



From Ideal to Reality : Revisiting Lawrence R. Samuel's *The American Dream: A Cultural History*

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Abstract

To seek a land that fulfils all their ambitions, wishes and desires has been the most earnest quest of humans for the last many generations. Ready to invest their wherewithal of their skills, talent, hard work and investment of all kinds with the sole purpose to achieve those eluding and missing attainments, the land of America seems to them to be the most fertile for them. Each individual, with their unique dream, has their own definition of what constitutes an American Dream. But those definitions when collectively defined, are impossible to be stated in a standard characterization due to their heterogeneity and because of the changes made in their description with each passing era. Lawrence R. Samuel's odyssey to seek the Holy Grail of the meaning of the phrase called the American Dream results in an assortment of diverse meanings which depends on an individual's viewpoint of what it is. Throughout his investigative book, Samuel endeavours to dissect and decode the phrase through multiple sources with the ultimate aim to fathom the ethos of America which binds people to her. Diving deep into the idea of the American Dream, the author encompasses the entire spectrum of the belief through multiple determinants. In his sincere pursuit, the author stumbles upon a plethora of findings that shed light on the conundrums that the phrase poses. The firmly held belief of the American Dream which lacks unanimity, is thoroughly examined through numerous perspectives by the author to attempt to fathom the term.

Keywords: America, dream, culture, ethos, definition, accomplishment, enquiry

Introduction

The fabric of a nation is determined in its cultural context. America has often been called as the greatest nation on earth and also as a melting pot of all cultures on the planet. It's a world within a world. Lawrence R. Samuel threads many elements that define America to understand the notion of the American Dream. In his book, *The American Dream: A Cultural History*, he investigates all aspects – from the ideals on which the foundations of America have been built to cinema – leaving no stone unturned in the process. By chronologically depicting the nation's progress that was based on the American Dream, he reveals the changing meaning of the phrase over time. Also, with the passage of time, the term meant differently to different people at the same time. In doing so, he portrays the national identity of the American people through culture and the possibilities and opportunities that America offers and are there for the taking for anyone who can make a contribution with their talent and skill. By dividing the period after 1931 into six defining eras for the term, Samuel discovers that the American Dream is a mirage that cannot be achieved because its existence is wrapped in myth and not reality. Throughout the documentation that he presents which takes the readers back in time when the Founding Father's envisioned a life for the people that had freedom, equality and justice as its essence, to the present times where start-ups are expected to provide economic stability and employment, Samuel has provided in-depth specifics to decode the American Dream.

The Origins of The Term

The philosophy started when "James Truslow Adams coined the term "the American Dream" in 1931, the phrase perhaps had more to do with the idealism at the heart of the American experience than simple material prosperity. The American Dream, he wrote in *The Epic of America*, is "that 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." (Elder, 2017). Samuel adds to that definition with the myriad meanings that have replaced it since then. The author has based his arguments and interpretation of the term by rummaging old print articles that have mentioned or discussed the American Dream. Samuel has taken great liberty and adapted much flexibility, and rightly so, to address the term in its varied forms. He goes back centuries before and earnestly attempts to read the meaning of the term, even before it was coined, through intellectual and philosophical arguments. He briefly scours the history of America and in a subtle manner, hints at the glamorization of America as a bait that many fell into without giving much thought. Samuel's endeavours to read between the lines of the idea of the American way of life, her culture and the aims and objectives of the American people to examine the ethos that drives the American people which constitutes the American Dream.

