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American Sociology's Investigations of the American Dream: Retrospect and Prospect

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Abstract The American Dream is among the United States' most recognizable and revered symbols of our national heritage. Celebrated in popular culture, this statement of national purpose has been analyzed by commentators across the broad range of humanistic and scholarly disciplines, including American sociology. While sociology has developed a lengthy history of studies dedicated to 'the American way of life' and – to a lesser degree – the role of the American Dream in society, the work of sociologists from earlier eras arguably over-shadows many of the efforts undertaken since the millennium. The present paper argues that sociology is especially well suited to investigations and analyses of the role and impact of the American Dream and urges a re-dedication of sociological efforts to chart its meaning and influence.

Keywords American Dream · Ideology · Social structure · Economic success · Opportunity · Mobility

The American Dream[1] is perhaps the most well-known, short hand summary of a nation's collective aspirations ever devised by man. As an advertising slogan it is pithy, peerless and evocative. Presidents of both parties have found it invaluable as a patriotic rhetorical device capable of moving the masses of Americans to harbor positive thoughts of their country's destiny. Moreover, the concept has demonstrated that it travels well overseas: while citizens of other nations do not always identify their aspirations linguistically as constituting the 'American dream' there is widespread evidence that similar cultural goals, and lifestyle practices, to those that undergird American society are now adopted and

[1]The question of whether to capitalize 'Dream' or not capitalize 'dream' in the phrase perhaps should not detain us long. An argument can be made that the phrase has become so ubiquitous, stylized, and nearly sacred that like other names, titles and labels we deem significant, we should grant the entire phrase the honor of capitalization. At the same time, the phrase appears so frequently in the text that capitalization becomes somewhat distracting and perhaps acts to reify the concept to the detriment of the analysis. Therefore I have capitalized the phrase in the Abstract and here but hereinafter the word 'dream' will appear in lower case, except where I am quoting from a source.

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pursued in many nations abroad. Indeed, the recent collapse of the housing markets and financial institutions in other nations in the lee of the 2008 'Great Recession' in the United States suggests the American dream may be the United States' primary 'export' to other nations in the modern world economy (Hauhart 2011).

What is the American Dream?

In 1931 James Truslow Adams, an author of American histories written in a popular vein, published *The Epic of America*. In his book, Adams summed up his capsule history of the American experience by noting:

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

(Adams 1931: 317) (Emphasis in original) Adams went on to say that many Americans appeared to have become 'weary and mistrustful' of the promise of the American dream. Adams attributed this attitude to his belief that Americans misunderstood what was meant by the dream. For Adams, a life that was "better and richer and fuller" did not mean a life that was conceived solely in materialistic terms. Rather, Adams meant a life in which personal fulfillment – or success as one personally defined it – could be pursued. In his view the crucial factor underlying the dream was the opportunity for every American to realize his or her personal vision within the confines of American society. In his original conception, one could achieve one's American dream through natural ability, hard work, perseverance and the achievements that would thereby follow.

In recent decades many have argued that the American dream has been reduced simply to the goal of economic success (Messner and Rosenfeld 2007). As an ideological buttress for twenty-first century American democratic capitalism, however, the concept has built in limitations. The key limitation acknowledged by most commentators that presents a potential danger for the concept's continued viability is the gap between promise and fulfillment. As a number of writers have recognized, the American dream's promise of equal opportunity for all to achieve monetary success becomes hollow without a reasonable chance within the competitive labor and financial marketplaces.

There are other shortcomings to defining the American dream solely in economic terms. A second limitation is the social malaise that reliance on the economic version of the American dream can generate even where the economic system reasonably supports widespread economic opportunity. This latter shortcoming arises because of the nebulous meaning of the concept and the inability of any cultural system to satisfy every imaginable human craving and need. While Americans may publicly espouse the monetary success ethic, economic success seldom satisfies fully. Various studies have suggested, for example, that beyond a baseline amount, increased income does not produce an increase in satisfaction (Kahneman and Deaton 2010). Yet abandoning the economic conception of the American dream leaves many Americans un-anchored in the modern era where the institutions of religion, family, and community have suffered diminution in their ability to

generate and sustain social engagement and commitment. This raises the culturally complex question of the American dream's relationship to what is often colloquially called 'the American way of life.' It is apparent the two are complexly inter-related yet the precise manner in which the two are intertwined has never been satisfactorily elucidated.

One consequence of these forces is that the American dream, with its undefined and boundless character, can generate an endless number of goals once it is embraced in a vaguely defined state, creating a bottomless cultural lure for the unwary and naively optimistic. The result is often an open-ended cultural maze of conflicted desire that perpetuates atomistic individualism in a country known for its emphasis on the individual. Under these circumstances, individual aspirations fostered by the American dream can perhaps more often produce dis-orientation, stasis, and discord than constitute a guided pathway to satisfaction and success. Ungrounded in his or her self-absorbed goals, Americans can toil alone fruitlessly in pursuit of an illusory and empty promise – the American dream.

These reflections raise a number of troubling questions about the contemporary American experience and the American dream. Recent economic difficulties for many Americans inspire one to ask whether James Truslow Adams' American dream promise can survive economic system failure like the Great Recession of 2008. Equally to the point, even if the American dream can survive widespread economic adversity, can the dream's effective delivery of economic success substitute for delivering a life worth living? Can the economic conception of the American dream be saved from foundering on an endless round of chasing success but experiencing failure that the American way of life has become for many in the throes of cyclical capitalist eras of boom and bust? Finally, just what is understood by 'the American dream' by Americans today? How do Americans view it and what do they hope to achieve through its promise? These questions about the American dream, and many others, warrant serious answers as we push ahead further in to the 'next American century'.

Importantly for our present purposes, these questions suggest that the American dream is well-suited to both theoretical and empirical examination by American sociologists. Indeed, American sociology arguably has a long history of examining the social factors that bear on one version or another of the American dream, including class, stratification, status, intergenerational mobility, individualism, community commitment, ideology, race, and work and family life balance issues. Yet, the American dream itself has only occasionally warranted sustained, direct investigation by American sociologists; rather it has most often been approached obliquely. Many of the sociological studies that have explicitly acknowledged an interest in the American dream are, by now, somewhat dated. For example, W. I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki's careful research in to the lives of Polish peasants is now nearly a century in print although it is true that other sociologists have conducted studies of more recent immigrants' American dreams. Likewise, Robert Merton's well-known middle range theory of the American success ethic dates from 1938. In place of direct and explicit investigations of the American dream, many of the more recent sociological analyses have been tied to a particular theme, impact, niche or facet of American society rather than its totality; constitute merely an extension of or addendum to earlier work; or, simply, consist of a mere collection of readings about the American dream (See, for example, Sternheimer (2011); Hanson and White 2011; Hatton 2011; Wuthnow 2006; Messner and Rosenfeld 2007). Indeed, the American dream seems to have attracted as many serious

contemporary analyses by historians (Jillson 2004), journalists (Shipler 2005; Ehrenreich 2001, 2005; DeParle 2004), anthropologists (Copeland and Labuski 2013), American and African American Studies professors (Marshall 2011), political scientists (Hochschild 1995) and literary scholars (Newlin 2013) as sociological examinations.

This paper attempts to rescue and re-direct the process of defining the issues that the American dream presents and urges that the American dream is worthy of direct theoretical and empirical sociological analysis. Arguably there is a need to identify and analyze the array of social forces evident in recent American history, rather than merely the socio-economic forces, that can constitute the proper ground for a re-vitalized sociological investigation of the American dream within the context of the American way of life. In so doing, I will argue that sociology is the discipline best suited to pursue extended, in depth analysis of the American dream. I will begin with a quick survey of some of the many sociological works that have investigated features of the American dream within studies of American 'ways of life' over the last century. Then, very briefly I will suggest some of the potentially more compelling issues for analysis that contemporary sociology might pursue and propose a modest direction for sociology to renew its historic commitment to investigating what is nothing less than our national creed. As Rank et al. (2014):151) remark "the American Dream lies at the heart and soul of the country." American sociology would serve itself and the nation well by re-examining the themes that have driven the American dream and reflecting on its future.

A Short History of Sociological Studies Re: The American Dream

W.E.B. DuBois: The Philadelphia Negro

It is altogether fitting that perhaps the earliest sociological investigation dedicated to elements of what would come to be called the American dream arose within a study of "the Negro problem" near the turn of the 19th to 20th centuries. W.E.B DuBois's *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899) was a monumentally ambitious undertaking for one man.[2] Dubois, after investigating the location of Negro neighborhoods within the city, selected the Seventh Ward as the subject of his study because he believed it epitomized the essence of urban living for Philadelphia's Negro population and contained "nearly all the Negro problems;…" (DuBois 1973:62) He then proceeded to make a house-by-house visitation to every Negro family in the ward of about 10,000 persons – perhaps as many as 2500 visits (DuBois 1973:17–18). There, he conducted interviews of the head of household or other available family member. The result was an exhaustive report of the living circumstances and conditions of the Philadelphia Negro in the Seventh Ward. DuBois gathered information, and wrote at length about, the size of families; educational opportunities; occupational opportunities; property ownership; the organization of religious institutions, so-called 'beneficial societies' and social life, Negro businesses and ameliorative institutions; the causes of Negro crime; housing stock and the prices to rent; social classes and their various amusements; the nature of contact between the races; and the effects of

[2] DuBois was aided by a single white woman, Isabel Eaton, in complete contravention to the tenor and racist attitudes of the time. Eaton supplied her own 80 page report on Negro Domestic Service as an appendix. The principal interviews were all conducted by DuBois, as the text makes clear.

Negro suffrage, good and bad. In his report one can readily discern the nature of concerns that have informed commentaries regarding the American dream ever since: the difficulty of certain circumstances; the importance of external conditions for influencing chosen ways of life; the goal of better living conditions and the aspiration to gain social status and thereby "rise" in life; the barriers that Negroes faced in their efforts to achieve social betterment; and the importance of improved contact between the races for the future of American society. Ultimately, like so many of the sociological studies discussed here, DuBois has no occasion to specifically reference the American dream, a phrase which did not come in to use until three decades later. Still, the combination of detailed accounts of Philadelphia Negroes' manner and conditions of living and their collective hopes for improvement clearly mark DuBois's study as part of the sociological tradition that American dream research and writing encompasses.

