

Special Article

The Resilience of Myth: The Politics of the American Dream

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During the twentieth century the myth of the American dream, synonymous with upward mobility and especially ownership of a single-family detached house, became a mainstay of the American political system and of American popular culture. The economic crisis of 2006–2012 profoundly shook confidence in this myth. In consequence, the myth-dream has been exposed to unprecedented efforts to abandon, critique, redefine and appropriate it. This essay analyzes those efforts and what they demonstrate about the vulnerability and durability of myth in the American political and cultural landscape.

The American dream: it is a concept, an aspiration, and an expectation, so well known it seldom seems to need explaining. The underlying principles — expectations of upward mobility and, more recently, homeownership — date as far back as the early nineteenth century, while the term itself is nearly a century old. Over that century the term has borne several different definitions; still, those using it, whether in print or daily discourse, typically dedicate little, if any, time to explaining it. In one notable instance, a Time-Life book titled *The American Dream: The 50s*, published in 1998, declared its very subject to be the American dream, yet it never defined or explained what that meant — it was simply taken for granted that readers would know. Such has been the widespread and enduring credence given to this guiding ideal in American life.

Integral to the genealogy of this term, its persisting role as a cornerstone of contemporary political and social discourse, is its status as a premier and lasting American myth: an object of common understanding that embodies broadly held cultural aspirations and expectations. While “myth,” as a concept, admits of multiple definitions, this essay takes it to mean a guiding set of understandings and beliefs that serve to organize in a very practical way the relationship between human consciousness and the physical environment. In other words, myth establishes a framework and sets the terms by which people encounter, comprehend and shape social relations and the space around them.

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By their very nature, myths are frequently, and in large measure, political. They have much to do with establishing the role and place of the citizen in society, and even organizing the ways citizens conduct daily life. In this sense, the crucial role of myth is often to sustain the relationship between the citizen, the broader culture, and social and political institutions. But a central goal of this essay is to examine how the role of myth also works inversely: how a myth may be turned against the prevailing regime when social and material circumstances no longer correspond to the expectations and understandings incorporated in it, and how it may then become a site for the interrogation and contestation of political positions and institutions.

The American dream has long been bound up with America's politics and political ideology, and for the most part the relationship has been harmonious. When in the 1920s ownership of a single-family house became woven into the dream as one of its central components, it was for deliberately political purposes: the dream house would become the standard material artifact accepted as fulfillment of the dream-myth. The rapid expansion of single-family housing after mid-century, by accelerating the numbers of Americans realizing the dream, thus became a principal mechanism of American political stability and economic prosperity. And for the remainder of the century this arrangement worked. Indeed, it embodied all the hallmarks of a highly successful myth: it was taken for granted, as a bedrock tenet of American citizenship and culture, that to have that single-family house was to fulfill the dream, and it was assumed that to fulfill the dream was to have "made it" in America.

The myth functioned collectively, too. The fact that homeownership continued to be extended across the population demonstrated the success of the United States as a nation and a political system. Myth thus became a template for tradition, specifically in the form of the single-family house — or, more precisely, the detached single-nuclear-family house — widely understood to be the locus of the "traditional" American family. And despite the preponderance of multigenerational households prior to World War II, the widespread presence of other, multifamily housing types, and the fact that "nontraditional" households today far outnumber "traditional" households, the single-family house remains the iconic American ideal. By virtue of housing as much of the population as it does, and by serving as a template that shapes the experience of those who live and grow up in them, this object of the dream-myth normalizes, replicates and instructs future generations in the apparatus and practices of tradition.

But what happens when a myth fails? Or, more precisely in this case, what happens when U.S. citizens find that the American dream-myth doesn't work for them the way that it is supposed to? What happens when those playing by its rules discover that success eludes them, that they haven't made it — indeed, that they can't make it? A simplistic answer would be to imagine that people would suddenly see the myth in another

sense — as a fallacy or falsehood. But the recent course of events, from the housing bubble of the early 2000s through the mortgage crisis and Great Recession of the late 2000s and its lingering effects in the 2010s, shows that despite crisis and despair, the power of the American dream-myth remains durable. Instead of blaming the myth — which would effectively entail rejecting deeply held beliefs — the crisis has thus afforded opportunities to look inside and behind the myth, to question whose interests it favors and whose precipitated its breakdown. Simultaneously, other, opportunistic interests have also taken advantage of the occasion to revitalize the dream by recasting it in terms favorable to themselves.

In this process, as circumstances have fallen out of alignment with beliefs and expectations, temporary moments of political consciousness have appeared — when the functioning of myth as a critical nexus between the political system and the practices of daily material life have been opened to scrutiny and interrogation. In other words, as material conditions have made the myth seem increasingly unattainable — indeed, thwarted the aspirations of many to achieve it — the myth has temporarily ceased to be an instrument for sustaining the political system, and instead become a fulcrum for interrogating it and potentially changing, or even hijacking it. The goal of this essay is to chronicle this process as it has unfolded in recent American history.

THE POLITICAL GENEALOGY OF THE DREAM

The American dream is, and always has been, critically allied with American politics. This condition was never more apparent than in October 1956, at the height of the Cold War, on the eve of the crisis of the Hungarian Revolution, when *House Beautiful* issued a "Report to the World on How Americans Live," pretentiously prepared to be "distributed, in sizable quantities, to all other countries of the world." Several articles in this volume tellingly focused on the private house, with titles such as "Everybody Can Own a House" and "The People's Capitalism" — both clear rejoinders to Soviet socialist practices. The keynote essay by *House Beautiful's* editorial director, Joseph A. Barry, titled "America — Body and Soul," encapsulated the role of the single-family house in fulfilling the American dream, and thus its importance for America's success and global hegemony:

To own one's home! Has this not been part of the democratic dream? . . . To have a good life while knowing the same good life is being enjoyed by most of the people around you. Here is a moral basis for civilization that has never before existed on so grand a scale.¹

In this overly jingoistic celebration of the single-family house as the redemption of civilization, Barry nevertheless encapsulated five core principles that have, over time, consis-

