
American Dream Studies in the 21st Century: An American Perspective

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Introduction

In a paper published a few years ago I argued (somewhat tongue in cheek) that the United States' most common export is not McDonald's hamburgers, Levi's jeans, nor rock n' roll; rather, it is the American Dream. (Hauhart, 2011) However, although perhaps not entirely serious at the time, the publication of this special issue of the journal in Slovenia leads me to believe I may have been on to something: the American Dream is known and of interest across the globe, not just in the United States. The iconic phrase is, in fact, a staple of journalistic meditations, both in the United States and elsewhere as this random sampling of articles suggests. ("Aarondeep Living the American Dream," *Coventry Telegraph*, Coventry, UK (January 20, 2015); Krishnaswamy, V. "American Dream," *Mail Today*, Delhi, India (January 22, 2016); Rifkin, Jeremy. "Worlds Apart on the Vision Thing," *The Globe and Mail*, Toronto, Ont., CAN (August 17, 2004), at A15; Ng, Teddy. "President Living in a Dream World." *South China Morning Post*, Hong Kong (April 4, 2013); "Michelle Obama and the American Dream." *Turkish Daily News*, Ankara, TR (August 30, 2008); "Holding on to European Dream still a Possibility." *Irish Times*, Dublin, IRL (February 11, 2005); and Sun, Xi. "When the 'Chinese Dream' meets the 'American Dream.'" *Straits Times*, Singapore (May 1, 2013)) Moreover, as the list of book length studies used as references to this paper, including my own *Seeking the American Dream* (2016), suggests there is no dearth of longer examinations of the Dream. Still, serious research into the American Dream has been less than satis-

fyng in many respects. There are a number of reasons this is so. There is, as one example, the problem of definition. There is also the problem of evidence since very few studies have attempted to test the definitions proposed by collecting evidence in support of one or another. The present paper will consider these and other factors that bear on developing a better understanding of the state of American Dream studies today.

The Question of Definition: What is the American Dream?

One of the more intriguing issues with respect to the American Dream is the fact that many of us assume we know what the phrase means. If, for example, one asks another person – as I have – whether they know what the American Dream is, many – and perhaps most – faced with the question will answer that they do know. Yet, if one follows up and asks the respondent to define it, one is likely to receive a range of answers. Thus, the matter of definition is a critical one for studying the American Dream.

There is a general consensus that the first recognized, widespread use of the phrase “American dream” in print may be attributed to James Truslow Adams in his 1931 book, *The Epic of America* (Cullen, 2003; Hauthart, 2016:p. x). In his epilogue, Adams recounts many of the advances that Americans made over its several centuries of existence in diverse fields of endeavor from medicine and science to literature and drama. Adams (1933: p. 317) then defines the idea that he believes has made the most important benefit to world progress:

If, as I have said, the things already listed were all we had to contribute America would have made no distinctive and unique gift to mankind. But there has also been the American *dream*, that dream of a land in which life should be better and fuller and richer for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement. (Emphasis in original.)

Adams went on at some length to elaborate on his understanding of the phrase and the role it played in life within the United States. While all of Adams’ reflections on the meaning of the term are not critical with respect to its definition, it is worth noting that he wrote:

[The American Dream] is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. (1933: p. 317)

A page later he elaborates further by stating:

No, the American dream that has lured tens of millions of all nations to our shores in the past century has not been a dream of merely material plenty, though that has doubtless counted heavily. It has been much more than that. It has been a dream of being able to grow to fullest development as man and woman, unhampered by the barriers which had been slowly erected in older civilizations, unimpressed by social orders which had developed for the benefit of classes rather than for the simple human being of any and every class. And the dream has been realized more fully in actual life here than anywhere else, though very imperfectly even among ourselves. (1933: p. 318)

Absent from Adams' discourse is any discussion of upward mobility although there is a statement about inequality: "There is no reason why wealth, which is a social product, should not be more equitably controlled and distributed in the interests of society." (1933: p. 322)

While Adams does not address upward mobility directly, it is implicit in his formulation that the American Dream is of a country where each and every one may prosper. Prosperity, of course, is intimately connected with the idea of economic success and it is this feature of the American Dream that has generated the greatest number of alternative conceptions attributed to it. The emphasis on prosperity, regardless of Adams' strenuous objections to a vision of the United States that elevates material success to the level of constituting Americans' highest achievement, has a long history within American culture and thought. The 'success ethic,' has long been celebrated in American popular literature, where one can 'pull oneself up [in society] by one's bootstraps.' This idea was first popularized, and then epitomized, by the *Ragged Dick* series of approximately 100 boys' novels written by Horatio Alger, Jr. beginning in 1868. Although Schamhorst (1980: pp. 75–6) contends that *Ragged Dick's* ambition is properly read as a rise to respectability, and not pure desire for riches, the Horatio Alger tales, as conceived in the popular imagination, have devolved into paeans to the "success ethic" in the 150 years since their first appearance.