The Early Years of Chicago Sociology

Sociology's engagement with the American dream may also be fruitfully traced to the earliest years of the University of Chicago's emergence as the first, and for decades after, most prolific and prestigious academic home for American sociological research. Briefly, Chicago sociology's history reveals three streams of research interest that featured prominently the analysis of social factors that, cumulatively, would lend themselves to offer the foundation for early influential formulations of American dream studies. These are: Jane Addams' founding and development of Hull House and the Settlement movement[3]; the investigations of Polish immigrant life encapsulated in W.I. Thomas's and Florian Znaniecki's five volume *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918–1920); and the documentation of the process, and impact, of internal migration of Americans from 'farm to city' by Chicago sociologists, ultimately culminating in Clifford R. Shaw and Henry D. McKay's social disorganization theory work. It is these three collections of works and the core common recognition they share – that human beings universally seek a 'better life' – that is the underpinning for subsequent sociological discussions of the American dream. Sociology's claim as the rightful principal source of investigation in to the components of the American Dream is thus intimately tied to the discipline's earliest progenitors.

As is well-known, Jane Addams, with the assistance of her friend Ellen Starr, moved in to what became Hull House, a dilapidated, although substantial, dwelling in the heart of Chicago's then industrial slums, in September, 1889. Given a free leasehold over one part of the house, Addams and her associates built Hull House in to a group of thirteen buildings over its first 20 years (Addams 1990). Addams pursued her plan of 'settling' in an urban setting amidst the poor after two trips to Europe in search of 'culture' and after experiencing a revulsion against her perception of her own life of indulgent study as 'mere preparation' for an encounter with life that she kept successfully postponing. Her observations of the poor in East London as well as her dream of universal

[3] Although Addams was not formally associated with the University of Chicago Sociology Department when she began her immersion in Chicago urban life, her work is widely recognized as influencing Chicago Sociology's recognition that one of the better ways to understand society was to go out in to the field and develop an understanding from the manner in which communities were organized.

fellowship led to the formation of her 'plan' to immerse herself in the lives of the poor. As she wrote after 20 years in Settlement:

> In time it came to seem natural to all of us that the Settlement should be there. If it is natural to feed the hungry and care for the sick, it is certainly natural to give pleasure to the young, comfort to the aged, and to minister to the deep-seated craving for social intercourse that all men feel.

(Addams 1990:65) Analyzing her own motivation and that of other "educated young people…seeking an outlet for that sentiment of universal brotherhood" (Addams 1990:68) Addams' conception of Hull House was a place where overly sensitive and isolated members of the better classes could engage in common labor, participate in the common intercourse of life, and experience "opportunities for helpfulness" (Addams 1990:69).

Although the Settlement movement thus began from philanthropic motives and a feeling of *noblesse oblige*, the result achieved over many years produced – among other things – Addams' detailed account of the ways of life experienced by the poor, and often immigrant, Chicago communities that became its sustaining force. As Addams recounts, Settlement house initiatives—whether the introduction of public kitchens, gymnasiums, or coffee-houses – ultimately came to be redefined by the community each served. Conceding that the food prepared 'scientifically' at Hull House in an effort to increase the healthful qualities of the poor's diets was indeed nutritious, one woman allowed as how she would still prefer to eat "what she'd ruther." (Addams 1990:78) Likewise, another man glancing about a cozy little room set up for young people to gather commented, "This would be a nice place to sit in all day, if one could only have beer." (Addams 1990:79) Thus, her memoir – intended purely as an account of life in Settlement – became a more comprehensive summary of the ways of life of the urban poor, with passages that evoked the problems of poverty, the adaptations the poor devised to accommodate their situation, the emergence of government social legislation in Illinois, the special needs of immigrant families, and the value found in social clubs, the arts, and socialized education by the communities Hull House served. In rendering her account, Addams casually recorded the social dreams of those who passed through Hull House's doors, including their aspirations for higher education, increased wages, better living conditions, and a better way of life than they and the previous generation had been able to live.

W.I. Thomas's and Florian Znaniecki's *The Polish Peasant*, written a decade later, is often described as a study of traditional culture among an ethnic group in the course of their emigration to the United States. Their study relied primarily on biographical materials – including letters sent and received between family members who remained in Poland and those who had already migrated to the United States. These letters recount the hopes and dreams of those who wrote them, often sandwiched between tales of woe and tribulation and – less frequently – triumph. Viewed one way, they encompass some of the earliest published accounts of emigrants' dreams for their American experience. A few examples will convey the essence of both their method and its relevance for studying the American dream.

Thomas and Znaniecki describe the Markiwicz family as "climbers" within the peasant nobility. Their son, Waclaw, and a cousin, Maksy, have both immigrated to America separately and exchanged letters. The letters of each are filled with accounts of jobs taken, the rate of pay, jobs left, new jobs acquired (and their rate of pay), and the

cost of commuting. Neither contemplates returning to Poland to buy land and farm; rather, both are consumed with making their way in America and prospering in paid employment. Waclaw's parents, in their letters, note their son has forgotten them and the way of life they and others within their circle aspire to in their home community. His parents cannot understand why he will not return to Poland, buy land in the village and settle down to farming. These different dreams are but two of many different variations expressed in the collected peasant letters. (Thomas et al. 1984).

Other letters are similar in that one member of a family has emigrated from Poland to the United States but owing to the different relations between the parties there is little yearning for reunification in the village. Wladaslawa Porzycka, a midwife, writes to her husband, a shoemaker, who is in America, "In my opinion it would be the best if you took us to you. You write that you are anxious about the children, lest they become American [illegible word]. But even in America it cannot be worse than this accursed Mlawa…so we thirst to be united with you, but not here, only in America…. So I beg you, dear Stas,…take us from here, that I may at least for a moment breathe freely,… (Thomas et al. 1984:176–77).

Thomas and Znaniecki explain the effects of immigration in their commentary in terms that anticipate the factors that constitute many versions of the American dream. They note that emigration isolates the individual from the family and community, thereby facilitating individualization and weakening the former bases for solidarity. They recount, as one example, Adam Raczkowki's adaptation to America where, for a time, he acquired a successful material position for himself, which further permitted him to become less attached to his family and former society. On June 27, 1906 Adam wrote to his sister in Poland: "…As to the work, I am working at the same factory,…[As to Poland] brother says he will not return, because there is nothing to return for. He has no property there, and it is better here in America….If I can return then perhaps I shall return some day or other, and if not I don't mind, because I do ten times better in America… (1984:46) For Thomas and Znaniecki, economic success like Adam's is "…one of the main feelings of personal importance" and "…is found almost universally among American immigrants." (1984:142). Thomas and Znaniecki conclude that the new class organization [in the United States] is based mainly on economic differences; consequently, they conclude that "economic progress seems the only test of individual value" (1984:142) – a view that coincides – as we shall shortly see – with the views of Merton (1938), Messner and Rosenfeld 2007), and others, regarding the contemporary content of the American dream. In sum, Thomas and Znaniecki nowhere describe their work as an analysis of the American dream. Yet, there it is, buried among the missives written by those pursuing it: a focus on hopes, fears, and aspirations; recognition of the changing nature of these among generations; and the attention to striving in the economic realm as the sole measure of a person's worth in the newly constituted social order free from ties to village, land, family, and tradition.

While Thomas and Znaniecki wrote regarding the Polish immigrant experience the work of Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay, among other early University of Chicago sociologists, addressed the other great migration that affected Chicago at the turn of the 20th century – the demographic shift from farm to city. Shaw and McKay's writings begin – like Thomas and Znaniecki's account of peasant life in Poland – with their recognition of the 'external' factors that impinge on their subjects – the difficulty of farm life, the impact of rural poverty, and so forth. Soon, however, their analysis shifts – as did Thomas and Znaniecki's – to the social factors that have changed concomitant with the geographical migration: the changing traditions, standards, and moral

sentiments that come to characterize those who live in inner city Chicago neighborhoods (Shaw and McKay 1931:109). Shaw and McKay, of course, were primarily interested in the crime that these inner city areas generated and – in particular – juvenile crime/delinquency. Their data did not consist of letters home, as did Thomas and Zananiecki's examination of the Polish peasant, but official statistics, anecdotes from interview data, and summaries of investigations by other researchers. Thus, they quote Healy and Bonner (1926) regarding the importance of 'the spirit of a community' (or lack thereof) in creating a culture where delinquency can flourish. In essence, Healy and Bonner (1926) depict neighborhoods where community solidarity has deteriorated to the point of individualized self-seeking, ultimately leading to pure predation, as communities degenerate in to combustible cauldrons that lead to increased crime.

For Shaw and McKay, the loss of community in city neighborhoods was more directly the result of mixing multiple emigrant groups – including African Americans from the south and farmers' sons and daughters from the agricultural midwest – in a normative void as compared to Thomas and Znaniecki's focus on removal of the isolated individual from the restraints of traditional peasant life and immersion in that same amoral urban void. The consequence described, however, is much the same: a substitution of self-aggrandizing standards concentrated on personal economic welfare rather than on collective, community standards of value. In Shaw and McKay's language, children growing up in these city neighborhoods found themselves without "restraining influences" other than the distant, formal ministrations of hostile or purely bureaucratic institutions (the police and the schools) while submerged in a society subjected to the relentless pressure of economic competition. The reduction of members of the community to their purely economic function, and corresponding success or failure on that single dimension, and the consequent deterioration of community institutions, mirrors the image that the Polish peasant letters provide of the Polish immigrant's experience. Just as the Polish immigrant wishes to escape the poverty and limitations of Polish peasant life the native born immigrant to Chicago's poorer neighborhoods thinks of nothing other than 'making it' sufficiently to move out to a better way of life. This, then, becomes the American dream regardless of origin: detachment from life in the community, making it economically and looking toward a better life elsewhere.

The American Dream in the Context of American Social Structure

While Thomas and Znaniecki, Shaw and McKay, and others focused on the aspirational motivations and the lived experiences of different populations in the new American landscape of the early twentieth century, other sociologists focused on the social structure and seismic demographic changes within the economy. In 1927 Pitirim Sorokin issued the first edition of *Social Mobility*, his landmark study. While there are many astute observations one may draw from Sorokin's work perhaps the core recognition for present purposes was his careful discussion of social position as a combination of a person's relation to other persons; a person's relation to groups in society to which he/she may – or may not – belong; and the various groups' relations to other groups and the population/human universe more generally (Sorokin 1959: 5–17). Here, Sorokin explicated – if he did not originate – the idea of social stratification within American society. While he did not develop all of its implications for the aspirational goals of society's members, Sorokin set the stage for those who later would do so, crucial for understanding the American dream.