FIGURE 1. *Federal National Mortgage Association headquarters, Washington, D.C. Photo by author.*



tently tied ownership of the single-family house not only to fulfillment of the dream but also to the hegemony of American capitalism: (a) it is a private, personal possession, ownership of which (b) furthers democracy, (c) encapsulates the good life, (d) articulates a moral vision, and (e) epitomizes the height of civilization. While few American homeowners or politicians would ever speak in such grandiose terms, these ideals have operated on many levels, from the tax deductibility of home mortgages to the very architecture of the Federal National Mortgage Association headquarters in Washington, D.C. (FIG. 1). Erected during the same period as when Barry wrote his essay, this massive, sprawling edifice is wrapped in a brick-and-white-trim veneer that couches (or conceals) in colonial-Williamsburg domesticity the immense Washington bureaucracy inside. The message is that the business of this quasi-governmental agency is all about citizens owning a home, that homeownership is their most important product. Not to let the implicit connection with the dream go unstated, during 2000 and 2001 this agency's National Public Radio credit line reaffirmed its *raison d'être*: "We're in the American Dream Business."²

The political roots of this dream extend at least as far back as the turn of the nineteenth century, to the beliefs of Thomas Jefferson and many of his contemporaries that the American republic required a population of independent gentleman farmers. Individual farmsteads, maintained by self-reliant men of virtue, would provide a foundation for the new nation. By mid-century, individualist pioneers staking out homesteads across the continent were celebrated as agents of American political and economic triumph, the nation's manifest destiny. Embedded in such a vision was the notion of opportunity: the ideal of the United States as a country whose citizens were free to realize their ambitions through their own diligent efforts.

Henry Clay articulated this ideal of the "self-made man" on the floor of the U.S. Senate in an 1832 speech urging protectionist trade barriers that would safeguard Americans' entrepreneurial opportunities. It was soon amplified and widely popularized through books such as John Frost's *Self Made Men of America* (1848) and Charles Seymore's *Self Made Men* (1858). The ideal gained further momentum by means of rags-to-riches stories such as Horatio Alger's *Ragged Dick: Or, Street Life in New York with the Bootblacks* (1866). This work ultimately became a series of more than a hundred books, selling an estimated twenty million copies, and emphasizing opportunities for people to achieve great success by pulling themselves up by their bootstraps. Popularizers such as Russell Conwell, whose "Acres of Diamonds" lecture, delivered more than six thousand times before his death in 1925, also preached self-directed industriousness and perseverance. And Dale Carnegie, whose books *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936) and *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living* (1948) became common household reading, solidified the dream-myth of America as a land of opportunity for self-made success.

Despite the widespread appeal of the ideal, the term itself, "American dream," did not appear in common usage until 1931, when historian James Truslow Adams, in his best-selling *Epic of America*, employed it to help explain what he called the structure of the American mind. In thus characterizing the myth as deeply lodged in an ideological register, he acknowledged its ongoing primacy and power in American politics. In passages where Adams discussed the dream in detail, his recurring theme was equal opportunity, affording access for all to a trajectory of success:

[T]he American dream [is] the belief in the common man and the insistence upon his having, as far as possible, equal opportunity in every way with the rich one.

...

[T]he American dream [is] that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement.

Despite the worsening outlook for any such success in the Depression year when Adams was writing, his historical perspective allowed him to sketch the evolution of the myth into an American ideological imperative: “It was on frontier after frontier of his vast domain that the American dream could be prolonged until it became part of the very structure of the American mind.”³

Meanwhile, the process of conjoining the single-family house with the American dream, effectively establishing a material benchmark for individual or family achievement, originated in the 1920s as a product of political and economic policy. Beginning early in the decade, government policy under the Warren G. Harding and Calvin Coolidge administrations progressively evolved to establish the ownership of a single-family detached house as the goal of every American family. The campaign was undertaken both in response to the specter of Bolshevism as well as in the interest of American capitalist enterprise. One of its central goals was to bind as many Americans as possible to the American political system through property ownership. As then Vice President Coolidge argued in 1922 in “A Nation of Home-Owners,” capitalism could not prevail without widespread ownership of property. It was “time to demonstrate more effectively that property is of the people,” which he proposed to do by urging “America to become a nation of home-owners.”⁴

As Secretary of Commerce under Harding and Coolidge, Herbert Hoover also played an instrumental role in this process. Concerned in part about the spread of Bolshevism, he actively orchestrated federal government support for homeownership. As he wrote in the opening line of his 1922 best-selling tract *American Individualism*, “we have witnessed in this last eight years the spread of revolution over one-third of the world.”⁵ And heeding the interests of those he represented through his portfolio at the Commerce Department, he argued that America could best secure immunity from this threat by broadening participation in the capitalist economy — specifically, through homeownership.

As Hoover wrote in a foreword to the 1923 government-produced manual *How to Own Your Home*, “The present large proportion of families that own their own homes is the foundation of a sound economic and social system and a guarantee that our society will continue to develop rationally as changing conditions demand.” He set a goal of “maintaining a high percentage of individual home owners,” because they “have

an interest in the advancement of a social system that permits the individual to store up the fruits of his labor.”⁶ In 1925 Coolidge went Hoover one better, suggesting that ownership of property in the form of a single-family homes was, in effect, a patriotic duty: “No greater contribution could be made to assure the stability of the Nation, and the advancement of its ideals, than to make it a Nation of home-owning families.”⁷

EMBRACING THE DREAM IN POPULAR CULTURE

The force of such a national campaign promoting single-family homeownership as a national ideal and a patriotic duty found resonance in popular culture. In 1926 a recording was made by Earle Fox and Lynn Cowan of the song “Dream House” that would become a standard for decades to come (and the first of numerous songs about dream houses through the remainder of the century). As its first line announced, “I’ve got a secret to tell you.” The suitor’s lyrics went on to describe a “cozy little dream house” that had just been built, in which “happiness” was already waiting for his chosen love. Even the “preacher man” was waiting; all that was missing was a response of “YES” to the proposal of marriage, children, and happy domesticity that this vision of a dream house conveyed.⁸

Within the next several decades popular culture readily propagated and solidified the dream-house ideal across other mass media. The daydream sequence in the 1936 Charlie Chaplin film *Modern Times* centers on a suburban bungalow in which the lead characters imagine themselves enjoying the good life. In *Miracle on 34th Street* (1947), the Christmas wishes of young Susan are similarly realized in a house she spots for sale, and in which her mother and her lawyer friend ultimately decide to get married, fulfilling Susan’s hopes. The dream house took a title role in *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* (1948), starring Cary Grant and Myrna Loy. And the “somewhere that’s green” daydream sequence in *Little Shop of Horrors* (1986) features a house that realizes heroine Audrey’s trinity of class, social and marital aspirations. These and countless other representations of the dream in film and television progressively established and reinforced the single-family house as both the premier instrument for achieving the American dream and the premier mechanism for signifying that its owner had “made it.”