Moreover, the flexibility in Samuel's approach to understand the term is obvious as he has divided his book into six chapters with each chapter focusing on the shift that reinvents the term and "For each period, he examines cultural expressions about home ownership, upward mobility, individualism, and religiosity, among other things. He discusses optimism and pessimism, racialized and gendered failures of the Dream, advertisements, and movies." (Hochschild, 2016). The investigations into the all encompassing nature of the

book in terms of subjects that fall under the American Dream right from religion to economic freedom, stamp Samuel's work as an all-inclusive study that briefs the readers regarding matters that matter to humans and are associated with the American Dream. His study runs deep with the mention of the Puritans who arrive in America with the hope and belief that they could practice their faith without the fear of being prosecuted. By mentioning that, Samuel underlines the value of the most basic of liberties that America as a country, and nation, promotes and stands for. The influx of people to America from all the corners of the world happened for a reason. And that cause was the mindset of the people who believed that America was a country of freedom, equality and opportunities where hard work was rewarded and contributions made to society were appreciated.

Therefore, it can be said with absolute certainty that Samuel's observations regarding the American Dream are very well consistent with the Declaration of Independence that states, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." (Declaration of Independence: A Transcription, n.d.). With the aforementioned declarations, the natural course is the path of boundless opportunities and possibilities if it is practiced in letter and spirit. Additionally, If Samuel's analysis regarding the origins of the American Dream is compared with or interpreted in accordance with the Declaration of Independence, in every era, it comes to notice that he wonders whether it truly materializes in reality. That evidently comes across as a juxtaposition with no clear answer to the American Dream. The origins of the American Dream are found in the Declaration of Independence but what makes matters complicated is the abstractness that is involved with it. Samuel, with his meticulous methodology, dissects the cultural essence of the American nation and the manner in which it affects the American Dream in every way, be it freedom, economic mobility or the possibilities of opportunities. The correlation between America as a nation with its beliefs and the definition of James Adams on what America stands for are a complex entity together. What makes it complex are the varied notions of the people between the both of them.

The Role of Economy

With the advent of industrialization, Samuel is of the opinion that the focus of the American population turned to materialism. Agriculture took a backseat and a steady job with a steady income became the norm. It is interesting to note that industrialization and the objects of materialism sprung up at the same time. To take utmost advantage of both the situations, the American Dream took a different form – that of gaining ownership of the new things that money could buy which were mostly related to comfort. A car, a house and a steady income became the new American dream. Not to mention the desire to have a family that was well provided for. The distinct change in the definition of the American Dream which was firstly, or fundamentally, about an individual's rights where liberty was at its core, gave way to materialism. Success at the workplace and wealth in monetary terms became the new objective of the American populace. The enticing combination of money and comfort led to a change in the cultural fabric as well. Samuel distinctly hints at this change and opines that it was the primary cause the American Dream and opened the floodgates for her immigrants.

Hence, “In the story of America’s rise during the Industrial Revolution, there’s a crucial but often overlooked chapter: the role of foreign immigrants. These were individuals who, just like many of us today, came to the United States in search of hope and a better life. Their contributions were more than just labor; they were the backbone of businesses that turned the American Dream into a reality.” (How Foreign Immigrants Fueled the American Dream During the Industrial Revolution, 2024).

Consequently, immigrants that came from all the corners of the world merged themselves in the American culture to a certain extent. And that created a culture that was different than the one before the amalgamation. At the same time, the mixing of cultures was not complete, it was partial. There were immigrants who kept themselves to their own cultures as their sole aim was to take benefits of the economic prosperity that America offered. This created people with different ideas in a country which became a melting pot for the different cultures of the world. However, what bound them together was the American Dream that had then come to be defined as economic prosperity. Samuel credits the American people for coming together as one for the betterment of themselves. It can be said with great confidence that the passion with which the people worked hard to achieve the American Dream created America, rather than the country creating them. The pursuit of personal wealth, and through that their happiness, made them believe was the American Dream. The financial stability that America offered led to the creation of new housing projects which manifested in the forms of skyscrapers and also in the demand for land on which they were built, a sign of a booming economy. As a result, the interconnectedness between economic opportunities, migrants and the economic growth of America as a nation and country, replaced the American Dream of liberty and fundamental human rights and equality to economic prosperity that also promised better living standards and infinite possibilities.

