

Hochschild, J. L. (1995). *Facing up to the American dream: Race, class and the soul of the nation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp. 15 – 38.

### What is the American Dream?

"In the beginning," wrote John Locke, "all the world was *America*." Locke was referring specifically to the absence of a cash nexus in primitive society. But the sentence evokes the unsullied newness, infinite possibility, limitless resources that are commonly understood to be the essence of the "American dream." The idea of the American dream has been attached to everything from religious freedom to a home in the suburbs, and it has inspired emotions ranging from deep satisfaction to disillusioned fury. Nevertheless, the phrase elicits for most Americans some variant of Locke's fantasy—a new world where anything can happen and good things might....

### The Meaning of Success

The American dream consists of tenets about achieving success. Let us first explore the meaning of "success" and then consider the rules for achieving it.

People most often define success as the attainment of a high income, a prestigious job, economic security. My treatment is no exception. But pace President Reagan, material well-being is only one form of accomplishment. People seek success from the pulpit to the stage of the Metropolitan Opera, from membership in the newest dance club to membership in the Senate. Success can be as amorphous and encompassing as "a right to say what they want to say, do what they want to do, and fashion a world into something that can be great for everyone."

Different kinds of success need not, but often do, conflict. A classic plot of American family sagas is the children's rejection of the parents' hard-won wealth and social standing in favor of some "deeper," more meaningful form of accomplishment. The rejection may be reversed, as Cotton Mather sadly reported:

There have been very fine settlements in the north-east regions; but what is become of them?... One of our ministers once preaching to a congregation there, urged them to approve themselves a religious people from this consideration, "that otherwise they would contradict the main end of planting this wilderness"; whereupon a well-known person, then in the assembly, cried out, "Sir, you are mistaken: you think you are preaching to the people at the [Plymouth] Bay; our main end was to catch fish."

Mather "wished that something more excellent had been the main end of the settlements in that brave country," but the ideology of the American dream itself remains agnostic as to the meaning of "something more excellent."

A definition of success involves measurement as well as content. Success can be measured in at least three ways, with important normative and behavioral consequences. First, it can be *absolute*. In this case, achieving the American dream implies reaching some threshold of well-being, higher than where one began but not necessarily dazzling. As Bruce Springsteen puts it, "I don't think the American dream was that everybody was going to make ... a billion dollars, but it was that everybody was going to have an opportunity and the chance to live a life with some decency and some dignity and a chance for some self-respect."

Second, success can be *relative*. Here achieving the American dream consists in becoming better off than some comparison point, whether one's childhood, people in the old country, one's neighbors, a character from a book, another race or gender—anything or anyone that one measures oneself against. Relative success implies no threshold of well-being, and it may or may not entail continually changing the comparison group as one achieves a given level of accomplishment

A benign version of relative success is captured by James Comer's "kind of competition ... we had... going on" with "the closest friends that we had":

When we first met them, we had a dining room and they didn't. They went back and they turned one of their bedrooms into a dining room... After that we bought this big Buick car. And we came to their house and they had bought another car. She bought a fur coat one year and your dad bought me one the next. But it was a friendly thing, the way we raced. It gave you something to work for, to look forward to. Every year we tried to have something different to show them what we had done, and they would have something to show us.

William Byrd II articulated a more malign version in 1736: slaves "blow up the pride, and ruin the industry of our white people, who seeing a rank of poor creatures below them, detest work for fear it should make them look like slaves."

Success can, alternatively, be *competitive*—achieving victory over someone else. My success implies your failure. Competitors are usually people, whether known and concrete (opponents in a tennis match) or unknown and abstract (all other applicants for a job). *U.S. News and World Report*, in an article celebrating "SUCCESS! The Chase Is Back in Style Again," graphically illustrates the relationship among competitors in the business world. An opponent may, however, be entirely impersonal. John Henry, "the steel-drivin' man," is famed for beating a machine, and Paul Bunyan for taming the primeval forest.

### **Tenets of Success**

The American dream that we were all raised on is a simple but powerful one—if you work hard and play by the rules you should be given a chance to go as far as your God-given ability will take you.

—President Bill Clinton, speech to Democratic Leadership Council, 1993

In one sentence, President Clinton has captured the bundle of shared, even unconsciously presumed, tenets about achieving success that make up the ideology of the American dream. Those tenets answer the questions: *Who* may pursue the American dream? In *what* does the pursuit consist? *How* does one successfully pursue the dream? *Why* is the pursuit worthy of our deepest commitment?

The answer to "who" in the standard ideology is "everyone, regardless of ascriptive traits, family background, or personal history." The answer to "what" is "the reasonable anticipation, though not the promise, of success, however it is defined." The answer to "how" is "through actions and traits under one's own control." The answer to "why" is "true success is associated with virtue." Let us consider each rule in turn.

