

The american dream and the various definitions



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The American Dream has been defined variously and with varying degrees of specificity. However, perhaps the most effective, broad definition has been offered by Clark (2003: p. 6), who has argued the following:

“ The process of attaining the American Dream is in essence the process of becoming middle class, which encapsulates moving up the socioeconomic status ladder, becoming homeowners in (often suburban) communities, and participating in the political process.”

The American Dream is therefore related to the process of individual self-improvement in an economic sense. It is related to a geographic process of moving away from cities, is concerned about becoming involved in politics, and, perhaps most problematically, is concerned about the process of “ becoming middle class”. Clark has extrapolated upon this general definition by defining in more precise terms what being middle class constitutes. He has argued, however, that the term “ middle class” eschews easy definition, essentially because it describes a broad-ranging set of values that have come to dominate American (and global) society. He has argued that “ it is easier to enumerate the concomitants of the middle-class lifestyle than to provide a precise definition” (Clark 2003, p. 6). These concomitants, he has argued, include the acquisition of material goods, such as “ a home and at least one car, other consumer items like television sets, dishwashers, and personal computers”, but is also associated with issues such as personal security: the middle class lifestyle, Clark has argued, also requires the individual to attain the funds necessary “ to educate and raise healthy children and provide support for a comfortable retirement” (Clark 2003, p. 6).

The issue as to how this striving towards a particular, middle-class lifestyle affects American society on the whole has provoked a substantial amount of debate. Firstly, the acquisition of material goods, a prerequisite for participation in the American Dream, requires one to earn over a certain amount of money – this association with material goods and status also promotes the idea of individual, rather than collective, freedom. This promotion of individualism also relates to issues of individual (and family) security and increased suburbanisation. In addition, the process of becoming middle-class requires one to continually strive for self-improvement – it is impossible to fully attain and be fully satisfied with the American Dream because a variety of factors render it a process rather than an outcome.

Critics of the American Dream and the values it espouses have pointed out that the values inherent to middle-class living in an American sense are paradoxical in their nature – it is impossible for an entire society to become middle-class because a middle-class requires a working-class to exist above. Income, as Clark (2003, p. 8) has argued, is relative, not actual – it is related to other members of an individual's immediate society. As such, the American Dream is guaranteed to produce people who are socially excluded from it because it is a necessary aspect of attainment of the American Dream to have a lower strata of society to improve from. In addition, the prioritisation of homeownership in the values of the American Dream prioritises security (and protection from others) over solidarity and communality. Thus, the American Dream can be regarded as criminogenic because it creates a highly individualistic, divided society. The prioritisation of homeownership and the suburbanisation inherent to this process leads to

the exacerbation of haves and have-nots in a given society. Criminological theories that relate the American Dream to a criminogenic process abound. Firstly, there is the idea of strain theory, which, Cernkovich et al (2000) have defined as follows:

“ Strain theory proposes that high aspirations among those with limited opportunities generate pressures to deviate.” (p. 134).

For supporters of strain theory, the American Dream is criminogenic because, on the one hand, the adoption of middle-class values leads to individuals acquiring high personal standards and aspirations, but on the other hand, does not allow each and every individual the genuine opportunity to achieve these goals. The inherent inequity of the American Dream, to strain theorists, creates a situation where opportunity is limited for some individuals – the ideals of egalitarianism promoted by the American Dream do not translate into reality because some individuals are born into positions of inferiority – in other words, while everybody aspires to the same set of values, some individuals are born into privilege while others are not. Thus, the egalitarianism ideals clash with the realities of birthright, creating a society where the opportunities promised by the American Dream are not real. As Young (1999) has pointed out the strain caused by the collective aspiration for middle-class values is criminogenic because of the contradictions inherent to the process. For Young:

“ The combination of relative deprivation and individualism is a potent cause of crime in situations where no political solution is possible” (1999, p. 16).

One of the key problems with the American Dream, Young has argued, is that the values of individualism is promotes leads to individuals competing against one-another to acquire material goods – it is not related to a class-system, where the poor steal from the rich – instead, the poor steal from one-another because they exist in a system where they are encouraged to compete against one-another. As Young continues to point out, the results of this “ combination of relative deprivation and individualism” are highly destructive and lead to the following events:

“ The working class area, for example, implodes upon itself: neighbours burglarize neighbours incivilities abound, aggression is widespread” (Young 1999, p. 16)

This dissection of the underlying criminogenic proclivities inherent to a society in which every individual strives for middle-class status, is different from the criminality of the past: according to Young,

“ The old-style crime of the 1950s, which was to a large extent directed at commercial targets and involved the judicious use of violence to control the ‘ manors’ of each ‘ firm’, was replaced with a more Hobbesian spread of incivilities. ‘ We never harmed members of the public’, muttered one of the Kray gang, lamenting the decline in civilized values in the East End of London.” (Young 1999, p. 16).