At about the same time Sorokin was writing, Robert and Helen Lynd were pursuing their investigation of a middle-size, middle American community – Muncie, Indiana (Lynd and Lynd 1929). Half a continent away and half dozen years later, W. Lloyd Warner and his associates did something very similar in 'Yankee City' (Newburyport, MA) (Warner et al. 1963). These classic studies were among the earliest examples of what would become a rich, twentieth century vein of community studies conducted by sociologists. Typically these studies displayed an equal concern with describing in substantial detail the social structure of American towns and cities while at the same time examining the inter-relationship of individual fortunes to what we might now call the opportunity structure.

The Lynds originally began their Middletown investigation to study religion in American life at the behest of a foundation created by John D. Rockefeller, Sr., founder of Standard Oil. However, the Lynds quickly concluded that they could not study religion in American life satisfactorily without understanding the entire community. Consequently, they expanded the framework for their study to include getting a living; making a home; training the young; using leisure; pursuing religious practice; and engaging in community activities.

The many important conclusions the Lynds reached regarding life in Muncie are too numerous to recount here. One important set of observations that would influence many later studies, including Yankee City, was their report on the 'class structure' in Muncie. The Lynds' investigation revealed a distinct two-class structure between what they termed the 'business class' and the 'working class'. These two groups, although living closely in a small city, were described as different as members of two separate nations. Members of each group did not mingle or otherwise associate with the other group nor did they share common understandings, common values, nor common aspirations. One notable difference that perhaps contributed to this divide was the varying degree of financial security experienced by each group: members of the business class seldom experienced severe financial distress due to unemployment during the 1920's whereas members of the working class routinely did experience being out of work (Lynd and Lynd 1929). Thus, the Lynds introduced prominently the notion of class differences, which had heretofore hovered unexplored in the background of many earlier studies, as a driving force in Americans' goals and expectations for their lives.

An illustration of the influence that class origin had on changing life goals may be found in the Lynds' discussion of the changing role of women in society. As they recounted, women were now engaged in the work force to a greater degree and this engendered energetic debate in Muncie, and elsewhere, regarding the proper roles for women. While 89% of girls in the three upper years of high school responded affirmatively to a survey question that they intended to work after graduation, the Lynds found that actual women workers were more concentrated in working class occupations; business class women either did not choose to work as frequently or, more likely, found that opportunities for suitable employment in business class positions were less often available (Lynd and Lynd 1929:25–27). In short, women's expectations for life were both conditioned, and limited, by the social environment in American society, especially the class structure.

As the Lynds also reported, men's lives were dominated by work opportunities and the exigencies of getting a living. As the Lynds phrased it, Middletown – as perhaps

representative of the United States generally – was "a culture in which economic authority was pervasive" (Lynd and Lynd 1929: 35) thereby affirming the primacy of economic values. However, the lived impact of this universal fact of American life in Middletown was different for the business and working class men. For working class men, it meant that younger workers were sought after by the growing industrial sector; there was a premium on speed, stamina and efficiency but little demand for advanced education. Older workers from the working class were less valuable. For the managerial or business class, however, advancing age did not inevitably produce diminishing opportunities. The Lynds found that these men were often able to maintain "stable earning power and social prestige." (Lynd and Lynd 1929: 35).

W. Lloyd Warner and his colleagues later pursued the distinctions among social classes and class influence on life chances even further than the Lynds. Through extensive interviews conducted in the 1940's, they concluded that Newburyport was characterized by six ranked classes that were more or less known as distinct by residents (Warner et al. 1963:35–60). Like the Lynds, the Yankee City researchers found that social class position was very influential with respect to the choices for association, business, and life that individuals pursued. Through a complicated analysis of the intersection of classes, institutions, and associations the researchers identified 89 hierarchical 'positions' that an individual might occupy within the class/social/occupational structure of Yankee City. While a person might occupy multiple positions at one and the same time, the researchers identified both cluster effects and direct levels of influence among the interconnections between different positions (Warner et al. 1963:157–188).

This portrait of Newburyport, as the Lynds described for Muncie, showed a separation in the way lives are lived among the classes. For example, Warner and his colleagues found that no members of the 'upper-upper class' were enrolled in the local public high school, nor could it be ascertained that any had been in living memory. Moreover, only four children of the 'lower-upper class' could be identified as enrolled in the local public high school during the time of their study in this community of 17,000. As the researchers pointed out, children from these two classes typically were sent to private preparatory schools – to prepare for college but more particularly to learn the rites and etiquette for a associating with their own kind. Members of the other classes typically attended the public schools. (Warner et al. 1963:245–46) Just as the Lynds discovered in Muncie, one's experiences, expectations, and opportunities were directly influenced by one's class origin. The implications of this general finding from both studies would guide many sociologists' investigations of community life, stratification, occupational and social mobility for the next 40 years.

A Sociological Theory Whose Central Concept is the American Dream

In a slight article published in 1938 Robert Merton addressed what he found distinctive about America's social structure – and it was not the class arrangements that focused the attention of the Lynds and Warner and his colleagues. Rather in "Social Structure and Anomie" Merton (1938) analyzed the impact of what he perceived to be the central motivating impulse in American life – pursuit of the American dream – and contrasted its universally prescribed cultural goal with the

inherent limitations of opportunity built into the structural arrangements in American society.

Merton's well-known analysis of the cultural role of the American dream and its consequences is elegant in its simplicity. Initially, Merton recognized the existence of separate spheres for cultural goals and cultural means and the uneasy relationship between the two. Acknowledging the importance of achieving the American dream for Americans, Merton asserted that the dream had become defined solely by one yardstick – monetary success. Moreover, while it would be possible for different sectors of American society to hold different values, and thus define the American dream differently, Merton contended that its success ethic was universally prescribed for all Americans. A difficulty arises, however, because the social structure is organized in a way that does not permit every American to achieve the American dream of monetary success. Rather, the limits of the social structure suggest that most individuals will not become monetarily successful.

In the light of this contradiction between the social injunction to strive for monetary success and the inability of the social structure to support the goal of monetary success for most Americans, Merton focuses on the adaptations that individuals make when they confront this dilemma. Briefly, he notes five accommodations. Conformity, which Merton believed to be the most common response, consisted of accepting the culturally approved goal of success as legitimate and continuing to pursue the goal within the culturally prescribed means of existing institutions (schools and workplaces) and honored values (education, work). Innovation involved the pursuit of the culturally prescribed goal of monetary success but through illegitimate means outside of conventional institutions and roles (i.e., crime and deviance directed at monetary success). Ritualism involved the relinquishment of the pecuniary success goal but rather blind commitment to the institutionalized means provided by conventional society. Persons who adopt this mode of adaptation act out the conforming role without any commitment to the prescription that they achieve success. Merton defined retreatism as involving a relinquishment of both the culturally prescribed goal of success and the culturally approved means of pursuing it. Retreatists, in effect, "drop out" of American society: they do not adopt the success goal and they make no effort to carry out the activities or engage in the roles that are approved by conventional society. Finally, Merton identified rebellion as a mode of response to the contradictions inherent in the American dream. Persons who adopt this stance repudiate both the cultural goal of pecuniary success and the institutionalized means of achieving it but do so only by asserting new cultural goals and attempting to re-fashion the social structure in order to support the alternative cultural vision. Revolutionaries of all stripes are examples of persons who have adopted this mode.

The result for Merton was a society particularly susceptible to anomie – a breakdown of the culturally approved normative structure which results behaviorally in the relinquishment of standards of decorum, deportment, and conduct by individuals. In this view many, if not most, of the problems of American society are generated by its principal cultural ideal – the American dream. As Merton (1968):223) phrased one observation in his later discussion of the tendency toward anomie, "The moral mandate to achieve success thus exerts pressure to succeed, by fair means if possible and by foul means if necessary." In short, the source of Americans' highest aspirations is likewise the source of their most common and lowest failings.

The Construction of Social Character in the American Way of Life

Post-war sociological analyses continued these investigations of the relations between classes, the economy, and the occupational sphere but did so in light of what was termed 'social character'. One of the earliest – and by far the most popular – of these investigations was David Riesman, Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney's *The Lonely Crowd* published in 1950. It was characterized in 1997 by Herbert Gans as the best-selling book by a sociologist in American history with reportedly 1.4 million copies sold by that time (New York Times 2002).

Riesman, Glazer and Denney's book, like so many other sociological studies, did not specifically reference the American dream. However, as with the earlier studies the authors were pursuing questions that arise from, and address, what we now understand to be central issues for its conception. They identified their task as examining that "configuration of attitudes" that characterized members of a society in a particular socio-economic-historical era (Riesman et al. 1961: 5). Riesman, Glazer and Denney argued that in order for a society to function well each society needed to develop ways for its members to acquire the desire to act in the manner in which the society needed them to act. Thus, the authors were engaged in the construction of an intimate theory that connected inner desire with social goals.

Riesman, Glazer and Denney argued further that there existed three general types of social character in American history. In tradition-directed societies individuals acquired the largely stock character available for their gender, class, and family position from the small number of others with whom they were in intimate daily contact. The emphasis in a traditional society was on behavioral conformity within a limited milieu. Here, one acquires one's dreams from the limited options available in the traditional community, much like Thomas and Znaniecki's peasants in Polish villages. Riesman. Glazer and Denney contrasted with this type the inner-directed person who develops an inner reliance on principles and purpose based on internalized values acquired through the privacy of the middle class nuclear family home. According to the authors, the inner-directed person appears somewhat independent of time and place because the individual carries within himself or herself an 'internal gyroscope' or 'piloting mechanism' that guides the choice of goals and decision-making throughout life. A person who is inner-directed may, for example, decide to pursue a life dedicated to artistic expression and disregard the social, economic, and interpersonal obstacles arrayed against such a choice since the individual's orientation is to the inner self and not others in the social environment. The final shift according to Riesman, Glazer and Denney has been the development of the 'other-directed' personality – one who is responsive to, and accepts direction from, a much wider circle than one's parents. Here, it is representatives of a broader peer group to whom one attends, accepting signals regarding life goals and behavioral conformity through a highly attuned, 'radar' like sensitivity to the expectations and direction of others. The authors find this characterological type common in the modern organizations that populated the American middle 20th century since close coordination with many others is central to adaptation within that environment (Riesman et al. 1961: 24–25).

Each social "type" would, as a consequence of their mode of adaptation and audience of reference, develop their own "American dream" quite differently. A tradition-directed individual would, perhaps, stay true to the cultural tradition in which they were

inculcated. Shortly we shall examine the Boston Italian-Americans that Herbert Gans characterized as "urban villagers," who can be understood as representatives of this type. Inner-directed persons would, by comparison, stay true to their own "star" regardless of the social environment whereas the other-directed person would find their purpose and goal from among those fashioned by others of their class and station.