In the mid-1940s, with the end of World War II in view, marketers of building products and appliances seized this dream-house ideal as a fertile opportunity for commercial expansion. Using images of detached, suburban, single-nuclear-family houses as dream-objects, companies such as General Electric, Kelvinator, and others established the dream house as the justifiable expectation of returning GIs and their families after years of separation, privation and loss. As early as 1943 General Electric was producing advertisements featuring daydreaming GIs and their brides envisioning houses

filled with consumer appliances.⁹ A 1959 *Saturday Evening Post* cover imaginatively expanded the scope of the dream to literally include constellations of commodities, as a young couple sitting under a nighttime sky spots all the elements of their future life outlined in the stellar patterns above — a pool, two cars, two pets, three children, a stereo, a television, a washer and dryer, a drill press, an air conditioner, and an assortment of other appliances (FIG. 2).¹⁰ In 1962 the first of many versions of Barbie's Dream House also appeared, disseminating the dream-house ideal ever more widely, educating future American housewives as to what they should expect and strive for.

In music, too, songs such as “Dream House for Sale” (Joe and Rose Lee Maphis, 1953), “Dream House” (John Eddie, 1986), and others centering on dream houses such as Bing Crosby’s “Dear Hearts and Gentle People” (1950), “My Heart Wasn’t in It” (Neal Coty, 1995), and “Dream House” (jp jones, 2000) affirmed and reinforced the single-family house as an aspirational ideal. Not every song was a record of success, however. Red Sovine’s “Dream House for Sale,” one of the top country hits of 1964, was cast in the form of a newspaper advertisement, its lyrics portraying a life of ruined dreams, now encapsulated in the forlorn emptiness of the erstwhile “dream house”:

*I was looking through the morning paper . . .
When I saw an ad that caught my eye. . .
One dream house for sale. . .
[T]here's no closing costs for the dreams I lost
When the girl I loved left town. . .
The only thing wrong with this house of mine
Is the black cloud that hangs above.
I guess it's there to keep out the sunshine
Since mine was a house without love.*¹¹

A video produced by the Kottonmouth Kings to accompany the 1997 film *Scream 2* featured a far more acerbic recognition that the dream was not working:

*Now my pops bought the system, American dreamer
Bought a new home and a brand new Beemer
But it didn't take long for things to fall apart
Because the system that he bought ain't got no heart
From the bills for days he got blood shot eyes
The American dream was a pack of lies.*¹²

Such tales of downfall and defeat were nevertheless a testament to the pervasive hold exerted by the dream-myth across all sectors of American life, extending well beyond the middle class to encompass rural blue-collar audiences and those attuned to urban and suburban hip-hop. They were tales of exception, chronicling that moment of disillusionment when the system and all of its promises fail and the dream is exposed as a sham, “a pack of lies.” However, typically, such

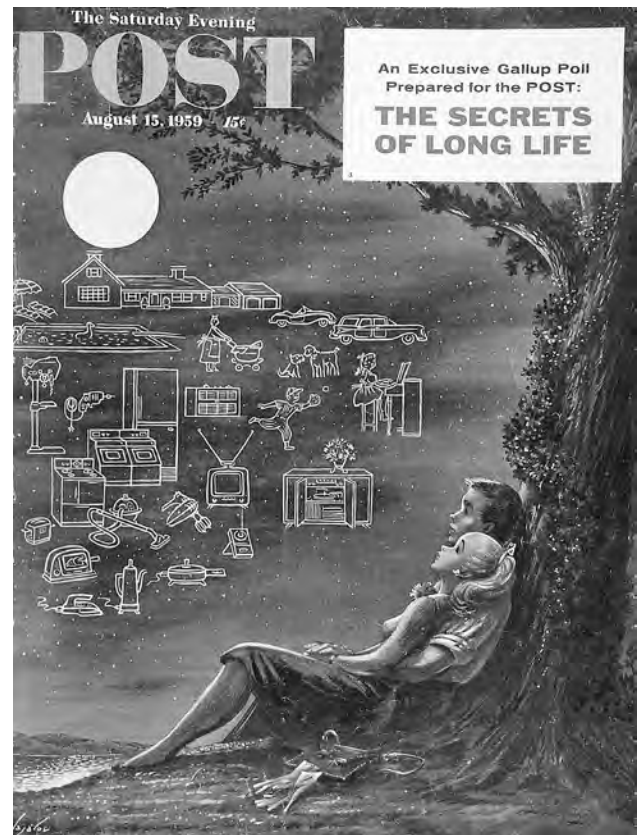


FIGURE 2. *Saturday Evening Post*, August 15, 1959, cover.

moments were understood to be individual exceptions, tales of glitches and misfits, not yet the wholesale disillusion that spread during the massive economic crisis that would come early in the new millennium.

Indeed, throughout the twentieth century, when adverse economic or social conditions tested the promise of the dream, the myth remained resilient, rebutting or even refuting the challenges confronting it. Thus, while the Depression forced many from their homes and precipitated widespread downward mobility, films such as *Modern Times* and books such as Dale Carnegie’s continued to sustain dream-house and self-betterment ideals. And in the 1960s and 1970s, despite the widespread and popular savaging of suburbia, its residents, and their aspirations — as evident in songs such as “Little Boxes” (Malvina Reynolds, 1963), “Pleasant Valley Sunday” (The Monkees, 1966), and “Subdivision Blues” (Tom T. Hall, 1973), or films such as *Over the Edge* (1979) — ever greater numbers of people ultimately chose houses in the suburbs that aspired to the dream-house ideal.