### **Who May Pursue Success?**

The first tenet, that everyone may always pursue their dream, is the most direct connotation of Locke's "in the beginning...." But the idea extends beyond the image of a pristine state of nature waiting for whoever "discovers" it. Even in the distinctly nonpristine, nonnatural world of Harlem or Harlan County, anyone can pursue a dream. A century ago, one moved to the frontier to hide a spotted past and begin afresh; Montana frontierswomen "never ask[ed] women where they come from or what they did before they came to live in our neck of the woods. If they wore a wedding band and were good wives, mothers, and neighbors that was enough for us to know."

But seldom, say Americans, does one need to take such dramatic steps; fewer than one-fifth see race, gender, religion, or class as very important for "getting ahead in life." Even two-thirds of the poor are certain that Americans like themselves "have a good chance of improving our standard of living," and up to three times as many Americans as Europeans make that claim. In

effect, Americans believe that they can create a personal mini-state of nature that will allow them to slough off the past and invent a better future.

### **What Does One Pursue?**

The second tenet, that one may reasonably anticipate success, is less straightforward. "Reasonable anticipation" is far from a guarantee, as all children on the morning of their birthday know. But "reasonable anticipation" is also much more than simply longing; most children are fairly sure of getting at least some of what they wish for on their birthday. On a larger scale, from its inception America has been seen by many as an extravagant birthday party:

Seagull: A whole cuntry of English is there, man,... and ... the Indians are so in love with 'hem that all the treasure they have they lay at their feete ... Golde is more plentiful there than copper is with us... Why, man, all their dripping pans and their chamberpots are pure golde; and all the chaines with which they chaine up their streets are massie golde; all the prisoners they take are fettered in golde; and for rubies and diamonds they goe forthe on holy dayes and gather 'hem by the sea shore to hang on their childrens coats.

Presumably few Britons even in 1605 took this message literally, but the hope of abundant riches—whether material, spiritual, or otherwise—persists.

Thus Americans are exhorted to "go for it" in their advertisements as well as their commencement addresses. And they do; three-quarters of Americans, compared with only one-third of Britons, West Germans, and Hungarians (and fewer Dutch), agree that they have a good chance of improving their standard of living. Twice as many Americans as Canadians or Japanese think future generations of their nationality will live better than the present generation.

### **How Does One Pursue Success?**

The third premise, for those who do not take Seagull literally, explains how one is to achieve the success that one anticipates. Ralph Waldo Emerson is uncharacteristically succinct on the point: "There is always a reason, *in the man*, for his good or bad fortune, and so in making money." Other nineteenth-century orators exhorted young men to

Behold him [a statue of Benjamin Franklin],... holding out to you an example of diligence, economy and virtue, and personifying the triumphant success which may await those who follow it! Behold him, ye that are humblest and poorest... —lift up your heads and look at the image of a man who rose from nothing, who owed nothing to parentage or patronage, who enjoyed no advantages of early education, which are not open,—a hundredfold open,—to yourselves, who performed the most menial services in the business in which his early life was employed, but who lived to stand before Kings, and died to leave a name which the world will never forget.

Lest we smile at the quaint optimism (or crude propaganda) of our ancestors, consider a recent advertisement from Citicorp Bank. This carefully balanced group of shining faces—young and old, male and female, black, Latino, Nordic, and Asian—all gazing starry-eyed at the middle distance over the words "THE WILL TO SUCCEED IS PART OF THE AMERICAN SPIRIT" conveys the message of the third tenet in no uncertain terms.

This advertisement is well aimed; surveys unanimously show Americans' strong support for rewarding people in the marketplace according to their talents and accomplishments rather than their needs, efforts, or simple existence. And Americans mostly believe that people are in fact rewarded for their acts. In 1952 fully 88 percent of Americans agreed that "there is plenty of opportunity and anyone who works hard can go as far as he wants"; in 1980, 70 percent concurred.

Comparisons across space yield the same results as comparisons across time. In a 1973 survey of youth in ten nations, only Swedes and British disagreed more than did Americans that a man's *[sic]* future is "virtually determined" by his family background. A decade later only 31 percent of Americans agreed that in their nation "what you achieve in life depends largely on your family background," compared with over 50 percent of Austrians and Britons, and over 60 percent of Italians. Most pointedly, half of American adolescents compared with one-fourth of British adolescents agreed in 1972 that "people get to be poor... [because] they don't work hard enough."

Americans also believe more than do Europeans that people ought not to be buffered from the consequences of their actions, so long as they have a fair start in life. Thus up to four times as many more Americans think college opportunities should be increased, but roughly half as many think the government should reduce the income disparity between high- and low-income citizens, or provide jobs or income support for the poor.

