

BOOK REVIEWS

The American Dream in History, Politics, and Fiction

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Publisher: University Press of Kansas, United States of America

ISBN 978-0-700-62309-9

ISBN (E-Book): 978-0-700-62311-2

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2223-0386/2023/n30a9>

The phrase *American Dream* is one of the most evocative phrases in the US national culture. The American citizens are conscious of its implied meaning. Some interpret it as a fair chance to succeed in an open competition with others for the good things in life. The promise of the American Dream has always been a willingness to learn, work, save, persevere, and play by the rules. This would ensure a better possibility to grow and prosper in America than anywhere else in the world. In the words of Walter Lippmann, the dream needs constant re-examination, criticism, and challenges in order to ensure its unwavering capacity to serve the needs and interests of the nation. It would be able to keep abreast of the current trends and developments, thereby remaining relevant at all times.

The title of the book brings about two rich dialogues into conversations—namely, one among the proponents of the dream and the other among its critics. The political and socioeconomic elites supported the dream. These included, among others, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Andrew Carnegie, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, John F Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Ronald Reagan, and Barack Obama. Most American citizens believe that the American story has been remarkable and exceptional. They also share the conviction that America is a super power. She won freedom and rose to economic primacy over the course of a century and a half, rising again

to cultural and military dominance in the second course of a century. The author highlights the spike of immigration as a direct consequence of America's superiority. Good economic prospects set America apart from other world countries.

However, there was also scepticism about the American Dream. Esteemed intellectuals such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Mark Twain, Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, William Faulkner, John Steinbeck, John Updike, Toni Morrison, and Philip Roth, sounded a warning about the dangers of implausibility linked to the American Dream. Politicians contend that America offers opportunities to all people who are willing to sacrifice liberties, save, and invest. However, in Kurt Vonnegut's words: "*Most people are the listless playthings of enormous forces.*" In their persuasive political campaigns, politicians brood over the national triumphs of America, while injecting optimism in the minds of the electorate about better days that lie ahead. Advancing the course of the *American Dream* became the cornerstone of their policies and programmes. The "New Deal" by Franklin Roosevelt is a classic example. In his sixth *Fireside Chat* delivered during the Great Depression, he promised a move to greater security for the average ordinary citizens than they had ever known in the history of America. His words had a settling effect on the hopeless, doubtful, and frightened public. The writer illustrates the role of novelists in guiding historical narratives. Novels offer a different pattern of communication. They allow us to tap into personal stories of ordinary people featuring opportunities, choices, limitations, dashed hopes, and fears. The readers of John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* broke down in tears when they read about the anguish of the Joad family as it slowly came apart under the pressure of the Great Depression that Roosevelt was struggling to fight. Cal Jillson argues that the understanding of the American Dream hinges on Roosevelt's narrative and John Steinbeck's story of the Joad family.

This book weighs the authenticity of assurances by political, social, and economic elite as opposed to the warnings of the literary elites about the role, place, benefits, and costs of the American Dream. The history of the American Dream has been an ongoing debate between political and literary traditions. The nation's political ideologies and economic policies prominently featured the notion of the American Dream. However, literature rejected it outright. The most interesting feature of this book is the competing perspectives between historical accounts and fiction. The writer maintains that fiction holds up a mirror to the American Dream. The images one sees are often bruised, battered, and broken by forces deeper than most people can manage. Fiction reminds us of the challenging nature of life. However, the dwindling interest in American novels is deeply disconcerting. Horatio Alger Jr's stream of the late nineteenth-century rags-to-riches novels have won a place in

Americans' national consciousness, but very few people read them today; no one considers them great American novels. One finds them on lower shelves with the self-help books of Norman Vincent Peale and Tony Robbins.