The reasons for this shift in values in British society in the period defined as “ late capitalism” is the result of the appropriation of more Americanised values, less concerned about class solidarity and more concerned about the attainment of individual success. And, as Young stresses, this promotion of

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individualist ideals leads to the increase of crime rates because the ideals of individualism are inherently recursive: according to Young,

“ Rising crime rates fuel public fear of crime and generate elaborate patterns of avoidance behaviour, particularly for urban women. The isolated problem area of modernity becomes an intricate map of no-go zones, of subways and parks to be avoided, of car parks to be navigated and of public space to be manoeuvred. And for many women these possibilities of the day become a curfew at night.” (Young 1999, p. 17)

According to Young, the promotion of egalitarianism and individualism over ideas of communitarianism lead to an increase in crime precisely because it generates a fear of crime, which feeds back into actual crime. Because the aspirations inherent to the American Dream by necessity create a deep-seated distrust of other individuals, the process is rendered criminogenic – this is especially true when the opportunities for achieving these goals are limited. In addition, Young has argued, the fact that success stories abound, and the meritocratic society partially functions, only exacerbates the frustrations of those excluded from it: according to Young, the American Dream and the aspirations toward middle-class life “ has within it a deep irony”: “ The cultural ideal of the meritocracy contradicts the existing structures of inequality of wealth and opportunity. That which legitimizes social order also creates unrest and disequilibrium within it.” (Young 1999, p. 149-150)

Thus, the jarring contradiction between the ideals of the American Dream and the realities it offers creates a society in which individuals collectively

aspire for the same goals, but in which the distribution of wealth is apportioned in a way that predetermines material success.

It is important to stress that the strain caused by a grotesquely unequal society all aspiring toward the same idealistic goals is exacerbated by the fact that the securities offered by it are illusory. Because the aspirations toward a middle-class way of life generate divisions between haves and have-nots, and because collective ideas of community and collective society are undermined in favour of individual success, the alienation caused by this process inherently transform the American Dream into a process rather than an outcome - very few individuals ever achieve the securities promised by middle-class life because the process is inherently aspirational. Strain theorists therefore point out that, in such a society, absolute wealth is not prioritised - in a society where people are encouraged to compete individually against others, relative goals are prioritised, and poverty becomes relative: as Young has stressed, the discontent this creates is part of a continuous process related to the contradiction between the American Dream's egalitarian values and the unequal society in which they are applied: "in such a world," Young (1999, p. 150) has argued, "although extremely wealthy by all historical standards, it is not absolute but relative deprivation which engenders discontent." Thus, the high aspirations, coupled with the continuous need to improve these aspirations, does not look outside of itself when an individual determines his or her status in the overall system. The American Dream leads to political isolationism, because the key concerns are related to one's immediate environment. And this clash between idealistic egalitarianism and the unequal society it creates leads to

the accumulation of strain among poorer, less fortunate individuals within it: Young (1999, p. 150) has argued that striving for the ideals of the American Dream can be seen as a race, but a race based more on predetermined factors rather than principles of fairness:

“ People feel unfairly rewarded in the race either because they have run just as hard as another citizen yet been rewarded substantially less or simply because they have not been allowed on the track, or on only a short part of it, so they feel deep in their hearts that they could have created a better life for themselves if only the changes had been there” (Young 1999, p. 150).

And, while some individuals adopt a “ point of realism”, in which they analyse the American Dream as something dependent on luck, this concatenation of individualistic aspirations and grotesque social and cultural inequality creates criminality because it does not allow individuals the opportunity to compete fairly – those from privileged backgrounds receive considerably more advantages than those who are not – yet, in the eyes of the American Dream, each are seen in equal terms. Thus, individuals who are not given the opportunity to compete feel inadequate by comparison, or else are forced to abandon the ideals of the American Dream in favour of a more realistic viewpoint. Young (1999, p. 150) has suggested that this is why American society is so enamoured with the notion of luck and chance – it is a better representation of the true nature of the American Dream.