### **Why Is Success Worth Pursuing?**

Implicit in the flows of oratory and survey responses is the fourth tenet of the American dream, that the pursuit of success warrants so much fervor because it is associated with virtue. "Associated with" means at least four things: virtue leads to success, success makes a person virtuous, success indicates virtue, or apparent success is not real success unless one is also virtuous.

That quintessential American, Benjamin Franklin, illustrates three of these associations: the *Autobiography* instructs us that "no Qualities were so likely to make a poor Man's Fortune as those of Probity & Integrity." Conversely, "Proverbial Sentences, chiefly such as inculcated Industry and Frugality," are included in *Poor Richard's Almanack* as "the Means of procuring Wealth and thereby securing Virtue, it being more difficult for a Man in Want to act always honestly, as ... *it is hard for an empty Sack to stand upright.*" Finally, mere wealth may actually impede true success, the attainment of which requires a long list of virtues: "Fond *Pride of Dress*, is sure a very Curse; E'er *Fancy* you consult, consult your Purse"; "A Ploughman on his Legs is higher than a Gentleman on his Knees"; and "Pride that dines on Vanity sups on Contempt."

Americans have learned Franklin's lessons well: they distinguish between the worthy and unworthy rich, as well as the deserving and undeserving poor. For example, most Americans characterize "yuppies" as people who "play fashionable games" and "eat in trendy restaurants," and on the whole they enjoy watching such forms of conspicuous consumption. But they also characterize yuppies as selfish, greedy, inclined to flaunt their wealth, and imbued with a false sense of superiority. These traits they mostly find unacceptable. Overall, Americans overwhelmingly deplore the 1980s sentiment of "making it fast while you can regardless of what happened to others." This is not simply a reaction against the Reagan years. In surveys throughout the 1970s, four in ten Americans deemed honesty to be the most important quality for a child to learn, compared with 2 percent proclaiming that a child should try hard to succeed. Virtually all Americans require that their friends be "honest" and "responsible"—core components of the third and fourth tenets.

Americans also focus more on virtue than do citizens of other nations, at least in their self-descriptions. A survey of youth in ten nations found that more Americans than people in any other country described their chief goal in life as "sincerity and love between myself and others," and in only one other nation (the Philippines) did more youth seek "salvation through faith." Conversely, only in Sweden did fewer youths seek "money and position," and only in three other countries did fewer seek "freedom from restrictions." More Americans than Europeans gain strength from religion, report prayer to be an important part of their daily life, and agree that there are universally applicable "clear guidelines about what is good or evil." In short, "this country succeeds in living a very sinful life without being deeply cynical. That is the difference between Europe and America, and it signifies that ethics *means* something here."

## The American Dream as Fantasy

We must beware reducing the dream to its components; as a whole it has an evocative resonance greater than the sum of its parts. The theme of most Walt Disney movies boil down to the lyrics in *Pinocchio*: "When you wish upon a star, makes no difference who you are, your dreams come true." It is no coincidence that Disney movies are so durable; they simply update Locke's fantasy. And the global, amorphous vision of establishing a city upon the hill, killing the great white whale, striking a vein of gold, making the world safe for democracy—or simply living a life of decency and dignity—underlies all analyses of what success means or what practices will attain it.

## Virtues of the American Dream

Combining the amorphous fantasy or the more precise tenets of the American dream with the various meanings of success shows the full richness—and seductiveness—of the ideology. If one measures success absolutely and accepts a wide array of indicators of success, the ideology portrays America as a land of plenty, and Americans as "people of plenty." This is the great theme of one of the most powerful children's sagas ever written in America, the *Little House in the Big Woods* series. Decades (and nine volumes) of grasshopper plagues, ferocious blizzards, cheating and cowardly railroad bosses, even hostile Indians cannot prevent Pa and his girls from eventually "winning their bet with Uncle Sam" and becoming prosperous homesteaders. In the words of one of Pa's songs:

I am sure in this world there are plenty of good things enough for us all.... It's cowards alone that are crying And foolishly saying, "I can't." It is only by plodding and striving And laboring up the steep hill Of life, that you'll ever be thriving, Which you'll do if you've only the will,

If success is measured competitively and defined narrowly, however, the ideology portrays a different America. Hard work and virtue combined with scarce resources produce a few spectacular winners and many dismissible losers. This is the theme of John Rockefeller's turn-of-the-century Sunday school address:

The growth of a large business is merely a survival of the fittest.... The American Beauty rose can be produced in the splendor and fragrance which bring cheer to its beholder only by sacrificing the early buds which grow up around it. This is not an evil tendency in business. It is merely the working out of a law of nature and a law of God.

The *Little House* series has sold well over four million copies; Americans prefer the self-image of universal achievement to that of a few stalwarts triumphing over weaker contenders. What matters most, however, is not any single image but rather the elasticity and range of the ideology of the American dream. People can encourage themselves with soft versions, congratulate themselves with harder ones, and exult with the hardest, as their circumstances and characters warrant.

