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The Reality of the American Dream

Finding The Good Life in the 21st Century

Madeline High

The American Dream is best defined by James Truslow Adams as a “dream of land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with the opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement” (Adams 404). Throughout the centuries of the United States, a better and fuller life has meant different things to different people. Today, a better and fuller life is often viewed in terms of economic and material prosperity such as buying your dream house or car. Since the founding of the United States, the American Dream has continued to become more and more materialistic. The value of people’s success is not measured in their quality of life, but through the amount of property they have.

Our society is very consumer driven and greatly emphasizes the importance of material gain. It is undeniable that the material prosperity of our country has made life easier and more efficient for many people and that it plays an important role in the American Dream: economic success can help people attain certain dreams such as financial security. However, I believe that people’s view of a better and fuller life is grossly unbalanced and narrowly defined. Many people tend to associate the Dream only with economic prosperity. The association of the Dream with quality of life is largely neglected. I argue that two of the greatest challenges facing the American Dream today are 1) the emphasis on material prosperity and 2) the wealth inequality in the United States. In order for the American Dream to

become fully available to more people, there needs to be a balance between economic prosperity and the quality of life.

The focus on material gain instead of the quality of life has created an unequal playing field for people in the United States which has led to wealth inequality. There are many people who work hard and are unable to make ends meet while there are others at the top who are at an unequal advantage because they received an inheritance or some type of financial support. The focus on materialism and consumption has decreased people's ability to be satisfied. Americans work so hard for material gain that they often are unable to find joy and excitement in their lives. James Truslow Adams described it best, writing: "we forgot to live, in the struggle to 'make a living'" (406).

The issue of materialism and wealth inequality is not a modern issue. At the time of perceived upward mobility during the mid-1800's, over 90 percent of the people at the top inherited money, and only 2 percent of the people at the bottom were able to rise from the bottom to the top (Fortin). While the nation believed that individuals could rise from poverty to wealth, this scenario was not very realistic. One example of this misperception was the election of Andrew Jackson. The Age of Jackson has often been interpreted as the age of the common man. Jackson in fact represented the *uncommon* man rising from rags to riches. Many Americans identified with the ideals of hard work, self-reliance, and determination that Jackson represented. However, while Jackson was personified as a symbol of the American Dream to the people, it was truly uncommon circumstances (and men of wealth) that helped Jackson get into the White House. For the first time in U.S. history, one million dollars was spent on advertising Jackson's campaign.

The wealth gap in the United States remained relatively the same over the next century. During the Industrial Revolution the U.S. made a dramatic shift from an agriculture society to a predominately industrial society. The new industry created advancements that enhanced the lives for many. While the lives of almost all people, including those at the bottom did improve materialistically, it did not

lessen the wealth gap. One percent of the population still controlled 20 percent of the wealth, and 10 percent of the population controlled 50 percent of the wealth (Fortin).

Since the Industrial Revolution, the wealth gap in the United States has increased dramatically. In an article, “Who Rules America: Wealth, Income and Power,” Professor William G. Domhoff researched the trends of wealth inequality in our country in the year 2010. Domhoff asserts that “in terms of financial wealth (total net worth minus the value of one's home), the top 1% of households had an even greater share: 42.1%” (Domhoff). This is over double the amount of wealth controlled by the top 1 percent during the Industrial Revolution. Through these statistics, it is evident that the wealth gap in our country is growing. I believe that the growing wealth gap is making it easier for the people at the top to achieve their dreams but more difficult for the people at the bottom to succeed.

In the past many people came to the United States to leave the stratified European society. However, upward mobility is becoming increasingly difficult in the United States. According to research by the PEW charitable trusts, “43 percent of Americans raised at the bottom of the income ladder remain stuck there as adults, and 70 percent never even make it to the middle” (1). The data shows that the dream of rising to the top economically is only available to a select few. The wealth gap in the U.S. is also much more dramatic than in the majority of European countries. According to the CIA Factbook, the United States has the 41st highest “degree of inequality in the distribution of family income in a country” (“The World Factbook”). The CIA’s list consists of 141 different countries. The countries at the bottom of the list, which are the countries with the greatest equality of wealth, are mostly European countries. The United Kingdom has the 35th most equal distribution of wealth and Germany has the 12th most equal distribution of wealth. (“The World Factbook”). This information strongly contradicts the belief that the United States is a less stratified society compared to Europe. The extreme difference between the degree of inequality of wealth between the U.S. and other

European countries emphasizes that much wealth inequality exists in the United States.

