

## **Introduction: Whither the "American Dream"?**

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The phrase, "The American Dream" was coined by James Truslow Adams in his extremely popular 1931 book *The Epic of America*, and entered the language almost immediately - especially in political rhetoric.\* Nowadays it is likely to be used in acceptance speeches, inaugural speeches; but it also appears frequently in book titles. Anthony Brandt has suggested that the phrase represents an American ideal of a happy and successful life to which all may aspire; coined during the Depression, the idea "represented a reaffirmation of traditional American hopes" (Brandt). However, the idea (if not the phrase) dates back to a much earlier period in American history - as witnessed, for instance, in De Tocqueville's locution: "the charm of anticipated success".

But what of the "American Dream" today? The topic was one which arose in one of my classes, when we were looking at Edward Albee's play of the same name. For an exercise, I asked the students to write down their immediate reactions to the play, and what it had to say about the American Dream. Here are some of their responses: -

When I come across the term "American Dream", I always remember Madonna's song about that term. She sang "I love you American Dream, you are the best thing I have seen, you are not just to dream". However it might be something to avoid, in that it provides the pretext for individualism and the pursuit of profit, which works against the common good. This is what Albee suggests in his play "The American Dream" (Melek Alptekin)

Albee suggests that the American Dream is an illusion: you may never reach anything by believing in the American Dream and by trying to achieve it. Just like the play, nothing really happens in life by trying to achieve the American Dream. The Young Man says he will do anything for money and that he has no talent, nothing but his body and his face; for Grandma, however, he is the embodiment of the American Dream. He may look wonderful on the outside but when you look inside it is empty. The American Dream also means money; in the world of Albee's play even a baby is bought by

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\* Originally Adams had wanted to call the book "The American Dream", but his publishers, Little Brown and Company, rejected the idea

money. America is shown as a land which is full of opportunities but nothing lasts forever. (Ayşim Hasan)

People who cannot reveal / express themselves in their native countries prefer to go to America which is the land of opportunity. Almost all the people seek for the American Dream, run after it. Thus, there is always a competition between people. Unfortunately, your background or your personal qualities determines whether you will be “selected” to pursue the Dream or not. This resembles Darwin’s “survival of the fittest” theory. In Albee’s play *The Young Man* is the representative of the American Dream, to possess him means that Mommy and Daddy hope to vicariously achieve their dream. However this proves to be an illusion (Kıvılcım Subaşı).

People become hopeless and helpless about their future; the dream no longer exists for them. Albee shows this is the case in his play; none of the family members can communicate with one another any more. All the characters are locked within their own linguistic prisons; the victims both of their self-interest and their rapacity. Hence the middle-class people think they know everything, while old people have nothing to say (Deniz Urulbay)

People prefer entertainment rather than having a social conscience, worship the big money-making institutions that dominate (and keep everyone under control). However with that inequality – for the rich people at least – comes the belief that the American Dream is equated with a perfect life based on wealth, perfect looks, good clothes, linguistic eloquence and industrial power. In other words, the American Dream is available for some (i.e. the bourgeoisie) but not for most people (Emine Yalçın).

And most colorfully:

Albee’s play is about family life, and when you do not fit into the stereotype of the ‘American dream family’ you are unhappy, because you think that you do not fit into society. Individualism and capitalism are the two most important concepts in the American Dream. If you have the power, you can do better, but if you are poor, nothing can be done for you. You are a victim of the bloody jaws of capitalism (Tolga Murat Boyraz).

With these observations in mind, I was interested to see just what the concept of the American Dream meant to other academics, both in the United States and elsewhere. This provided the inspiration for this issue of *JAST*. There are eleven contributions from a variety of scholars, which have been grouped into four categories. The first two essays – Leo Mahoney’s “Daniel

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Denton’s *A Brief Description of New-York: A Pre-Industrial American Dream* and Graham Stott’s “Amerindian Identity, the *Book of Mormon*, and the American Dream” focus on the idea at different points in American history. Mahoney’s essay focuses on the account of New York in the 1660s published by Daniel Denton, a visiting Englishman. Stott’s contribution focuses on Joseph Smith Jr’s *Book of Mormon*, which argued that the future of white America depended on the continent’s native population rather than the white settlers (whom he believed would ultimately be dispossessed). With this in mind, Smith believed that the idea of the American Dream was morally bankrupt – over ninety years before Adams defined the term in his *Epic of America*.