Thus the American dream is an impressive ideology. It has for centuries lured people to America and moved them around within it, and it has kept them striving in horrible conditions against impossible odds. Most Americans celebrate it unthinkingly, along with apple pie and motherhood; criticism typically is limited to imperfections in its application. But like apple pie and motherhood, the American dream turns out upon closer examination to be less than perfect. Let us look, then, at flaws intrinsic to the dream.

## Flaws in the Tenets of the American Dream

### The First Tenet

The first tenet, that everyone can participate equally and can always start over, is troubling to the degree that it is not true. It is, of course, never true in the strongest sense; people cannot shed their existing selves as snakes do their skin. So the myth of the individual mini-state of nature is just that—a fantasy to be sought but never achieved.

Fantasies are fine so long as people understand that that is what they are. For that reason, a weaker formulation of the first tenet—people start the pursuit of success with varying advantages, but no one is barred from the pursuit—is more troubling because the gap between ideological claim and actual fact is harder to recognize. As a factual claim, the first tenet is largely false; for most of American history, women of any race and men who were Native American, Asian, black, or poor were barred from all but a narrow range of "electable futures." Ascriptive constraints have arguably been weakened over time, but until recently no more than about a third of the population was able to take seriously the first premise of the American dream.

This flaw has implications beyond the evident ones of racism and sexism. The emotional potency of the American dream has made people who *were* able to identify with it the norm for everyone else. White men, especially European immigrants able to ride the wave of the Industrial Revolution (and to benefit from the absence of competition from the rest of the population) to comfort or even prosperity, are the epitomizing demonstration of America as the bountiful state of nature. Those who do not fit the model disappear from the collective self-portrait. Thus the irony is doubled: not only has the ideal of universal participation been denied to most Americans, but also the very fact of its denial has itself been denied in our national self-image.

This double irony creates deep misunderstandings and correspondingly deep political tensions. Whites increasingly believe that racial discrimination is slight and declining, and blacks increasingly believe the opposite. But this form of racial conflict is not unique. For example, surveys show that more women than men believe that women are discriminated against in employment and wages, in "being able to combine family and work," and in their overall chance to pursue their dreams. Similarly, regardless of when the survey was conducted, more men than women believe that women are better off now than a decade earlier with regard to these issues. Not surprisingly, bitter disagreements about the need for affirmative action, policies to stem sexual harassment, family leave policies, and the like ensue.

### The Second Tenet

The flaws of the second tenet of the American dream, the reasonable anticipation of success, stem from the close link between anticipation and expectation. That link presents little problem so long as there are enough resources and opportunities that everyone has a reasonable chance of having some expectations met. Indeed, panegyrics to the American dream always expound on the bounty and openness of the American continent. Governor James Glen typified eighteenth-century entrepreneurs of colonization by promising that

Adventurers will be pleased to find a Change from Poverty and Distress to Ease and Plenty; they are invited to a Country not yet half settled, where the Rivers are crowded with Fish, and the Forests with Game; and no Game-Act to restrain them from enjoying those Bounties of Providence, no heavy Taxes to impoverish them, nor oppressive Landlords to snatch the hard-earned Morsel from the Mouth of Indigence, and where Industry will certainly enrich them.

Three centuries later, the message was unchanged:

All my life I am thinking to come to this country. For what I read in the magazines, and the movies.... I would have a beautiful castle in the U.S. I will have a thousand servant. I will have five Rolls-Royces in my door.... We thinking everybody has this kind of life.... I have this kind of dream.

These fantasies are innocuous so long as resources roughly balance dreams for enough people enough of the time. But if they do not—worse yet, if they used to but do no longer—then the dream rapidly loses its appeal. The circumstances that cause resources no longer to balance dreams vary, from an economic downturn to a rapid increase in the number of dreamers to a narrowing of the grounds on which success is publicly recognized. The general point, however, always holds: no one promises that dreams will be fulfilled, but the distinction between the right to dream and the right to succeed is psychologically hard to maintain and politically always blurred. It is especially hard to maintain because the dream sustains Americans against daily nightmares only if they believe that they have a significant likelihood, not just a formal chance, of reaching their goals.

In short, the right to aspire to success works as an ideological substitute for a guarantee of success only if it begins to approach it. When people recognize that chances for success are slim or getting slimmer, the whole tenor of the American dream changes dramatically for the worse.

The general problem of scarcity varies depending on how people measure success and how broadly they define possible goals. It is most obvious and acute for those focused on competitive success in only a few arenas; by definition resources and opportunities are insufficient to satisfy all dreamers in such a case. But it may be more problematic for those who measure success relatively or who admit a wide array of outcomes into their picture of success. After all, there are more such people and they have no a priori reason to assume that many will fail.

