

Rethinking ‘Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness’: The Modern American Dream

 Zarifa Sadigzade

Nakhchivan State University, zarifasadig@gmail.com
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Keywords	Abstract
the American Dream Socio-Cultural Transformations in America Individualism and Social Justice Historical Perspectives on American Ideals	This article explores the historical trajectory and evolving significance of the American Dream, tracing its roots in the agrarian aspirations of Colonial and Revolutionary America to its modern emphasis on personal fulfillment, inclusivity, and social justice. Employing a multidisciplinary methodology—incorporating historical texts, literary critiques, and socio-political analyses—the study situates the American Dream within four eras: Colonial and Revolutionary America, the Industrial Revolution, Post-War consumerism, and the contemporary period. Findings indicate that the original vision centered on land ownership and independence, later shifting to prioritize material wealth and suburban ideals in the twentieth century. In recent decades, the focus has broadened to include individual self-realization and equity, reflecting increasing demographic diversity and global interconnectedness. Although the American Dream remains a powerful symbol of national identity, it confronts ongoing challenges, including persistent inequality and environmental concerns. By highlighting the Dream’s capacity for adaptation, this article underscores its continued relevance, offering insights into the ways it can inform societal aspirations and policy decisions in a rapidly changing world.

1. Introduction

The American Dream, a cornerstone of American ideology, originated with the Declaration of Independence's promise of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Initially rooted in the ideals of equality and opportunity, it symbolized the possibility of achieving success and prosperity through hard work and determination. Over time, this vision has evolved, mirroring the nation's shifting cultural, economic, and social landscape (Samuel, 2012).

Understanding the evolution of the American Dream is crucial for exploring the dynamics of American history and identity. It reflects not only the nation's aspirations but also its struggles with inequality, consumerism, and changing values. Delbanco (1999) notes that this concept has served as a cultural barometer, adapting to societal changes while maintaining its symbolic power as a collective goal.



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Despite the enduring appeal, the American Dream has been reinterpreted across generations. Originally focused on land ownership and independence, it shifted during the industrial era to emphasize material wealth, and today, it incorporates notions of personal fulfillment and social equity (Rosenberg, 2011). This progression highlights a need to examine its transformation and its implications for contemporary society.

This article traces the evolution of the American Dream, examining its origins, transformations, and modern interpretations. By exploring key historical and cultural milestones, it will argue that the American Dream has transitioned from agrarian ideals to economic success and, most recently, to individual self-realization.

2. Methods

This article employs a multidisciplinary approach to explore the evolution of the American Dream, utilizing historical texts, literary works, scholarly articles, and socio-political analyses. Key sources include Albee's *The American Dream* (1961), which critiques the dream's disillusionment, and Samuel's *The American Dream: A Cultural History* (2012), which comprehensively examines its cultural development. Other references, such as Rosenberg's *Spreading the American Dream* (2011) and Messner and Rosenfeld's *Crime and the American Dream* (2001), offer perspectives on economic and social impacts.

The analysis follows a chronological framework, charting the American Dream's trajectory across four distinct eras:

1. Colonial and Revolutionary America: Focused on agrarian independence and the pursuit of liberty.
2. Industrial Revolution: Shift to material wealth and economic mobility.
3. Post-War America: Rise of consumerism and suburban ideals.
4. Modern Times: Redefinition toward self-fulfillment and social justice.

Each period is examined thematically, linking the American Dream's ideals to the socio-economic and cultural context of the time. This approach underscores how historical milestones, literary critiques, and cultural narratives have shaped and reshaped the concept, providing insights into its relevance and challenges in contemporary society.

The scope includes analyzing the tension between aspiration and reality, as highlighted in works like Delbanco's *The Real American Dream* (1999) and Luttwak's *Endangered American Dream* (2010), while also considering the dream's inclusivity and sustainability in an increasingly globalized and diverse America.

3. Results

Early America: Freedom, Equality, and Land Ownership

In its earliest conception, the American Dream was deeply rooted in agrarian ideals, emphasizing independence, equality, and land ownership. Drawing from the Declaration of Independence, the promise of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" defined the aspirations of a new nation. Delbanco (1999) highlights that during this era, owning land symbolized not just economic security but personal freedom and equality in a society striving to distinguish itself from the European aristocracy. This foundational



vision of the American Dream underscored self-reliance and the belief that prosperity could be achieved through honest labor.

