

## The American Dream: A Cultural History

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Jim Cullen

This is a useful book, a troubling book, and a book tells us something about the strange state of contemporary publishing. I'll try and deal with each of these in turn.

I'll begin, speaking as a historian, by saying that the American Dream is surprisingly open editorial terrain. By my reckoning this is only the third recent history of the topic, following my 2003 book *The American Dream* and Southern Methodist University political scientist Cal Jillson's *Pursuing the American Dream* the following year. (I still regard Harvard literary critic Andrew Delbanco's brief collection of lectures, *The Real American Dream*, as the most evocative and wide-ranging book on the subject, though, as its subtitle – *A Meditation on Hope* – indicates, it is more suggestive than comprehensive.) (1) Given how omnipresent the concept of American Dream is around the globe, how ambiguous its multiple meanings are, and how often in turns up as an aspect or subtext of so much scholarly discourse, one might think its history would have attracted more focused attention than it has.

I suspect this relative paucity has something to do with the orientation of the academy in the last half-century. We live in an age of particularity. Gone are the days when a major historians like Henry Steele Commanger and Merrill Petersen could publish books with titles like *The American Mind* or *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind*. (Which American mind? Whose American mind?) (2) Our postcolonial mindset looks with suspicion on anything that smacks of a totalizing ideology, except as a symptom of, or an illustration of an intention to impose, a form of false consciousness.

The American Dream seems particularly problematic in this regard not only because of its prevalence in popular discourse as the essence of a national character, but also because of its concatenation with another

idea that is in even worse repute: American Exceptionalism. At the heart of any notion that the United States is a unique civilization in the history of the world – and at the heart of any moral claim in that uniqueness – lies an assertion that the nation offers historically unprecedented opportunities for individuals to forge their own destinies. Empires come and empires go, but *this* empire is special because (in the words of George Washington) it is an empire for liberty.

I consider myself a recovering Exceptionalist. Back when I was promoting *The American Dream* I would go around saying that no one speaks of the French Dream or the Chinese Dream. But I've since learned this is wrong in two senses. First, while it may be narrowly true, there really was a more or less Roman Dream, for example, when one considers the way that empire used channels of citizenship (like the army) that afforded bona fide upward mobility. (The U.S. used immigrant recruiting to meet chronically short staffing demands for recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.) One could say the Confucian civil service was the Chinese Dream. Or that the 19th-century Foreign Office was a form of the British Dream. Moreover, anyone who's paying attention to what's going on in Asia these days knows it's clear that there is something very much like an Indian Dream taking shape, among others.

All this said, the sheer fervency with which Americans still invoke and affirm the American Dream as a living reality in their lives, and the sheer length of time they have done so, is a historical phenomenon worth noting and documenting, even if relatively few people appear to be interested in doing it. And this is where Lawrence Samuel's work comes in. His book demonstrates, in a way no previous one has, just how pervasive the discourse of the Dream has been in the last 75 years.

Samuel has very sensibly decided to focus his work on the segment of the American Dream saga that begins in 1931. Why 1931? Because that's the year popular historian James Truslow Adams published *The Epic of America*. Whether or not he actually coined the term, it was Adams – revealingly, he was rebuffed when he wanted to title his overview history of the nation *The American Dream* – who gave it currency, defining it as 'that *dream of a land* in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone'.<sup>(3)</sup> Though it was not common before then, most analysts of the American Dream believe some such notion of the concept long precedes the 1930s; it looms large over John Winthrop's famous sermon 'A model of Christian charity' (1630) no less than F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925). But it was *The Epic of America*, released at the very nadir of the Great Depression, which crystallized the term in common parlance. Samuel's first chapter makes clear that the book was greeted with widespread attention from the moment it was published, and that Adams remained its chief interpreter, for decades to come.

Adams, a blue-blooded Yankee who viewed the New Deal as a mistake and thought Americans were a little too prone to self-congratulation, viewed the American Dream an idea that was too easily conflated with mere consumerism, as did many leftist intellectuals at the time. And yet, as Samuel shows, there was a surprising vein of optimism surrounding it in the 1930s – more evident in political and psychological terms than economic ones – which only intensified with the coming of the Second World War, which led even Adams to describe it as an instrument in the fight against totalitarian oppression.