The problem of scarcity may be most devastating, however, for people anticipating absolute success or for people willing to see success almost anywhere. They, after all, have the least reason to expect failure. Losers of this type have an unmatched poignancy: "I don't dream any more like I used to. I believed that in this country, we would have all we needed for the decent life. I don't see that any more."

Conversely, the availability of resources and opportunities may shape the kind of success that Americans dream of. If resources are profoundly scarce (as in a famine] or inherently limited (as in election to the presidency), people almost certainly envision competitive success in that arena. If resources are moderately scarce, people will be concerned about their position relative to that of others, but will not necessarily see another's gain as their loss. When resources and opportunities seem wide open and broadly defined—anyone can achieve salvation, get an "A" on the exam, claim 160 acres of western prairie—people are most free to pursue their idiosyncratic dreams and to measure their achievement by their own absolute standard.

This logic suggests a dynamic: as resources become tighter or success is more narrowly defined, Americans are likely to shift their understanding of success from absolute to relative to competitive. Before the 1980s, claims one journalist, "there was always enough to go around, plenty of places in the sun. It didn't even matter much about the rich—so long as everyone was living better, it seemed the rich couldn't be denied their chance to get richer." But "today [in 1988] that wave [of prosperity] has crested.... Now when the rich get richer, the middle class stagnates—and the poor get decidedly poorer. If left unchecked, a polarization of income... is likely to provoke consequences that will affect America's politics and power, to say nothing of its psyche."

The risks of anticipating success do not stop with anticipation. Attaining one's dreams can be surprisingly problematic. From William Shakespeare to William Faulkner, writers have limned the loneliness of being at the top, the spiritual costs of cutthroat competition, the shallowness of a society that rewards achievement above all else. Alexis de Tocqueville characteristically provides one of the most eloquent of such admonitions:

Every American is eaten up with longing to rise.... In America I have seen the freest and best educated of men in circumstances the happiest in the world; yet it seemed to me that a cloud habitually hung on their brow, and they seemed serious and almost sad even in their

pleasures. The chief reason for this is that... [they] never stop thinking of the good things they have not got.... They clutch everything but hold nothing fast, and so lose grip as they hurry after some new delight.

The obsession with ever more material success threatens the body politic as well as the individual soul:

When the taste for physical pleasures has grown more rapidly than either education or experience of free institutions, the time comes when men are carried away and lose control of themselves at sight of the new good things they are ready to snatch.... There is no need to drag their rights away from citizens of this type; they themselves voluntarily let them go.... The role of government is left unfilled. If, at this critical moment, an able and ambitious man once gets power, he finds the way open for usurpations of every sort.

Not only nineteenth-century romantics cautioned against the failures of success. Today psychotherapists specialize in helping "troubled winners" or the "working wounded," for whom "a life too much devoted to pursuing money, power, position, and control over others ends up being emotionally impoverished." In short, material— and perhaps other forms of—success is not all it's cracked up to be, even (or especially) in a nation where it is the centerpiece of the pervasive ideology.

The problems of success, however, pale beside the problems of failure. Because success is so central to Americans' self-image, and because they expect as well as hope to achieve, Americans are not gracious about failure. Others' failure reminds them that the dream may be just that—a dream, to be distinguished from waking reality. Their own failure confirms that fear. As Zora Neale Hurston puts it, "there is something about poverty that smells like death."

Furthermore, the better the dream works for other people, the more devastating is failure for the smaller and smaller proportion of people left behind. In World War II, members of military units with a high probability of promotion were less satisfied with advancement opportunities than members of units with a much lower probability of promotion, because failure to be promoted in the former case was both more salient and more demonstrably a personal rather than a systemic flaw. The "tunnel effect" is a more nuanced depiction of this phenomenon of relative deprivation. The first stage is one of relative gratification, in which others' success enhances one's own well-being. After all, drivers in a traffic jam in a tunnel are initially pleased when cars in the adjacent lane begin to move "because advances of others supply information about a more benign external environment; receipt of this information produces gratification; and this gratification overcomes, or at least suspends, *envy*." At some point, however, those left behind come to believe that their heightened expectations will not be met; not only are their hopes now dashed, but they are also worse off than when the upward mobility began. "Nonrealization of the expectation [that my turn to move will soon come] will at some point result in my 'becoming furious.'" And one is still stuck in the tunnel. In short, the ideology of the American dream includes no provision for failure; a failed dream denies the loser not only success but even a safe harbor within which to hide the loss.