The next two essays focus on the concept of the American Dream as represented in literary works. Manoli Lopez Ramirez’s “Treasure Hunt in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Peter Goldthwaite’s Treasure*” focuses on the transformation of American society from a colony to a democracy, arguing that this change gave rise to a new breed of person, one who can shape a new American Dream based on concern for others rather than the pursuit of wealth. Sinan Akilli takes up a similar theme in Sam Shepard’s *Curse of the Starving Class*, wherein all the characters believe they have been in some way cheated by the American Dream “both spiritually and materially”, as individuals are discovered to be struggling vainly against an impersonal system.

The next section looks at representations of the American Dream on film and television. J. Emmett Winn looks at the 1990 film *Pretty Woman*, a cross-class fantasy that suggests that any class struggles can be overcome through ‘true love’ (whatever that might be). This conforms to the basic American belief that success or failure is individually determined rather than the result of socioeconomic conditions. In a detailed, sometimes complicated analysis of Adrian Lyne’s *Indecent Proposal* (1993), Lerzan Gültekin argues that the American Dream is characterized by an affluent way of life that is often associated with ‘money madness’ rather than men of ambition and enterprise whose success contributed to the prosperity and greatness of the American nation. The dream itself is essentially a commodified dream whose fulfillment is material rather than spiritual (this once again takes up the theme raised in Kutlu’s and Akilli’s contributions). Finally Erik Angelone looks at the reality-show *MTV MADE* in both its American and German manifestations, arguing that (among other things) the notion of “blood sweat and tears” comes across in the American version, something which he argues has become synonymous with attempts to live out the dream. By contrast strong displays of emotion do not surface in the German version of the show, perhaps reflecting the German (or northern European, perhaps) tradition of indirectness. On a broader front,

Angelone's essay reveals the 'Americanness' of the American Dream; how it is fundamentally different from the dreams pursued in other contexts.

Tomasz M. Lebiecki's essay considers the question of whether the American Dream is accessible to all citizens of that country. Focusing especially on the Latinos, his conclusion remains a pessimistic one - that the future looks especially bleak, particularly for those who believe that America is equated with freedom and democracy. But the same also holds true for other ethnic groups: Hispanics may still take the lead in polls and surveys when expressing such 'disinterest' but the population descended from the once dissenting Protestants that believed in individual hard work and in God helping those who help themselves is quickly catching up and their Dream has less and less in common with the lofty ideals that drove their ancestors across the Atlantic.

Richard Profozich's essay looks to the future, and whether the American Dream can still survive in the contemporary world. His conclusions, like Lebiecki's are pessimistic: he quotes one authority who calls the American Dream a creation of the West Coast, resting on a cult of personality not character, on celebrity not talent, and marketing and consumption, image more than substance. Its key to success is lifestyle, where a charismatic personality makes and breaks their rules and succeeds without really trying. Perhaps that is what renders shows like *MTV MADE* so successful.

The last two contributions - both reviews - focus on the theme of the American Dream in different ways. The first, a review of a production of Odets's *Waiting for Lefty* in Ankara, directed by the present writer, looks at how the idea of the American Dream was represented on stage, and whether the play itself, which has often been characterized as specifically of its time (1935) has anything to say to contemporary audiences - especially non-American audiences. The final contribution, a review of Andrew W. Arpey's book *The William Freeman Murder Trial*, brings us back to where we began: going back to the nineteenth century, it suggests that, while the American Dream has always been apparent in people's minds, the reality is often very different. From the evidence of most of these contributions, the same appears to have been true over the last century and a half. Perhaps the students were right after all.

### Works Cited

Brandt, Anthony. "The American Dream". The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 4<sup>th</sup> edn. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company (2004). Website address <http://www.yourdictionary.com/ahd/a/a0250500.html>.