With the publication of C. Wright Mills' *White Collar* in 1951 sociologists' work on the themes that constitute the American dream took a decided, if less than dramatic, shift. Mills' argument accepts the broad outlines of the analysis offered by Riesman, Glazer and Denney, although Mills does not cite or reference their work. However, Mills comes much closer than any of his sociological forebears to articulating a conception of the American dream that owes a debt to Robert Merton. Thus, in a chapter succinctly titled "Success," Mills sums up the history of American striving by noting that the "American gospel of success…" "…seemed to pervade the whole society…" and had "its money target clear and visible" (Mills 1956: 259–60). Mills believed this was the driving motive for the American way of life but that its pursuit took different forms in different eras, echoing Riesman, Glazer and Denney's general approach. Thus, Mills saw a distinct difference between the character qualities extolled during the 19th century entrepreneurial phase Riesman called "inner directed" and the 20th century white collar "organization man" hoping to 'climb the ladder' of success within a modern bureaucracy. Mills saw the entrepreneurial style as based on notions of competitive risk and hard work whereas, like Riesman, Glazer and Denney, he saw the "other directed" individual as intent on "getting along" with peers through attentiveness to those in one's occupational surround while developing a style that focused on techniques for "handling" people (Mills 1956: 262–63). In the latter phase, Mills identified many intermediate goals ("rising above" manual labor and the lower ranks; promotion within bureaucracies) and techniques associated with achieving these goals (increased education). In the end, the desired result remained much the same: pecuniary success. For this reason, Mills saw the contemporary American, and particularly the middle class, as solely seeking any "success" that might lead to monetary success; Mills believed the American middle class will choose any route, or follow any political leader, but only after they see the route or leader has already 'won' a successful place in society.

The American Dream for the Black Middle Class

Writing in French in 1955,[4] E. Franklin Frazier, perhaps the most prominent black American sociologist at the time, addressed "the behavior, the attitudes and values of the 'black bourgeoisie'" – a group that Frazier contended had begun to play an important role among black Americans over the preceding two decades. Frazier located the roots of what he contended was a "new" black middle class in the spirit of modern business enterprise that arose in black society subsequent to Emancipation. According to Frazier (1957), a principal vehicle for the newly aroused aspirations of black Americans was the Freedmen's Bank. Although the Bank ultimately failed, it – along with other banks dedicated to serving black communities in the late 19th century – represented the first concerted effort by African Americans to acquire wealth and establish themselves as property holders. As Frazier records, however, it was not as

[4] Frazier's book was translated and published in English for the first time in 1957.

businessmen, primarily, that African Americans joined the middle class. Rather, African Americans created a solid middle class principally on the basis of their incomes as white collar workers (Frazier 1957). By the 1950 census, for example, Frazier (1957):47) is able to point out that about one sixth of the Negro men in the United States are employed in occupations that identify them as part of the black bourgeoisie. By way of contrast, Frazier (1957):53) discusses the range of African American businesses existing at the time as falling "within the lowest category of small businesses," the majority of which in Harlem, as one example, were found to be restaurants (Frazier 1957:57). Correspondingly, Frazier (1957:81–85) found that in recent decades what he characterized as "Negro higher education" became devoted chiefly to "educating the black bourgeoisie" – not members of the race as a whole and certainly not those African Americans who pursued pure knowledge for its own sake.

Frazier's portrait of the lifestyle achieved by the black middle class in mid-twentieth century America was not, however, an unalloyed report of success and economic advancement. Rather, Frazier found their lives imbued with a number of sources of unease and insecurity. Thus, he contended that the black bourgeoisie had no cultural roots in either the black or white worlds (Frazier 1957:112). Frazier also claimed that members of the black bourgeoisie continued to exhibit status anxiety in the form of an 'inferiority complex' that found its origin in their forebears' slave status. According to Frazier's (1957:146–9) analysis, members of the black bourgeoisie addressed this anxiety by segregating themselves within the African American community. Here they were protected from direct competition with whites and could assume a position of superiority vis-à-vis less successful African Americans. For Frazier (1957):48–9), members of the black bourgeoisie were merely propagating "false notions about their place in American life and [creating] a world of make-believe." Frazier devoted the balance of his book to describing what he considered to be "this make-believe world, in which the black bourgeoisie live,…" (1957:149) Although now generally accorded the status of a 'classic' treatise of American sociology, Frazier's book was roundly criticized and attacked for many of its conclusions about the black middle class at the time of its publication.

Class and Community Studies in the Mid-Twentieth Century

By the time Mills wrote, the country's cleavage into relatively distinct social classes had been firmly established by social scientists if the exact nature and demarcation of the boundaries and number of those classes was still a matter for academic debate. Increasingly, sociological studies focused on the 'ways of life' among relatively homogeneous 'slices' of Americans. Mirra Komarovsky's *Blue-Collar Marriage*, John Seeley and his colleagues' study of the 'North American' way of life in a Toronto suburb, Herbert Gans' investigations of *The Urban Villagers* and *The Levittowners*, and Ulf Hannerz's examination of life in a major metropolitan African American 'ghetto' in *Soulside* are representative of these studies. While none of these works identified their primary purpose as an investigation of the American dream, by examining closely these uniquely situated American ways of life aspirational themes emerged that we can retrospectively recognize as evidence of the dreams different Americans envisioned for their lives during the early post-war era up through the 1960's.

Mirra Komarovsky, for example, documented the emergence of companionate marriage ideals in her working class subjects that in many instances were frustrated

by the class location of, and class limitations imposed on, her respondents. Thus, she found that economic and occupational frustrations were most pronounced among those respondents who were less well educated. These frustrations, in turn, often led to frustrations in the marriage. Thus, the couples' desire to own their own home was thwarted by economic insecurity and men's desire to rise in occupational status thwarted by their lack of education. Komarovsky's interviews suggested that both led to wives' dissatisfactions, which often took the form of unhappiness with the husband (Komarovsky 1967: 280–310). In short, Komarovsky found – as had the Lynds and Warner and his colleagues found before her – that class status, the American desire for economic success, and the limitations built in to the opportunity structure of American life are factors that affect dream formation, dream acquisition, and dream satisfaction.

According to the authors of *Crestwood Heights*, their goal was simply to depict the life of a community. In introducing their subject, however, the authors note that Crestwood Heights may seem immediately familiar as it is the sort of modern suburb that Hollywood likes to use in its gauzy portraits of the American dream. (Seeley et al. 1956:3) Ironically, of course, the researchers are investigating this setting for the 'American dream' in Canada rather than the United States. Unlike many earlier sociological studies, however, their focus on the American dream is direct, explicit and sustained. They state: "For those thousands of North Americans who struggle to translate the promise of America into concrete reality for themselves, and even more important, for their children, [Crestwood Heights] is in some sense a mecca." Seeley et al. 1956:3) For the first time since Robert Merton's 1938 paper "Social Structure and Anomie", sociological researchers explicitly offer a definition of the (North) American dream: "a dream of material heaven in the here and now." (Seeley et al. 1956:6) Although conceding that material abundance is a dream not limited to North America, the authors note its uniquely American connection as the impetus for millions of immigrants to venture forth through dangerous waters and uncertain times in search of a prosperous life. Seeley and his colleagues also ascribe a "peculiar twist" to the American search for material well-being since the pursuit of the goal is not purely self-interest but rather is justified by, and sacrificed for, one's children. This motivation, while not unknown more generally, achieves its ultimate expression in North America because, in the authors' view, the social structure is sufficiently porous to extend some reasonable promise of upward mobility.

The consequence for daily life in Crestwood Heights is that residents are oriented primarily toward the future, optimistically viewed. Family and community are experienced – and sought as – a stable platform in which the young can begin their solitary climb toward a more prosperous life 'somewhere out there' tomorrow. The corollary is that an individualistic system that values highly self-sufficiency, independence, and worldly success thereby culturally dis-values, and hostilely opposes, resignation, acknowledgement of defeat, and the acceptance of human limitation. As the authors remark, the residents of Crestwood Heights maintain "a continuous latent hope, impervious to all experience, that someone somewhere has sufficient knowledge and goodwill to resolve [the] intolerable relations of hostile dependency" that infect the life of the community. (Seeley, at al., at 402). The (North) American dream, in short, has its shortcomings apparently even in a suburban paradise.

Herbert Gans' investigations of the low income population of native born Italian-Americans living in Boston's urban West End and the slightly economically better off

transplants to the newly developed Levittown outside Philadelphia in suburban New Jersey produce somewhat different stories of American ways of life in the context of post-war class society. Gans' depiction of life among Boston's working class West Enders focused on differences in lifestyle orientation between groups he calls routine seekers, action seekers, strivers (or 'middle class mobiles') and the marginalized or maladjusted (Gans 1962: 28). With the exception of the strivers, Gans found that this ethnic American group was satisfied with life in its urban setting and sought little that its environment and the peer group version of traditional Italian village life transplanted to urban Boston did not provide (Gans 1962: 74–119). By way of contrast, those who were attracted to move to Levittown in the years shortly after it was built beginning in 1958 were seeking a 'better way of life' outside the urban context in a new American suburb. According to Gans, these suburban transplants included working class, lower middle class, and upper middle class Americans. While class differences among respondents were evident in many details, Gans found a common focus in their primary desire to acquire more spacious housing and to 'own their own home'. To do so, respondents from each group were willing to uproot themselves from their former, established way of life and social network to obtain better living conditions in a 'new' modern home (Gans 1967:24–41). Although Gans noted that suburbia was – at the time – a "much maligned" part of America he generally found respondents from all groups satisfied with their new way of life, with a minor exception for modest percentages of working class women who felt isolated and young women with newly born children who experienced similar loneliness (Gans 1967:220–245).

Gans' reports on these two distinct groups can both be read as narratives of Americans who have fashioned satisfying lives out of the environments, opportunities, and materials they found at hand – that is, Americans who were, for the most part, living their own unique variation of the American dream. Ulf Hannerz,[5] in his study of life in an ethnically homogeneous ghetto neighborhood in Washington, D.C., also found substantial numbers who shared the lifestyle and concerns "most closely to mainstream American assumptions about the "normal" life." (Hannerz 1969:38) By this he meant a focus on a nuclear family of stable composition, home ownership or a desire for home ownership, secure, stable, although working-class, employment, and the goal of upward mobility. Still, Hannerz was also able to easily document alternative lifestyles that he characterized and labeled as "the swingers", the street families, and the street corner men (Hannerz 1969:42–58). In reporting his findings, he underscored an observation made implicitly if not explicitly by previous researchers: ways of life are constrained by economic realities and alternative cultural adaptations are, in many instances, means of coping with an external environment that is not wholly forgiving, predictable, nor controllable.

