

The future of the american dream sociology essay



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As Franklin Roosevelt understood, Americans will postpone immediate gratification and endure hard sacrifices—if they must—so long as they are convinced the future can be better than the past. But we face a far more difficult problem at our moment in history. What do you promise people who have been told they can have anything they want, who are repeatedly congratulated for living in the best of all possible circumstances? How do you tell them “ the good times,” as we have known them, are not coming back? Americans need a new vision that helps them deal with reality, a promising story of the future that helps them let go of the past.

Here is the grand vision I suggest Americans can pursue: the right of all citizens to larger lives. Not to get richer than the next guy or necessarily to accumulate more and more stuff but the right to live life more fully and engage more expansively the elemental possibilities of human existence. That is the essence of what so many now seem to yearn for in their lives. People—even successful and affluent people—are frustrated because the intangible dimensions of life have been held back or displaced in large and small ways, pushed aside by the economic system’s relentless demands to maximize yields of profit and wealth. Our common moral verities have been trashed in the name of greater returns. The softer aspects of mortal experience are diminished because life itself is not tabulated in the economic system’s accounting.

The political order mistakenly accepts these life-limiting trade-offs as normal, as necessary to achieve “ good times.” At earlier periods of our history, the sacrifices demanded by the engine of American capitalism were widely tolerated because the nation was young and underdeveloped. The engine

promised to generate higher levels of abundance, and it did. But what is the justification now, when the nation is already quite rich and the engine keeps demanding larger chunks of our lives?

What families, even those who are prosperous, typically lose in the exchange are the small grace notes of everyday life, like the ritual of having a daily dinner with everyone present. The more substantial thing we sacrifice is time to experience the joys and mysteries of nurturing the children, the small pleasures of idle curiosity, of learning to craft things by one's own hand, and the satisfactions of friendships and social cooperation.

These are made to seem trivial alongside wealth accumulation, but many people know they have given up something more important and mourn the loss. Some decide they will make up for it later in life, after they are financially stable. Still others dream of dropping out of the system. If we could somehow add up all the private pain and loss caused by the pursuit of unbounded material prosperity, the result might look like a major political grievance of our time.

More important than all the other losses is that people are also denied another great intangible—the dignity of self-directed lives. At work, at home and in the public sphere, most people lack the right to exercise much of a voice in the decisions governing their daily lives. Most people (not all) are subject to a system of command and control over their destinies. They know the risks of ignoring the orders from above. Not surprisingly, many citizens are resigned to this condition and accept subservience as “the way things are,” and their lives are smaller as a result. Many find it hard to imagine that

these confinements could be lessened, even substantially removed, if economic organizations were informed by democratic principles.

What's needed in American life is a redefinition of " life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Given the nation's great wealth, the ancient threats of scarcity and deprivation have been eliminated. Yet people remain yoked to economic demands despite wanting something more from life-freedom to explore the mysteries and bring forth all that is within them. Collectively, Americans need to take a deep breath and reconsider what it means to be rich.

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What Happens to the American Dream in a Recession?

Pollsters for The New York Times and CBS News set out last month to try to answer that question. And the results seemed somewhat contradictory.

Although the nation has plunged into its deepest recession since the Great Depression, 72 percent of Americans in this nationwide survey said they believed it is possible to start out poor in the United States, work hard and become rich - a classic definition of the American dream.

And yet only 44 percent said they had actually achieved the American dream, although 31 percent said they expect to attain it within their lifetime. Only 20 percent have given up on ever reaching it. Those 44 percent might

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not sound like much, but it is an increase over the 32 percent who said they had achieved the American dream four years ago, when the economy was in much better shape.

Compared with four years ago, fewer people now say they are better off than their parents were at their age or that their children will be better off than they are.

So even though their economic outlook is worse, more people are saying they have either achieved the dream or expect to do so.

What gives?

We asked Barry Glassner, who is a professor of sociology at the University of Southern California and studies contemporary culture and beliefs.

“ You want to hold on to your dream even more when times are hard,” he said. “ And if you want to hold on to it, then you better define it differently.”

In other words, people are shifting their definition of the American dream. And the poll - conducted on April 1 to 5 with 998 adults, with a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 3 percentage points- indicated just that.

The Times and CBS News asked this same open-ended question four years ago and again last month: “ What does the phrase ‘ The American dream’ mean to you?”

Four years ago, 19 percent of those surveyed supplied answers that related to financial security and a steady job, and 20 percent gave answers that related to freedom and opportunity.

