

THE CONTINUOUS DAWN OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

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Abstract: *The present paper aims at highlighting the evolution of the syntagm "The American Dream" in the American national mentality, from a historical point of view with all its changes. In an interdisciplinary approach, we correlate the cultural and political studies with the linguistic studies and try to prove that the American Dream never changed its content, despite the promoted ideology behind the expression. Even if the ideological content correlates to democratic values, the American dream may sometimes appear as utopic as any political ideology. Trying to find a reason for the persistence of the metaphor in discourses, we go toward the therapeutic metaphor and propose the concept of national therapeutic metaphor, with two main roles: prevention and healing of collective mentality.*

Key words: American Dream, founding metaphor, conceptual metaphor, therapeutic metaphor.

The dawn of the American Dream as a founding metaphor

The syntagm "The American Dream" is so rooted in the international collective mentality that people often do not have questions on its appearance and original significance. In a historical approach, Professor Sarah Churchwell investigates the American Dream's rise as idea, content, and significance. She shows:

“Before about 1900, there is little discernible trace in American cultural conversations of the phrase ‘American dream’ being used to describe a collective, generalisable national ideal of any kind, let alone an economic one. The phrase does not appear in any of the foundational documents in American history – it’s nowhere in the complete writings of Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton or James Madison. It’s not in Hector St. John Crèvecoeur or Alexis de Tocqueville, those two great French observers of early American life. It’s not found in the works of any of America’s major nineteenth-century novelists: Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville or Mark Twain. It’s not in the supposedly more sentimental novels of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Louisa May Alcott, or even Horatio Alger, whose ‘rags to riches’ stories are so often held to exemplify it. Nor does it crop up visibly in political discourse, or newspapers, or anywhere noticeable in the public record”. (Churchwell, 2019: 27)

In *The Epic of America*, James Truslow Adams depicts the passage from the Great American Desert to the Great American Dream, described as “the greater and the better”, increased economic prosperity, and social success, in an obsessive pattern starting with the second half of the 19th century, even if America has always been “a dream land”. Still, beginning with the mentioned period, the American Dream becomes the ethos of the American nation. (Adams, 1931: 214-217).

Churchwell shows that, during her research, the first public use of the term was occasioned by President Ulysses S. Grant’s seventy-third birthday in 1895, when an orator expressed: “Oh, critic and cynic, dreamer and doubter, behold America, as this day she stands before her history and her heroes. See her millions of people, her free institutions, her equal laws, her generous opportunities, her schoolhouses and her churches; you see misfortunes and defects, for not yet is fully realized the American dream; you surely see her mighty progress toward the fulfilment of her philosophy.” (Churchwell, 2019: 30)

The idea of American Dream appears in the context of international relations in order to highlight America's messianic role in shaping the world, more like a phrase than a consistently shaped idea: "the American dream of rehabilitating China (...) bastard American dream of Empire in Philippines, as well as the pan-American dream of hemispheric travel, or conquest". (Churchwell, 2019: 28) Even if this type of American dream appears strange in the present perception, it did not lose its meaning in the political discourse.

Barack Obama shows in his book *The audacity of hope: Reclaiming the American Dream* (2006) that "most Americans can't locate Indonesia on a map. This fact is puzzling to Indonesians, since for the past sixty years the fate of their nation has been directly tied to U.S. foreign policy" (Obama, 2006:272). Indonesia becomes in Obama's view a metaphor for "the world beyond our borders". He considers that, by serving the American nation's interests, sometimes there was disregard and illegitimacy to other nations' aspirations and ideals. Obama states: American foreign policy has always been a jumble of warring impulses". (Obama, 2006:280). This description should not come as a surprise since Woodrow Wilson considered war a premise for a safe world and democracy, probably a reinterpretation of the Latin adagio: *Si vis pacem, para bellum*, established during the 4th century by in *De re militari* by Publius Flavius Vegetius Renatus.

Since then, The American dream for other nations manifests, passing from war for peace and "America first" to "peace and consideration for all" and "The American dream", at least to the level of the political discourse. In his first foreign policy speech since taking office, President Joe Biden insisted on the key message: 'America is back' and the fact that diplomacy is the leading U.S. instrument at the international level. While his predecessor, Donald Trump, was relying on foreign policy on the motto "America first", President Joe Biden distanced himself from that position. He insists that international relations would be the most precious asset of the United States, especially when the entire world is facing challenges. The head of the White House stated that "The U.S. must regain its credibility and moral authority for which they were known in the world." (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-americas-place-in-the-world/>)

The American Dream as “metaphor they live by”

The conceptual metaphor begins its journey in the land of linguistics during the '80s, due to the work *Metaphors we live by*, published by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, who explain this type of metaphor by showing that the metaphors have a larger than thought use in communication and, in general, in the human life. They also state that the metaphors are in close connection with the conceptual system created/known by each individual:

“The concepts that govern our thought are not just matters of the intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning, down to the most mundane details. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities. If we are right in suggesting that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor. But our conceptual system is not something we are normally aware of. In most of the little things we do every day, we simply think and act more or less automatically along certain lines”. (Lakoff, Johnson, 2003).