Culture, Ideology, Ways of Thinking and the American Dream

It should have become apparent by now that there is perhaps no true endpoint in our summary of American sociologists' prior work that – in some manner – addressed what

[5] Hannerz trained in anthropology at the University of Stockholm but conducted his doctoral fieldwork that led to the publication of *Soulside* in Washington, D.C. His book, an exercise in urban ethnography, was far more influenced by sociological analyses of African American ghetto life than anthropological works, as his many textual references and extensive discussions attest.

is meant by the American dream. Still, there are unique analytical approaches developed periodically and one can be found in Jules Henry's[6] *Culture Against Man*. Henry's book is both description and cultural critique and is explicit about his concern with the American dream experience. Henry's depiction of life in the contemporary United States of the late 1950's and early 1960's is grounded in his analysis of financial motivations, commercial practices (especially advertising), and the 'pecuniary logic' that he believed informed and infected every facet of American culture. Like many others, Henry saw the economy as driving most Americans' lives and behavior. However, unlike earlier researchers, he did not find this to arise purely from their own self-interest; rather, Henry observed that the 'irrationally' high standard of living common to the United States led certain sectors of the socio-economic structure to necessarily strive to maintain the status quo. Advertising, for example, no longer simply tried to sell a product; it sold instead a way of life and, indeed, in Henry's view it sold a philosophy: pecuniary logic. This philosophy – like all philosophy – began with an (unstated) assumption: the American way of life must be sustained, at all costs. Since that way of life relied on a constant state of expansiveness and economic growth, the task of doing so entailed two interrelated economic commands: create (or develop) more desire (to engage with the economy) and consume more. In Henry's view it is the American dream that is recruited to carry the cultural burden of accomplishing these tasks. Thus, he points to advertisements meant to attract the scientific elite to industry: "An invitation to a better way of life … from Melpar" (Henry 1965:32) in which a 'stimulating environment' for professional growth may be found in a workplace of 'minimum stress' located in an area with the 'country's highest per capita income'. Such an opportunity would be, of course, the American dream. But, as Henry asks, do these elite American scientific dreamers' dreams come true? Henry's answer: they do not. He cites Bureau of Labor statistics to the effect that recruits to industry come largely from newly conferred Ph.D.'s and that more than two-thirds of scientists who left government, industry, or foundations went elsewhere (primarily to universities) while those who left universities only went to industry 16 % of the time (Henry 1965:35).

In short, the American dream is a phenomenal advertising slogan but a cultural mirage. It does have a definite effect on the American way of life though: the American subject to a constant barrage of American dream-related advertising has learned to develop a 'pecuniary self'; that is, an empty or diminished self that can only find shape and direction from its relation to the marketplace – whether the marketplace for employment opportunities or the marketplace for brand consumables. Henry concludes that while Americans may have started with a Self they have, somewhere along the way, lost it and now must spend the remainder of their days accepting the 'solutions' for the empty Self offered to them by the economy. The American dream services this space by transmuting commonplace – and even unpleasant – experiences, such as going to work in the morning or joining the armed services, into something vibrant,

[6] Henry is one among several of the academics whose work is discussed here whose career crossed disciplinary lines. Henry was trained in anthropology (under the direction of Franz Boas and Margaret Mead) at Columbia University (Ph.D. 1935). However, from the late 1940's until the time of his death in 1969 he served as professor of sociology and anthropology at Washington University, St. Louis and – of course – the volume discussed here is an analysis of American society and culture, whether characterized as from an anthropological or sociological perspective.

exciting, fun, pleasurable, even poetic (Henry 1965:45–86). In sum, the American dream is a marketer's dream. It can conveniently be fashioned through emotive advertising to "sell the sizzle, not the steak" through the use of fantastic visual imagery and hyperbolic rhetoric. It can, and does, induce Americans to do what the economy needs to be done on the terms the economy needs it to happen.

A few years later Philip Slater, in *The Pursuit of Loneliness* (1990; originally published in 1970), offered his own distinctive analysis of American culture. Slater's analysis also arguably expanded the established contours generally applicable to previous sociological discussions of the American dream. Slater's critique begins with his explicit statement that he is writing about middle class American life as an American. He does so, he points out, because he believes that the problems he raises are "most fully developed in America" and, thus, there exists no better laboratory than America to examine them. Slater explains that he writes about problems in American life because he believes that by the late 1960's each day 200 million Americans invest considerable energy in creating, and re-creating, the "social calamities that oppress, infuriate and exhaust us." (Slater 1990:2) Thus, unlike commentators who focus on the economic underpinning to the American dream, Slater is committed to describing the value-laden behavioral shortcomings to achieving a better way of life within American society. Indeed, only in his 1976 revision did Slater add a brief, fifteen page chapter on the influence of money and the economy on our way of life. Slater's approach returns the American dream discussion to a focus on truly social factors and forces.

The gist of Slater's assessment of the American dream and the American way of life at the time of his writing was disarmingly simple: Americans are often divorced from their own agency, their own motivations, and the consequences of their own action. Although it is Americans themselves who have created the dysfunction and polarity in American society we all look for others to blame – Communists in the 1950's, liberals if we are conservative, right-wing 'nut jobs' if we are liberals. Moreover, all of this is pursued with a lack of awareness, and a heightened sense of denial, that permits us to suppress many of our human traits and most poignant longings – for community, trust, cooperation, and friendship; for direct engagement with our society; and for permission to share with others the ability to control and influence the direction of our personal and collective lives (Slater 1990:8). Individualism, that most characteristic American trait, reduces us – in Slater's view – to a "jungle of competing egos" (Slater 1990:10) submerged in the invidiousness of our capitalist economic system where common goals are few and freedom to seek more apartness is the endgame of our individualistic fantasy.

The consequence according to Slater is a culture that is short on helping behavior, nurturance, supportiveness, complementarity in roles and – in the end – self-defeating due to its continual competitive acquisitiveness and one-dimensional focus on self-aggrandizement. For Slater, it is not the economy per se that causes Americans to feel short-changed bur rather the feelings of loss and deprivation that pervade Americans' sense of self because of the disjunction between our inner and outer worlds. The result is a society in which we can have just about anything we want but, in the end, we aren't even able to articulate our most earnest yearnings anymore because the social forms we have created compel us to sit quietly, hands folded, without knowing who we are, while Rome burns around us. Can these social and emotional deprivations be solved by more and better paying jobs? By better government policies? In Slater's view, it is the

technological and material driven-ness that permeates our society whose motivational roots must be expunged before Americans can re-orient their longings to embrace a newly configured American dream – where individual Americans do not need to shoulder the burden of "making a place" for himself or herself in society solely on one's own (Slater 1990: 13–14; 24–5; 104).

In the final analysis, Slater unequivocally embraces a definition of the American dream that reflects James Truslow Adams' original conception. At the time of his writing, Slater believed that Americans exhibited a "hunger" for balance and quality in their lives. They wanted, in short, to lead 'decent' lives where Americans needs and desires match their energy and resources and unnecessary striving, neglect, overabundance and insufficiency are eliminated (Slater 1990:151–52). The result would be a reduction in all those social indicators which spell a culture under stress – crime, mental illness, suicide, chronic disease, apathy, isolation, and anomie. Slater's work urges that the American culture of individualism, materialism, and competitiveness led us not to the American dream but rather away from it toward a fractious and fractured culture.

A Return to an Emphasis on Class and the Importance of Structural Economics

Shortly after the appearance of Slater's *The Pursuit of Loneliness*, Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb weighed in with their own modestly dystopian view of American life in *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (1970). Sennett and Cobb's thesis is a complicated one; however, reduced to its major outline they argue that while the United States has provided a platform from which many lower class and working class individuals have risen in the social and economic structure, their rise has not produced unalloyed satisfaction or happiness. Indeed, in many cases the subjects of their investigation express unhappiness or ambivalence about their social ascent and seem doomed to experience lives of personal inadequacy even though their outward, relative success is tangible and assured.

Sennett and Cobb's analysis is based on a tri-partite framework. First, the authors conclude, based on their interviews, that many of their primarily working class subjects express the view that badges of competence and ability offer both positive recognition and produce a tension that complicates their inner lives in class-based American life. Thus, on the one hand, those who strive and achieve occupational success and social ascent experience the benefits of having risen. On the other hand, those same individuals feel cut off – from their origins, from other members of their family, from their class and community, and – in some cases – from their own sense of human dignity (Sennett and Cobb 1972:53–78).

Second, Sennett and Cobb found that their subjects adjusted to their feelings of personal inadequacy by demanding that their children be different than they are; thus, the subjects define the success of their lives by the sacrifices they make on behalf of their children – who they then demand should outperform them and rise even further. In this sense, the authors characterized generational sacrifice as a "contract" that required those for whom the sacrifice is made to act reciprocally in recognition and acknowledgement of the sacrifice made. (Sennett and Cobb 1972:119–31) As Sennett and Cobb (1972:131–35) also document, however, this vision of intergenerational mobility through sacrifice is subject to injury through 'betrayal' by one's own offspring, who decline to accept their part of burden of sacrifice by accepting it gracefully and striving to fulfill what is, after all, their parents' American dream.

Finally, Sennett and Cobb analyze what they consider to be the "uses of injured dignity" within a class society. In essence, they conclude that the hidden injuries of class serve to keep members of the working classes with their 'shoulders to the wheel,' that is, moving within class society to seek "more money, more possessions, [and] higher-status jobs" (Sennett and Cobb 1972:171). The key recognition, however, is these Americans keep striving not to enhance their material rewards but in an attempt to restore and heal the psychological deprivation they feel has arisen from their limited place in the class structure. Thus, American workers attempt to assuage their fear of failure – and of living a failed life – by continual material validation.

Beginning in the late 1970's American sociologists, along with American economists, often focused their attention on broad structural changes that were taking place within corporate capitalism, the world of work, and the global economy. In retrospect, it is easy to discern that these changes were dramatic and produced far-reaching effects on American society. Indeed, the effects are still with us in many communities although the critical time period for the release of the economic forces that still beset us was from approximately 1975 to the early 1990's. It was these structural economic changes, in part, and the negative impact they had on middle class, blue collar, and lower class ways of life that inspired, to one degree or another, the still current conception of the American dream as purely the province of economic well-being. A very brief survey of some of the work of American sociologists in this era will convey the nature of the studies undertaken. For Sennett and Cobb (1972:196), the real injury of class is this cloak of protective alienation that Americans wrap around themselves to separate and isolate their person from the performing self that the class structure compels them to become.