More recently, exasperation with the social and environmental effects of sprawl called the prevailing manifestation of the dream into question. *Newsweek*’s cover of May 15, 1995, sported the banner headline “Bye-Bye, Suburban Dream,” and complained that much of America had reached “the



FIGURE 3. “American Dream Is Back.” USA Today, April 7, 1998, cover.

point at which each new subdivision subtracts more from the quality of life than the new inhabitants will contribute to the economy by buying wind chimes, mesquite logs and Navajomotif throw rugs.” Still, any loss of confidence in the dream was short-lived. Indeed, by 1998, just a year after the Kottonmouth Kings’ acerbic lament, a *USA Today* cover story sported the bold headline, “American dream is back: Housing market riding ‘incredible’ wave” (FIG. 3).¹³ As it proclaimed, progress toward the dream had only been temporarily interrupted. And the cover photo of McMansions under construction affirmed that progress had resumed toward the realization of ever greater dreams through ever more monumental houses. The fundamental political myth of widespread opportunity for upward mobility, quintessentially realized in ownership of a “dream home,” remained stalwartly intact.

REAL ESTATE COLLAPSE AND RECESSION: FAILED DREAM

The first years of the new millennium promised to demonstrate the vitality of the dream on a scale never before seen, as easy mortgage money expanded homeownership opportunities to segments of the population for whom the dream had previously seemed unattainable. Politicians were only too eager to reinforce and capitalize on this trend. In 2001 President George W. Bush stated in a radio address that “homeownership lies at the heart of the American Dream,” and he urged all

Americans “to make the American Dream a reality for more families.”¹⁴ His administration began doing just that through a series of initiatives in 2002. First came a white paper, “A Home of Your Own,” issued over the president’s name.¹⁵ Next, the Department of Housing and Urban Development issued a “Blueprint for the American Dream.”¹⁶ The American Dream Downpayment Act of 2003 then explicitly aimed to assist minorities in their efforts to become homeowners.¹⁷ Unmistakably mirroring Coolidge administration policy, and clearly cognizant of the crucial political role of the dream myth, Bush administration policy sought to commit as much of the population as possible to property ownership. As part of that process, the political and economic identities of ever more citizens became tied, for better or worse, to the fortunes of an economic regime in which the imperatives of property, finance and capital soon displaced the interests and very expectations of citizenship they had once promised to fulfill.

The political association of housing with the American dream had originally been an undertaking of the 1920s — which, like the first decade of the twenty-first century, was a period of overconfident financial expansion. But those harmed by the financial collapse of the Depression (and of the periodic recessions thereafter) amounted to only a fraction of those who committed themselves to the real estate market during the bubble of the early 2000s. Those who would be swept up in this new collapse constituted a segment of the population whose numbers and demographic breadth were impossible to ignore.

It might be expected that such an extensive failure would result in the dream being discredited and abandoned. When conditions change so much that they undermine and subvert a myth, and when trying to live in accordance with it becomes a widespread exercise in frustration and failure, it could easily have been forsaken. Instead, what happened bespeaks not only the power of this particular myth, anchored as it is in two centuries of American social and political history and wedded to private-property-based American capitalism, but also the potency of myth itself as a fundamental and necessary component of the American polity.

The remainder of this essay explores six different (though overlapping) respects in which this crisis has engendered intensive debate and activity — engaging dream and myth, often critically, but not always with a willingness to abandon either. These six respects, mapping different directions in which responses to the crisis have unfolded, took form as follows: as declarations that the dream was “only a myth,” thus challenging its very authority; as attempts to maintain the authority of the dream by redefining it in other, more sustainable, terms; as efforts to shore up the dream in its original form so that it could remain an aspirational force in American politics and society; as political and economic critiques of the dream, leveraging its collapse to mobilize widespread disaffection with the American political system; as overt politicization of the dream to advance partisan electoral politics; and as advertising campaigns to hijack the dream, in efforts to bind the dreamer to commercial interests through opportunistic marketing.

DECLARING THE DREAM IS “ONLY A MYTH”

The word “myth” bears a number of significations. In popular parlance, it often functions as a synonym for fantasy or deception. But in academic discourse, it commonly is understood as a central component in processes by which cultures establish and legitimize themselves. The American dream-myth, as described here as a set of guiding principles and beliefs, has functioned in the latter sense for the past two centuries. Nevertheless, at a moment of crisis, when expectations in accordance with those principles and beliefs could no longer be sustained, it became possible to condemn the guiding principles as fictive, or even as outright misrepresentations.

In *Second-Rate Nation: From the American Dream to the American Myth* (2005), Sam D. Sieber did just that. Analyzing what he saw as the accelerating decline of the United States as a country and a society, he concluded that a long-term process of degradation since the 1960s had become “a gradual shift from the traditional American Dream to a full-blown American Myth.” A dream, he explained, is “a fond vision of the future,” while “[a] myth is a theatrical celebration of past and present with little substance, and in fact conceals the emptiness of the present under false colors of greatness

as a means of assuaging anxiety.” Thus, the American Myth, embracing the notion that “in spite of its flaws, the United States is the best country in the world,” was nothing more than “the American Dream running on empty.”¹⁸ While not necessarily blaming the erstwhile dream for America’s decline, Sieber did identify the collapse of the dream into the empty and deceptive sort of myth as complicit in, and to an extent responsible for, America’s decline.

In a similar vein, Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph E. Stiglitz, Chairman of the Council of Economic Advisors in the Clinton administration and a harsh critic of economic inequalities under American capitalism, identified the dream-myth as having deliberately misled Americans. In *The Price of Inequality: How Today’s Divided Society Endangers Our Future*, which appeared in 2012 in the wake of the Great Recession, he discounted the promises of opportunity and upward mobility integral to the American dream as the deceptive kind of myth, a lie: “America has always thought of itself as a land of *equal opportunity*. Horatio Alger stories, of individuals who made it from the bottom to the top, are part of American folklore.” But, he wrote, “increasingly, the American dream that saw the country as a land of opportunity began to seem just that: a dream, a myth, reinforced by anecdotes and stories, but not supported by the data.”¹⁹ The effect of the dream-myth, in other words, was a travesty: those who aspired to its fictive objects could do nothing but fail.

At the same time these writers have sought to show that the American dream is based on falsehoods, the Center for the Study of the American Dream at Xavier University in Cincinnati, a Jesuit institution, has sought to document this empirically. This has involved efforts to establish concrete grounds on which to benchmark the dream, approaching it in terms of qualities that can be quantified and measured. Paradoxically, the center’s extensive website offers no clear definition of its object of study; however, some inference as to its crucial role can be gleaned from the assertion that “[t]he American dream defines our aspirations; it is these aspirations and their connected values that distinguish us in the world.”