This emphasis on economic success leading to upward mobility in American culture is also found in Tocqueville's examination of the American character in *Democracy in America* (1961), first published in the 1830's. However, Tocqueville's view was less sanguine than Horatio Alger's. Tocqueville found that Americans' desire to fulfill every material want, quench every physical desire, acquire every newly invented means of doing so, and struggle to rise above the mass of common men was doomed to

failure. In Tocqueville's estimation, the restless ambition to master business and amass wealth that he witnessed only led Americans to dwell on the advantages that they do not possess. For Tocqueville, the restless spirit of unchecked desire that drove Americans was a burden that overhung their lives and darkened their brows. The aspiration for upward mobility was then, in a term the film director Alfred Hitchcock was said to have created, a "Macguffin" – an object of desire that everyone wants and inspires the action in a plot, but one that will often reveal itself, as the Maltese Falcon did, in the book (Hammett, 1929) and film (John Huston, 1941) of the same name. Allegedly gold encrusted with diamonds, the Maltese Falcon turned out in the end merely lead painted black.

The upshot is that Adams, in initially framing his vision of the American Dream, only had the first word – not the final word – about its meaning. Other writers have offered subsequent definitions and treatments of the idea, whether directly or indirectly. Indeed, not too long after Adams formulated his vision of the American Dream, Robert Merton (1938), in perhaps the most famous ten page sociological paper ever written, used the idea of the "success ethic" to help explain the social forces that contribute to Emile Durkheim's (Simpson, 1963) meditations on anomie. In so doing, Merton disagreed, albeit implicitly, with Adams' idealistic emphasis on the American Dream of a nation where every man and woman can attain fulfillment as the United States most characteristic cultural quality. In its place Merton instilled competition and, most particularly, competition within a capitalist economic order where the accumulation of wealth as a pecuniary symbol of success is the dominant cultural goal (Merton, 1938: pp. 675–76). Merton, in short, saw the principal driving motivation of American culture to be the attainment of material success contrary to Adams' renunciation of materialism's primacy and his exaltation of opportunity for all. The two visions of the central cultural aim and impetus within the United States are thus diametrically opposed.

For Merton (1938), however, the situation in which the principal cultural goal was pecuniary success was only one part of the cultural equation. Equally important was the degree of access to institutionalized means to achieve success as well as the relative proportion between success within the institutionalized means for achieving valued goals and actual (or perceived) receipt of pecuniary reward. In Merton's view, an equilibrated balance between cultural ideals and social structural opportunities was the only manner in which a society could sustain itself successfully. He found in the United States that the strength of the drive for pecuniary success constituted "a disproportionate accent on goals" (Merton, 1938: p. 674) that overwhelmed the institutionalized means to satisfy

the pecuniary desires inspired by the ‘success ethic’. One consequence according to Merton was crime: the dominant ‘cult of success’ would induce some members of society to evade the institutionalized means by breaking the rules resulting in “...fraud, corruption, vice, crime, in short ...” (p. 675). Many, embracing Merton’s observation, have subsequently taken up this perception of the impact and operational definition of the American Dream (Quinones, 2015; Messner and Rosenfeld, 2013; Contreras, 2012). In sum, Merton’s identification of pecuniary success as the predominant cultural goal in the United States directly contradicts James Truslow Adams’ focus on the American Dream as the United States’ principal aspiration and primary contribution to the world.

