move up the social ladder and achieve the desired prosperity.

3. Evolution of the Concept

The American Dream is the same age as the American people and it has undergone considerable changes over time. David Kemp is one of the authors who underline the constant evolution of the concept: “The

American Dream isn't a static idea, but a constantly evolving set of beliefs and ideals" [3].

When the early settlers came to America to escape religious persecution and poverty, their happiness was about staying alive, doing the will of God and being able to work to earn their living. "The roots of the American dream can be traced all the way back to the first colonists to settle the New World. The Puritans who fled religious persecution in England became self-made successes throughout New England largely on the strength of their spiritual beliefs that it was preordained. For them, life on earth was a constant battle between the forces of good and the forces of evil, and the only way to battle evil was to be ambitious, work hard, and always strive for success. Their religion taught them that prosperity on earth would eventually lead to spiritual peace and eternal life. They sought wealth and status, but only to reap the rewards of heaven"[4].

The American Revolution brought about a shifting of perspective on the American Dream. An illustrative example of this change is the main character in the eponymous novel *Rip van Winkle* by Washington Irving, who appreciates the conversations with his friends at the village inn more than hard work, much to the despair of his wife. One day he falls asleep and wakes up two decades later in a dramatically changed world, but he is content that now he can be idle and have time for himself no longer being criticized for this due to his age.

The pioneers of the Industrial Revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries pursued affluence and success. It was a period during which a great number of emigrants from Europe came to the United States in search of opportunities for a better life in a land where religious or social restrictions were a lot less oppressive than in the country of origin. During this time there appeared two new classes, divided by an ever growing gap: the workers and the extremely rich. The immigrants, the women who were

employed, the children, the black people or the native Americans were hugely disadvantaged. "Not everyone shared in the economic prosperity of this period. Many workers were typically unemployed at least part of the year, and their wages were relatively low when they did work. This situation led many workers to support and join labor unions. Meanwhile, farmers also faced hard times as technology and increasing production led to more competition and falling prices for farm products. Hard times on farms led many young people to move to the city in search of better job opportunities" [5].

A century later, President Franklin D. Roosevelt came up with a version of American dream that implied the help of the government for the impoverished Americans to find jobs and pensions for old people who were unable to work and the facilitation of the "enjoyment of the fruits of scientific progress in a wider and constantly rising standard of living" by increasing taxes and putting an end to special privileges for the few. [6] It was a dream that was based on four freedoms: freedom of speech and expression, freedom to worship God, freedom from want, and freedom from fear [7].

After the World War II, a period of economic prosperity and expansion of the middle class, the American Dream identified with homeownership and consumerism.

Nevertheless, the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, the feminist movement that built on its success in the 1960s, and other social turmoils characteristic to the 20th century challenged the long-established meaning of the American Dream, shedding light on the inequalities that were created by the political and social system at the time and on the dearth of opportunities caused for those that were not the "right" race, gender, and/or socioeconomic status. In addition to economic and social factors, the American Dream began to encompass the ideals of

freedom and equality. It represented the promise of a society where individuals were judged not by their race, religion, or background, but by their character and abilities. As Martin Luther King Jr. famously declared, “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” [8].

4. Significance of the American Dream in Contemporaneity

Today, the American Dream is undergoing a reevaluation in the face of globalization, waves of immigration, technological advancements, social movements, growing economic inequality. It still reflects an ongoing quest for meaning, fulfilment, and equality, but the new paradigms that are emerging prioritize sustainability, inclusivity, and social justice. “The contemporary interpretation has come to include all people regardless of race, gender, and other identities in this right. Like the American Dream itself, the nuance of modern interpretations has gone through a series of transformations from when the Declaration of Independence was written. The story of this transformation, and why it matters, goes back to the people who started it all” [9].

Economic prosperity continues to represent the defining constituent of the American Dream and the Americans maintain their pursuit for a better life, determined to attain a higher standard of living and to be able to provide food and housing for themselves and for their families. Yet, most of those that are part of the new generation of adults believe that it is a lot harder and it takes them a lot longer than it did their parents to achieve financial stability. “Americans feel they’d need to earn approximately \$233,000 a year on average to be secure or comfortable with their finances, a new Bankrate survey finds. To be rich and achieve financial freedom, Americans say they’d need to make about two times more:

roughly \$483,000 on average, according to the poll. Both numbers are significantly larger than the average earnings full-time, year-round workers made in 2021 (\$75,203), according to Census Bureau data.” [10].

The notion of homeownership, which has been considered by experts as one of the main elements that go into the making of the American Dream has been challenged in the last two decades, especially by the 2008 crisis and by the housing market collapse that followed. Due to high prices and few houses and apartments on the market in relation to the demand, “the home affordability outlook appears grim. [...] Though down from its 2023 high of 7.79%, the average 30-year fixed mortgage rate in 2024 remains well over 6% amid rising home values. As a result, home buyers continue to face affordability challenges.

Monthly mortgage payments are back on the rise, with the median payment in January climbing to \$2,671, up from \$2,361 in December, according to Redfin.

And the news doesn’t appear to look much better for eager home buyers in the months ahead” [11].