The center’s publications are heavily focused on information derived from surveys, which in turn center on such issues as whether immigrants should pass a civic literacy test or whether elected officials have lost sight of the American dream, however defined. Its flagship report is a periodically updated chart called the American Dream Composite Index, which amalgamates several proprietary statistical measures, including an economic index, a well-being index, a societal index, a diversity index (i.e., respondents’ “level of satisfaction with diversity”), and an environment index. Yet what is most notable with respect to the center’s work is that it has radically undermined the practical role of the American dream as a foundational myth. To clear up any “myths” surrounding the dream (and thereby authenticate this version of the dream), it has identified five specific myths (i.e., falsehoods) that have corrupted the dream. Among these are that “Homeowner-

ship is the American dream” and that “The American dream is American.”²⁰ Thus recasting the dream in terms that reject its longstanding role as a foundational American myth, the center has attempted to divorce the dream not only from homeownership but, even more remarkably, from America.

REDEFINING THE DREAM

In the eyes of many such as Stiglitz, the disconnect between the deceptive optimism of the dream-myth and the incapacity of the American economy to fulfill people’s hopes ought to have accelerated public recognition of deficiencies in the nation’s capital- and property-centric economic system. But for many, it was impossible to abandon the appeal of myth itself, or the confident optimism that it sustained. Faced with crisis, there has therefore been ample incentive to redefine the dream in more attainable terms.

As early as 1980 Studs Terkel laid important groundwork for this understanding in his book *American Dreams: Lost and Found*. By pluralizing “dream” to “dreams,” Terkel focused not on the collective dream, participation in which bound Americans to aspirations of upward class mobility and homeownership, but rather on individual stories of people pursuing their own personal hopes and ideals based more in their particular life trajectories than a collective social enterprise. In parallel fashion, Dan Rather’s collection *The American Dream: Stories from the Heart of Our Nation* (2001) recounted the stories of individuals defining their own versions of the dream — from living off the land, to serving God or country, to simply starting a family. More recently, in 2012, in the face of the Great Recession, Fox News Latino broadcast a series of very particularized portraits under the common headline “Our American Dream,” which highlighted stories of individual immigrants achieving remarkable success. As with the work of Terkel and Rather, these portraits cast the dream quite narrowly in terms of fulfilling individual trajectories, such as becoming a hotel manager at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas or winning a Small Business Administration award for entrepreneurial success. Perhaps inadvertently, the series nevertheless made it clear that these individuals were outliers, succeeding despite the odds and challenges faced by so many others.

By detaching particular narratives from the common, collective myth, efforts such as these have become one way to redefine the dream without abandoning it, in terms that are more individually achievable, if less universally recognizable. Other approaches to redefining the dream have maintained the notion of a common and collective myth, but recast it in terms of radically different sets of issues. Abandoning such traditional concerns as upward mobility and homeownership, the Center for a New American Dream, founded in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 1997, has instead focused on consumption, quality of life, and environment. On a webpage titled “Redefining the Dream,” the center thus recast the dream as “[i]

nspiring, engaging, and challenging Americans to re-examine their cultural values on consumption and consumerism and initiating a new national conversation around what ‘the good life’ and the ‘American dream’ mean.”²¹ The definition of the dream, in other words, was now up for grabs, as the center sought to appropriate the rhetorical value of the term to address issues of consumption and sustainability.

The Museum of Modern Art has similarly taken advantage of the opportunity to advance a reformist social agenda. In 2011 it mounted a large and highly publicized exhibition, including a series of associated public forums and publications, titled “Foreclosed: Rehousing the American Dream.” Nominally concerned with housing as an instrument for pursuing or achieving the dream, MOMA’s featured text was “The Buell Hypothesis,” produced by the Buell Center at Columbia University in 2011. Like the architectural and urbanistic projects on exhibit, this report focuses quite narrowly on affordable and sustainable housing. It leaves the impression that the dream could be realized by virtue of a population being housed according to two common criteria, equity and sustainability — rather than in terms of personal aspiration and achievement.

In 2010, as the housing crisis persisted and the economy stagnated, others defined the problem in terms of fixing the wreckage: redefining the dream in terms that could fill the void that the collapse had produced. Since the myth had not delivered, Tom Hartmann’s book *Rebooting the American Dream* sent the dream back to the drawing board. Hartmann’s dream, thus recast, yielded “11 ways to rebuild our country,” ranging from rolling back the Reagan tax cuts to “Put Lou Dobbs out to Pasture” — a panoply of objectives that no longer added up to a coherent dream, but rather suggested pragmatic fixes to immediate problems.²² Later that year *Time* magazine took up the very same problem of regenerating the dream, in an issue whose cover showed a house fronted by a withered, decaying picket fence. Yet its featured essay, by Fareed Zakaria, “How to Restore the American Dream,” omitted any mention of housing, upward class mobility, or other aspirations by which the dream was once recognized. Instead, it outlined specific fixes for the American economy, ranging from job creation and investment to training and education.²³ “Restoring the American Dream: Getting Back to Work,” a program aired on CNN in September 2011, also featuring Zakaria, narrowed the focus even more. Virtually jettisoning the ideal of a dream house, it focused simply on job creation. “If there’s an idea of the heart of the American dream, it’s surely a job. A family, a house, two cars to be sure. But at the center, a good job and rising wages.”²⁴ Simply repairing the economy so that it would function better seemed to have become the new American dream.

In the above cases and in parallel efforts elsewhere — such as redefining the dream as unfettered property rights, unhindered entrepreneurialism, restoration of economic productivity, more available and affordable housing, and (not

least) the freedom for anyone to delineate the dream on their own terms, however idiosyncratic — the effect of the political and economic crisis has generally not been to expose and challenge deficiencies in the underlying political and economic system. Rather, it has essentially been to blame the messenger — that is, the dream that embodied and signified the principles and processes built into the system. The remedy, in effect, has been to recast and redefine the messenger-dream-myth in terms that are more pragmatic, or more attuned to narrow interests, leaving the system itself intact.