Wealth inequality in the United States has also played a large role in people's perception of achieving the American Dream. In a study of the American Dream entitled, "Can the American Dream Survive the New Multiethnic America? Evidence from Los Angeles," Mara A. Cohen-Marks and Christopher Stout interviewed people of different ethnic groups regarding their perception of the American Dream. The results show that the people interviewed believed materialism and the notion of economic prosperity played a large role in people's perception of the American Dream. The results confirm a "strong association between homeownership and the American dream" (834). The study also showed that "income is highly correlated with perceptions of achievement of the American dream. Angelinos with the highest household incomes are 50% more likely to believe that they have achieved the American dream than are the poorest respondents in our data set" (835). The statistics suggest that the Dream has come to seem exclusive. People who are poor are less likely to believe that they can achieve the American Dream.

Reasons for the increasing wealth gap in the United States are presented in Heather Beth Johnson's book, *The American Dream and the Power of Wealth*. Johnson interviewed and analyzed black and white families regarding the power of wealth and the American Dream. In her interviews with families, many people attributed their success to their own hard work, and many of the families that were struggling blamed themselves for their failures. Johnson however, affirms that financial success is not based solely on hard work. She attributes many families' success to intergenerational transfers. "Intergenerational transfers" refers to the passing along of assets both at death and throughout one's life" (8). Through her research, Johnson discovered that the majority of wealth, "between one-half to more than 80 percent all accumulated wealth is received through intergenerational transfers of assets" (7).

In her interview with the Johnsons, a middle-aged, educated black family, they stated that they did not understand how their college friends, who made similar incomes, were more financial secure than them. Johnson explains that the reason for this family's insecurity was not related to income, but wealth. While the family had a good income, their "net financial assets were negative \$14,000" (138). The family did not have the support of intergenerational transfers from their family members. This lack of financial support was a major cause for their financial insecurity. However, the Johnsons blamed themselves for their failures because of the ideology of the American Dream: hard work leads to success. The story of the Johnson family shows that the belief in the American Dream is so strong that many people do not realize the role intergenerational transfers play in exacerbating the wealth gap in the U.S. I do not claim that intergenerational transfers are bad or that people who receive inheritance do not work hard. However, it is important to understand that the difference in wealth creates an unequal playing field and inhibits some individuals from achieving their Dream.

Today, when people view the American Dream, I believe that they focus too much on economic prosperity. I believe that from this limited perspective the Dream is not very successful. While people still readily agree to the ideas of hard work, individualism, and upward mobility, realistically, these values are not always enough. Johnson's research shows that economic success is not available to everyone based strictly upon how much they work. The role of family wealth and inheritance are two major factors that lead to people's success. While the American Dream has become more exclusively materialistic over the past decades, economic success is not the only way to view the Dream. A better and fuller life consists of much more than material prosperity.

In order for the American dream to be fully attainable to the most people, we must begin to recognize the importance of the quality of life and redefine their perception of a better and fuller life. In the Edward and Robert Skidelsky's book, *How Much is Enough?: Money*

and the Good Life, the authors characterize the good life by breaking it down into five categories; health, security, leisure, friendship, and one's own unique personality. These five aspects of the "good life" are clearly echoed by the beliefs of the Founding Fathers and other scholars such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Edward Bellamy, and John Maynard Keynes. I believe that the ideas presented by these scholars show how the American Dream is alive today and also present ideals to strive for in the future.

Many of the aspects that represent the good life stem from the Founding Fathers' belief in the importance of education and virtue. During the time of the Industrial Revolution and continuing on today, many people have equated happiness to material gain. When the Founding Fathers created the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States, they did not believe that the best society was created through wealth, but through education and virtue. John Adams claimed that "the form of government which communicates ease, comfort, security, or, in one word, happiness, to the greatest number of persons, and in the greatest degree, is the best" (85). Adams's vision of the best government was very similar to the American Dream. Both ideas emphasize the desire to create a better life for all people. Adams' idea of a better life was not focused on materialism, but the quality of life among the people. He believed that a quality life was created through virtue and education. "Virtue and simplicity of manners," he writes, "are indispensably necessary in a republic among all orders and degrees of men" (182).