Bluestone and Harrison's[7] (1982) examination of the deindustrialization of America was representative of many works along these lines. Their review of the underlying economic infrastructure suggested that many corporations that were the backbone of private employment in the United States were choosing to disinvest – rather than invest – in the nation's basic productive capacity. The cumulative and collective effect of this overall tendency was to eliminate jobs for Americans – or substitute minimum wage jobs for salaried or skilled wage jobs. The consequence was often wrenching for Americans and the American way of life: unemployment, under-employment, wage stagnation, wage loss, and economic hardship generally. As Bluestone and Harrison noted, the consequences for workers and their families were hardly academic: those affected suffered serious physical and emotional health problems while whole communities suffered loss of revenue needed to support schools and other community institutions (Bluestone and Harrison 1982:22). The authors' accounts of the impact of plant shutdowns, plant re-locations, and other infrastructure disruptions were replete with scores of individual tales of economic hardship engendered by these macroeconomic forces. While some argued that disinvestment somewhere always leads to reinvestment elsewhere, Bluestone and Harrison's comparison of the loss of economic vitality in Youngstown, Ohio and the emergence of a boomtown in Houston suggests that even

[7] Bluestone and Harrison, like some of the earlier writers discussed, have mixed academic pedigrees. Bluestone, although a professor of economics, was for many years the Director of the Social Welfare Research Institute at Boston College. Harrison was a professor of political economy and planning at MIT. Nevertheless, their work was widely representative of the work of many sociologists from the 1970's to the 1990's with its emphasis on structural changes in the economy and labor markets, including William Julius Wilson's several studies from this period.

when the loss of jobs to foreign operations is discounted, there was a substantial net loss for the economic lives of millions of Americans (1982:49–107). In essence, millions of Americans had their American dream moved out from under them.

A few years later Harrison and Bluestone (1988) followed up their investigation of deindustrialization in the American economy with an analysis of the succeeding years of economic malaise and stagnation. In *The Great U-Turn* the authors explicitly remarked on the assumption under-pinning their work: "…what is essential to the American Dream is the promise of an ever-improving standard of living. Americans expect to find and hold higher-paying jobs as they get older, and they expect their children to fare even better." (1988:vii) Thus, the authors explicitly define the American dream in economic terms with an emphasis on intergenerational mobility.

The authors' analysis of the state of American life toward the end of the 1980's retains its focus on the corporate "bottom line" and the economic circumstances faced by many Americans, which they glibly label the "unemployment line" (Harrison and Bluestone 1988:110). Generally, the picture they paint is of a modest recovery in corporate profits and what the authors called "the dark side of the American story" – more job creation but with the number of low-paid jobs "mushrooming" (1988:113). The consequence was a decline in real annual wages for most Americans during this period, especially those sectors which rely on wages for the overwhelming bulk of their income. A corollary is that the wage and income gap – which the authors report as modestly narrowing between 1966 and 1973 – reversed itself and began steadily widening through the late 1980's (1988:118). A second, concomitant change was the shift in numbers of manufacturing jobs, which were decreasing, compared to service jobs, which were increasing (1988:120). These converging trends led, in the authors' view, to what Harrison and Bluestone denominated as the "declining middle" and encouraged them to ask, [Is this] "An End to the American Dream?" (1988:137).

Their answer was delivered in the structural terms of their overall analysis: American families today [late 1980's] find themselves on a treadmill, running as fast as possible, to sustain a standard of living achieved fifteen years earlier with less effort. This effect was produced, in the authors' view, by the practices and policies of corporate and government leaders, which were increasing profit while "wreaking havoc" on the American dream (1988:138). Thomas Moore (1996), investigating the changing economy of the 1980's and early 1990's independently suggests, too, that many Americans were forced to prioritize the economic basis for their lives due to the widespread reality of workplace instability and economic insecurity within America's private workplaces. Katherine Newman[8] (1988), publishing her own investigation of these economic forces the same year as Bluestone and Harrison, focused her lens on the "hundreds of thousands" of middle class families that experienced downward social mobility through loss of jobs and income. Sifting the evidence on social mobility, Newman's conclusion mirrors the primary reservation that has been expressed regarding the viability of the economic version of the American dream's success ethic: "One can play by the rules, pay one's

[8] Newman, who holds her Ph.D. degree in anthropology from the University of California, Berkeley, has held appointments in sociology departments for much of her career, including positions affiliated with sociology at Princeton and Harvard. Her work has primarily been directed at studies of the poor and middle classes in the United States, including the volume discussed here.

dues, and still be evicted from the American dream. There simply is no guarantee one's best efforts will be rewarded in the end." (1988:229).

An Argument for the Pre-eminence of Values

During this same general period Robert Bellah and his colleagues conducted a considerably different form of investigation into the American way of life. As they reported in *Habits of the Heart* (1996), originally published in 1985, they sought to answer fundamental questions:

> How ought we to live? How do we think about how to live? Who are we, as Americans?
>
> What is our character? These are questions we have asked our fellow citizens in many parts of the country. … [We asked] … what matters most to them,… about their doubts and uncertainties, and their hopes and fears…

Their conclusions, ruminative and qualified, were based on 200 in-depth, but non-random interviews conducted of predominantly white, middle class Americans between the years 1979–1984. Most of these were conducted in San Jose and Santa Monica, CA and in and around Boston, MA (Bellah, et al., xliii-xlv). In the end, their focal themes revolved around the American success ethic, the value Americans place on freedom, Americans' sense of justice, and the reciprocal influence of each of these concepts with the contemporary impact of American individualism.

Initially, Bellah and his co-authors concede that the American success ethic is an important dimension in the lives of many Americans. However, these authors differ quite considerably in their assessment of its prominence compared to Bluestone and Harrison and others. They conceive of its meaning quite differently. For those who espouse the economic American dream approach, economic success supersedes all other values. For Bellah et al. (1996):196) success in one's job involves economic success for the American middle class but it also consists of other elements – being held in professional esteem, establishing professional relationships, and so forth. Moreover, their interview subjects generally voiced other goals as equally – or more – important than economic success, including finding and establishing one's identity, establishing personal relationships through love and/or marriage, engagement with the community, or religious belief and involvement.

The strengths of *Habits of the Heart* are several. First, Bellah and his colleagues base their investigation – much like Thomas and Znaniecki – on listening to their subjects discuss their lives and their ways of life. Thus, they do not start with the assumption that achieving the American dream simply means achieving monetary success; rather they investigate that possibility among several other conceptions suggested by their respondents. Second, the authors listen intently. By doing so the authors monitor the tensions their subjects voice regarding the various dimensions of their lives. They carefully record – for example – their respondents' efforts to "strike a balance between the kind of self-interest implicit in the individualistic search for success and the kind of concern required to gain the joys of community and public involvement." (1996:199) The authors note similar 'balance' issues between the search for identify, engagement

with others, and pursuit of one's career. For Bellah and his colleagues, middle class American life is characterized primarily by a set of attitudes, aspirations, and expectations toward status mobility that shape their respondents' actions but it also entails and requires navigation within an ambiguous sea of uncertain standards amidst a throng of other competing aspirants (1996:148–49). It is in this context that Bellah and his co-authors conclude that the "inner tensions of American individualism add up to a classic case of ambivalence" toward the American way of life (1996:150–51).

The 'Truly Disadvantaged' rather than the 'Black Bourgeoisie'

While Slater, Bluestone and Harrison, and Bellah and his colleagues concerned themselves largely with the white, lower middle and middle tier of Americans in terms of income, lifestyle and status, William Julius Wilson was investigating American life for the truly disadvantaged in a series of studies of predominantly African American communities in and around Chicago (Wilson 1987; 1996). Wilson's most notable examination of the conditions of American life among the black underclass, *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987), acknowledged the social deterioration of inner city ghettos in the second half of the twentieth century, including an increase in out-of-wedlock births, single head of households, welfare dependency and increases in the number and seriousness of crimes committed. Yet, Wilson's analyses found that pervasive joblessness was, in the end, perhaps the most influential factor in each of the deteriorated social indexes for the inner city impoverished neighborhoods.

Wilson followed his initial investigation with *When Work Disappears* (1996), a detailed follow-up that focused its investigation on the disappearance of low-skilled employment in the inner city. Wilson found that while unemployment was a problem for both black women and men that long term joblessness was more concentrated among black underclass men. This resulted in a significant increase in the number of nonworking men. in prime-age class who were, in former eras, employed (Wilson 1996:25–56). Wilson, too, found – like Bluestone and Harrison – that that these changes were related to the general decline in manufacturing/mass production jobs in the United States. The impact – as many other analyses of the inner cities during this period attest – is a reduced legitimate opportunity structure, typically leading to an increase in illegitimate avenues to produce income leading, in turn, to increases in crime (1996:57–9). These influences led, more or less directly, to the fading vitality of the urban black family structure. In the end it was rather easy for Wilson to conclude, as Bluestone and Harrison had, that the sizable gap in income equality threatened the way of life for Americans at the lower end of the economic spectrum. While Wilson did not use the term "American dream" in his two books – perhaps because the truly disadvantaged he was writing about seldom had sufficient confidence about their American prospects to dream – the implications of his findings and their impact was clear.

Low Income Americans' Dreams in the Era of Welfare Reform

Sociological studies of the American prospect after the millennium concentrated their attention on the economic aspirations and circumstances of predominantly middle class Americans. Sharon Hays (2003) investigated the new world of welfare reform brought about by changes in federal welfare legislation: 1996's Temporary Assistance to Needy

Families (TANF) and the related Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act. Her examination of 'welfare mothers' and the impact of changes in federal law on the population that welfare law served illuminated a sector of the nation's poverty population largely absent from prior studies due to their focus on the middle classes. Moreover, Hays depicts her mission as exploring "the cultural, norms, beliefs, and values embedded in welfare reform." She argues that the 1996 Acts can best be understood as a form of social initiative aimed at legislating family values and supporting the work ethic (Hays 2003:10). Indeed, Hays finds the two prongs internally contradictory and labels them the "Family Plan" and the "Work Plan" respectively.

