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The American Dream: A Still Viable Concept of American Exceptionalism?

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A recent essay in *Harper's Magazine*, written by Daniel T. Rodgers, begins with the statement "American exceptionalism is in the news once again," (15) and then goes on to show why such grand narratives are no longer valid in a postmodern world. Rogers explains how exceptionalist narratives help to construct an imagined nation, transforming the limited, local contexts of everyday life into a singular, nationally bounded consciousness. Such narratives tend to generalize and mythologize situations so as to simplify reality and silence and marginalize parts of a nation's past. And they are built on an exaggerated focus on the "other," indicating not just uniqueness, a difference from the other, but a deviation from the rules that apply everywhere else but not in the exceptional nation. At any rate, grand narratives have broken down into a confusing amalgam of competing small narratives: "If there is no universal historical law, there can be no exceptions—no exceptional nations and no exceptional histories" (18).

The exceptionalist rhetoric has come back into American politics, according to Rogers, as a reaction to the war against terrorism. But the truth of the matter is that America is simply a nation in a dangerous world like any other.

Even the 'here' and 'elsewhere' distinction is breaking down according to postmodern theory, so that "the very premises of a nation-centered history of the United States are now up for grabs. Nations exceed their own borders, with archipelagos of presence, power, and vulnerability scattered across the globe. […] the world is now present within virtually every nation's borders in the form of trade, investment, satellite communication, and in the populations of the new global cities" (18).

Rogers' argument makes sense, of course. It is part of the contemporary post-industrial, post-national, postmodern interpretation of the world. Yet one grand narrative about the United States seems to challenge this interpretation: the notion of the American Dream. It seems to be a persistent

factor in the way Americans view themselves and their country, and in the way others see America.

In the title of his recent book about the history of the American Dream, Jim Cullen calls it the "idea that shaped a nation," so that at the beginning of the 21st century, it remains a major element of the American national identity. Andrew Delbanco calls the American Dream the universal ideal, the hope that all humankind searches for, and the idea that "transformed the United States into one swaggering country, acquiring a whole mythology" (53). Rather than built upon the notion of difference and superiority to the 'other,' the American Dream, according to both Cullen and Delbanco, is built upon a belief in universal human rights and a connectedness to the rest of the world. The thing that matters about the American Dream, says Delbanco, is how it transforms one's relations with others, not its internal effects within the person or within a country. It is both a promise and a moral imperative, says Cullen. It requires in everyone the duty to improve not only our own condition, but to assist in helping others. It is an idea defined in terms of inclusion, not exclusion, and it has always been a global dream, not a localized one.

Alexis de Tocqueville, in his classic *Democracy in America*, talked about "the charm of anticipated success" that existed in America (qtd. Cullen 5). Abraham Lincoln, in discussing the substance and focus of government (any government), said that its leading objective is "to afford all, an unfettered start, and a fair chance, in the race of life" (qtd. Cullen 96). In *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald called the promise of America the last and greatest of human dreams. Both Colin Powell and Oprah Winfrey present themselves as examples of the Dream fulfilled.

Classical sociological theory also makes a point about how such a concept may fit into the contemporary world. In their discussion of mass media and society, Ryan and Wentworth make several points that are relevant to the notion of the American Dream. They explain that in the process of societal change and maintenance, postmodern society is constantly changing and has to be functionally supported by a system of 'creative destruction' whereby the outdated ideas and processes of the past must give way. The boundaries of community and traditional values are stressed; conservative, change-resistant ties are loosened. This is part of the natural historical social processes of individualization, privatization, and weakening of community. The individual is forced into the flow of large-scale change where survival is based on the 'change or die' principle. Unlearning the old becomes just as important as learning the new (new attitudes, perspectives, skills, technologies) (Ryan and Wentworth 23). Adaptability and the ability

to change become the primary skills necessary to survive in the postmodern world.

Of course this creates a feeling of uncertainty in individuals. We are uncomfortable with the lack of traditional mores and values to support us and with the necessity of constantly learning new things and forging our way in a strange new world. We look for temporary respite by holding on to traditions and cherished values. Yet such a situation also provides opportunities for growth and development, as well as the freedom to be creative and inventive.

The American Dream fits into the processes of societal change quite easily, in two regards. First, it is a traditional belief that people can hold on to, something that can provide stability in an otherwise unstable environment by forging connections to others, as it is a shared belief based on providing opportunities to all. Second, it provides a space for change, for individual growth and development, where we have the opportunity to be who we want to be. In the words of one recent immigrant to the US: "[I want] to live the way I want to live, to have no boundaries" (qtd. Cullen 187).

