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THE RISE AND FALL OF THE AMERICAN DREAM: FROM FRANKLIN TO FACEBOOK

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to provide and explain the historical development of the concept commonly known as the American Dream with a view to examining its gradual transformation from Franklin's self-made man to ready-made success promoted on social media platforms such as Facebook. Comparing prominent stages in American history, the paper will study the contribution each of them made to the legacy of the American Dream. Finally, we will attempt to answer the following questions: Are the fundamental concepts of the American Dream, such as upward mobility, still present in the digital age? Have the virtues commonly associated with the achievement of any aspect of the American Dream become obsolete? What constitutes the American Dream in the era of social media?

Keywords: American Dream, social media, digital age, upward mobility.

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Introduction

The concept of the American Dream is perhaps most concisely formulated in the words of James Truslow Adams, who coined this phrase in 1931. The author claims that the American Dream, in its essence, encourages the idea of "a better and freer life, a life in which a man might think as he would and develop as he willed" (Adams, 1933, p. 21). Though frequently present throughout American history, "the American Dream has never been a straight line. It has experienced its ups and downs, and has adapted its meaning to the cultural environment" (Vukčević, 2019, p.165). The Dream continues to flourish in the digital age, transforming nowadays faster than ever to satisfy the Internet generation's growing needs.

The core of the American Dream verges on the mythical shared by the whole nation's collective imagination. It has evolved into a powerful narrative crossing racial, religious, class, age, and gender boundaries. The clichéd rags-to-riches interpretation of the Dream is oversimplified and does not attest to its continuous allure instead of the ideology behind it and the underlying psychological and symbolic imagery that do. Therefore, we side with Cullen (2003, p. 7) when he claims that "[t]he American Dream would have no drama or mystique if it were a self-evident falsehood or scientifically demonstrable principle."

The Dream is often invoked in inaugural speeches and presidential campaigns; it is always a useful marketing tool and a frequent motif in literature. The allure of the American Dream is indeed as strong nowadays as it used to be in the era of the Founding Fathers confirming that it is, more than language or religion, a unifying principle of the American nation as a whole (Bilig, 2009, pp. 33-72). "No other idea or mythology […] has as much influence on our individual and collective lives, with the Dream one of the precious few things in this country we all share" (Samuel, 2012, p. 2).

The Dream of Upward Mobility

Upward mobility has been an inseparable component of the American Dream since its inception and undoubtedly mostly responsible for its widespread popularity. Owing to this idea, the US became a synonym for the land of opportunity where modest beginnings constituted no impediment to a willing, determined and self-sacrificing individual who wanted to shape his (or her) own destiny. [1]

[1]Although at first somewhat limited in scope, seeing that it referred solely to a white male, the term *individual* has gradually become more inclusive, making the American Dream more available as a consequence.

The American presidents are perhaps those who embody the Dream of upward mobility in the most attractive of ways, seeing that they indeed stand at the very top of the pyramid – "rising from obscure backgrounds and through dint of hard work or through success in war, [they] have enjoyed great public esteem. From Jackson, the war hero, to Lincoln's log cabin origins and now Clinton himself, all confirm that the self-made rule has validity" (Newman and De Zoysa, 1999, p. 61). The former American president, Donald Trump, also exemplifies J. T. Adams's principle – each American has the inherent right to be restricted by no barriers outside those of his own construction, as well as opportunity according to his ability or achievement.

Another salient aspect of the Dream lies in the implicit assumption that one can never be or have enough. This notion has proved to be, time and again, rather attractive despite the paradox that lies in its core. The same is true for the attraction of "infinite possibilities, unlimited opportunities, inexhaustible comparatives" – one can always have more, do better, become richer, or be happier (Samuel, 2012, pp. 15-16).

They Had a Dream: Great Expectations

James Truslow Adams, referred to as the historian of the American Dream by Nevins (1968), bears responsibility for introducing the term *American Dream*. Even though "it's not clear whether he actually coined [it] or appropriated it from someone else, […] the phrase rapidly entered common parlance as a byword for what he thought his country was all about" (Cullen, 2003, p. 4). And America was all about the Dream, the Dream of a better, happier, more prosperous life, of hope and success, ultimately about the notion that any aim was achievable as long as one was willing to work hard to accomplish it. "That dream or hope had been a vital force from the moment the first colonists came to Jamestown and Plymouth" (Nevins, 1968, p. 68).