Significantly, Samuel’s take on the Great Depression is worthy of note. The American Dream regarding financial prosperity gained more traction, belief and glamor after the stunning reversal America made to her fortunes after being in the doldrums. The spirit of the American Dream enamoured more people and it truly became an epitome of pomp and show. The attitudes of the American people became more pragmatic and a sense of pride got embedded in their psyche. America was no longer a country of a single identity. It became a country of identities. The American Dream was no longer just about liberty or economic prosperity because with each era, the definition got upgraded and included an assortment of diverse achievements that broadened the meaning of the American Dream. Samuel further brings into the picture the civil rights movement that runs parallel to the economic growth to broaden the scope of the American Dream. His intention is clear – to let the readers know that not was all hunky dory in the American way of life and that equality was not that ‘white’ America was ready to offer so easily. The authors take is unbiased as he also mentions the civil rights movement to end racism and promote equality. The fight for gender equality and other social changes were indirectly linked to the economic growth. With job opportunities available easily for both sexes, the family structure was redefined and with disposable incomes at hand, the surge in spending went unabated. Ultimately, the economic upturn not only resulted in wealth creation but also influenced social changes that were in accordance with the American Dream.

The Role of Culture

The definition of culture is of an all encompassing nature related to the way of life of a people. But that definition does not suffice. That is so because the definition of American culture has to be taken into consideration which is vastly different from the other cultures of the world due to its diverse nature. Therefore, to give it a proper description, it can be said that, “Defining American culture in simple terms is not as easy as it may seem. American culture is not only defined by its fast-paced lifestyle, fashion, and “to-go” coffee cups. It is also the culture of many diversity, different religions, races, and ethnicities. It is a culture that nourishes competition and political correctness, and also tries to enforce the freedom of speech. Some would say that American culture is contradictory, a flux of different people and values.” (Čirjak, 2020). The thread that binds that spectrum of variety together consists of the components of music, movies, literature, sports and television. Samuel dives deeply into this aspect of cultural phenomena and dissects it to understand their role. It becomes necessary to fathom the role of Hollywood which portrayed America as a land of glamor, wealth and success. The multiple rags-to-riches stories of actors and the freedom with which one can involve themselves in arts through unbridled freedom of expression appealed to the people and became one more addition to the definition of the American Dream. In fact, Hollywood became the chief contributor to the image of the American Dream as its reach was more effective and impactful than any other medium.

Additionally, Lawrence Samuel attributes the role of literature, the different forms of music and television series to be sources that played their part very well in promoting and defining the American Dream. The gradual shift that took place in the perception of the people in and outside America because of the media included the idea that a person from any corner of the world is accepted into the American fold warmly. Literature, especially fiction, harped on the themes that ranged from a life that was adventurous, exciting and offered anything and everything from love to happiness. This image that was created was actually quite different from reality. The projection of America became more of a heavenly destination that offered an individual to live a life on their own terms without any interference by the society or the law. The larger than life depiction of the American Dream was further accentuated through music. The anthems that were sung in praise of America created a sense of superiority in being American. The lyrics and the videos that came along with the songs made it seem that the American Dream was a life where everything came easy. Samuel believes that all was a monumental shift from the days when America was considered to be a land that rewarded hard work and provided the opportunities for it. The American Dream was now about comfort that could be gained easily. The role of the media was paramount to emboss the consciousness of people with the belief that anything that was American was good and the rest of the world could not catch up to them in any way. However, Samuel opines that all mediums through which the American Dream was propagated went overboard in their efforts to such an extent that they were not only misleading but also not factual in many ways.