Thomas Jefferson agreed with Adams about the importance of education and believed that the best society was created by educating the masses. Jefferson advocated for "a crusade against ignorance," and wanted to "establish and improve the law for educating the common people" (312). He believed that educating the people would protect them from any injustices and manipulations in government. Jefferson claimed that education was the key to preventing a monarchy from forming and allowing people to live more freely. The letters from Adams and Jefferson both show that the U.S. government

provides security for the people not only militaristically, but more importantly through education and virtue.

Adam Smith, the founder of capitalism, held a similar view to the Founding Fathers. He agreed that virtue was the key to real happiness. In his *Happiness: A History*, Darrin McMahon quotes Adam Smith who wrote, “wealth and greatness are mere trinkets of frivolous utility no more adapted for procuring ease of body or tranquility of mind than the tweezer cases of the lover of toys” (qtd. in McMahon 329). For Smith, McMahon explains, “tranquility and enjoyment . . . had less to do with economic condition than it did with virtue” (329). Smith believed that in order to achieve a better, fuller, and richer life people needed to stop focusing on material wealth and needed to start focusing on their virtues and values. Smith pointed out that wealth alone does not bring individuals the satisfaction and enjoyment. Satisfaction and enjoyment must come from within us, which can be achieved by following our own ideas, thoughts, and values.

Another key aspect to the good life was health. In one of his letters, Thomas Jefferson discussed the importance of walking. While the Founding Fathers were devoted scholars, they understood that the mind needed to rest. They knew that their health was very important. Jefferson recommended two hours of exercise a day because “a strong body makes the mind strong” (309). Walking was a healthy way to relax, relieve stress, and enjoy your time.

Today many people walk and exercise not out of enjoyment, but to lose weight or stay in shape. Many people go to gyms to work out and walk on treadmills instead of outside. Instead of a fun and relaxing activity, walking becomes a chore. Some people do not have time to walk because they are too exhausted from working while others simply do not like to be active. People become so focused on material gain that they do not take time to take care of their health.

“Results from the 2011–2012 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES), using measured heights and weights, indicate that an estimated 33.9% of U.S. adults aged 20 and over are overweight, 35.1% are obese, and 6.4% are extremely obese”

(Carroll). This survey shows that health is a major concern in our country. There are many contributors to weight gain and walking is not the only cure. However, Jefferson's letter about walking reveals that the Founding Fathers were aware of the importance of exercise. Jefferson's letter on walking puts in perspective what should truly be valuable to us. Our society has become so rushed and consumer driven that people do not spend enough time caring about their health.

Another important aspect of the good life is leisure time. John Adams advocated for quiet time. He even believed that the entitlement of quiet time should be recorded in the Declaration of Independence. I really appreciate the idea of having quiet time. Today, we live in such a rushed society where we are constantly surrounded by media. This lifestyle contributes greatly to the amount of stress we have in our lives. Adams's notion of quiet time could truly help relieve our stress. It would allow people to get away from their worries and relax and reflect. Today, Americans often misinterpret leisure with being unproductive, and to activities such as watching TV or playing on a computer. However, the Founding Fathers asserted that leisure time does not mean laziness or idleness. The leisure time they valued is when you spend time doing something active that you enjoy such as educating yourself through a good book or learning to cook a new meal. These are both ways that you can be productive while still enjoying yourself.

The belief in the importance of leisure is also reflected over a century later by Edward Bellamy and John Keynes. They envisioned a future not of more material gain, but a future of less work and more leisure time. In 1887 Edward Bellamy published *Looking Backward*. The book appeared during the time of industrialization in the United States. In *Looking Backward* Bellamy claimed that in the year 2000, the United States would become a Utopian society where people would work together to build a more virtuous society. Clearly, the future Bellamy dreamed of is not accurate today and highly idealistic. However, I do believe that his book points out issues in our society such as poverty and reiterates the certain ideas of what constitutes the

good life. In his future world people are able to retire at a much younger age. This gives them time to have leisure and enjoy the rest of their lives. The future characters in the text regarded labor “as a necessary duty to be discharged before we can fully devote ourselves to the higher exercise of our faculties, the intellectual and spiritual enjoyments and pursuits which alone mean life” (Bellamy 27). For the characters of Bellamy’s future, their leisure time after retirement was not filled with laziness, but participating in activities they enjoyed.