The American Dream is also deeply connected to the concept of social mobility, of advancing up the socioeconomic ladder. Recent studies show that despite the fact that many believe the United States to be a country where anyone, regardless of who their parents are or where they were born or how lucky they are can climb the ranks if they work hard enough, make sacrifices when needed, persevere in the face of adversity and are not afraid to take risks. However, studies have shown that social mobility in the United States has declined in recent decades, raising questions about the fundamental principles of meritocracy and equal opportunity. “In reality, there is less movement up and down the economic ladder here than in many other countries” [12].

We would like to emphasize the idea that the notion of opportunity no longer encompasses only the financial success.

Nowadays it is about having access to quality education, decent healthcare, and a fair justice system. The means for reaching success have also diversified including social activism, entrepreneurship, creative expression. Today's Americans need to be well off but they should also realize full potential and valuable members of society. Success has come to include notions of fulfilment and well-being, individuals aspiring to meaningful careers, satisfying relationships, and a sense of purpose. The newer generations strive to achieve work-life balance, are preoccupied with their personal growth and take their mental health very seriously. At the same time, there is also increased attention paid to sustainability, to collective well-being and to environmental issues.

5. American Specificity of the Concept

All people aspire to higher standards of living. The uniqueness of the American Dream is given by a unique mixture of values, ideals, and wishes that distinguish it from other national narratives and visions of affluence. The American specificity of the concept is explained by David Kemp in *Rethinking the American Dream*: “As a people, we Americans are unique in having such a thing, a more or less Official National Dream. (There is no correspondingly stirring Canadian Dream or Slovakian Dream.) It is part of our charter—as articulated in the second sentence of the Declaration of Independence, in the famous bit about ‘certain unalienable Rights’ that include “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of

Happiness”—and it is what makes our country and our way of life attractive and magnetic to people in other lands” [13].

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, we can affirm that the notion of the American Dream is a multifaceted one and is in a process of continuous evolution. No matter the epoch to which one makes reference to, there are common elements that are present in all the definitions: the aspirations for success, freedom, equality, and social advancement. These elements are proof that human nature does not change and that the desire for improvement has remained within us.

The impact that this dream has had on the Americans is undeniable. “Much like other powerful mythologies like religion, the Dream is entrenched in everyday life, shaping not just the view of the world for those individuals who choose to believe in it, but also the decisions one makes and the actions one takes. America would have been a much different place without its Dream, it is safe to say, all of us probably affected in some way by it. One did not have to be actively pursuing the American Dream for it to play a role in one’s life, in other words, the mythology in one’s DNA” [14].

Even though the achievement of the American Dream is still a chimera for many who cannot prevail over the challenges posed by the financial burdens or by complexities of various natures, it continues to inspire and give hope to those who are determined to persevere in the face of adversity.

References List

- [1] Bod, Eva. *The Evolution of the American Dream*. May 9, 2022. Available from: <https://www.thecollector.com/american-dream-evolution/> 22.03.2024.
- [2] James Truslow Adams. *The Epic of America*. Page 404. Taylor & Francis Group, 2017.
- [3] Kemp, David, *Rethinking the American Dream*. “Vanity Fair”, 05. 03. 2009, Available from: <https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2009/04/american-dream> 200904, 22.03.2024.
- [4] ***, *The Colonial American Dream*. Available from: <https://www.encyclopedia.com/education/educational-magazines/colonial-american-dream>, 27.03.2024.

- [5] ***, Presentation. U.S. History Primary Source Timeline, <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/united-states-history-primary-source-timeline/rise-of-industrial-america-1876-1900/overview/>, 27.03.2024.
- [6] Franklin Delano Roosevelt. *The Four Freedoms*. Delivered 6 January, 1941. Available from: <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/fdrthefourfreedoms.htm>, 22.03.2024.
- [7] *Idem*.
- [8] *Read Martin Luther King Jr.'s 'I Have a Dream' speech in its entirety*. Updated January 16, 2023 10:32 AM ET. Originally published January 18, 2010 1:00 PM ET, heard on *Talk of the Nation*. Available from: <https://www.npr.org/2010/01/18/122701268/i-have-a-dream-speech-in-its-entirety> , 27.03.32024
- [9] Bod, Eva. *The Evolution of the American Dream*. May 9, 2022. Available from: <https://www.thecollector.com/american-dream-evolution/> 22.03.2024.
- [10] Foster, Sarah, Survey: *The average American feels they'd need over \$200K a year to be financially comfortable*. Edited by Amy Sims, published July 06, 2023. Available from: <https://www.bankrate.com/personal-finance/financial-freedom-survey/>, 28.03.2024.
- [11] Rothstein, Robin, Basile, Caroline. *Housing Market Predictions for 2024: When Will Home Prices Be Affordable Again?* Available from: <https://www.forbes.com/advisor/mortgages/real-estate/housing-market-predictions/>. 28.03.2024.
- [12] Smith, Ember et all. *Stuck on the ladder: Wealth mobility is low and decreases with age*. June 29, 2022. Available from: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/stuck-on-the-ladder-wealth-mobility-is-low-and-decreases-with-age/> , 02.04.2024.
- [13] Kemp, David. *Rethinking the American Dream*. "Vanity Fair". 05. 03. 2009. Available from: <https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2009/04/american-dream> 200904, 22.03.2024.
- [14] Samuel R., Lawrence. *The American Dream: A Cultural History*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 2012. 197.