Jennifer Hochschild’s (1995) treatment of the definitional question remains perhaps the most enlightening overall. Initially, Hochschild (1995: p. 15) agrees with Merton that “[T]he American dream consists of tenets about achieving success” and that “[P]eople most often define success as the attainment of a high income, a prestigious job, economic security.” Yet, Hochschild finds this answer insufficient because, in her view, it fails to answer four questions: Who may pursue success? What does one pursue? How does one pursue success? And why is success worth pursuing? (1995: pp. 18–24) Hochschild’s discussion of these questions leads her to identify four corresponding flaws to the American Dream. Thus, for example, the universalistic exhortation that everyone may, and should, pursue success in the United States is problematic because everyone cannot participate equally nor can most start over. Likewise, the belief that the American Dream offers a reasonable anticipation of success falters where there simply aren’t enough resources or opportunities to go around. Further, Hochschild notes that individualism in the United States infuses the Dream with the idea that success results from actions and qualities under one’s control, thereby placing the onus of failure on each person. Finally, the separation of society’s members into winners and losers has debilitating effects on both: losers clearly feel badly about their failure but winners suffer from pride which, as the Bible instructs, often goes before the fall (1995: pp. 26–34). Hochschild’s cogent analysis ultimately leads her to re-frame both Adams’ and Merton’s conception of the American Dream. In so doing, she emphasizes, on the basis of numerous strands of evidence from the United States that the American Dream has come to centrally rely on an expectation of intergenerational upward mobility (1995: p. 44, 47). Hochschild’s conception has become perhaps the most common, or popular, definition of the American Dream as many immigrant families testify to the desire for a better life for themselves and their children as the primary motivation for coming to the United States. This

definition, of course, raises the problem most often posed today in studies of the American Dream: is the dream in danger because of the gap between aspirations for economic and social mobility and the realities of limited opportunity and slowed economic growth?

The Problem of Class, Race and Gender Privilege in a Promised Land of Equal Opportunity

The lure of Adams' vision of the American Dream – a land of equal opportunity where each person may achieve his or her fullest development – is endangered, and becomes dangerous, where economic privilege remains, barriers to class mobility retain their force, and the 'success ethic' continues to dominate a people's aspirations. In such a matrix of forces, two social outcomes are often produced. First, the "have nots" feel marginalized, face inordinate disadvantages that they often cannot overcome, and – consequently – incur disabling envy, anger and class resentment. This is the class divide that has been subjected to considerable analytic scrutiny in recent years in the United States (Putnam, 2015). Second, however, even those who benefit from the advantages of privilege can feel beleaguered and betrayed and perceive, wrongly, that their way of life is threatened. Reacting to their own misperception, the privileged can become further isolated within their protected and segregated enclaves and fume with resentment of their own (Hochschild, 2016). Arguably, this is the state in which the United States finds itself in today with both the privileged and the underprivileged embattled. The American Dream, which suggests that the United States is a land of opportunity where all can prosper, raises expectations that cannot be fulfilled since those expectations have no limits. Rich and poor alike can become embittered when the reality fails to meet each group's imagined vision of what the American Dream promise has held out to them as their rightful reward

Campos (2017) is among the most recent analysts to provide data that suggests economic inequality remains firmly entrenched in the contemporary United States, leading to the white working class resentment that drove Donald Trump into the Presidency. However, what that economic and related social survey data show is that while a substantial economic gap separates working class Americans in the United States from the professional classes and elites, white working class households still earned substantially more than black working class households (Campos 3). Campos concludes that a "genuine working class movement" (Campos 3) would therefore unite white and black working class members against their true class enemies. This form of idealistic analysis, however well intentioned, simply disregards the nature of privilege which demands

that embedded notions of racial, class and gender superiority cannot be whisked away (or wished away) by reference to the economic reality. Rather, the American Dream, with its open ended, universalistic invitation to prosper offers no respite from pecuniary and status competition once the race is on. The classes, including the white American working class, will never feel as though they have achieved their dream so long as they remain subordinated within a class hierarchy. In a hierarchical society, it is merely a question of who deserves to be looked down on. In the United States, and probably in all class societies, resentment is generally directed downward (even as inclusion and opportunity are withheld from the lower classes from above) – toward non-white racial and ethnic groups, women, the young, and any group that can be treated as ‘the other,’ that is, outsiders. This history of exclusion has been ably documented by Jillson (2004) with specific reference to the American Dream and by Karabel (2006) with regard to the illusory “meritocratic” nature of elite higher education in the United States.

Pernicious Outcomes: The Catalytic Effect of the American Dream

The American Dream may – or may not – have been correctly defined by James Truslow Adams but its impact within the matrix of social and economic forces alive today in the United States has generally become pernicious. The twin emphases of competitive capitalism and American individualism that form the backbone of the American cultural ethos quietly buttress the American Dream’s urgent exhortation to prosper in ways that are antipathetic to individual success as a person and destructive to social stability. Examples are many. One that we have already broached is crime. Others may be equally insidious.

