Totally Awesome Student

Professor Irizarry

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The American Dream and What it Means

For almost ninety years the idea of the American dream has inspired the disadvantaged and weak to work hard for the dreams. It is, after all, one of the oldest ideals of the United States that through hard work, self-sacrifice, and discipline anyone can achieve success in this country. For as long as this notion has existed there has been a raging debate over the specifics. Some believe that it may have existed once but has since been sacrificed in the name of profit margins; There is also an argument that it never existed in the first place and was instead a ruse to elicit labor from the poorest of citizens and immigrants. This paper seeks to define and explore the American Dream while also trying to understand why this concept has become so prevalent in the culture of the United States.

As with most details pertaining to this subject there is a debate around the exact definition of the American Dream. This paper will refer to what is most likely the original definition. The phrase was first coined by James Truslow Adams in 1931 and he defined it as the “dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement”. This definition focuses on one’s own abilities as the vehicle by which a person can improve their situation. Based on this, all able-bodied adults who are willing to put forth the effort should be able to improve their circumstances and personal wealth. This version of the American Dream is what has inspired millions of people from all over the world to leave their home countries behind and migrate thousands of miles to the United States. It has also served to give hope to the poorest American citizens that their situations are not permanent and through determination they can achieve the financial stability and comfortable life experienced by those in the upper classes. Whether this concept is true is another debate entirely.

While the definition of the American Dream clearly states that all people who come to the United States should enjoy the same opportunities based solely on their skills and hard work, this may not be the case. In many cases a person can be prevented from advancement not because of any fault of their own, but instead because of their gender, race, or ethnicity. In John Iceland’s “Poverty in America: A Handbook” he explains that African Americans in the Jim Crow era southern United States were legally barred from most of the career options that would pay them enough to escape poverty. Instead they were forced to work as sharecroppers or in other forms of manual labor which paid insufficient wages for long, hard hours. This type of work meant that any kind of economic advancement and securing proper education for one’s children was impossible; this ensured that generations of African Americans would remain in this vicious cycle of poverty.

Immigrants often experienced similar disenfranchisement when they arrived to the United States. In large, industrially advanced cities in the late nineteenth and twentieth century Immigrants were used as pseudo-slave labor in factories and construction jobs. They were paid meager wages, worked long hours, and could only afford to live in disease-ridden tenement buildings. Their children didn’t receive an education but instead worked in factories for wages that were even lower than their parents. Despite the long, hard hours that immigrants worked they saw no real path out of poverty. The history of African Americans and immigrants appear to directly contradict the promises of the American Dream: that through hard work and determination you can be successful in this country.

While there are definitely flaws in the logic of the American Dream, there are many who argue that is still attainable. For many immigrants from third world countries, poverty in the United States is a marked improvement over the conditions in their home country. While there might not be much chance for upward mobility, many immigrants to this country have an easier time finding jobs, have much better living conditions, and have a much higher chance of securing a good education for their children then they would in their country of origin. Even though these first-generation immigrants sometimes live in extreme poverty, the lowest socioeconomic classes in the United States still live in better conditions than the poor in many areas of the world. According to Robert Rector and Rachel Sheffield in their article “Air Conditioning, Cable TV, and an Xbox: What is Poverty in the United States Today” the average American poor family has many modern amenities that can make living here very comfortable. Most households below the poverty line had television, air conditioning, kitchen appliances, and many other conveniences that are considered necessities in this country but may be luxuries to many poor immigrants. With this in mind we can see that the American Dream could very well be true for many of these immigrants.

The American Dream is not an easy concept to understand, even if one knows more or less what it stands for. It can mean different things for different people, and its level of attainability changes depending on one’s individual circumstances. For some it’s the height of American idealism, and for others it’s a mockery of what this country pretends to stand for. The American Dream is not dead, but it also isn’t alive and well. It’s the same as it has always been: A formality for some, and an impossibility for others.

Works Cited

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