SHORING UP THE DREAM

In 2002 and 2003 the Bush administration had already undertaken a series of initiatives, described above, aimed at broadening the base of those who could aspire to and perhaps achieve the dream. Although the American Dream Downpayment Act (2003) and President Bush's support for it were underreported in the mainstream press, Bush emphasized a vision that involved expanding the population of American-dream aspirants to include those historically most disenfranchised from it. In an address at the St. Paul AME Church in Atlanta on June 17, 2002, Bush framed his remarks (as had Hoover eighty years before) in terms of defending America and its freedoms against foreign threat, and he opened with a reference to the "60,000 troops fighting terrorism so that we can be free, all of us can be free." The rest of the speech focused on increasing the rate of minority homeownership. His approach was to tout the appeal of the American dream, to make it desirable and appear attainable for minorities, ultimately in hopes of recruiting them into the ranks of homeowners. As Bush attested:

I do believe in the American Dream. I believe there is such a thing as the American Dream. And I believe those of us who have been given positions of responsibility must do everything we can to spotlight the dream and to make sure the dream shines in all neighborhoods, all throughout our country. Owning a home is a part of that dream, it just is. Right here in America if you own your own home, you're realizing the American Dream.

Bush emphasized that he was counting on the dream to perform a specific role — namely, to provide the necessary motivation to propel its new adherents to homeownership:

Now, we've got a problem here in America that we have to address. Too many American families, too many minorities do not own a home. There is a homeownership gap in America. The difference between Anglo America and African American and Hispanic home ownership is too big. . . . And so that's why I propose and urge Congress to fully fund the American Dream

*Downpayment Fund. This will use money, taxpayers' money to help a qualified, low income buyer make a downpayment. And that's important.*²⁵

The devastating effects of the housing bubble, the ensuing mortgage crisis, and the Great Recession ultimately limited, and perhaps even reversed, any potential impact of the Bush-era program. Yet this did not necessarily limit the opportunity for politicians to continue efforts to shore up the dream and maintain its force as an aspirational goal in American political and economic life. In 2011 the Congressional Progressive Caucus, acknowledging a precipitous decline in popular confidence in the dream, and the economic disenfranchisement experienced across a broad spectrum of the population, sought to remedy these problems head-on by means of the "Restore the American Dream for the 99% Act." Recognizing the growing vulnerability of the dream to being hijacked by commercial interests, the object of the legislation was to recast the dream in a way that might facilitate buy-in for more of the population at large, "the 99 percent." As one cosponsor, Representative Keith Ellison, stated:

*Well, the thing is, the American dream is up for grabs at all times. . . . But we believe that the American dream is a dream that includes the private sector and the public sector, that it means that we're in this thing together. . . . And I think that that dream is under assault from a certain sector of our community and so we're going to snatch it back from them and hold up an American dream that is inclusive and that means that we're going to invest in our public wealth, not just private gain.*²⁶

Although never passed by Congress, the proposed act was a forceful legislative attempt to recast the dream in terms of creating jobs, while decreasing government support for defense, the Afghanistan war, the oil and gas industry, and Wall Street, while sustaining Medicaid, Medicare and Social Security. In other words, it sought to trade in upward mobility and homeownership for adjustments to the economy that might help reverse the declining condition of the nation's middle and lower economic strata.

Those on the other side of the political and economic spectrum were no less worried about the possible collapse of the dream and what that might mean for the American economy and political system. As early as June 2007 *Forbes* had published a special issue on "The American Dream," replete with images of picket fences and articles about homebuying. Although some of the articles in it were pessimistic (which was not surprising, given the housing market collapse then in progress), one nevertheless touted a rise in homeownership among Hispanics, while others offered plenty of reassurance that the house was still part of the dream, and that the dream was alive and well. Despite its acknowledgment that the bubble was in the throes of bursting, *Forbes* was eager to shore

up the dream with fulsome remarks reminiscent of Joseph Barry's 1956 panegyric in *House Beautiful*: "the fact remains that the American Dream of a white picket fence has never before been so widely realized and so concretely. If allowing people to have a home they can call their own is a measure of a society[']s legitimacy, our national house stands tall."²⁷

CRITIQUING THE DREAM

As the country sank deeper into the Great Recession over the next two years, such optimistic exhortations proved harder to sustain. In May 2009 an American RadioWorks series titled "A Better Life: Creating the American Dream" acknowledged that the ideal of a house as a universal goal was crumbling. Without abandoning faith in the dream itself, the series nevertheless questioned whether it might be time to dissociate it from homeownership. "The American dream has roots in the nation's loftiest ideals — the right to liberty and the pursuit of happiness. So when did it also come to mean a house, a car and a college education?"²⁸

Four years earlier, the comedian and social critic George Carlin had fixed on the American dream as the quintessence and centerpoint of what he saw as the consummate failure of the American system to address the needs of ordinary citizens. Recognizing the power of the dream to captivate, he exhorted his audience to wake themselves to the inequitable and dysfunctional system it fronted. "[T]he owners of this country know the truth: It's called the American Dream, because you have to be asleep to believe it," he said, urging his listeners to recognize how their complacent faith in it only abetted the rich and powerful.

*It's never going to get any better, don't look for it, be happy with what you got. . . . I'm talking about the real owners now, the real owners, the big wealthy business interests that control things and make all the important decisions. Forget the politicians. The politicians are put there to give you the idea that you have freedom of choice. You don't. You have no choice. You have owners. They own you. They own everything. . . . They don't want a population of citizens capable of critical thinking. . . . You know what they want? They want obedient workers. Obedient workers, people who are just smart enough to run the machines and do the paperwork. And just dumb enough to passively accept all these increasingly shittier jobs with the lower pay, the longer hours, the reduced benefits, the end of overtime, and the vanishing pension that disappears the moment you go to collect it, and now they're coming for your Social Security money. . . . It's a big club, and you ain't in it. . . . [I]t's the same big club they use to beat you over the head with all day long when they tell you what to believe. . . .*²⁹

Although Carlin's salvo was delivered as the housing bubble was still growing, he spoke to glaring cracks already evident in the system, cracks that got wider as the bubble burst and the recession took hold. His critique of the dream, although light-hearted, addressed it incisively as the keystone of a system that ultimately served the interests of a very elite few. It was that system that was fronted by the carcass of a myth promising opportunity, mobility and homeownership.