Initially, Hays' work is distinguishable from earlier studies, too, because of the fact that the vast majority of adult welfare clients at the time she wrote - 90 % - were mothers. The great majority of these were raising their children alone: just 7 % of recipients were in two-parent households. Thus, while these mothers do not know each other and cannot in that sense form a 'community', this population of Americans and the lives they lead is distinctly different than Gans' examination of Levittown or Boston's North End or Wilson's look at a south side Chicago neighborhood. Perhaps of greater interest in this regard, welfare recipients have long been painted with a tarred brush – painted black, that is. As Jill Quadagno (1994) has argued U.S. welfare policies have long been driven by racial animus resulting in reduced assistance compared to other industrialized nations even though only roughly a third of U.S. welfare recipients are African American.

Hays' findings are of substantial interest in light of the focus of the present paper on the American dream. Generally, she concludes that the story of welfare reform was dominated by a shared recognition of the values of work, childrearing, equality, inclusion and citizenship regardless of the political and social divisiveness, bureaucratic hassles and pure economic hardship strewn along the way. In a sense, without denominating it as such, she found welfare reform to be a cultural attempt to instill a re-invigorated American dream in an isolated, dependent and often demoralized sector of American society – the welfare bureaucracy and its client audience. However flawed both the vision and the execution, Hays' analysis suggests that many of the values that undergird the American dream found their way in to the 1996 Acts and sought to inspire an ethic of independence, aspiration, and effort as corollaries to the provision of needed economic assistance. The degree to which any of the goals of welfare reform has been successful is, of course, largely in the eye of the beholder yet the fact that the reform effort was enfolded in value statements reflective of the ideals of the American dream is significant.

The 'Truly Disadvantaged' and the 'Black Bourgeoisie' Face Up to 'Our Kind of People'

In the mid-1980's a chance encounter between Lawrence Otis Graham,[9] then a first year student at Harvard Law School, and Reginald Lewis, then the wealthiest black man in America, spawned Graham's interest in formally investigating and writing

[9] Graham was a Harvard Law graduate and lawyer in New York City at the time he wrote *Our Kind of People*. He has written more than a dozen non-fiction books, primarily about black American society and the black experience. He has consciously pursued participant observation studies for some of his work, including serving as a $ 7/hour server at a white country club while on leave from his New York law firm. Thus, while not a sociologist, the work underlying *Our Kind of People* arises largely from his own (unannounced) participant observation as a quasi-insider to the black elite.

about a hidden part of America's black society – elite black America. Ultimately, the book he wrote – *Our Kind of People* (1999) – described an insular world of intense socialization for American black kids growing up in the latter half of the twentieth century. These children of the black elite (and the children of aspirants to membership in the black elite) were immersed in 'Jack and Jill' societies, the 'right' cotillions, camps, and private schools, and attendance at one of the 'three colleges that count' (Howard, Spelman and Morehouse) followed by membership in one of the 'right' fraternities or sororities. In shimmering detail, Graham spends the second half of his lengthy volume describing the social ties and interconnected institutions of black elite life across the dozen most important 'black' American cities. The picture he paints is one of carefully drawn status distinctions that lead either to inclusion or exclusion from the rarefied realm that elite black Americans have cultivated for themselves for over a century. As Graham notes (1999:xii), the way of life he described consisted of a world "filled with irony and conflict" for many black Americans who aspired to join. The black elite often lived "at the boundary of two worlds and been misunderstood by both."

The American Dream Meets the 'Great Recession'

Leicht and Fitzgerald (2007), writing before the "Great Recession" driven by the housing mortgage crisis truly revealed itself, focused their analysis on what they concluded was the "debt peonage" incurred by the American middle class over the preceding three decades. In retrospect, their analysis of the credit crisis that struck the American middle, lower middle, and working classes hard in 2008 seems prescient and undeniable. They set out carefully, for example, the various changes in credit laws and lending practices that over a half century created the climate in which middle class Americans could finance a 'growth' style of consumption in an otherwise no-growth atmosphere of declining real earning power, outsourcing, job instability and layoffs. Their conclusion is that many Americans who are "playing by the rules" are simply engaged in the illusion of middle class prosperity; the truth is that many Americans are just getting by and have few prospects for changing their economic situation. In this regard, Leicht and Fitzgerald (2007):11) characterize middle class Americans as "post-industrial peasants" – as surely bound to others who control their fate as medieval peasants were bound to the manor lord who controlled their land holding.

While Leicht and Fitzgerald's (2007) analysis of the economic plight of many middle Americans at the millennium is compelling, their investigation of the American way of life and the dreams of Americans is limited, as with many previous studies, by their focus on the (largely white) middle class and the authors exclusive focus on financial/economic matters. To be fair, it is true that Leicht and Fitzgerald critically evaluate the consequences of post-industrial debt peonage – which prominently include the further fraying of community recorded by Bellah and his colleagues twenty years earlier. Thus, Leicht and Fitzgerald (2007) attribute much of the political alienation, anger, and polarity in American society noted over the previous decade or two before their writing to an economic and jobs climate that so demands Americans' attention that they can no longer engage with neighbors, their larger community, a region or the national conversation because of the predominance

of personal economic concerns. The question, however, of whether Americans are completely consumed with economic goals and economic concerns is largely reduced to an assumption. Their reasoning is simply that many middle class Americans are objectively in a money bind according to all indicators and – therefore – this circumstance must be both the focus of their American dream and the predominant factor driving its present failure. As a logical matter, the conclusion the authors offer does not flow directly from the economic facts they recite. It may well be that Americans were alienated and polarized by values issues ("the culture wars") long before economic issues divided them further. Many sociological investigations that accord economic concerns primacy share the same weakness: they do not seriously address the question of whether other factors may be causally more influential. This weakness of analytical reliance on the economic version of the American dream warrants its own consideration.

Summary

This preliminary summary of the work sociologists dedicated to investigating the contours of American life in the 20th century (and beyond) has been necessarily selective and incomplete. Many deserving sociological studies of the 'American way of life' have no doubt been overlooked. My review also does not include related inquiries by psychiatrists and psychologists – such as Kenneth Keniston's insightful investigation of young men alienated from the American way of life (Keniston 1965) or his equally discerning analysis of those who rebel against it (Keniston 1968). Both studies – and many more one could name – are arguably important commentaries on the American dream, even if ones not conducted by a sociologist. Still, one can easily recognize that the studies presented here focused on many of the most critical issues related to the nature, purpose, means, and relative success in pursuing life goals, and the nature of the social structure, within the context of American society. Some of the studies were direct and explicit in stating their authors' interest in examining the 'American dream' while others were silently implicit, although often equally engaged in a nearly identical sociological enterprise.

Arguably, however, sociology has made few advances beyond these earlier efforts in the immediate past. In the most recent decade one can contend, with some degree of credibility, there has been a tendency for sociologists to simply repeat tired formulas regarding social structure, class, the economy and mobility and not investigate in complex detail the actual lived lives of Americans, the hopes they conceive, and the promises they seek to fulfill. Many studies, for example, circumscribe their inquiries in to American society by limiting their understanding of the American dream purely to its definition as economic success. Tensions and polarities that arise from different social forces than the economy are sometimes given short shrift as are explorations of the American way of life that require micro-sociological approaches to understand aspirations that are not easily subsumed within the categories of thought embodied in mainstream American sociology. In short, there seems to have been diminishing interest in posing and answering questions about the nature of the contemporary American dream for Americans and, to a lesser extent, examining its relation to the daily lives of Americans. In this void, other disciplines – journalism, economics, and anthropology among them – have launched their own efforts, which in many instances have been more imaginative and wide ranging. However, as I will argue, research in to the

American dream is uniquely the province of sociology and American sociology should return to the task of exploring the nature of the American dream in the 21st century. In the few pages that follow, I will attempt to chart out some of the considerations that I believe should guide this inquiry.

Conclusion: Considerations for the Sociological Study of the American Dream

I have argued that sociology is particularly suited, and exceptionally well-prepared, for undertaking contemporary inquiries in to the nature, and prospects, of the American dream. I have reached this conclusion after examining sociology's historic commitment to investigating the 'American way of life' and the social forces that shape it. If the foregoing demonstrates nothing else, it should sensitize us to the many divergent, fruitful arenas for sociological research regarding the American way of life as the dreams of Americans – facile, convoluted, politicized, or sublimated – are all around us.

The Success Ethic: An Insufficient Proxy for the American Dream

The American dream of James Truslow Adams promised a life that was 'richer and better and fuller' for everyone. Adams' vision of life in America where every person can seek personal fulfillment has arguably been transformed to one of avid pursuit of individual economic success (Messner and Rosenfeld 2007; Hochschild 1995; Merton 1938). Still, even among demographic groups that one might suspect envision an economic American dream - such as business franchisees - there are often competing dreams (such as the simple desire to own one's own business and 'not have a boss') identified by research (Birkeland 2002). Yet, neither the economic nor social system in the contemporary United States can likely support the sort of overall economic prosperity that will sustain this version of the American dream in the future.

An initial analysis of the ideological limitations of the economic dream suggests that the likelihood of achieving the conventional American dream, regardless of the specific details of its substantive character, is – at its heart – dependent to a significant degree on a strong economy that supports widespread access to a middle class way of life for most Americans. The experience of the Great Depression is sufficient evidence that this is the case. As Richard Pells (1973) has written, the impact of the Depression was not simply to encourage American writers and thinkers to address the failure of the economy and propose reforms that might prevent future economic collapse. Rather, there was almost a universal response to 'do more' than merely restructure American institutions; there was instead an effort to identify some new value system or national purpose that reflected, in Pells' view, "a profound loss of faith in the American Dream…" (1973:99) While the initial shock to society was economic in nature, the effect on Americans was experienced as a psychological one that undercut American's belief in their country and themselves. Instead of just salvaging a ruined economy, American intellectuals of all persuasions responded to this widespread recognition of the country's mood and conceived of the nation's primary need as a re-defined and re-invigorated American dream (Pells 1973).

Thus, the question remains whether a strong economy – in and of itself – is sufficient to sustain a meaningful dream that most Americans are willing to live today. Galbraith (1958), writing in the flush of post-war prosperity, reflected an underlying optimism

about American society while acknowledging the income gap, poverty, and other issues. Perhaps in the new economy of abundance that post-World War II America experienced a robust economy seemed to project the 'solution' for many of the United States' problems, as well as constitute the source of its members' primary aspirations. While many sociological investigations over the last 30 years have focused primarily on the changing realities that have re-shaped Americans' economic lives there is not widespread, unequivocal evidence that Americans across race, class and other demographic factors believe they live happy and satisfied lives under late modern capitalism (Brueggemann 2012). At best, one can say that basic economic health is a necessary, but not sufficient, foundation for Americans to achieve what they consider to be their 'American dream' (Rank et al. 2014). In short, the economic version of the American dream may not be the dominant paradigm any longer, if it indeed ever was the preeminent conception that formed the American dream for most Americans.