Until recently, *To kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee (1960) would have sprung to many minds with Atticus Finch advocating for justice and the rule of law against a community opposed to blacks. *Go Set a Watchman* was another book that Lee intended to write before being redirected by her agent toward a more positive and comfortable *Mockingbird*. In *Watchman*, Atticus is a far less noble figure, defending not only justice but community standards as well. It turns out that most of our great novels frequently challenge and seldom reinforce our national myths. That seems to be their great value. The real intention of the writer in the American Dream has been to juxtapose the commitment of comfortable classes to the American Dream with the reality that the novels teach about life especially among the weak and vulnerable. Some classic American novels from Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, to Richard Russo's *Empire Falls*, and Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* simply have not shown the American Dream featuring preparation, hard work, as well as frugality leading to maximum security available throughout society. They all contend that the American Dream was illusory, beyond reach. It came across as a nightmare. The author illustrates how fiction has challenged claims that the American Dream offers the American people a latitude to rise. One of the important lessons learnt from fiction is that playing by the society's rules is no guarantee of success. Life remains hard and failure is always common. The American Dream offered no alternative ways to envisaged security and success. There has been widespread criticism of the American freedom. Azar Nafisi, author of *The Republic of Imagination* (2014) criticized politicians for praising American freedom as the right to compete for power and wealth. She argues that the freedom by so many fictional characters is the kind of freedom that makes them turn their backs on society. Social scientists perceive the American Dream as a structural and foundational element of our individual, as well as social identity. They are concerned about the existing gap between the promises of the American Dream and the realities of American people's lives. The systemic inequalities show that Americans of all races, ethnicities, and genders are not in the competition for America's top spots. Robert Rank, a sociologist, quoted an interviewee named Chris: "*You know partly it is just history. Opportunity leads to opportunity and lack of opportunity leads to lack of opportunity. People do not realize how hard it is if you were born with headwind, how hard it is to move up compared to someone who has got a tailwind just helping them along.*"

In the words of Lippmann, "our business is not to lay aside the dream, but to make it

plausible. While we celebrate the dream remaining plausible for those fortunate enough to have a tailwind just helping them along, national attention must turn to making the dream plausible for those who struggle against the headwinds of modern life. The basic structure of *The American Dream in History, Politics, and Fiction* is historical. It describes both the evolution of the American Dream and its fictive challenges.

- Chapter 1 details the American Creed, as well as the American Dream and the roles played by these ideas and ideals in American history.
- Chapter 2 provides a division of American history into familiar periods and trace both the evolving content of the American Dream and its challenges in national fiction. The writer interrogates the articulation of the American Dream in each chapter of the book. How fiction described the reality and plausibility of the American Dream is another subject of interrogation. The author further questions the forces used by the story-tellers such as Hawthorne and Melville, Stowe and Twain, Dreiser and Sinclair, Morrison, Updike and Roth, Russo and Franzen to keep the dream beyond the reach of many Americans. These forces include, among others, human weaknesses, fallibility, the fury of nature, poverty, need, sex, gender, race, religion, culture, violence, and war. Individuals struggle to overcome these natural and social forces.
- The opening line of chapter 9 questions the feeling of the American public about its dream today. Extensive surveys conducted over the last half century indicates that many American citizens still cling to the dream, as well as the idea that hard work is the best path to success and economic prosperity. The survey also suggests that confidence particularly among parents is gradually eroding. They become sceptical about the prospects of the dream for their children. Where do the average working class citizens stand with regard to the American Dream? Where do women and minorities stand? These pertinent questions justify misgivings expressed by the majority of Americans about the dream. The rising inequalities and failing mobility among American citizens posed a serious threat to the dream.

Conclusion

The book presented an interesting gap between the idealised American Dream and its practical dynamics. The author further explored the promise of the dream and the actual experiences of the American people. Another interesting episode of the book is the synergy

between historical accounts and fiction, featuring the role of politicians and social, as well as economic elites. The writer presented arguments around the promises of the dream and the realities of life in America. The greatest challenge is to make the American Dream real in every aspect of American life as it enters a new century.