The ensuing five chapters of Samuel's study loosely segment into decades, beginning with the 1950s and ending with the turn of the current century. Relying heavily on journalistic discourse – a matter I'll return to momentarily – he suggests there are two basic dynamics at work in the discourse of the American Dream. The first is that the conversation surrounding it has been shaped by larger geopolitical events. So it is that historically specific phenomena like the Cold War or the Civil Rights Movement immediately become points of reference in discussing the state of the Dream.

The second, and more interesting, theme is that the discourse of the Dream is relatively static, returning repeatedly to the same questions. Among the more pressing ones: Is it still alive? With the coming of every economic downturn, commentators repeatedly assert that the Dream frontier is closing (again). There was a lot of this talk in the 1970s. And in the early 1980s. And again in the early 1990s. And of course since the Great Recession of 2008. But there was also anxiety about it in the 1950s and 1960s. Samuel quotes a 1949 study showing that while 35 per cent of teenagers expected to hold jobs in the professional class, the labor

force only supported 10 per cent of such workers (p. 67). Even at a time many in the West regard as a halcyon age of economic opportunity, there were concerns that aspirations outstripped reality.

Another question Samuel shows coming up repeatedly is just what the American Dream actually *means*: Is it about upward mobility, typically understood in terms of income? Is it about personal security, often expressed in terms of home ownership? The ability to follow one's bliss, even if it *isn't* remunerative? Not surprisingly, there's no real consensus among the people Samuel quotes. Perhaps a little more surprisingly, he makes no real attempt to articulate his own definition of the term beyond making the apposite observation that basing a dream on pecuniary gain dooms one to frustration, since perceptions of wealth are always relative (p. 198).

Which brings us to what I regard as a serious methodological problem with Samuel's *American Dream*. In the introduction, he writes:

The book relies primarily on period magazines and newspapers as its source material and secondarily on previous books written about aspects of the topic, as I firmly believe that journalists serving on the front lines of the scene represent our most valuable resource to recover unfiltered stories of the Dream (p. 11).

This makes a lot of sense. The problem is that there is virtually nothing *but* newspapers and magazines as source material. Entire chapters cite nothing else. That might be justified if the book was called *The American Dream in the Mass Media* or some such title. What's particularly troubling here is that when Samuel discusses a book like Norman Mailer's 1965 novel *American Dream*, or the writings of Harvard president James B. Conant, or any number of Hollywood movies, his footnotes indicate that he relies on *reviews* of such works rather than engaging them directly. Shockingly, none of his many citations of Adams name *The Epic of America* directly. That book is listed in the 'Selected bibliography', and Samuels quotes Adams repeatedly (typically newspaper stories). But there's never a sentence, passage, or reference that makes clear he's actually read the book. What he gives us, then, are hardly 'unfiltered' stories of the Dream: everything he tells us is second-hand.

This may explain why the book has a slightly musty quality. We're told that there were concerns about conformity with the American Dream in the 1950s; that the American Dream was in upheaval in the 1960s; and that it was beset by economic uncertainty in the 1970s. When we rely on journalists alone for our understanding of reality, that reality is almost inevitably going to reflect the tenor, if not the clichés, of the moment. Samuel does little more than reinforce attitudes rather than question or reframe our understanding of events. To many of us, that's the opposite of what history – or at any rate, historical scholarship – is supposed to do. The most likely reader of this book is going to be an undergraduate who plucks it off a well-resourced library's shelves (less well-resourced libraries are unlikely to buy it). While that student may gain a better grasp of the arc of American cultural history in a very general sense, it may also serve to obscure, rather than truly clarify, the contours of the past. The student essay on the American Dream that relies on Samuel is likely to be described as a complicated idea that has meant different things to different people at different times – a deadening notion that makes so many of us rightly dread grading papers.

The author holds a Ph.D. in American Studies from the University of Minnesota, which may explain the blurb from the highly regarded Lary May, who teaches there. But Samuel is not a professional scholar. The back flap copy describes him as the founder of Culture Planning LLC, 'a Miami- and New York-based resource offering cultural insight to Fortune 500 Companies'. The firm's website quotes Slate.com describing Samuel as 'the Margaret Mead of plutocrats', and a mentions a clientele that's a 'Who's Who of Fortune 500 Companies', one of which is named as JP Morgan.