Of course, as Ryan and Wentworth explain, such ideas as the American Dream do not exist in a disembodied way. They exist insofar as they are used by people and formulated into doctrines, political strategies, common sense, and expectations. The American Dream is a complex idea with many implications that can cut in different ways. It has often been a story of omissions, of exclusion as well as inclusion, of fulfillment and greed. Insiders have often enjoyed its protection and promise, while those outside suffer prejudice and exploitation. This has especially been the case for women and blacks in America.

A *Wall Street Journal* article criticizes Fitzgerald's wrongheaded idea that the Dream died with Gatsby. It takes, of course, a decidedly economic view of the Dream. Its version, positive and full of confidence, is one limited to a materialistic perspective. The defining American characteristic says the *Journal* is optimism, the "national personality" (Bailey A1). It is an optimism that translates into dollar figures as part of the GDP. It is an optimism that allows Americans to dream and also continues to bring immigrants, dynamic newcomers who add to the optimistic ideology and to dreams of achievement and wealth. This leads to the kind of risk taking (entrepreneurialism in the business world) that delivers rewards (and failures) but that significantly inspires creativity. Echoing Ryan and Wentworth, the *Wall Street Journal* says that "in the New World, creating the new makes a bigger impression than mastering the old "(Bailey A6).

Philip E. Devine examines how traditions shape our lives, traditions such as religion, liberalism, Romanticism, feminism, or the American Dream. They give us a framework to make judgments and to determine our world view, the fable we live in. We are the benefactors or victims of many traditions, explains Devine. Jacques Derrida has declared that nothing exits outside the test. Similarly, just as the influence of language can not be overcome, neither can the influence of traditions. They form our world view and generate factual pictures as well as moral beliefs that we use to make judgments about ourselves and others.

The American Dream, as one of these traditions, is a liberal notion rooted in the Enlightenment idea that progress is sure to follow if we allow reason to be our guide. Reason will lead us to liberty and happiness. The Dream is based on the idea of individual autonomy and the liberal tradition of freedom, equality, human rights and justice. It is a promise that anyone can make it; that the American people are not fixed in their circumstances of birth but are free to become whatever they want to be.

As Cullen explains, America is a country constituted of dreams. Its very justification rests on it being a place where one can, for better or worse, pursue distant goals (182). The problem with pursuing dreams, even shared ones, is that not everyone sees them in quite the same way. And, as is often the case in America, the gap between what is and what should be is often large. Therefore, the American Dream often exists on the boundary or margin where reality ends and illusion begins. Just as the illusion of Hollywood films melts away into the parting credits, so the American Dream has a tendency to dissolve, to break up into half-truths or untruths. This is where postmodern criticism can help to demythologize the notion of the Dream. It can help to explore the ways in which American narratives, images, and traditions structure how we construct our notions of self. It can help to explore how the notion of the American Dream became a national ideology central to the way the US came to understand its place in the world. Postmodern theory and practices teach us not that truth is illusory, but that it is institutional (Hutcheon 178).

According to Jameson, theories of the postmodern no longer obey the laws of classical capitalism, the primacy of industrial production, and the omnipresence of class struggle. There are three moments in capitalism, Jameson says: market capitalism, monopoly capitalism, and multinational capitalism. And it is the task of the current third stage to examine the representation of such a totalizing myth as the American Dream and the processes by which it is formed. The preferred vantage point of such an analysis is the margin, the place where differences and domination emerge

(Leitch 10). The purpose of the analysis is to scrutinize the ideological and social forces (regimes of reason) that exist along the margin and that establish the meaning system called the American Dream.

The American Dream was born from religious fervor, from the Puritan passion for divine protection and belief that the world was corrupt but could be reformed. Thus came a cornerstone of the American Dream, that things could be different, that by connecting to something larger and more enduring than yourself you could make connect to others and create a future where your children might have a better life. Yet the Puritans could not create a harmonious community in spite of their high ideals; material conditions, human impulses (like greed), and intellectual disagreements pulled people apart.

The religious vision had a secular counterpart, of course. America was ordained as a land of liberty and opportunity, so that it became a promised land to be re-conquered and reworked for the glory of God and for profit. What united the sacred and the secular, according to Stephanson, was the idea of America as a unique mission and project in time and space, but one that could reward the spirit and the wallet.