In 1930 economist John Maynard Keynes had a similar view of the future to Edward Bellamy. He believed that the growth of technology would allow people to work less, and society would become less focused on material goods. “I see us free,” Keynes writes, “. . . and the love of money detestable, that those walk most truly in the paths of virtue and sane wisdom who take least thought for the morrow” (qtd in Skidelsky 6). Keynes imagined not only a new world of more leisure, but he also imagined that the country would grow more morally to reflect the view of virtue of the Founding Fathers.

A final aspect of the good life was the association of own unique personality. Ralph Waldo Emerson was a great advocate for pursuing your own unique personality. In his famous “Self-Reliance,” Emerson states that “to believe your own thought, to believe that what is true in your own private heart is true for all men,—that is genius” (259). He believed that self-reliance meant living for yourself, not just living to fit into society. Today, materialism has led to conformity. People desire mass produced items such as the newest iPhone. In the epilogue to *The Epic of America*, Adams pointed out how dependence on mass production has led to a lower quality of thought and expression among men (409). Technology can inhibit people from thinking on their own and cause them to blindly follow information that they hear on the TV or internet.

I believe that education also plays an important role in self-reliance. As Jefferson explained in his letter “A Crusade Against Ignorance,” education is important to make sure that people do not

become manipulated. Education can also teach people not to follow the crowd. I believe that the more educated people are, the more capable they are to think for themselves and be confident in their opinions. Education plays an important role in staying true to your own unique personality.

In order to have a fulfilling and enjoyable life Americans need to recognize the importance of the quality of life. Aspects of the good life such as education, health, and own unique personality all play a role in creating a better and fuller life. I believe that if people begin to focus on these values, instead only material prosperity, it will broaden the scope of the American Dream and make it more available to all people. I do not believe that people should stop viewing economic prosperity as an aspect the Dream, but they should incorporate the ideas of economic success with the good life to achieve the Dream.

When looking at the Dream from a broader perspective and incorporating both the aspects of the good life and economic prosperity, it becomes clear there are many different ways people can pursue their Dreams. It is also important to note that the American Dream is different for different people. What brings fulfillment to one person may bring stress or unhappiness to others. What makes the American Dream so great and unique is the freedom for anyone to pursue their own personal Dream.

Colleges and universities are a great representation of living a better and fuller life. Many colleges offer the opportunity for people of different race, ethnicity, culture, and economic background to come together for the ultimate goal of achieving a higher education. An education not only prepares students for the future, but it also teaches them to think for themselves. College is the first time many students are independent from their parents. Many students live away from their families and are able to make their own decisions. This independence allows students to practice self-reliance and develop their own unique personality. During college students also have the ability to meet new people and make new friends, as well as form relationships with their professors and professionals in their career

path. Certainly not all colleges are as diverse as others and not every student is independent and breaks out to make new friends. Everyone college experience is different. However, I do believe that no matter what university students attend, all universities offer the opportunity of a higher education for those who desire it.

Another way that I believe the American Dream is expressed today is through local community markets such as Cincinnati's Findlay Market. Findlay Market offers a diverse background of people of all ages that come together to share the experience. The vendors are able to find self-fulfillment and expression through their food, crafts, and music, while the buyers are able to spend their time leisurely, walking through the market enjoying the different foods and items for sale. The market is an example of how economic prosperity and the good life become intertwined to create a better and fuller life for many different people. The people at the market work hard to sell their products, but they are also able to find satisfaction from what they produced. The majority of buyers at the market worked hard to be able to afford the variety of food and other goods at the market, but they are not continually working. They are able to relax, come together with friends, and enjoy their time at the market. I believe that universities and local markets are sites where the American Dream is alive today. Both places present a broad and more balanced scope of how economic prosperity and the aspects of the good life work together for people to obtain their Dream.

The examples of universities and local markets show that the American Dream is alive today, but people must also realize that the American Dream is not equally available to everyone. The wealth gap in the U.S. has excluded many people from the Dream, and the focus on materialism has left many people unsatisfied with achieving the economic aspect of the Dream. The American Dream does not fare well from an economic perspective. However, the Dream is alive when the ideas of the quality of life are intertwined with economic prosperity which is presented in the Findlay Market example. I believe the American Dream will fare better and be available to the

most people if people embrace the ideas of the Founding Fathers and scholars such as Emerson and James Truslow Adams who advocated for better education for all, a greater sense of virtue, and awareness of the importance of health and leisure, and self-reliance.

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