The first colonists used to dream big even three centuries before J. T. Adams recognized and named their ethos. Misunderstood and mistreated in their homeland, they proclaimed the Church of England decadent and adopted a new, Calvinist theology of predestination. Driven by the utopian vision of a city upon a hill and with a sense of mission, the Puritans headed for the New World, holding great expectations. In *The Epic of America* (1933), Adams explores the singularity of the American frontier spirit, pointing to the accumulation of capital as its prime characteristic. Due to the Puritan transformation of hard work into a moral value and leisure into evil, "[m]ere ease and wealth, because so hardly won and won by the exercise of the moral virtue of work, took on exaggerated importance and became God's blessing" (Adams, 1933, p. 33).

One of the founding principles of Protestantism, as well as the American Dream, is the idea that "our station in life is earned rather than inherited" (Samuel, 2012, p. 3). More than a hundred years ago, Max Weber noticed in *The Protestant Ethic and the*

Spirit of Capitalism that it was no coincidence that the capitalist economy developed under the auspices of protestant societies, where it also reached its peak and continues to flourish to this day. Though the notion of the pursuit of profit and its continuous renewal as an end in itself is no capitalist invention, seeing that it "[has] existed in all civilized countries of the earth, so far as economic documents permit us to judge," it was the fusion of the religious ideas of ascetic Protestantism and entrepreneurial spirit of the Pilgrims on the banks of New England that resulted in an ethos that shaped the national character of one of the most powerful economies in recent history (Weber, 1958, p. 19).

Newman and De Zoysa adopt a similar position emphasizing the long-ago noted compatibility of the Puritan work ethic with money-making, which reached "its apogee in the US" (1999, p. 6). Cullen's words (2003, p. 15) echo Weber's as well when he claims that the fundamental difference between all varieties of Protestantism and Catholicism concerns the possibility of reform – "the cornerstone of what became the American Dream." The individualistic capitalist doctrine thus got its ethical foundation and justification in religion.

The abridged version of the Puritan ethic – "a positive orientation towards hard work, saving and a strong desire to succeed on one's own merit" (Newman and De Zoysa, 1999, p. 7) – appears to be their enduring bequest woven into American culture seeing that "becoming healthy, wealthy, and wise had gone beyond an instrument of salvation into being a practical end in its own right. This emphasis – some might say mania – for self-improvement, cut loose from its original Calvinist moorings, remains a recognizable trait in the American character and is considered an indispensable means for the achievement of any American Dream" (Cullen, 2003, pp. 30-31).

A great preacher and unofficial creator of the American Dream was one of the Founding Fathers and signers of the Declaration of Independence whose words strongly influenced the American ideology emphasizing the importance of personal and civic virtues in shaping both a successful individual and a successful nation – Benjamin Franklin. Though at times accused of crude materialism and utilitarianism – he "codified the sense of opportunity offered by the new American experience in predominantly economic terms" (Barbour, 1979, p. 1) – Franklin not only articulated what would become the American ideal in the decades and centuries to come – the self-made man – he also embodied it, making the mythology much more compelling.

Franklin's life and work epitomize the idea that "a man has to acquire a certain amount of necessary wealth so that his destiny will be in his own hands […]. America can be the land of the free because in America every man can acquire the minimum wealth necessary to be his own man" (Barbour, 1979, p. 25).Franklin did dismiss the somewhat contradictory Calvinist doctrine of the calling but kept the Puritan work ethic, which in the form of a secular gospel paved the American way to wealth (Gilmore, 1979, p. 106; Morey-Gaines, 1982, pp. 84-85).

"[T]he original and essential guardians of the privilege to dream an American dream at all" are the basic documents of the United States of America, first and foremost the Declaration of Independence (Morey-Gaines, 1982, p. 4). It contains the founding principles of the American Dream – the three alluring but somewhat ambiguous promises. While Life and Liberty are definable to a degree,[2] it is the third concept, however, which has proved the most troublesome and misleading.

And the Pursuit of Happiness: The Time of Their Lives

No other age in US history has defined the American Dream in such materialistic terms as the postwar era of the 1950s and 60s. According to Cullen (2003, p. 136), this seems to be the Dream version with the broadest appeal and most widely realized. With the Housing Act and GI Bill, home and car ownership, together with other consumer delights, became "the central repository for what many considered 'the good life'" (Samuel, 2012, p. 56). That America was an ownership-driven society was not a novelty – ever since the times of the Pioneers owning a piece of land has been the (un)conscious wish of many an American, which the Homestead Acts, in effect for over a century, perfectly corroborate.