It was John Winthrop, the principal leader of the Massachusetts Bay Colony during its first two decades, who urged his followers to create a colony that would be 'A Model of Christian Charity.' By evoking the image of a holy city upon a hill, Winthrop transformed the colony into a center of European and world attention. Peter Conn explains: "This vaunting definition of the Puritan experience would reverberate through centuries of America's political history" (9).

God's bidding did not involve women's active participation, however. Existing on the margin, Anne Hutchinson, perhaps America's first feminist, and "a woman of wit and bold spirit" in Winthrop's own words, spoke her own conscious and propagated ideas that were considered heretical and seditious. She spoke of issues of faith and inner light, and rejected worldly success as a sign of salvation, professing the belief that worldly goods imperil the soul by lulling it into self-love. Thus the Puritan edict to live in the world, but not of it, to look for hope and not just material gain, became an important element of the American Dream.

Benjamin Franklin brought Enlightenment ideals and logic to bear on the American Dream. Conn explains how the strands of the American myth converge in Franklin's life and writings. He is the poor boy who finds wealth, wisdom, fame, and freedom, the exemplary self-made man who reinvented himself and became the model of upward mobility. His emphasis

on self-improvement remains a recognizable trait in the American character, necessary to achieve any American Dream.

Jefferson incorporated the strengths of the Enlightenment into the Declaration of Independence. This document provides the basis for the belief in a happier, better, richer life for all. According to Cullen, Jefferson's phrase "the pursuit of happiness" defines the American Dream because it treats happiness as a concrete and realizable objective (38). It is, indeed, the charter of the American Dream. But more importantly it came to function as a moral standard by which the policies and practices of the nation could be judged. It provides a standard by which we can measure success, but it also calls attention to the gap between what is and what we believe should be, a gap that defines our national experience. Tocqueville saw this when he visited the United States in the 1830s, making the point that the American idea loses all coherence if it admits exceptions. The one thing fatal to democracy is a class of people without hope. It can thrive only if sees to its universal distribution.

The trouble was that hope stopped at the color line. It was W.E.B. Du Bois who faced up to the violent and emotional realities of life for blacks in America and who announced in his *The Souls of Black Folks* that the problem of America was the problem of the color line. He stated the demands of his people, that political power, civil rights, and higher education must be theirs, and should be within the dreams of all citizens. Blacks in America must live up to their responsibility, he said, "a responsibility to themselves, a responsibility to the struggling masses, a responsibility to the darker races of men whose future depends largely on this American experiment" (qtd. Baym 757). Echoing the words of Jefferson in declaring that a government which did not protect its citizen's human right lost its right to govern, Du Bois supports the idea that the Declaration of Independence gives liberty not only to the people of the US but to the world. Weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men so that all shall have an equal chance.

Cullen explains that the American Dream depends on equality. We all need to believe that equality is one of the core values of American life, and that its promise extends to everyone. Otherwise, not everybody is eligible for the American Dream. That the circumstances of everyday life in the US routinely belie this belief is not a problem as long as the principle is affirmed, he says, and as long as opportunity and upward mobility exist (108).

There lies the rub. A recent article in the British publication *The Economist* says that equality of opportunity and upward mobility, the foundations of the meritocratic ideal, are in trouble in America. Americans still believe in the ideals that enable everybody to benefit from the abilities of

the entire population. The problem is that income inequality is growing at levels not seen since the Gilded Age, and social mobility is declining. "Most Americans see nothing wrong with inequality of income so long as it comes with plenty of social mobility. But the new rise in inequality does not seem to have come with a commensurate rise in mobility. There may even have been a fall." The article concludes that "The United States risks calcifying into a European style class-based society" ("Ever Higher" 39). The upper 1% of the population, the tiny slither of the American elite, live an increasingly isolated existence, so that "a gap [is] widening between the people who make the decisions and shape the culture and the vast majority of ordinary working stiffs" ("Ever Higher" 40). And little is said about it. Education continues to be the key to upward mobility, but the educational system is increasingly stratified by social class. And it has become harder for people to start at the bottom and rise up the company hierarchy, and harder for managers to keep their jobs.