### **The Third Tenet**

Failure is made more harsh by the third premise of the American dream—the belief that success results from actions and traits under one's own control. Logically, it does not follow that if success results from individual volition, then failure results from lack of volition. All one needs in order to see the logical flaw here is the distinction between necessary and sufficient. But that distinction is not obvious or intuitive, and in any case the psychology of the American dream differs from strict logic. In the psychology, if one may claim responsibility for success, one must accept responsibility for failure.

Americans who do everything they can and still fail may come to understand that effort and talent alone do not guarantee success. But they have a hard time persuading others. After all, they



are losers—why listen to them? Will we not benefit more by listening to winners (who seldom challenge the premise that effort and talent breed success)?

### The Fourth Tenet

Failure, then, is unseemly for two reasons: it challenges the blurring between anticipation and promise that is the emotional heart of the American dream, and people who fail are presumed to lack talent or will. The coup de grace comes from the fourth tenet of the dream, the association of success with virtue. By the psychologism just described, if success implies virtue, failure implies sin.

American history and popular culture are replete with demonstrations of the connection between failure and sin. In the 1600s, indentured servants—kidnapped children, convicts, and struggling families alike—were described by earlier immigrants as "strong and idle beggars, vagabonds, egyptians, common and notorious whores, thieves, and other dissolute and lousy persons." Nineteenth-century reformers concurred: fallen women are typically "the daughters of the ignorant, depraved, and vicious part of our population, trained up without culture of any kind, amidst the contagion of evil example, and enter upon a life of prostitution for the ratification of their unbridled passions, and become harlots altogether by choice."

Small wonder that in the late twentieth century even the poor blame the poor for their condition. Despite her vivid awareness of exploitation by the rich, an aging cleaning woman insists that many people are poor because they "make the money and drink it all up. They don't care about the kids or the clothes. Just have a bottle on that table all the time." Losers even blame themselves: an unemployed factory worker, handicapped by a childhood accident, "wish[es] to hell I could do it [save money for his children]. I always said for years, 'I wanna get rich, I wanna get rich.' But then, phew! My mind doesn't have the strong will, I say, 'Well, I'm *gonna* do it.' Only the next day's different." These people are typical. In 1985, over 60 percent of poor people but only 45 percent of the nonpoor agreed that "poor young women often have babies so they can collect welfare." Seven years later, the same proportions of poor and well-off agreed that welfare recipients "are taking advantage of the system."

The equation of failure with evil and success with virtue cannot be attributed to poor education or low status. College students "who learned that a fellow student had been awarded a cash prize as a result of a random drawing were likely to conclude that he had in fact worked especially hard." In another experiment, subjects rated a presumed victim of electric shocks who was randomly selected to receive compensation for her pain more favorably than a victim who would not be compensated. "The sight of an innocent person suffering without possibility of reward or compensation motivated people to devalue the attractiveness of the victim in order to bring about a more appropriate fit between her fate and her character." Devaluing losers allows people to maintain their belief that the world is fundamentally just, even when it patently is not.

Losers are obviously harmed by the association of success with virtue. But the association creates equally important, if less obvious, problems for winners. Fitzwilliam Darcy, in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, epitomizes the defect of pride: if I believe that virtue produced my success, or that success has made me even more virtuous, I am likely to become insufferably smug. That may not bother me much, but the fact that people around me feel the same way will. In addition, this equation raises the stakes very high for further rounds of endeavor. If I continue to win, all is well; if I falter, I lose my *amour-propre* as well as my wealth or power. Alternatively, if I recognize that I partly owe my success to lying to a few clients, evading a few taxes, cheating a few employees, then I am likely to feel considerable guilt. This guilt might induce reform and recompense, but it may instead induce drinking to assuage the unease, persecuting other nonvirtuous winners, striving to show that losers are even more sinful, or simple hypocrisy.

These problems intensify when patterns of group success rather than the idiosyncrasies of individual success are at issue. When members of one group seem disproportionately successful, that group acquires a halo of ascribed virtue. Consider a 1907 article by Burton J. Hendrick on "The Great Jewish Invasion" in *McClure's Magazine*. The author's name, the publication, the date, and the title all lead one to expect an (at best, thinly veiled) anti-Semitic diatribe. The first few

pages seem to confirm that expectation, with their claims that "the real modern Zion, greater in numbers and wealth and power than the old, steadily gathers on Manhattan Island," and that "the Jews are active, and invariably with success, in practically every business, professional, and intellectual field. The New Yorker constantly rubs shoulders with Israel." These feats are all the more "remarkable" because "the great mass of its [New York's] Jews are not what are commonly regarded as the most enlightened of their race" since they come from eastern Europe. After all, "no people have had a more inadequate preparation, educational and economic, for American citizenship."