As the collapse of the housing market gained momentum in 2007, the growing number of families and households failed by the dream precipitated more widespread queries into the corrosion of the dream by (and even the complicity of the dream in) a corrupt economic and political system. In *Chasing the American Dream: New Perspectives on Affordable Homeownership*, editors William M. Rohe and Harry L. Watson blatantly questioned whether the expectation of owning a home, as part of the American dream, wasn't just the real estate industry ginning up a phony expectation. As they wrote: "some have questioned the extent to which this cultural propensity for homeownership has been artificially created, or at least enhanced, by those who seek to benefit from the construction, financing, and sale of single-family homes."³⁰ Likewise, an acerbic cartoon by Randy Bish, appearing in March 2009 in the *Pittsburgh Tribune Review*, spoke to the feelings of many who had been dispossessed by the mortgage crisis, and who were angry that large corporations had been bailed out by the government while they had been left to languish. Titled "The American Dream," it included images of a husband and wife, two children, a modest bungalow captioned "A Home I Can't Afford," and an image of a grinning President Obama, holding an object labeled "Mortgage Deal," sarcastically captioned "And a Government That Will Bail Me Out."³¹

By 2011 Carlin's exhortation to wake up from the dream also reverberated in a report issued by The Pew Charitable Trusts titled *Downward Mobility from the Middle Class: Waking Up from the American Dream*. The report, authored by Gregory Acs, documented not only that expectations of upward class mobility were no longer realistic, but also that many Americans should instead anticipate a downward fall. Despite "[t]he idea that children will grow up to be better off than their parents [being] a central component of the American Dream, . . . [a] third of Americans raised in the middle class . . . fall out of the middle class as adults."³² The import of this study reverberated loudly in additional studies that confirmed and expanded upon Pew's findings. Notably, the November 14, 2011, issue of *Time* featured a cover emblazoned with the words "Can You Still Move Up in America?" and an illustration showing a ladder with a hand grasping one of its broken rungs, which was clearly evocative of the populace falling down, and even off, the American ladder of opportunity (FIG. 4).³³

Undoubtedly, the most trenchant political fallout of the mortgage crisis and the recession that followed was the rise of the Occupy movement. The housing crisis and the ensuing collapse of the dream were so acute that large numbers



FIGURE 4. Time, November 14, 2011, cover.

of people mobilized across the country, and even across the globe, to reclaim their place in a political and economic system that had not only disenfranchised them but had actively abetted the deterioration of their lives. News coverage was extensive, and the vocabulary of political discourse expanded to include potent critical terms such as “the 99 percent.” Occupy protesters, many bearing signs proclaiming “The American Dream Is Over” and “RIP American Dream,” or forming funeral processions bearing the symbolic body of the American dream, made clear that the dream-myth, or its remains, was a pivotal issue in this moment of crisis. Their message was only amplified by extensive and sympathetic press coverage.

Jonathan D. Moreno, writing for *The Huffington Post*, observed that “more than any other, ours is a country founded on progress, the core concept of the ‘American Dream.’”³⁴ But as he and many others observed, the dream now stood out in embarrassing relief against the failures of the very system it ostensibly had sustained. As Yascha Mounk wrote in *Slate*: “These days, though, politicians are no longer so confident about the American Dream. Questions about America’s class system — and its strain on the country’s social fabric — have entered the national conversation in a way unlike any time

in recent memory.”³⁵ Other commentators focused on how the collapse of the dream revealed a broken system that exacerbated divides along other lines — generational, racial and educational, in particular — leaving America’s youth, minorities, and less well educated in the lurch. The failure of the abiding myth had catalyzed, at least temporarily, trenchant and productive critique.

POLITICIZING THE DREAM

The peak moments of disillusion with the dream, along with the most intensive critiques of it, coincided with the campaign leading up to the 2012 presidential election. In such a period of flux, with constituents presumably hungry for reassurance and credible aspirations that they could pursue with some confidence, candidates found a ready opportunity in repurposing the dream. Seizing what still remained of the aspirational expectations embedded in it, they recast it as a vehicle of their own political vision. “Steel Dynamics,” a Mitt Romney television commercial broadcast in May 2012, featured shots of (presumed) employees at a Steel Dynamics industrial plant (in an unspecified location) recounting the process of starting up the company as “building a dream,” thanks to “Mitt Romney’s private sector leadership team” (FIG. 5). Tapping into the enduring aspirational expectations associated with the dream, one employee testified on screen, “One of the hardest things to do, is move up a socioeconomic status in a generation. . . . Because of this company, I’m able to do that with my family.” Clinching the dream for the Romney campaign, the voiceover proclaimed, “American workers in a small town: proving that anything is possible in America,” while another employee concluded the commercial saying, “If that’s not the American dream, I don’t know what is.”³⁶

Allied with the Republican right, the Heritage Foundation produced a number of publications in 2011 and 2012 that cast its vision in terms that again latched on to the aspirational power of the dream, and that promised that adopting its agenda would amount to restoring the dream. In fact, “Saving the American Dream: The Heritage Plan to Fix the Debt, Cut Spending, and Restore Prosperity” (2011) preserved virtually nothing of the traditional dream. At best, it paid lip service to homeownership and upward mobility, while instead presenting “a detailed plan to redesign entitlement programs, guarantee assistance to those who need it, and save the American dream [which remained undefined] for future generations.”³⁷

The dream was so central to political discourse in this period that commentators insisted that candidates were talking about the dream even when the candidate hadn’t mentioned it. Assessing Barack Obama’s 2012 State of the Union address, in which there was no mention of the American dream (and the noun “dream” did not even appear), media outlets as diverse as Fox News, the Associated Press, and *The Huffington Post* nevertheless promoted the notion that

FIGURE 5. “Steel Dynamics.” Mitt Romney campaign commercial, May 2012. Screen capture by author.



Obama was talking about the dream, with headlines such as “Obama: American Dream Is in Peril, Fast Action Needed.”³⁸ Unlike the above instances in which the Romney campaign and the Heritage Foundation appropriated the dream to serve their own agendas, in this case the press independently felt compelled to hold Obama to a long-lasting standard, even though it remained ill defined in their commentaries — and completely unmentioned in his text.