In recent years the United States has become aware of a looming student debt crisis. Yet, the social and economic factors that have precipitated the crisis have been manifest for decades. Young people in the United States have long been told that to prosper economically they need to obtain a college or university degree. Overwhelmingly in recent decades, high school graduates have flocked to U.S. higher education in response. Yet, since the time of the post-war G.I. Bill (The Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944) the cost of college tuition has risen dramatically, especially within the last few years. As William Celis (1994) of the *New York Times* reported on the G.I. Bill’s 50th anniversary, a returning WW II American serviceman, Mike Machado, attended St. Mary’s University, a private college, in San Antonio, TX for \$ 85 per semester tuition while receiving a \$ 250 monthly stipend for living expenses for his family of four

– all paid for by the United States government. By comparison, Jacqueline Williams, who left the Air Force and attended a two year college in San Antonio in the early 1990s, was given \$ 4,800 per year under the G.I. Bill which did not even cover her tuition (Celis, 1994). Over the twenty-plus years since, college tuition has increased exponentially. One review states that the tuition at private national universities in the United States has risen 179% between 1995 and 2015. (Mitchell 2015) Other reviews report different figures, some of which show lower increases, but the steep trajectory of increased tuition and related costs over time in the United States remains the central story.

The resultant gap between coverage of college costs by, for example, the G.I. Bill beginning in 1944 and higher rates of tuition and fees has been filled in the United States through private student loans. Students, urged to attend college or university, and facing generally unfavorable job markets without a college degree, have been persuaded to incur substantial debt on the theory that it is the only viable avenue to achieve the American Dream of prosperity. The result according to a seven part series reported by a team of reporters from the *New York Times* in 2012 (Martin and Lehren, 2012) has been the creation of a generation of student debtors. As the various stories reported make clear, students, driven by the desire to achieve upward mobility and pursue their American Dream incurred substantial college tuition debt only to find in many cases that changes in the economy did not allow them to prosper as they anticipated. Mixed into this set of circumstances the authors of the story note are increased efforts to lure student consumers: “Colleges are aggressively recruiting students, regardless of their financial circumstances. In admissions offices across the country, professional marketing companies and talented alumni are being enlisted to devise catchy slogans, build enticing Web sites — and essentially outpitch the competition” (Martin and Lehren, 2012). The intersection of the pressure to attend higher education, the lack of marketable skills in the U.S. job market upon graduation from high school, the influence of peers, parents, and guidance counselors, and the desire to reach for their own personal conception of the American Dream create a nearly irresistible vortex of forces. In the process, Adams’ vision of the American Dream is reconfigured beyond recognition. Absorbing the latest op-ed piece as I write this I read, “Student debt is crushing Mainers’ dreams,” (Libby, 2017) a story that has not reached its end.

The student debt crisis in the United States might seem an anomaly disconnected from Adams’ American Dream if it were not for the fact that other personal and societal financial crises did not share some of the same structural and social-psychological features. Among the more re-

cent is the 2008 housing crisis in the United States (and across much of the developed world) which led directly to the so-called Great Recession of 2009–10. The United States has long had an official policy of encouraging home ownership (Carliner, 1998). Federal officials were instrumental in loosening lending restrictions on first-time homebuyers, a practice that contributed to both an increase in home buying and, combined with lowered down payment and relaxed credit requirements, to the sub-prime mortgage and housing crisis of 2006–2010 in the United States (Streitfeld and Morgenson, 2008). Numerous sources over the past fifty years have documented the degree to which Americans literally bought into this vision: owning a home became identified as a central part of the American Dream (Williams, 2009; De Palma, 1988). Builders, loan companies, banks, and private investors targeted Americans in order to sell them the Dream. Michaelson (2009), in his account of the Countrywide Financial collapse during the 2007–10 U.S. housing market crisis, describes in candid detail his role in sculpting gauzy, 30 second television commercials urging consumers that they, too, can own a part of the American Dream with the help of Countrywide. Lures of this nature were used to enroll creditors in mortgages that were under-collateralized and encouraged buyers to purchase more expensive homes than they could afford, sometimes based on fraudulent paperwork. The combination of these forces – driven by the unquenchable desire of Americans to buy a home as part of the American Dream – led directly to the U.S. mortgage and housing crisis that ultimately spread throughout the world (Hauhart, 2011). The aftershocks of this crisis linger today in many countries (Marks-Jarvis, 2015). In short, the mortgage/housing market crisis, like the student debt crisis, owe much of its origination to the manner in which Americans conceive of their contemporary American Dream aided and abetted by institutions which are more than willing to sell them their vision of the American Dream – for a price.