Straight from a Coca-Cola commercial, the Suburban Dream was at the same time the consequence and the driving force of the culture of consumption, which would permanently alter the structure of the American Dream, adding a dose of consumer bliss to it. Moreover, in that laissez-faire capitalism, the middle class was practically living the Dream. At least the Joneses were. All others had to do was keep up.

In *The Status Seekers* (1960), Vance Packard challenges the idea that the postwar US is a classless society, claiming that it is markedly socially stratified with members of lower-income groups constantly striving to reach higher strata by always acquiring new and prestigious indicators of status, ranging from a luxurious house at a "proper" address and distinguished club memberships to the adequate choice of leisure activities and schools for kids.

So, the era of abundance and prosperity following the Second World War did not, expectedly, reduce, nor eliminate class divisions. It also emphasized them intensifying the status anxiety as the American Dream was slowly drifting away into the ever higher

[2] To paraphrase Cullen (2003), in the era of genetic engineering and cloning, the mere category of life becomes problematic, not to mention more complex notions such as freedom, or the discrepancy between the way the Founding Fathers understood these terms and our attempts to do so.

and unattainable social caste. Instead of "individual skill, responsibility, and personal worth," people were increasingly judged by income levels and consumption patterns, with their social-class rank becoming the sole criterion for being accepted or rejected by the community (Packard, 1960, p. 38). This way, the pursuit of happiness turned into the pursuit of a lifestyle with the notion of leisure as its prominent feature.

The Dream of the Coast

The subjectivity of the concepts of happiness and success had as a consequence the plurality of the American Dream, the most enticing of which has proved to be the California Dream that emphasizes great wealth and self-indulgent life. As Cullen explains, the Dream of the Coast is "less about accumulating riches than about living off their fruits, and its symbolic location is not the bank but the beach" (Cullen, 2003, p. 160).

One of the ways of acquiring the means necessary for an affluent lifestyle was gambling. From the times of the first colonists, then the Gold Rush and Gilded Age, to quiz and game shows of the '70s, becoming fabulously wealthy quickly and effortlessly has always been an attractive notion which culminated in the purely monetary incarnation of happiness – Las Vegas, the apotheosis of the land of opportunity. Thus, sheer luck and readiness to take a risk became seemingly the only prerequisites for attaining the California Dream.

Those longing for fame in addition to material riches went to Hollywood, where yet another adaptation of the Dream was on offer – to live happily (and opulently) ever after. As Samuel (2012) explains, it was movies where the Dream was at its dreamiest. Whereas the traditional version of the Dream "rested on the sense of character," this one "rested on personality" (Cullen, 2003, p. 177). This way, the celebrity culture and entertainment industry became the bastions of the American Dream and the Golden State the epitome of easy living, which it remains to this day. Therefore the idea of the quest slowly diminished as it was moved from a lifelong and spiritual into a more earthly and tangible realm.

iGen: Who Stole Their Dream?

That ours is the age of a great economic and power divide is a well-documented and notorious fact, but one that has to be mentioned nevertheless if we are to understand the world we inhabit as well as the world that inhabits our heads, consequently shaping our dreams. Predatory capitalism of the 1990s and early 2000s enabled the top 1% to seize the vast majority of profits and power. Soon enough, this became a global issue with rich people growing insanely rich, the middle class slowly eroding, and the poor

barely surviving. Not only has the Dream of upward mobility vanished, but it has also given way to the downward spiral (Newman and De Zoysa, 1999, pp. 167-170; Smith, 2013, pp. 47, 61-65, 70-75, 98-120).

In such an unstable climate, there is an overwhelming sense of impotence and growing disenchantment with the system that can no longer support the American Dream, complete with a decent job, a house in the suburbs, and two cars in a garage. Therefore, new variations of the Dream emerge that have very little, if anything, in common with the original ideal, but are highly compatible with "the rampant materialism that now pervades the capitalist world" (Newman and De Zoysa, 1999, p. 101).

New voices of the Dream are young people about to enter the workforce and take over leading positions, the new generations who have been promised a better future, which is fast approaching, people born and raised in the digital age, with unrestricted internet access, smart-phones in their hands and computers in their bedrooms, people whom Jean M. Twenge from the University of San Diego calls iGen. As the author explains in her research entitled *iGen – Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy – and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood* (Tvengi, 2018), 'i' in iGen stands for the *Internet*. However, this paper shall argue that it could indicate *instant*, *illusion*, *image*, *idol,* or *individualism*.