Individualism

A significant theme that has permeated American dream studies at one time or another is individualism. On the one hand, the near-obsession with economic well-being that pervades both studies of the American dream and the attitudes of many Americans is intimately tied to the American emphasis on individualism. As one example of the impact individualism has on the way Americans live, Americans' demand for private transportation represents a significant cost that individuals and families must underwrite. To do so, Americans must clearly achieve a level of success within the economy and to not do so is for Americans to suffer a substantial indignity that is incompatible with the American dream. To the extent Americans were more willing to rely on public transportation their insatiable need for income to sustain private transportation would be moderated and, arguably, a higher level of economic security would be more easily achieved. Yet individualism prevents many Americans from contemplating this way of life. In this regard a re-imagined series of studies of the American dream should direct some substantial part of its focus toward understanding the role that American individualism plays in the ways in which Americans live.

Individualism is also apparent as a theme within the American dream with respect to what is not said. Thus, Americans are often reported as self-absorbed and less concerned with the welfare of others and their communities (Slater 1990). This makes sense within the context of American capitalism where competitive individualism within markets is the dominant narrative. Clearly in such an environment one must be engaged in looking out for oneself since no one else will be. Yet, there are also reports in American dream research from Americans about the fulfillment they receive from service to others – for example teachers whose life goals and sense of self-realization are tied to the skills, support and encouragement they offer students (Rank et al. 2014:62–63). In either case the reports suggest that the individualistic ethos within American culture warrants close examination as an important factor within the meaning of the American dream.

Traditional Middle Class American Way of Life

There is also apparent in a number of the studies addressed earlier a nearly implicit, almost unacknowledged, realization that perhaps the American dream as it is most

commonly conceptualized and offered to Americans as a model for living has not aged well. This observation arises from the proposition that it is far more important to note what is not said, and not the explicit focus of study, than exclusively attend to only those features of society and social organization that constitute the formal basis of study. Clearly, a limited concentration on how white, middle class Americans live and whether they are achieving the American dream would constitute a naively unsatisfactory emphasis and obvious bias. So, too, would adoption of a somewhat broadened conception that includes members of the diverse panorama of ethnic and racial America but still limited its perspective to the more traditional lifestyles.

There is for example, substantial evidence that among some Americans the 'marriage, family, house in the suburbs, two cars in the driveway' version of the dream is viewed as either unattractive or unsustainable (Brueggemann 2012: 138–140). Still, the literature on the American dream suggests there is no generally agreed upon alternative way of life or symbolic ideological fix available for our national myth. Eric Klinenberg, a New York University sociologist, has recently documented the increase in the number of Americans who live alone. Yet his work is less forthcoming on whether or not this lifestyle actually constitutes a new American dream. Thus, his *Going Solo*: *The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone* (2012) offers only anecdotal evidence that is comparatively thin with respect to the proposition that living alone will be sustainable over the long term for many Americans. Klinenberg's stories of positive adaptations in the form of solo living are easily countered with other anecdotes of loneliness, disaffection, and alienation, especially among those in lower socio-economic strata or rural populations. In short, living alone may simply be a temporary compensatory adaptation to the contention, by some, that the American social fabric is "coming apart" at the very seams (Murray 2012). To the degree that Charles Murray is correct, there is an ongoing social collapse of traditional ways of American life; but why should anyone who is not already bound by those value commitments attempt to re-energize failed forms of community, sociability and solidarity? A brief interregnum of living solo may seem ideal under such dystopian conditions. This line of thinking would seem to be particularly applicable to younger generations whose hope for vertical social mobility may have been permanently eclipsed by recent economic events and long term structural changes.

In sum, in the absence of a sustainable strong economy, the traditional compensatory lifestyle satisfactions and institutions have exhibited far less holding power than the conventional rhetoric surrounding this version of the American dream would propose. Recently, a new cohort of sociologists has explicitly taken up the subject and warned of further probable deterioration of this conventional form of the American dream due to a historic decline in social mobility over recent decades (Rank et al. 2014). Thus, the goal of single family home ownership financed by sizable private debt that has become one operational formulation, or theme, within the late twentieth century American dream (Michaelson 2009) has suffered a severe, if not entirely irrecoverable, setback (Yoder 2012; Brannigan 2013; Christie 2013; Williams 2009). Indeed, the entire debt industry, which has been a silent foundation for the American dream since the Depression (Calder 1999; Whalen 2011; Hyman 2012) has experienced such recent perilous crises as to challenge its sustainability (Hauhart 2011). Some social analysts are now even attributing homelessness and living on the street to this unachievable aspiration as a significant factor in the failed American dream (Wasserman and Clair 2010:5–6). Similarly, attainment of a

college degree – another instrumental goal for many Americans that has become a dream unto itself – has become increasingly difficult due to the cost of higher education in the United States. Although some still can attain this element of the dream the cost-benefit ratio of attaining a college degree dream has plummeted. As all recent reports indicate, student debt has ballooned (Blow 2013; New York Times 2013). Moreover, given Americans' instrumental view of higher education (Collins 1979), the fact that college degrees simply do not guarantee 'good jobs' anymore blunts the efficacy of the historic intersection of these three inter-related pillars of the American way of life. Some who search for the American dream today have rejected its lure, perhaps, for these reasons (Zukin et al. 2012). All of these forces appear to severely undercut that segment of the American dream that suggests aspirations for intergenerational mobility feature prominently in many Americans' definitions of the dream (Rank et al. 2014). Yet, it remains an open question as to what actually constitutes today's American dream when both the economic and non-economic content of the traditional formulas have been so little investigated over the last decade or two. What we will become as Americans in search of our multi-form, evanescent dreams (Zogby 2008), although a source of endless fascination, warrants more dedicated and targeted investigations across a broader set of dimensions and diverse populations if we are to grasp its meaning and direction.

The Sociological Study of a Nation's Aspirations

The consequence of these trends – and perhaps of many others besides – is that the ideological limits of the economic dream have likely been approached – if not already surpassed – due to changing economics, aspirational transmutation, and the simple inability of the economic dream to fulfill its promise. Still, rather remarkably, independent studies continue to show that American college students overwhelmingly express belief in the promise of the American dream (Hauhart and Birkenstein 2013; Abowitz 2005) even as there exists some disagreement about what, exactly, the American dream entails (Hauhart and Birkenstein 2013). Perhaps only if the dream's conception can be broadened and re-energized can it likely continue to sustain an American way of life within corporate capitalism further in to the twenty-first century (Duina 2011). Yet many predatory economic forces still persist and pervade American society (Ferguson 2012; Moss 2013). Sociology, as the study of emergent and competing social forces, is in a position to offer trenchant analyses of the changing contours of the American dream should it accept the challenge.

Yet, to do so American sociology will need to arguably use both a wider and narrower set of lenses to examine the subject, adopt some different methods, forego its rather unreflective attraction to the economic version of the American dream, and re-enter the domain of values. American sociology's periodic near-adoption of economic analyses as the sole quiver of motivational narratives that undergird and propel the American way of life borders too closely at this historic moment to a 'self-fulfilling prophecy'. At least one recent group of sociological investigators has recognized the critical roles played by hope and optimism as essential elements of the American dream that, in turn, act as sustaining forces within society (Rank et al. 2014). Their effort in this regard is one of several recent salutary turns that may act to broaden American dream research and re-orient these investigations so as to benefit our understanding. It should

not take sociologists long to realize that the questions one asks – and the investigations one fails to conduct – pre-determine to a substantial extent the answers one finds. Sociology, having invested heavily (along with many other commentators) in the economic version of the American dream, may find itself asked to "double up" its bet or leave the table. Sociology, as a study of *social* processes, should choose the latter alternative by re-inventing its study of the American way of life and the role the American dream plays within it for the 21st century.

Community Studies, Subcultures, the American Way of Life, and the Construction of a Self

How can sociology reclaim some of the missing thrusts of its historic commitment to investigating the elements of the American dream? Arguably it can do so by returning, to a degree, to some of its historic methodological roots, shifting its inquiries from a near-exclusive focus on the economy to social relations and social arrangements, and asking – directly – about Americans' hopes and dreams. In essence, sociology could re-embrace the sort of community studies typified by John Seeley's work in a Toronto suburb and Herbert Gans' explorations in the North End of Boston and suburban Levittown, New Jersey. Sociology could also rely to a greater degree on Gans' and Hannerz's approaches – participant observation – to identify, enter, and fully understand the many contemporary lifestyle niches that early 21st century America has been generating along its economic, social, political, racial and sexual divides. This would be, in effect, a return to in-depth studies of significant subcultures that – although sometimes cross-cutting – constitute the 'new communities' that have formed as the conventional institutional foundations for the traditional American dream have crumbled. These explorations would no doubt suggest complementary research in to cultural oases inspired by the flux of contemporary life reflected in the new social media as well. Since the pace of social change is a factor, exploratory research seems quite apropos along these lines so as to develop an appreciation for the further lines of inquiry that should ultimately be pursued and the questions that need to be asked at this historic juncture. Sociology perhaps needs to be more flexible in its approach to the topic where emerging cultural themes, living arrangements and rapidly shifting business models (within the tech and cyber worlds, among others) absorb significant numbers among our population.

Finally, sociology should consider a return to deeper engagement with examination of the constellation of elements that Americans now sort through to create an identity, a self. The distinguished work of David Riesman and his colleagues, Jules Henry, and Philip Slater, among others, should guide us in this regard but our use of their insights cannot act as blinders to our present predicament. Rather, their commitment to independent inquiry should force us to venture out into new realms of self-discovery being pursued by Americans beyond the comfort of our libraries, classrooms, and present theories. Risk-averse intellectual projects that simply constitute 'business as usual' will not serve sociology or American society well. Only a re-engineered means of coming to terms with the lived experiences of contemporary Americans will provide us a meaningful understanding of the social narratives that constitute the basis for our current iteration of the American dream.

In sum, the American dream is a powerful idea that has shaped the lives of Americans for nearly a century. Many of its essential themes have influenced

Americans for even longer. As Swanson (2014):6) recognized with respect to the "body banking" metaphor applied to blood, milk, and sperm preservation units, its incorporation in to our language acknowledges that the term is not merely a rhetorical gesture; rather its acceptance – and in the case of 'the American dream' near omnipresence – suggests that the term has become "a concept that governs our thought." (Swanson 2014:6 quoting Lakoff and Johnson 2003) Concepts this powerful pretty clearly deserve our careful examination.

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