Yet the article goes on to describe in careful and admiring detail how these dirt-poor, ignorant, orthodoxly non-Christian immigrants work, save, cooperate, sacrifice for their children—and end up wealthy beyond anyone's wildest imaginings. Nor are they merely money-grubbers; Russian Jews are "individualist[s]," the "city's largest productive force and the greatest contributor to its manufacturing wealth," demonstrating "intense ambition," abstinence, and foresight. In his highest accolade, Mr. Hendrick even insists that the Russian Jew's

enthusiasm for America knows no bounds. He eagerly looks forward to the time when he can be naturalized.... The rapidity with which the New York Jew adopts the manners and trappings of Americans almost disproves his ancient heritage as a peculiar people. ... Better than any other element, even the native stock, do they meet the two supreme tests of citizenship: they actually go to the polls, and when once there, vote independently.

In short, in one generation the east European Jewish immigrant has gone from an unassimilable, bovine drag on the American spirit to the epitome of all the American virtues. Nothing succeeds like success.

The contemporary equivalent of Mr. Hendrick's amazing Jews are Southeast Asians. A century ago, Chinese and Japanese immigrants could hardly be derogated enough. Now newspapers have a seemingly endless supply of rags-to-riches stories about destitute boat people whose daughter became the high school valedictorian a scant five years later and is now a pre-med student at Stanford. Such success is inevitably attributed to hard work, self-discipline, family support, and refusal to follow the bad example set by American-born peers. This portrayal is so ubiquitous that spokespeople for Asian immigrants feel impelled to insist publicly that not *all* Asians escape poverty, crime, and discrimination, and that even the successful pay a heavy emotional cost.

It would be churlish to argue that excessive praise is as bad as racism or ethnic slurs. But newly anointed groups are too often used to cast aspersions on some despised group that has not managed to fulfill the American dream. In Burton Hendrick's case, the main negative reference group is the Irish, who drink and gamble, yield their productive jobs to Jews, and—worst of all—band together in labor unions, in the "Irish vote," and in political party machines. In the case of immigrant Asians, the usual (if slightly more subtle) message is "Why can't African Americans do the same thing? At least they speak English when they start school." This dynamic adds yet another component to the nightmare of a failed American dream. Members of a denigrated group are disproportionately likely to fail to achieve their goals; they are blamed as individuals (and perhaps blame themselves) for their failure; and they carry a further stigma as members of a nonvirtuous (thus appropriately denigrated) group.

This effect of the fourth tenet can be taken a further, and most dangerous, step. For some Americans always, and for many Americans in some periods of our history, virtuous success has been defined as the dominance of some groups over others. This phenomenon extends the idea of competitive success from individual victories to collective hierarchies. If women are weak and emotional, it is *right* for men to control their bodies and wealth; if blacks are childlike pagans, it is *right* for whites to ensure their physical and spiritual survival through enslavement and conversion; if citizens of other nations refuse to recognize the value of capitalism and free elections, it is *right* for Americans to install a more enlightened government in their capitol. I find it hard to present these sentiments with a straight face, but they have arguably done almost as much as the American dream to shape Americans' beliefs, practices, and institutions.

## Flaws in the American Dream Taken as a Whole

### Atomistic Individualism

Not only each tenet, but also the ideology of the American dream as a whole, is flawed. One problem stems from the radical individualism often associated with the dream (although the ideology entails nothing that prohibits groups from pursuing collective success). Achievers mark their success by moving away from the tenement, ghetto, or holler of their impoverished and impotent youth, thus speeding the breakup of their ethnic community. This is a bittersweet phenomenon. The freedom to move up and out is desirable, or at least desired. But certainly those left behind, probably those who leave, and arguably the nation as a whole lose when groups of people with close cultural and personal ties break those ties in pursuit of or after attaining "the bitch-goddess, success." The line between autonomy and atomism is hard to draw.

American culture is full of stories about the mixed effects of success on communities and their residents. A Polish-American folk song tells of a man who emigrated to America, worked for three years in a foundry, returned home with "gold and silver," but found that "my children did not know me, for they fled from me, a stranger." The emancipated children may be as pained as the abandoned parents, as illustrated by the five brothers who complained to the *Jewish Daily Forward* in 1933:

Imagine, even when we go with our father to buy something in a store on Fifth Avenue, New York, he insists on speaking Yiddish. We are not ashamed of our parents, Cod forbid, but they ought to know where it's proper and where it's not. If they talk Yiddish among themselves at home, or to us, it's bad enough, but among strangers and Christians? Is that nice?

Only irresponsible romanticism permits the wish that peasants and villagers would opt for tradition rather than opportunity. It is surely significant that across the world and throughout centuries, they almost never do. But one can still regret what is lost. And Thomas Hooker's warning cannot be shrugged off: "For if each man may do what is good in his owne eyes, proceed according to his own pleasure, so that none may crosse him or controll him by any power, there must of necessity follow the distraction and desolation of the whole."