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Now, fewer people are pegging their dream to material success and more are pegging it to abstract values. Those citing financial security dropped to 11 percent, and those citing freedom and opportunity expanded to 27 percent.

Here's some respondents' answers that were put in the category of freedom and opportunity:

" Freedom to live our own life."

" Created equal."

" Someone could start from nothing."

" That everybody has a fair chance to succeed."

" To become whatever I want to be."

" To be healthy and have nice family and friends."

" More like Huck Finn; escape to the unknown; follow your dreams."

Those who responded in material terms were hardly lavish. Here's a sampling:

" Basically, have a roof over your head and put food on the table."

" Working at a secure job, being able to have a home and live as happily as you can not spending too much money."

" Just financial stability."

“ Owning own home, having civil liberties.”

Mr. Glassner said, “ For the vast majority of Americans at every point in history, the prospect of achieving the American dream has been slim but the promise has been huge.”

“ At its core, this notion that anyone can be president or anyone can be a billionaire is absurd,” he said. “ A lot of Americans work hard, but they don’t become president and they don’t become billionaires.”

Still, he said, Americans have always believed in possibilities. And they have consistently said over time that they can start poor in this country and become rich, regardless of the economy or their circumstances. The 72 percent who feel that way today is down from the 81 percent who felt that way in 2007, but 72 percent is still a very high percentage, especially given the downward economy.

“ It would be hard to find another country where it’s as high,” Mr. Glassner said.

The percentage of people who say the American dream does not exist or is only an illusion has remained low - 3 percent today and 2 percent four years ago. As one such person put it to our pollsters last month: “ A bunch of hooey.”

By the way, the phrase “ the American dream” is generally agreed to have been coined first in 1931, in the midst of the Depression. In his book, “ The Epic of America,” the historian James Truslow Adams wrote, “ It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in

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which each man and each woman shall be able to attain the fullest stature of which they are innately capable.”

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The American Dream Goes On

By Mortimer B. Zuckerman

Posted June 13, 2008

Is the American middle class an endangered species? The majority of Americans have long shared one state of mind: that they are in some central way members of the middle class and hold a passport to the good life.

Click here to find out more!

It's true that there's been a contraction of the number of middle-tier households earning between \$45, 000 and \$90, 000. And it's true they are having a tough time. Six in 10 testify to incomes falling behind the cost of living; six in 10 find it hard to pay for gasoline; and five in 10 say they can't afford healthcare. More than a quarter say they have trouble even affording food. To maintain their lifestyle-including those fancy cable TV packages, broadband Internet connections, and travel-they've sent more family members to work, taken on more debt, and borrowed through home equity loans, though the housing slump has undermined that asset.

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At the other end of the income spectrum, the well heeled keep doing better. The number of millionaires has shot up, and the wealthiest 1 percent of U. S. families have pushed their share of total national income to levels-21 percent-unseen since the Gilded Age. Yet growing inequality has had little traction thus far as a political issue.

Why is this?

Partly because some have moved up, as economist Stephen Rose points out. There are 12 percent more households earning in excess of \$100, 000 than 20 or so years ago. And those making less than \$30, 000 have not increased. So virtually the entire “ decline” of the middle-class group has come from people moving up the income ladder, not down.

Higher standards. Those in the middle, and below, are also living better. As William Robert Fogel, the Nobel Prize-winning economic historian, put it, “ In every measure that we have bearing on the standard of living...the gains of the lower classes have been far greater than those experienced by the population as a whole.” Among the inequalities that have narrowed: The quality of goods at the more moderate price levels has improved faster than at higher price tags; rich and poor are less apart in life expectancy, height, and leisure. It’s the attitude of Americans that explains the low combustibility (at the moment!) of income inequality. Most Americans tend to believe that people bear primary responsibility for supporting themselves and that market forces are immune to public policy. There’s a reflection here of the optimism and confidence characteristic of American life. In one study by Roland Benabou, more than half of Americans think they will be above the

median income in the future (even though that is mathematically impossible). Americans, quite simply, believe that plenty of opportunities exist to get ahead, and, indeed, 82 percent of those born into poverty are much better off than their parents and more than a third of them have made it into the middle class or higher.