HIJACKING THE DREAM

Perhaps the most dramatic, and most insidious, transformation of the dream, once it became fair game for reassessment in the wake of the mortgage crisis and the Great Recession, was its appropriation by commercial interests to serve their own ends. This entailed using the dream as an emblem of specific products and services or redefining the status of having achieved the dream in terms of owning or using those products and services. Some of the groundwork for this approach was evident as early as 2004 in Cal Jillson’s *Pursuing the American Dream: Opportunity and Exclusion over Four Centuries*. This book proposed a neoliberal conversion of the dream to serve private commercial interests by redefining it in terms of entrepreneurialism:

The American Dream has always been, and continues to be, the gyroscope of American life. It is the Rosetta stone or interpretive key that has helped throughout American history to solve the puzzles of how to balance liberty against equality, individualism against the rule of law, and populism against constitutionalism. The American Dream demands that we constantly balance and rebalance our creedal values to create and preserve an open, competitive, entrepreneurial society in which

*the opportunity to succeed is widely available. Despite the many conflicting strands of the American Creed, the American Dream insists that this must, and must increasingly, be a country in which opportunity is available to all and honest hard work yields the chance to succeed and thrive.*³⁹

As the national economy continued to flounder in 2011, a number of those entrepreneurial interests, seeking new marketing strategies to engage the distressed economic landscape, recognized in the population of potential customers the same disillusionment with the dream that political critics and candidates for office had identified, and they sought to turn that disaffection to their advantage. For example, in 2011 American Family Insurance launched its ingenious “American Dreams” marketing campaign. Recognizing that the ideal of homeownership had become increasingly fragile in the minds of many Americans, the company produced a series of billboard advertisements and television commercials that promised a way to protect that ideal from harm. Cleverly shifting attention from the source of greatest anxiety, foreclosure (against which American Family could afford no protection), the campaign sold standard homeowner liability and casualty insurance as “dream insurance”: “American Family Insurance is your American dream insurance. . . . Your dream is out there. Go get it. We’ll protect it.”

In one American Family commercial, a concluding sequence emblazoned the words “WE’LL PROTECT IT” over a shot rolling past suburban tract houses.⁴⁰ The key factor in this video, as in the entire campaign, was a shift in approach to how the dream would be fulfilled. What used to be understood as fulfillment — simply possessing the house and living in it — was now overlaid with a thick layer of anxieties about potential losses, some of which (fire, burglary, etc.) could be addressed by American Family, and some of

which (underwater mortgage, foreclosure) could not. What the commercial implied was that an additional instrument was necessary if one really wanted to achieve the dream, and that instrument was insurance. Once it was purchased, the dream would truly be secure.

In the same year the Principal Financial Group took this approach a step further, recasting the road to the dream ever more explicitly in terms of purchasing a retail financial service. Their iPhone app, called “The Dreamcatcher,” launched in December 2011, featured a photo gallery in which users were encouraged to place images of their “Top 10 Dreams.” For those unsure as to what those dreams might be, they offered explicit suggestions: “Capture anything that represents financial dreams. A bigger house. Paying for college. A more secure retirement.”⁴¹ Key here was the characterization of those dreams as financial objectives, which in turn transformed the process of achieving the dream into the purchase of a financial service. Thinking such as this may likewise have been behind the introduction in 2012 of two new Girl Scout badges, “Financing My Future” and “Financing My Dreams,” which effectively transmitted the importance of financializing the dream to subsequent generations.⁴²

Several years earlier, in 2007, just as the housing collapse was entering its worst phase, Ameriprise Financial had pioneered this approach with perhaps the hardest sell of all. Its commercial “Dream,” featuring Dennis Hopper, did not explicitly refer to the American dream, or to upward mobility or homeownership. But in the examples it offered, such as starting a new business, making a movie, or “build[ing] an eco-friendly house in the desert,” and in the sequences showing an Ameriprise planner helping every step of the way, from definition of the objective to its realization, the implication was clear: fulfillment of the dream was necessarily

reliant on, and perhaps an unrealistic objective without, the ongoing engagement of a financial services company.⁴³

Other efforts to retailize the dream centered more explicitly on homeownership. In 2011 the National Association of Realtors® (NAR), concerned over a lack of confidence not only in the real estate market but in those associated with it (not least the mortgage brokers who had led so many down the road to ruin) released a commercial whose script related a cautionary tale. The opening sequence showed a young boy, excited to visit his grandparents’ house, saying “I love staying here,” and “I’m going to have a house like this when I grow up” (FIG. 6). But as the camera panned to the house across the street, it showed another family packing a moving van, emptying a house with a “For Sale” sign in front. As the voiceover warned, “For the first time in generations, the dream of homeownership is being threatened. Realtors®, members of the National Association of Realtors®, are here to represent you and protect homeownership.” Here, as with American Family Insurance, a Realtor® would hardly have been able to mitigate the present circumstances causing the family to move out across the street. Still, a Realtor® might well have helped a prospective home purchaser avoid a risky investment. But the commercial offered a much broader, more indeterminate, promise — namely, to “protect homeownership” — again communicating the message that the dream would be sustained as much through the purchase of a service as through other means.⁴⁴ As with the campaigns of other commercial and professional interests, the message broadcast by the NAR sought to salvage what it could from the still durable aspirations and expectations of the dream-myth, and convert them into imperatives for new generations of consumers to pursue fulfillment of the dream by means of financial and professional services.



FIGURE 6. “Future Generations.” National Association of Realtors advertisement, 2011. Screen capture by author.

Here, as with countless other commercial interests seeking advantage in the transformed conditions of the postcrisis landscape, the dream was profoundly transformed. From homeownership as an instrument for achieving the dream and emblem of having made it, the dream had been recast in terms of purchasing a professional or financial service. Having hijacked the dream, purveyors of those services essentially sought to sell it back to their clients in a form equivalent to a time-share.

THE RESILIENCE OF MYTH

It is too soon to tell how profoundly the economic crisis of the past several years may have changed the content and course of the American dream-myth. Myths are living social and

political constructs. What the recent history of the American dream demonstrates is the degree to which myths are resilient. As malleable and manipulable sociopolitical constructs, they serve as durable, evolving instruments to guide and coalesce the interests of varied social cohorts.

The historical course of the American dream-myth shows that in times of political and social accord, as in the 1950s, myth is a bond, a common foundation. In times of economic and political disruption, as in the case of the recent Great Recession, myth can become the site of struggle, contestation, redress, and new political and economic configurations. Throughout these upheavals, however, just as the central tenets of the myth — opportunity, mobility and homeownership — have not been wholly displaced or supplanted, neither has its instrumentality in the operations of the underlying political and economic system.

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