Industrial Revolution: Wealth Accumulation and Economic Mobility

The Industrial Revolution marked a significant shift in the American Dream, as urbanization and industrialization redefined success. Messner and Rosenfeld (2001) argue that this period saw a growing emphasis on material wealth and upward economic mobility, driven by opportunities in burgeoning industries. The dream became less about landownership and more about financial success, symbolized by the rise of the “self-made man.” This era was also marked by social inequality, as opportunities were not equally distributed, leading to tensions that would shape the dream’s evolution.

20th Century: Consumerism and Suburban Ideals

Post-World War II America saw the American Dream take on a suburban form, characterized by home ownership, stable employment, and the nuclear family. Luttwak (2010) notes that the dream became synonymous with consumerism, fueled by the economic boom and mass production. Suburban expansion, epitomized by developments like Levittown, embodied this vision, promising comfort and prosperity to middle-class families. However, critiques emerged, with works like Albee’s *The American Dream* (1961) exposing the emptiness of such materialistic aspirations, questioning whether the dream was becoming increasingly hollow.

Modern Era: Individualism, Diversity, and Social Justice

In recent decades, the American Dream has undergone a profound transformation, emphasizing individual fulfillment, inclusivity, and social justice. Samuel (2012) describes this shift as a move away from collective ideals of prosperity to personal growth and self-expression. Modern interpretations of the dream recognize the importance of diversity, acknowledging systemic barriers that have excluded marginalized groups. Social movements like Black Lives Matter and increasing awareness of climate change reflect broader societal values shaping the dream today. This redefinition underscores the adaptability of the American Dream in addressing contemporary challenges and aspirations.

4. Discussion

Interpretation of Findings

The evolution of the American Dream mirrors the broader societal, economic, and political transformations in American history. Early emphasis on agrarian ideals reflected the country’s founding ethos of liberty and equality, aligning with its break from European feudal systems. The Industrial Revolution’s focus on wealth accumulation and economic mobility highlighted the rapid urbanization and technological advancements shaping a new economic order. The 20th century’s suburban ideals and consumerism embodied post-war economic prosperity and a cultural shift toward comfort and stability. Finally, the modern redefinition of individualism and social justice underscores America’s increasing diversity and the push for inclusivity in an era marked by globalization and digital interconnectedness.

Current Relevance

Today, the American Dream’s modern interpretation resonates deeply in a globalized world, where individual aspirations often transcend national boundaries. As Samuel (2012) noted, the dream has become less about material success and more about achieving personal fulfillment and contributing to collective



well-being. This shift is particularly significant in an increasingly diverse America, where inclusivity and equity are essential for fostering social cohesion. The evolving dream also reflects global concerns such as climate change and human rights, positioning it as a model for addressing universal challenges.

Limitations

This analysis primarily focuses on broad historical and cultural trends, leaving certain nuances unexplored. For instance, the American Dream's evolution across different racial, ethnic, and socio-economic groups requires more in-depth investigation. Additionally, while the references provide a strong foundation, they may not fully capture recent developments influenced by technology, migration, and global interconnectedness. Future research could benefit from incorporating more contemporary sources and diverse perspectives.

Implications

Understanding the evolution of the American Dream offers valuable insights into shaping future societal goals and personal aspirations. By recognizing its adaptability, individuals, and policymakers can harness the dream to address contemporary challenges, such as economic inequality and climate sustainability. Furthermore, this evolving narrative underscores the importance of fostering inclusivity and equity, ensuring that the dream remains relevant and attainable for future generations. As Rosenberg (2011) suggests, the American Dream's enduring appeal lies in its ability to inspire hope and ambition, making it a powerful force for positive change in an ever-changing world.

Conclusion

The American Dream has undergone a significant transformation since its inception, evolving from an agrarian ideal centered on freedom and land ownership to a vision of economic mobility, material success, and suburban comfort. In the 20th century, the dream became closely tied to consumerism and the nuclear family, while in the modern era, it has shifted towards individual fulfillment, diversity, and social justice. This journey reflects the broader societal, economic, and political changes in America, as well as the nation's response to global challenges and a rapidly changing cultural landscape.

Understanding the evolution of the American Dream is crucial for grasping the dynamics of American society and culture. It sheds light on how the concept has shaped, and been shaped by, the nation's history and continues to influence its future. As the dream adapts to the needs and aspirations of each generation, it remains a powerful symbol of hope and possibility.

As the American Dream continues to evolve, what does it mean for future generations in a rapidly changing world? This question invites reflection on how the dream will adapt to meet the challenges of the 21st century, ensuring that it remains relevant and attainable for all, regardless of background or circumstance.

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