Education is another great American success story. There has been a dramatic increase in the percentage of adults completing high school and college. Nearly 90 percent of all adults get high school diplomas today compared with 33 percent in 1947; college graduates have soared from 5.4 percent in 1947 to almost 30 percent today. More than two thirds of Americans concur with the statement that people are rewarded for intelligence and skill-the largest percentage across 27 countries taking part in an international survey of social attitudes. This reflects the widespread belief in the ability to get ahead and helps explain why Americans are more accepting of economic inequality than peoples in other countries and why Americans are less likely to believe their government should take responsibility for reducing income disparity.

For all that, reaction is gathering force in at least two areas. One is an increasing distrust of free trade. There is a widespread conviction that globalization-seen by economists as a boon-holds down earnings for millions of Americans who compete with workers overseas. Free trade has become a political albatross.

Secondly, the level of wealth in the stratosphere of incomes has gotten so extreme that it is provoking a considerable majority to support the notion that wealth should be more evenly distributed through higher taxes.

Zuckerman, Mortimer B. "The American Dream Goes On." www.usnews.com. US News and World Report, 2010.

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Is the American Dream Still Possible?

By David Wallechinsky

published: 04/23/2006

To be "middle class" in America once meant living well and having financial security. But today that comfortable and contented lifestyle is harder to achieve and maintain. PARADE commissioned Mark Clements Research Inc. to survey Americans nationwide about their finances and outlook for the future. Contributing Editor David Wallechinsky-author of recent articles on where your tax dollars go and on pork-barrel spending-interprets the results.

The traditional American Dream is based on the belief that hardworking citizens can better their lives, pay their monthly bills without worry, give their children a start to an even better life and still save enough to live comfortably after they retire. But many average Americans are struggling-squeezed by rising costs, declining wages, credit-card debt and diminished benefits, with little left over to save for retirement. (See statistics below.)

Does the dream survive? Do most Americans still believe they can forge better lives for themselves?

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PARADE surveyed more than 2, 200 Americans, of whom fully 84% described themselves as belonging to the middle class, regardless of where they live (living costs are higher in some regions) or the size of their household.

For this report, we focused on U. S. households earning between \$30, 000 and \$99, 000 a year. Most of those surveyed describe themselves as married and having a family. More than 64% say they are employed full-time or part-time. Most say they are in reasonably good health and have a satisfying religious or spiritual life. They own a home and at least two cars, and they are able to take vacations. By international standards, they live a life of prosperity.

Yet behind this prosperity is a growing unease. Half of the employed respondents say that they've experienced either increased health-care costs or a cut in health benefits over the last three years, and 39% have had cuts in their overtime, raises or bonuses. Almost two-thirds say they live from paycheck to paycheck, and 47% say that no matter how hard they work, they cannot get ahead. More than a third worry about job loss.

Richard Oden of Conyers, Ga.-married, with five children-worked in the beer industry for 23 years. Last year, he developed pneumonia and required major surgery. When he was unable to return to work by a given date, he says, his company terminated him at age 54-even though he had a perfect attendance record and no performance problems.

To help support his family, Oden had to dip into his 401(k) fund, paying a penalty for premature withdrawal. " This was very stressful," he says. " Everything had gone up-except wages."

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Oden has since started his own business, a “ leadership and personal development” consulting firm. His wife, Josett, works as a representative in the health-care field. “ I do believe I will recover financially,” Oden says, “ and that I will realize a decent retirement. But the traditional American Dream? For most Americans, it’s still a dream-a pipe dream.”

Having drawn on his own retirement fund, Oden knows that saving can be a big problem. In the survey, nearly 83% say that there is not much left to save after they’ve paid their bills. Statistics from the Commerce Department bear this out: The savings rate for Americans is the lowest it has been in 73 years.

Self-reliance and sacrifice. Most of those interviewed display qualities common to American success stories: determination, flexibility, pragmatism, willingness to work hard and especially self-reliance. Almost three-quarters of the middle-class respondents surveyed say they take responsibility for their own financial destiny and believe that they will succeed or fail based on their own efforts. Still, many are downsizing their dreams.

Shelly Comer, 43, of Dos Palos, Calif., is a divorced mother of three who also takes care of a friend of her oldest child, Michelle. She is going into debt so that Michelle can go to college. Shelly has worked her whole life-as a receptionist, janitor, preschool teacher and activities director at a hospital. Recently, she became a registered nurse and now works the night shift in obstetrics at another hospital. Her annual income is \$70, 377.

