

The Culture of the American Dream

The term “American Dream” didn’t exist until 1931, but the idea behind it is older than the nation itself.¹ The only constant over the concept’s history is the hope for change as its core principle.² But the kind of change people hoped for developed over time from the Puritans’ early desire to land and homeownership, to the fight for independence represented in the American Revolution, the desire for emancipation during the era of American slavery and Jim Crow, the desire for equality in the civil rights movement with Martin Luther King, to today’s desire for individual success.³

Historically, the “American Dream” was largely focused on a goal that benefited the national community. However, the recent shift toward personal fulfilment of the ideal has lead scholars to draw a connection between the American Dream and America First.⁴ America First has a similar ambiguous character as the American Dream and the phrasing stems from around the same time.⁵ In the 1920s the American Dream developed largely into the desire for “selfish economic pursuits” and “excessive wealth;” it lost focus on the original more democratic and equality oriented goal and became vastly focused on economics.⁶ Society turned away from the ideas of equality and turned to greater individualism, which has become the contemporary understanding for the American Dream.

For immigrants the United States has been painted as the “land of opportunity” and has been associated with great upward economic mobility and the idea that working hard will be rewarded with economic success and wealth.⁷ The economic implications of the American Dream also benefitted governmental propaganda programs to unite the nation even further against communism during the Cold War.⁸ This was possible due to the newly encapsulated dream of ownership especially regarding single-family houses and the great support for consumerism which played into capitalist ideology and therefore strengthened the American public’s negative sentiment toward communism and increased the economic ideals of the American Dream.⁹ Politicians have found ways throughout history to leverage the imagery of the American Dream to motivate voters.¹⁰

This new understanding of the American Dream is also visible in current entertainment media. The “rags-to-riches” trope of people working hard and getting rich is omnipresent in American reality TV shows.¹¹ The extreme trust in upward economic mobility is therefore also caused by the constant reinforcement of the new understanding of the American Dream via entertainment media.¹² This constant inflow of promises of future success is simply false considering the ever-growing income inequality and decreasing general and intergenerational economic mobility.¹³ The current American Dream and its

¹ Lawrence R. Samuel, *The American Dream a Cultural History*, 1st ed. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2012): 3.

² Samuel: 5.

³ Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation: 7-9*.

⁴ Denise Lynn, “Behold, America: The Entangled History of ‘America First’ and ‘The American Dream’ by Sarah Churchwell (Review),” *The Journal of Arizona History* 60, no. 3 (2019): 376–78: 376.

⁵ Lynn: 376.

⁶ Lynn: 377.

⁷ Jennifer Wolak and David A. M. Peterson, “The Dynamic American Dream,” *American Journal of Political Science* 64, no. 4 (2020): 968–81: 968.

⁸ Samuel, *The American Dream a Cultural History*: 7.

⁹ John Archer, “The Resilience of Myth: The Politics of the American Dream,” *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 25, no. 2 (2014): 7–21: 968.

¹⁰ Wolak and Peterson, “The Dynamic American Dream.”: 968.

¹¹ Eunji Kim, “Entertaining Beliefs in Economic Mobility,” *American Journal of Political Science* 67, no. 1 (2023): 39–54: 43.

¹² Kim: 39.

¹³ Kim: 39.

portrayal in entertainment media therefore distorts Americans' perceptions of their contemporary economic reality.

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