Kövecses shows:

“Lakoff and Johnson challenged the deeply entrenched view of metaphor by claiming that (1) metaphor is a property of concepts, and not of words; (2) the function of metaphor is to better understand certain concepts, and not just some artistic or aesthetic purpose; (3) metaphor is

often not based on similarity; (4) metaphor is used effortlessly in everyday life by ordinary people, not just by special talented people; and (5) metaphor, far from being a superfluous though pleasing linguistic ornament, is an inevitable process of human thought and reasoning". (Kövecses, 2010: X)

Kövecses also shows that the conceptual metaphor can be conventional or unconventional (new). Regarding the American space, the same author writes that the American society is multi-structured and the American citizens are members of several ethnic, social, political, geographical, professional, and conventional groups, each group bringing its own set of biases. Thus, it is normal for the conceptual metaphors to vary depending on the numbers of appurtenances and divisions, which can become dimensions of the conceptual metaphors. Still, the researcher considers the second set of variables, named "alternative frames" showing that "the same event or thing may be viewed metaphorically employing alternative frames. Such alternative understandings divide large segments of American society, and may form the basis of important debates that characterize American society at any given time". (Kövecses, 2016)

Susan C. Strong, founder of Metaphor Project and author of *Move our message. How to get America's ear* affirms that, in order to catch the attention of the American citizens, the messages need positive frames delivering, which must be related to specific themes, called "elements of the American story":

- The American dream – “pioneering, being on the frontier of something, creating the new, bright future, we invent ourselves b/c we are a ‘can do’ people”;
- The American nation – "a new kind of nation with a mission, beacon of hope, melting pot, the cradle of freedom, democracy's defender, champion & missionary, home of equal opportunity, fairness, and equity, of hope, choice, and power, the conscience of the world, rule of law, human rights, political rights, a classless society";
 - The freedom to succeed;
 - The continuous movement;
 - The security of the small towns;
 - From human to superhuman.

Are we allowed to question this founding national conceptual metaphors to establish their relevance in time? Jonathan Charteris-Black writes on the critical analysis of the conceptual metaphor:

"Without the ability to discuss issues according to the metaphors of our choice, we are limited in our means of persuading others how we see the world. Without the ability to be critical of metaphors, the only alternative would be bland acceptance of the metaphors of the others. (...) Metaphors both reflects and determines how we think and feel about the world and, therefore, understanding more about metaphor is an essential component of intellectual freedom". (Charteris-Black, 2004).

In our opinion, the American Dream's global impact also comes from its pluriculturalism, including elements from various culture. (Vănoagă, 2019). Giovanni Sartori (2007) establishes the differences between multiculturalism and pluriculturalism, showing that multiculturalism acknowledges various cultures in one space, while pluriculturalism also acknowledges the specificity of various coexisting cultures, without forcing their dilution in *the melting pot*. In Sartori's opinion, the American society is defined by pluriculturalism, because each American comes with cultural background and identity to build a community of identities, compared to the European space that is more restrictive in allowing foreign identities.

In close connection with the idea mentioned above is the metaphor *America is a nation of immigrants*, a metaphor coined by J.F. Kennedy in a homonymous posthumous volume (1964). *America is a*

nation of immigrants is an important component of the American Dream, which seemed to be non-valid during Donald Trump's presidential mandate, when America denied its origins of state build by immigrants. The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services erased this metaphor from their introduction text, reflecting the new political reality, which became very restrictive in welcoming new immigrants as citizens. The text was changed from "U.S.C.I.S. secures America's promise as a nation of immigrants by providing accurate and useful information" to "U.S.C.I.S. administers the nation's lawful immigration system, safeguarding its integrity and promise by efficiently and fairly adjudicating requests for immigration benefits while protecting Americans, securing the homeland and honoring our values." (Jordan, 2018)

Another crucial element of the American Dream is "the land of all opportunities", theoretically offering each citizen and immigrant the possibility to put in practice any idea destined to bring social, financial, and professional success. This aspect reflected in time, even in American legislation. Barack Obama presented in 2001 a proposal DREAM Act (Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minor Acts), aiming to grant temporary residence to minor immigrants, with the possibility to receive full residence to the majority. (Matos, 2020) The legislative proposal also intended access to education, medical assistance, personal and professional development, and all the living and development possibilities of an American citizen. Still, the DREAM Act was not validated by the U.S. Senate, which is, for us, a question on America's availability as "land of all possibilities" for immigrants.