Michelle, 19, is a freshman at the University of California at Merced. She says she is concerned about the financial burden her education is placing on her

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family: “ In order to meet our expected family contribution, my mother had to borrow the entire amount of her share.” For her part, Michelle earned six small scholarships, two of which are renewable for next year, and took out a federal loan. She also works 16 hours a week in the financial-aid office at the university.

Shelly has a retirement plan through the hospital. “ But I have nothing saved for me,” she says. “ I’m putting it all into the kids, so that they can succeed in school. Our parents did everything for us, and I hope to do the same for my kids. I don’t count on anyone else to help us get to where we want to go. It’s all up to me and my family. And I trust in God to help us.”

Who is responsible? One of the most intriguing results of the Parade survey is that 89% of the middle class believes that businesses have a social responsibility to their employees and to the community. Yet 81% believe that, in fact, American businesses make decisions based on what is best for their shareholders and investors, not what’s best for their employees.

Randy Omark, 55, and Cherie Morris, 58, of Stroudsburg, Pa., husband and wife, are former flight attendants for TWA. Cherie took a buyout in the late 1990s-before American Airlines bought TWA in 2001. After the acquisition, Randy was put on “ furlough” (as were about 4, 000 other former TWA flight attendants) and never rehired. After 26 years with the two airlines, his pension was frozen and then taken over by the government. Now he gets \$324 a month in payments.

Today, despite having a college education, Randy works for \$9 an hour finding community jobs for mentally challenged adults. Cherie works for a greeting-card company for \$7.25 an hour.

“ It used to be that if you stayed with your job, you would be rewarded,” says Cherie. “ Now there is no guarantee.” As for retirement, Randy says, “ Eventually, we will just downsize everything, sell our house and move into a smaller one.”

Is the dream changing? Simone Luevano, 46, and Miguel Gutierrez, 44, run a garage-door installation and repair business in Albuquerque, N. M. While the business grossed \$453,000 last year, they took home just \$50,000 net to live on. They have a daughter-Marilyn, age 7-who is deaf in one ear and goes to a private school that costs \$3600 a year.

Simone says that financial stress is part of their lives: “ It comes from the ‘ maybe, could be, should be’ nature of our business.” When the economy is down, people don’t buy a new garage-door system. The cost of gas at the pump is a major factor, she adds: “ When the price of gasoline goes down, business goes up.”

Have they prepared for retirement? Simone laughs, then replies, “ The words ‘ retirement’ and ‘ vacation’ are not in our vocabulary. You know that old Tennessee Ernie Ford song: ‘ I owe my soul to the company store’? We don’t think about retirement. They’ll have to take me out of here with my high-top tennies on.

“ The American Dream is a bygone thing,” she adds. “ It’s not the way life is anymore. I used to believe I was responsible for my own destiny. But it’s not that simple. Now it’s faith and fortitude.”

The Stressed Middle Class

National statistics show the increasing pressures on middle-income Americans:

The real median household income declined 3% from 2000 to 2004.

The percentage of households earning \$25, 000 to \$99, 999 (roughly middle-income range) shrank 1. 5% from 2000 to 2004.

Last year, real average weekly earnings actually fell 0. 4%.

The savings rate for Americans is the lowest it has been in 73 years.

Credit-card debt is at an all-time high, averaging \$9, 312 per household.

The average cost per year of a public college (in state) is \$12, 127, a 25% increase since 2001.

A private university costs \$29, 026.

Here’s What Americans Say

Our survey of middle-income Americans about their financial outlooks showed both skepticism and hope.

More than 52% of middle-class Americans think that they’re better off than their parents were, but...

56% think things will be worse for their own children or for future generations.

Nearly 57% say they believe that the middle class in America is decreasing.

51% of employed members of the middle class have experienced either increased health-care costs or a cut in health benefits, and 39% have experienced cuts in overtime, raises or bonuses.

66% say they tend to live from paycheck to paycheck.

47% say that no matter how hard they work, they cannot get ahead.

Nearly 83% say that there is not much money left to save after they have paid their bills.

89% of the respondents believe that businesses have a social responsibility to their employees and to the community, but...

81% believe that American businesses make decisions based on what is best for their shareholders and investors-not what is best for their employees.

74% of the middle class say they take responsibility for their own financial success or failure.

80% say they believe it is still possible to achieve the American Dream.

Wallechinsky, David. "Is the American Dream Still Possible?" Parade [Parade] 23 Apr. 2006, Final

ed.: n. pag. Web. 28 Mar. 2010. edition_04-23-2006/Middle_Class_feature>.

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