Reproducing Class Stratification: Institutional Performances and Cultural Incapacity

James Truslow Adams' conception of the American Dream envisages a level playing field of opportunity for all. However, numerous studies of educational institutions and workplaces in the United States suggest that both formal and informal cultural barriers exist that prevent many Americans from achieving their American Dreams, most particularly ones that incorporate upward mobility as a core goal. They do so, according to many studies, through a process of succumbing to elimination.

The first line of Susan Dewey's (2011: p. ix) *Neon Wasteland*, her observational study of a topless dancing venue in New York state pseudonymously named "Vixens," sums up the dilemma for many Americans seeking the American Dream. Cinnamon, one of the dancers Dewey befriends, says "There are some lines that, once you cross them, you can't go back again." As Dewey (2011: p. ix) relates,

She was explaining how it was impossible for her to leave her job as a topless dancer not only because it was the sole source of economic support for her daughter, but also due to her perception that she was somehow psychologically damaged by her experiences onstage.

These factors, however, are only a small part of the equation as Dewey (2011: p. xiii) comments further regarding the structural factors that also come into play:

Women who have engaged in sex work for lengthy periods as their sole source of income can find it particularly difficult to seek out other jobs because employers are, at best, hesitant to view such experiences as transferable skills and, at worst, prone to negative judgments about the nature of such work.

Thus, although the women who worked as topless dancers at Vixens were uniformly there as a result of the "powerfully seductive promise of socioeconomic mobility through the rapid generation of cash income" (2011: p. xiii) as part of "a first step toward a better future," (2011: p. 21) Dewey finds that their hopes for social mobility, deliberately played upon by management, are almost never realized. As Cinnamon acknowledges in the first line Dewey chose to start her book, crossing certain lines eliminates one from alternative futures.

Social elimination through cultural incapacity starts long before employment in a working class, dead end job, however, as Julie Bettie (2014) documents in *Women Without Class*, her study of the intersection of race, gender performances, and class at Waretown High, a pseudonymously named school in California's Central Valley. Education has long been identified in the United States as one of the principal routes – if not *the* primary route – to upward social and economic status (Sorokin, 1959). However, while education may be a route to upward social, economic and cultural mobility, schools are not ideally meritocratic, if they are meritocratic at all (Deresiewicz, 2015; McNamee and Miller, 2013) in the way in which the school process helps or hinders those from class origins other than the middle class professional groups that dominate them. As many studies show (Lareau, 2011), there are cultural limitations that

impair some from succeeding in educational institutions. Bettie's careful ethnographic report on student peer groups at Waretown High is simply among the more recent to describe how the intersection of certain life circumstances combine to disable some students from achieving through education.

Bettie's observational study of girl peer groups details identifiable preferences for styles of dress, accessories, speech, and demeanor (2014: p. 45) that telegraph specific group membership. These group affiliations based on cultural choices, when combined with salient school curriculum choices and engagement/dis-engagement from specific extracurricular activities, act either to facilitate – or restrict – what Bettie (2014:p. 49) calls “class futures.” Thus, while there is a strong tie between a person's class origin, their present socioeconomic status, and success in school, the critical influence of peer group membership with its shared codes either shapes further the reproduction of one's social class or, when resisted, allows for class related performances that augment the ability to pass from one class to another, whether upward or downward.

At Waretown High, Bettie was able to identify the prominent peer groups: preps, chicas, cholas, hicks, skaters, and smokers. The preps were mostly white, with a handful of Mexican-American girls, middle class, well integrated into the school environment, and displayed good social and academic skills. These girls dressed well, often had their own automobiles, and expressed themselves with distinctive styles for their hair that always emphasized feminine display in a manner not shared by other girl groups (2014: p. 20–1, 57, 63). The chicas, on the other hand, who were Mexican-American and predominantly working class, wore more makeup and tight fitting clothing than the prep girls. They avoided difficult college preparatory classes and gravitated to the vocational or business classes. They showed generally little interest in the classroom curriculum, often flirting with male substitute teachers and turning their attention to a girl culture built around heterosexual romance, clothes, appearance, shopping, and shared personal interests (2014: pp. 58–60; pp. 63–64). As Bettie describes, these preferences and alliances shape the class futures that individuals can envision, aspire to achieving, and attain.