The Busting of the Myth

The earlier meanings of the American Dream had philosophical values but the meaning got corrupted in its later versions. Even the earlier moral and ethical codes of conduct were never practiced entirely or everywhere in the country. The most important promise made by the idea of the American Dream was economic prosperity. Samuel points out that things were never what they were made to believe and the American dream was an unreal objective to achieve in its entirety. To a great extent, economy got the people together making them forget their differences, but overall, the American Dream was never achieved. Samuel scratches the shiny surface with facts and gets to the layers beneath it that tell a different story altogether. In recent times, the economic downturn has caused a dramatic rise in poverty levels and the gap between the haves and have-nots is ever widening. The cost of homes has shot through the roof making housing unaffordable. The rising taxes and growing unemployment has put a new spin on the term the American Dream. So much so that it has changed the way Americans were living decades before as it has affected every aspect of their life. To sum it up, “From the historically unaffordable housing market and budget-breaking day care rates to high car prices, the United States has a cost of living problem many years in the making. Parents of young children are making difficult choices to afford child care — or they’re opting to evade it by dropping out of the workforce altogether. Parents are also struggling to buy bigger cars to haul around their growing families while simultaneously socking away some money in college savings plans. For too many, the American Dream feels like an illusion.” (Egan, M, 2024).

This change, that has occurred over the decades that includes an absolute control over its population by the government through laws that range from taxation to restrictions in certain areas that did not exist before, has slowed down the progress of America in such a way that the American Dream myth has been busted according to Samuel’s. The rise in poverty levels which is directly connected to unemployment and the lack of investment in America by big corporations. The author has stressed on the fact that the American Dream was purely understood by most as economic prosperity. All the other meanings throughout the decades never gained precedence over financial security. However, the creation of wealth, which was the very foundation of the American Dream seems to have weakened in the present times. The prime example of it is the manner in which laws that protected the workers, were over a period of time, struck down in favour of huge corporations. Gender inequalities at the work place still exist and racism has never been completely erased from the American consciousness. Through those findings, the author is certain that the term called the American Dream was just that, a dream. It’s presence in reality was non-existent. Consequently, “The American Dream is just that, a dream, and reality is in direct opposition to that. No doubt there exists people who are able to rise from poverty to immense wealth, but there is no grand movement or equal opportunity enabling this rise. To pretend that there is, contributes to the dehumanization and disenfranchisement of American citizens.” (Wang, 2021).

The Future That Awaits

Samuel expresses his concerns regarding the future of America and the American Dream by breaking down the spheres in which the most difficult challenges lie ahead. It's no wonder that he considers globalization a major threat because that's what is really hurting the American economy. The outsourcing of work to countries where cheap labour is available is a worrying matter that needs to be addressed. He mentions the collapse of the manufacturing sector in which America prided itself. The difficulties faced by the middle class and the shrinking of that class can directly be blamed on the closure of manufacturing units that were caught in the complex maze of taxation and government policies that failed them. The American economy stood steadily on small manufacturing units that are now almost extinct as the competition that they faced from cheap labour countries was impossible to win. The reason being the government did not offer them the safety net that was needed against lopsided business policies. Samuel reiterates that the American Dream was built on self-sufficiency and that policy should not have been tampered with. High employment levels were the foundations of the American Dream and they now are on a downward spiral with no easy solution in sight.

Additionally, the author brings up the threat posed by technology which is the prime reason that jobs are taken away from the American people. A recent study shed light on this issue and came up with the following conclusion – “The study uses new methods to examine how many jobs have been lost to machine automation, and how many have been generated through “augmentation,” in which technology creates new tasks. On net, the study finds, and particularly since 1980, technology has replaced more U.S. jobs than it has generated.” (Dizikes, 2024). Therefore, the concerns raised by Samuel are right and cannot be disputed. The current state of America, with its inclination to let technology do the jobs of the American people acts as a spoke in the wheel of the American Dream. Samuel is of the opinion that somewhere along the way to make America better, the fundamentals of the character of the country and nation were tampered with which led to the disruption of the American progress. In an era where economic prosperity and independence from dependence meant living the American Dream, it was so because job creation and guaranteed employment was the core policy of the American ethos. However, in the later decades, that situation changed drastically and the American Dream no longer existed. However, Samuel ends the book on a positive note and still hopeful that America can regain its lost glory. He suggests ways in which it can be regained. Ultimately, the fact remains that if America has to redefine itself, it has to go back to its roots regarding economic policies.

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