Overprotected, seemingly well-informed, constantly connected, intent on living in virtual realities of their gadgets and anxious when confronted with real life, the generations of today, in vigorous pursuit of acceptance and validation from their cyber-friends, have reached "the verge of the most severe mental health crisis for young people in decades" – blissfully happy on their social media platforms on the one hand, terribly lonely and depressed in their real lives on the other (Tvengi, 2018, p. 117). Obsessed with appearances and popularity, the cult of youth and beauty and modern role models the new media are constantly bombarding them with, they find themselves torn "between what [they] are and what [they] ought to hope to be" (Morey-Gaines, 1982, p. 26).

This is also connected with the collapse of parental guidance, devaluation of all kinds of authority, the crisis of confidence in political leaders, pessimistic atmosphere, and catastrophic predictions for the future (Lasch, 1991, pp. 167-169; Lipovecki, 1987, p. 45). The emergence of new idols should not be disregarded either, seeing that "media culture has become a dominant force of socialization, with media images and celebrities replacing families, schools, and churches as arbiters of taste, value, and thought,

producing new models of identification and resonant images of style, fashion, and behavior" (Kellner, 1995, p. 17).

Up until recently, the crux of the American Dream rested on individual agency, hard work, and striving, while merit, morality, industriousness, integrity, and diligence were practiced as a matter of course – "[v]irtue and reward [were] locked in a symbolic embrace" (Cullen, 2003, p. 85). "Expectedly, the evolution of the American Dream has been heavily influenced by the rise of the self over these past eighty years," and even more so during the first two decades of the twenty-first century marked by techno-capitalism, social media, and hedonistic modus vivendi (Samuel, 2012, p. 9). "The shift from civic and communitarian interests to personal and private ones" (Samuel, 2012, p. 166) led to American culture being designated as narcissistic way back in 1979 when Christopher Lasch wrote his now cult *The Culture of Narcissism.* Nevertheless, bearing in mind the process of globalization, the idea of individualism, and the advent of new technologies and the Internet, we could rightly state that it has outgrown its original narcissism, becoming hyper-narcissistic.

Following this trend, modern-day, atomized, attention-seeking Narcissus, who lives in and for the moment and promotes his self as a marketable commodity on various Instagrams, YouTubes, and Facebooks longs to turn his life into a spectacle to gain the approval and acceptance of the Lacanian Big Other in the form of followers and likes. In the society of surface where self-indulgence and instant gratification have become imperatives and the boundaries between the public and private realm blurred, success tends to turn into a paid-for performance because being seen as having made it matters more than actually making it – "[n]othing succeeds like the appearance of success" (Lasch, 1999, p. 59)

Samuel (2012, pp. 180-181) points out that the most popular TV show in the US in the first decade of the twenty-first century was, not surprisingly, *American Idol* since it "most compellingly expressed the essence of the American Dream" as well as "our adoration of and desperate pursuit for fame; our unabashed worship of celebrity and that we all perhaps had the potential of becoming one." It is precisely this potential for becoming a celebrity, a superstar, an influencer that keeps being reiterated, and that has come to dominate our media-mediated lives, or at least the lives of iGen. "The media give substance to and thus intensify narcissistic dreams of fame and glory, encourage the common man to identify himself with the stars," states Christopher Lasch (1991, p. 21).

Similarly, Dobbs (2006, p. 24), in his critique of corporate America, claims that contemporary society has come to adulate and glorify the wealthiest, irrespective of the values they embody; hence entertainers, professional athletes, and CEO's are the ones we reserve our honor for. However, this concept of material success proves a bit inconvenient after all. "Because wealth is perceived as relative rather than absolute,

many researchers have found, chasing dollars is ultimately a no-win game, the fact that someone somewhere has more than you do spoiling the whole thing" (Samuel, 2012, p. 198).

The pillars of the contemporary global industry are not in accord with the fundamentals of the American Dream. Under the pretense of equal opportunity, the system has equated happiness with success and then placed it on the throne. Whereas the legacy of the Dream was still present in the last decades of the twentieth century, the new millennium with its neoliberal capitalism and advanced technology saw the introduction of entropy at all levels of life, from business and politics to leisure and private realm. "As the information age and what it means is digested, it becomes even more apparent that many Americans are, in the foreseeable future, incapable of sharing in its promise. For them, the 'American Dream' will remain elusive" (Newman and De Zoysa, 1999, p. 82).