Prep girls, for example, embrace adult, middle class norms for comportment during late adolescence as one means of preparing to move upward socially and economically through another educational institution. (2014: p. 61) This means that while the prep girls may not be any less sexually active than their chicas peers, they conduct their sex lives in more secrecy and insure that their upward trajectory is not disrupted by an unplanned pregnancy by using birth control (often without the knowledge

of parents) (2014: p. 68). Chicas (and non-preps generally), on the other hand, engaged in displays that violated adult, middle class norms by engaging publicly in ways that laid claim to adult status before middle class adults think appropriate (2014: p. 61). For example, having little likelihood of an extended adolescence in higher education like the preps, the chicas are more ready to see having a baby while still in high school as a valuable marker of adult status. Motherhood, and the responsibility for care and nurture that comes with it, can be used to gain respect that might not otherwise be forthcoming on other grounds (2014: p. 69).

The attitudes that group members share, sometimes implicitly, are key to these girls' class futures. As Bettie (2014: p. 72) relates, non-prep girls seldom wanted to talk about their plans after high school. Indeed, Bettie observes that "...I saw clearly [that raising the subject] caused the girls to feel uncertainty and a related stress, so they changed the conversation to music and fashion." As one example, the "going away to college" experience was not something the chicas could envision, let alone desire: it was a prep dream that their class origin, their peer group affiliation, and the consequences of their peer group choices reserved for the preps and not for them. Working class "performers" among Bettie's subjects could, at most, aspire to attend the local community college while beginning their working and parenting adult lives at the same time (2014: p. 71). Working class non-performers, such as the largely white "smokers," could envision and expect even less for the future. Typically from "hard living" families with parents who had not finished high school or barely done so, the smokers also had little interest in the school's curriculum, rarely expressed plans for after high school, and often simply hoped to hang on to graduate (2014: pp. 13-4; pp. 85-86).

These constellations of combined class factors clearly have direct implications for the ability of various class actors to achieve the American Dream of upward mobility although it is important to recognize that origins are not determinative. Bettie (2014: pp. 159-60), for example, carefully discusses the differences in orientation that facilitate the transition from working class culture to aspirational middle class culture and middle class futures. These class differences also expose class members to other experiences related to the American Dream as well. As Bettie (2014: pp. 73-6) describes, working class students who want to "make it" are quick to become targets of those trying to sell them the American Dream in one package or another. As one example, proprietary, for profit, schools present themselves as alternatives to the public and private non-profit sector by advertising widely, making appealing promises of a better future, deploying deceptive techniques, and targeting the most vulnerable youth –

often those from low income populations of color (2014: p. 76). Yet, as Bettie (2014: p. 76) concludes, students who try and take this alternative route “will still probably not end up with jobs that pay them enough to support themselves and will likely go into debt as a consequence of attending.” It almost seems that believing in the American Dream of upward mobility has become a predisposing factor in insuring that one does not achieve it.

Conclusion

Given the foregoing, why would anyone believe in the American Dream? Yet, rather miraculously, nearly everyone in the United States does. As Hochschild (1995: p. 55) observes based on mountains of evidence she presents, “Americans are close to unanimous in endorsing the idea of the American dream.” A modest analysis that I produced with a colleague reached the same conclusion about American college students who almost universally believe in the Dream and think they will attain it (Hauhart and Birkenstein, 2013). How can one explain this? Perhaps Rank, Hirschl, and Foster (2014) come closest with their discussion of elements of the American Dream that have produced very little scholarly examination: hope and optimism. As these authors correctly point out, without the existence of hope (for something) sustaining the optimistic possibility that what is sought can be achieved, what exactly would the American Dream consist of? Thus, while my present effort is limited by my inability to take the matter further in the context of this paper, it may well be that the proper province of American Dream studies will always be the nature of people’s hopes and aspirations, the challenges they face, and the outcomes they experience. Like the American Dream itself, studies of this nature would constitute an endless quest – but one well worth pursuing.

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