
Education and the American Dream

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As a central element of American culture, the American Dream is said to represent a distilled version of basic American values and the single most important emancipatory ideal associated with the American 'way of life'. As Jennifer L Hochschild emphasized in her book *Facing Up to the American Dream*, it represents 'a central ideology of Americans [...], a defining characteristic of American culture' (Hochschild, 1995: p. xi). In fact, both in the US and abroad, the American Dream constitutes a symbol of progress and has been synonymous with hope in general. Moreover, throughout history, its progressive idealism has had a galvanizing influence on a number of emancipatory social projects, e.g. the Civil Rights movement. At the same time, its promise of upward social mobility [firmly grounded in the merit-based idea of equal opportunity] encapsulates best the idea of non-discrimination and fairness that stand at the very center of social phenomena as diverse as racial desegregation, the 'war for talent', migrations, educational reforms etc.

The voluminous literature on the American Dream in disciplines as diverse as sociology (Hauhart, 2016), political science (Ghosh, 2013; Hochschild, 1995; Jillson, 2016), the economy (Shaanan, 2010; Stiglitz, 2013), migration studies (Clark, 2003), history (Cullen, 2003), advertising (Samuel, 2001), cultural studies (Lasch, 1996; Lawrence, 2012), linguistics (Fischer, 1973), religious studies (D'Antonio, 2011), anthropology (Duncan, 2015), literary studies (Churchwell, 2013), educational theory (DeVitis & Rich, 1996) as well as philosophy (Cannon, 2003; Peters, 2012; Sandel, 1996), points out that the idea of the American Dream is far from simple or unproblematic. In fact, as Robert Hauhart emphasizes in his

book *Seeking the American Dream*, '[i]t would be foolish, and counter-productive, to ignore the contributions that derive from history, literature, economics, anthropology, political science and journalism' (Hauhart, 2016: p. ix).

Yet, its 'standard' interpretation as an idealized 'metaphor of basic American values' and the US 'dominant national ideology' (Hochschild and Scovronick, 2003: x), is no longer straightforward, as the American Dream has also been associated with a wide range of ideas not everyone finds appealing. As an archetype of (material) success and consumerism in general, the American Dream has also been subjected to a number of objections leading to the criticism that its promise of equal opportunity and material prosperity for all has not been fulfilled. As the writers of the joint report *Opportunity, Responsibility and Security: A Consensus Plan for Reducing Poverty and Restoring the American Dream* by two of the leading US think-thanks, i.e. Brookings Institution and the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research [AEI] have emphasized, the current state of affairs 'contradicts our country's founding ideals' (AEI/Brookings, 2015: p. 8).¹

Furthermore, backed with indicators and other data on increasing economic inequality (compared to other democratic countries), some of the leading contemporary scholars (e.g. Krugman, 2012; Putnam, 2015; Rank et al., 2016) and public intellectuals (e.g. Chomsky, 2017; Reeves, 2014) have questioned its emancipatory potential as well as its basic promise of upward social mobility.² It is precisely this gap between its emancipatory potential and its idealized image on one side and a set of indicators suggesting that the American dream has utterly failed, that has given rise to a series of objections leading to the assertion that it represents an empty or even false promise. In fact, while its advocates champion it as some sort of a 'brilliant construction' (Hochschild, 1995: p. xi), its [many] critics depict it as nothing less than a 'necessary illusion' (Lasch, 1996: p. 52).

Surprisingly enough, despite a number of divergent approaches aiming to shed light on this complex [and controversial] social ideal, some of the recent interpretations over its alleged failure(s) have been disturbingly simplistic. While part of the 'problem' in understanding the American Dream is to a large extent dependent on the complexity of the social fact

1 The report is available at Brookings' webpage: <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Full-Report.pdf>

2 See, for example, Alan Krueger's article 'The great utility of the Great Gatsby Curve' discussing the relationship between intergenerational mobility and income inequality in USA <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/social-mobility-memos/2015/05/19/the-great-utility-of-the-great-gatsby-curve/>

itself, a reductionist understanding of its nature and an impoverished understanding of its vitality can be primarily attributed to the 'standard' interpretation best epitomized in Jennifer Hochschild's introductory chapter to her book *Facing up to the American Dream* ['What is the American Dream']. This substantive question came to define what the existing research on the American Dream has been focusing on. Nevertheless, despite much of its productivity, this approach – to a large extent – turns out to 'hit the target but miss the point'.

This journal special issue of the *Šolsko polje* journal entitled 'Education and the American Dream' aims to move the discussion further. It brings together 7 articles and an interview on some of the most pressing issues associated with the American Dream and its relationship with education. The article by Robert Hauhart, as he emphasizes, 'attempts to lay out some of the principal theoretical and empirical issues that bear on the future potential for studies of the American Dream'. In his paper, Michael Peters 'describes the crafting of the American dream as a rhetorical device that utilises narrative resources to tell and retell a story of America's history as a philosophical reflection on the core value of social equality that defines national identity and the future to which all Americans might aspire to'. Furthermore, it also examines the role of the American Dream in Obama's speeches that he contrasts with Trump's slogan "Make America Great Again!'. Cyril Ghosh examines various elements of university admissions in the US and argues that the Percent Plans are the 'most aligned with the widely popular ideology of the American Dream and therefore has the potential to have the broadest possible support from Americans across the ideological spectrum'. In his interview Peter McLaren discusses some of the persisting challenges associated with the American Dream and its controversial historical legacy. In particular, he challenges straight away the 'standard' interpretation of the American Dream and questions its overall coherence. The concluding part of the interview is devoted to the presentation of the relationship between education and the American Dream. In his essay, Srečo Dragoš analyses two separate questions linked with the local and global meaning of the American Dream, i.e. [i] the resilience of the American Dream, which is strengthened in proportion to the distance from its origin (why the above mentioned dreams are the strongest on the global periphery in the case of Slovenia); and [ii] whether such a development is more dependent on voluntaristic or more on deterministic factors. Next, Igor Bijuklić 'examines the subject of technocracy in the Progressive era (1880-1920) focusing on the instrumental character that was ascribed to communication for achieving social cohesiveness and a perfected socialisation of men among the growing populations of immi-

grants'. In particular, he aims to examine how mass production and consumption introduced uniformity as their new potential and how, consequently, conformism gained an entirely new character while losing all its explicit characteristics. In his essay, Darko Štrajn examines the conceptual foundations of the relationship between the American Dream and education. In the final contribution for this journal special issue, Maja Gutman 'aims to analyze the narrative and archetypal frameworks of the American Dream and demonstrates, how the solid structure of this concept forms an invisible modern mythological fabric in modern media representations, and more broadly, popular culture'. Furthermore, the book review by Valerija Vendramin evaluates Robert Putnam's book *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*.

As the contributions to this journal special issue make clear, the basic question over the American Dream might not *substantive* [what is the American dream] but *motivational* [why is the interest for its preservation and reproduction so important].

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