One more piece of context: Samuel is an unusually prolific writer. In addition to authoring books on Second World War bond drives and television advertising, he's also written a string of three titles to be published in

2013 alone. This is a remarkable output even for an author who is not doing archival research. Besides *The American Dream* in 2012, Samuel published another book in 2011 and two more in 2010.<sup>(4)</sup> One associates such pace with a successful mystery novelist more than a historian. One wonders how he does it; *The American Dream* includes no acknowledgments.

One of the ironies here is that while Samuel is a fluid writer who pitches his work toward a general audience, his books are all published by small presses, usually academic ones, which typically measure sales by the hundred. Larger trade houses, which count sales in thousands, have largely abandoned surveys of this kind, unless you're a celebrity or have a major academic credential that counts as a platform. There seems to be a real disconnect between readers, writers, and publishers here. Writers are producing books that most publishers don't want, and the publishers who *do* want them can't reach audiences willing to pay for them, one reason why such books tend to cost too much, because only captive market of research libraries will buy them and allow publishers to recoup the cost of producing them – sometimes, which is a problem given that many scholarly presses are now expected to at least break even. Such a regime may make sense in an academy that understands itself as a self-conscious elite with different interests than a culture at large, but few scholars like to think of themselves that way, certainly not humanities scholars who like to imagine that their work can be part of a larger conversation about the nature and future of their societies. This may not be a new story, but insofar as it's changing it's for the worse. (One indication: the decline of newspaper book reviewing in the United States, which used to be seen as a plausible means of publicizing new books affecting on their commercial fate.)

One imagines that for Samuel, at least, a full bibliography is a useful marketing tool: prospective clients might be impressed by a consultant who can say he publishes scholarship regularly. I will confess that I find the idea of writing books as a business strategy distasteful. On the other hand, most professional scholars consider their books important credentials on the road to jobs and promotions. In that regard, their interests are no less pecuniary, even if writing is more central to their identities. Books have always been deeply enmeshed in capitalist systems. But somehow they seem to matter less on their own terms than they once did. I imagine that there's more than one reader of this publication, American or otherwise, who nursed a dream of becoming an Author. But that dream appears to be dying, at least in its current form. Perhaps it will be resurrected in virtual form online (though this book is not available in an e-book edition). There are some reasons to think so, though it's unlikely to be satisfying to those whose aspirations are contained between covers.

As I've indicated, I have strong reservations about Samuel's methodology. But I wish him well, if for no other reason than to believe a life of the mind is economically viable outside the prim confines of the academic quad. I would be very interested to hear more about how he understands and practices what he does, and where his sources of hope are.

## Notes

1. Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation* (New York, NY, 2003); Cal Jillson, *Pursuing the American Dream: Opportunity and Exclusion Over Four Centuries* (Lawrence, KS, 2004); Andrew Delbanco: *The Real American Dream: A Meditation on Hope* (Cambridge, MA, 2000).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Henry Steele Commager, *The American Mind: An Interpretation of American Thought and Character Since the 1880s* (1950; New Haven, CT, 1959); Merrill D. Petersen, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (New York, NY, 1960).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America* (Boston, MA, 1931), p. 404.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Lawrence R. Samuel, *Pledging Allegiance: American Identity and the Bond Drive of World War II* (Washington, DC, 1997); *Brought to You By: Postwar Advertising and the American Dream* (Austin, TX, 2002); *Sexidemic: A Cultural History of Sex in America* (Lanham, MD, 2013); *Shrink: A Cultural History of Psychoanalysis in America* (Lincoln, NE, 2013); *Freud on Madison Avenue: Motivation Research and Subliminal Advertising in America* (Philadelphia, PA, 2013); *Supernatural America: A Cultural History*

(Westport, CT, 2011); *The End of Innocence: The 1964–1965 Worlds Fair* (Syracuse, NY, 2010); *Future: A Recent History* (Austin, TX, 2010). Lawrence is also the author of *Rich: The Rise and Fall of American Wealth Culture* (New York, NY, 2009). [Back to \(4\)](#)

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