### Narrowing "Success"

William James followed his comment on "the moral flabbiness born of the exclusive worship of the bitch-goddess, success" with the less well-known observation that "that—with the squalid cash interpretation put on the word success—is our national disease." It was at best indecorous for a man as wealthy and prestigious as William James to castigate others' pursuit of wealth or inattentiveness to philosophy. But his concern is warranted. The American dream is susceptible to having the open-ended definition of success, which can equally include salvation or writing the great American novel, narrowed to wealth, job status, or power. Well-educated women (not to speak of men) are embarrassed to admit that they would rather raise happy children than practice corporate law; environmentalists worry that the value of a beautiful forest cannot be monetized and therefore will not be considered in regulatory decisions. Even high school seniors, for whom "having lots of money" has become increasingly important over the past two decades, overwhelmingly and increasingly agree that "people are too much concerned with material things these days."

Sometimes market values colonize, rather than submerge, other values. Economists designing environmental regulations assign monetary value to a stand of redwood trees, thereby cheapening (note the metaphor) the meaning of the primeval forest in the eyes of environmentalists. Some feminists seek to enhance the status of women by calculating the wages due to housework and including them in the gross national product; other feminists see this move as turning loving wives

and mothers into calculating *homo economici*. The problem in these and similar cases is not that the assignment of monetary worth is too high or low, but that the very process of assigning monetary worth reduces an array of values to a single thin one.

Only sentimentalism allows one to value the purity of artistic poverty over the sordidness of corporate wealth unless one made the choice after experiencing both states. But it is a serious flaw in the American dream if those who envision success in artistic or religious or altruistic terms must defend their vision as well as fight to achieve their chosen goals. Nothing in the ideology requires reducing success to money and power, but the ideology is so vulnerable to the reduction that that point must count as an internal flaw, not merely as grounds for an external attack.

### **The Ideology as Deception**

I have argued that the American dream need not be individualistic in the narrow sense, given that one can under its rubric pursue success for one's family or community as well as for oneself. But it is highly *individual*, in that it leads one to focus on people's behaviors rather than on economic processes, environmental constraints, or political structures as the causal explanation for social orderings. That focus is not itself a flaw; it is simply an epistemological choice with methodological implications for the study of American politics. But to the degree that the focus carries a moral message, it points to a weakness at the very heart of the dream.

The idea of the blank slate in the first tenet, the almost-promise of success of the second, the reliance on personal attributes in the third, the association of failure with sin in the fourth—all these elements of the dream make it extremely difficult for Americans to see that everyone cannot simultaneously attain more than absolute success. Capitalist markets require some firms to fail; elections require some candidates and policy preferences to lose; status hierarchies must have a bottom in order to have a top. But the optimistic language of and methodological individualism built into the American dream *necessarily* deceive people about these societal operations. We need not invoke hypocrites out of Mark Twain or "blue-eyed white devils" in order to understand why some people never attain success; hypocrisy or bias only enter the picture in determining *who* fails. But our basic institutions are designed to ensure that some fail, at least relatively, and a dream does nothing to help Americans cope with or even to recognize that fact.

### **Few Alternative Visions**

All ideologies are designed to put the best possible face on the social structure within which they operate, and all privilege some values over others. So all the flaws I have described, damning though they may seem, must themselves be judged in light of the comparable flaws of other ideological formations. That point is intended to soften slightly the critique of the American dream, but it also raises a final problem with it.

Americans have few alternative ideologies against which to measure the distinctive virtues and flaws of the American dream. Alternatives are not completely absent: Thoreau's *Walden* has long been recognized as a sharp political challenge couched in a literary classic. "Country-party" or labor republicanism, Protestant fundamentalism, and ascriptive Americanism similarly have deep roots and on occasion strong adherents and powerful institutional manifestations. But most Americans honor these alternative visions more in the breach than in the observance, if then. *Walden* is read by more students majoring in English than in political science. "Small is beautiful" and "social limits to growth" are slogans for a few, but warnings to many more. And many possible visions—within-class solidarity and cross-class warfare, a military or theocratic polity pursuing collective glory, small cooperative enterprises living lightly on the land—are barely visible in the American political spectrum. In short, the political culture of the U.S. is largely shaped by a set of views in which the American dream is prominent, and by a set of institutions that make it even more prominent than views alone could do.

Tocqueville assured his readers that "up to now the Americans have happily avoided all the reefs I have just charted." Some Americans continue, 150 years later, to sail free, and perhaps

they always will. But some have wrecked, and some have never gotten anywhere near the boat. For those afloat, the ideology of the American dream is a vindication, a goad to further efforts, a cause for celebration—and also grounds for anxiety, guilt and disillusionment. For the shipwrecked and drifters, the dream is a taunt, a condemnation, an object of fury—and also grounds for hope; renewed striving, and dreams for one's children.