The goal of the American Dream has always been to end up with more than you started with. A prime motivation for immigration to the US and for migration within it has long been to procure some gain, to attain the good life. But the dream of the good life has often focused on getting something for nothing. From the exaggerated claims of the riches of the Virginia Colony used to attract settlers to the New World, to the California gold rush promising riches at your feet, there for the taking, the prospect of easy gain has cast a lasting spell on the American imagination. New currents in the American Dream, off shoots of the desire for easy gain, are shaping its character, built on a cult of personality, celebrity lifestyle, and a culture of consumption.

If there is any ideology that can ultimately corrupt the American Dream it is the ideology of the personality cult, celebrity status, and easy rewards, of an internally focused narcissism that puts self gain above everything else and degenerates into the 'self-love' that the Puritans warned about. For the American Dream has always been about shared hope, and as the Puritans also explained, pride is the enemy of hope.

Susan Faludi discusses this kind of corruption of the American Dream in her book about the male crisis in America, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Male*: "We have changed from a society that produced a culture to a culture rooted in no society at all" (34). Emphasis on the individual and on personal gratification and fame take center stage and threaten to undermine the principles upon which the Dream is based. People's lives become more and more centered around celebrity and image, glamour and entertainment, and marketing. Faludi illustrates her points with several case studies of male

life in new-millennium America. One such study involves the game of American football. She explains how football has changed from a blue collar game built on hard work, discipline, and loyalty to the team and town, to a corporate white collar contest built on marketing and TV contracts, where individual celebrity and brand names rule the action on the field. In the early days of football, teams were part of the community. The players came from the town where the team was based and played their whole careers in the same place. Boosters backed their team with enthusiasm because it was a way to literally give a boost, a leg up, to the next generation. Their role as supporters allowed them to father a team. Every successful coach was seen as the embodiment of the ideal dad. Modern day teams are owned by millionaire businessmen with little affection for the fans or players. They are men who run the team as a business focused on the number of games won and amount of profit made. TV and ad money has drawn the game into the corporate world of competition. The continued gaze of TV cameras has brought on celebrity culture, where players and fans alike are caught up in the desire for the camera's attention. Fans have become props. Players have become free agents on the move from town to town, marketing their celebrity image to the highest bidder, removed from the very idea of the team, loyal only to their agents, their own careers, and to fame. Modern fame is not to be shared; there is not brotherhood of celebrity; team service is replaced by self-promotion.

Even more revealing is Faludi's analysis of young suburban men and their understanding of what it means to be a man in the 21st century. The 'good bad boy' has a history and tradition in American, she says. His ancestors go back to Tom Sawyer. He was America's vision of itself, crude and unruly, but endowed with an instinctive sense of what is right. He was rebellious, but he was loyal to friends and family and sincere in his desire to make life better for himself and for others. In current times a darker vision of what America's promise has become is centered on the 'bad bad boy.' He is the young man epitomized by brutal criminality and predatory sexuality. The kind of behavior displayed in TV news casts, in shows like *Cops*, and on talk shows like Jerry Springer. Faludi focuses on a group of young men in the Los Angeles area who formed a gang called the Spur Posse, named for their devotion to a basketball player on the San Antonio Spurs team. Membership and position in the gang was based on a sex for points contest. Each time a team member 'hooked up' with a girl he got a point. It is all about brand names, explains one team member. "We don't want to waste our time romancing. It's just for the points. You had to have the points I was developing my reputation. I was developing my brand name" (qtd. Faludi 110). Gang members received the recognition they were looking for by

appearing on TV talk shows and getting other media attention. They were shepherded around New York City in limousines and put up in fancy hotels. Their notoriety and media attention were all part of a larger marketing strategy. "There's the factor of our sales," explains the gang member. "It's good for marketability to have us in the audience [of the *Tonight With Jay Leno* show]. You gotta get your image out there. It's all about building that image on a worldwide basis" (qtd. Faludi 111).

Cullen has a name for this version of the American Dream, calling it the West Coast Dream. It rests 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. That much of this dream is illusory is not surprising. That much of it is part of everyday existence in America and part of many people's lifestyles, is. It corrupts the American ideal of having freedom and space to recreate yourself and using your talents and skills for development and growth, to be whatever you want to be, and turns it into a shallow goal of easy success built on little but image.

Andrew Delbanco ends his book *The Real American Dream* by saying that one of the most striking features of contemporary culture is an unyielding craving for transcendence, for something further to be sought after. The trouble is that our symbols for this something further are terribly weakened. His fear is that some new cult may fill this yearning. It could be that it already has.

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