The American Dream in its original meaning appears to be "out of synch with today's present-focused, live-in-the-now therapeutic approach and contrary to pretty much everything to be found in au courant Buddhism, begging the question of if it is time we adopt a much different kind of guiding mythology" (Samuel, 2012, p. 9). The new ruling mythos arises in the form of a dangerous illusion that equates success with the number of likes and followers on social media platforms – in other words, with fame and fortune, which are "all the more compelling if achieved without obvious effort. This is the most alluring and insidious of American Dreams, and one that seems to have become predominant at the start of the twenty-first century" (Cullen, 2003, p. 9).

While the traditional version of the American Dream emphasized quality, its contemporary mutation settles for quantity. As Vukčević (2019, pp. 166-167) points out, referencing Samuel (2012), "[t]he new markers that convey the realization of one's Dream [are]: acclaim, admiration, envy, and public recognition." Whereas this fantasy appears possible for a few YouTubers, bloggers, and influencers whose content mostly perpetuates socially acceptable lifestyles and the values embodied in the ruling ideology, feeding on their subscribers' overwhelming sense of inadequacy, for the vast majority of iGen'ers, this pseudo-dream remains an illusion.

Conclusion

How far removed American society is from its Pilgrim origins indicates the gradual but remarkable transformation of the Puritan creed into a hedonistic modus operandi – not only do puritanism and hedonism stand at the opposite sides of the spectrum, the incongruity between the two ideologies illustrates that the American Dream is actually unsustainable in contemporary conditions. Hence theorists' doubts in that regard – does the Dream still exist, was it stolen, could it be restored, or has it perhaps irrevocably

turned into a nightmare and lost cogency altogether. The promise of the good life as a reward for hard work, determination, thrift, and self-sacrifice has been broken. In contrast, the noble democratic ideals of equal opportunity, freedom, and justice have become unattainable in practice.

Once upon a time, morality and ideals used to be densely woven into the fabric the American Dream was made of, but today we live in the era of diminishing expectations devoid of transcendental ideas and goals (Lipovecki, 1987, p. 45). Franklin's self-made man is long dead and gone, together with his notions of individual and communitarian progress. Material wealth, which has become an end in itself, is no longer a result of virtue, effort, or hard work, but clever manipulations and readiness to use the system and be used by it. Whether the concept of the American Dream, already significantly transformed, can endure, remains to be seen.

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USPON I PAD AMERIČKOG SNA: OD FRENKLINA DO FEJSBUKA

Rezime

Prikazom istorijskog razvoja koncepta poznatog pod nazivom američki san, u ovom radu nastojali smo da ispitamo njegovu postupnu transformaciju od ideala samostvorenog čoveka koji je artikulisao Bendžamin Frenklin do instant uspeha koji se danas promoviše na društvenim mrežama poput Fejsbuka. Uporedivši važne faze američke istorije, od kolonijalnog perioda preko kalifornijske zlatne groznice do perioda prosperiteta posle Drugog svetskog rata, rad ukazuje na doprinos koji je svaka od njih dala konceptu amričkog sna kakav danas poznajemo. Nastao u vreme prvih kolonija, američki san postao je nacionalni etos koji u osnovi čini ideja o slobodnom pojedincu koji kroz naporan trud i rad može napredovati i postići uspeh u društvu jednkakih mogućnosti za sve. Značenje ovog pojma se vremenom menjalo sa razvojem političkih sloboda, ali i širenjem američke države. Otkriće zlata u Kaliforniji sredinom 19. veka

rađa san o bogaćenju preko noći koji se brzo širi celom zemljom, a nastanak Holivuda početkom 20. veka donosi ideale popularnosti i lagodnog života. San o predgrađu nastao u periodu posle Drugog svetskog rata dodatno popularizuje ideju materijalnog uspeha, koji mnogima ostaje uskraćen.Zaključna razmatranja ukazuju na nepodudarnost osnovnih ideala američkog sna, poput društvene pokretljivosti i napredovanja, sa tekovinama kasnog kapitalizma. Vrline koje su kroz istoriju obično dovođene u vezu sa ostvarenjem bilo kojeg američkog sna, poput upornosti, marljivosti i čestitosti, zastarele su i postale nepotrebne u digitalnog eri koja favorizuje slavu i bogatstvo kao oličenje uspeha ne postavljajući pitanje kojim sredstvima se do njih dolazi.

Ključne reči: američki san, društvene mreže, digitalno doba, društvena pokretljivost.

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