The situation worsened during Trump's mandate, but the newly elected president, Joe Biden, criticises this approach:

"It is a moral failing and a national shame when a father and his baby daughter drown seeking our shores. When children are locked away in overcrowded detention centers and the government seeks to keep them there indefinitely. When our government argues in court against giving those children toothbrushes and soap. When President Trump uses family separation as a weapon against desperate mothers, fathers, and children seeking safety and a better life. When he threatens massive raids that would break up families who have been in this country for years and targets people at sensitive locations like hospitals and schools. When children die while in custody due to lack of adequate care." (<https://joebiden.com/immigration/>)

Biden promises to continue Obama's efforts to break instead of building walls for families and for all those arriving in the U.S.A. to find safety and freedom and reach the democratic dream that came to define America. Biden intends to "take urgent action to undo Trump's damage and reclaim America's values; modernize America's immigration system ; welcome immigrants in (...)communities; reassert America's commitment to asylum-seekers and refugees; tackle the root causes of irregular migration; implement effective border screening". (<https://joebiden.com/immigration/>)

The American Dream as "fable they forget by"

In her book, *White Trash*, Nancy Isenberg (2016) considers that the American Dream components are for the Americans "fables we forget by", showing that property, education, and justice equality were never perfect in America. However, the American Dream is so strong as symbolism that tends to overcome the harsh reality of white people that fail to live the American Dream in its original meaning. They also fail to live it as any success.

"We know what class is. Or think we do: economic stratification created by wealth and privilege. The problem is that popular American history is most commonly told—dramatized—without much reference to social classes' existence. It is as though in separating from Great Britain, the United States somehow magically escaped the bonds of class and derived a higher

consciousness of enriched possibility. (...)The hallowed American dream is the gold standard by which politicians and voters alike are meant to measure quality of life as each generation pursues its own definition of happiness unfettered by the restraints of birth (who your parents are) or station (the position you start out from in the class system)". (Isenberg, 2016:16)

Isenberg identifies several categories of classes that question the idea of the American Dream: clay-eaters, waste people, squatters, bad blood, half-breeds, mudsills, scalawags, and rednecks. Referring to Trump mentioning the word "dream" several times in his inaugural statement in 2017, she criticizes the word in relation to reality, showing that dreams do not improve social, economic and health conditions. (Isenberg, 2016:xxiii)

Besides appealing to masses, the dream is a useful instrument for wealthy people to keep the others striving to achieve and turn a blind eye on reality. The danger encompassed in the American Dream concerning justice was signalled in a 1900 article in the *New York Post*, showing that the American Dream will end when the rich ask for preferential treatment. (Churchwell, 2019:22)

Donald Trump, a very wealthy man, elected as president proclaimed the end of the American Dream in 2015 ("Sadly, the American Dream is dead") and his desire to recover it, turning the American Dream in the direction of deepening the social differences, the racism and closing borders for immigrants. The number of citizens attracted by his policy raises people's question considering that the American Dream is the opposite of what it pretends to be, both in the original meaning and the contemporary one. Confronted with the loss of elections, Trump refused the truth and played the fraudulent elections card, refusing the first results. Even in conditions of legal contesting of the results, clinging to power seems, and preferential treatment seems to be the components of Trump's American Dream, thus showing its fragility.

Noam Chomsky identifies in his work *Requiem for the American Dream. The neoliberalists developed the principles of concentrated Wealth and Power* the principles and mechanisms of the American Dream for the last fourteen years. "The American Dream, like most dreams, has large elements of myth to it. Part of the nineteenth-century dream was the Horatio Alger story—'we're dirt-poor but we're going to work hard and we'll find a way out', which was true to an extent." (Chomsky, 2017: 11)

The American Dream became the antonymic form, a 'nightmare'. This nightmare is based on political and economic inequality. Even if, this process starts from the '70s, in his recent work, Chomsky explains how its evolution depicts a profound tendency of a power cluster. Moreover, this power cluster is detectable from the starting point of the American Republic, the dawn of a republic which from the very beginning intended to protect the 'minority' of the wealthy and powerful. One of the founders, James Madison, was the one, who claimed that one of the Senate's role is to protect the rich from the large mass actions. Nonetheless, he questioned if the republican variant is the best option for the basis of the American government according to the received objections. The powers of the individuals became the sum of the power, the community power which is given to the representatives.

"That great powers are to be given, there is no doubt; and that those powers may be abused is equally true. It is also probable that members may lose their attachments to the states which sent them—Yet the first branch will control them in many of their abuses. But we are now forming a body on whose wisdom we mean to rely, and their permanency in office secures a proper field in which they may exert their firmness and knowledge. Democratic communities may be unsteady, and be led to action by the impulse of the moment. Like individuals they may be sensible of their own weakness, and may desire the counsels and checks of friends to guard them against the turbulence and weakness of unruly passions. (Madison, 1787)"

However, democracy is assimilated by James Madison with the weaknesses of the individuals. Even if the Senate is an institution, like any other institution, it is led by people. It already common knowledge of fact that human nature is guided by the instinct of individuality to the detriment of the community interests. This means that the power of democracy consists in the power of the representatives to respect the community's values, principles and especially, laws. As long as the representatives' interest is subjective and impartial the community benefits will be divided between “debtors and creditors, and an unequal possession of property, and hence arises different views and different objects in government.” (Madison, 1787)

Chomsky, in his study, focuses on the intellect or the utopic ideology of neoliberalism, which holds on to the unacceptable point that the markets should dictate all aspects of human society. He dichotomizes the destructive effects of this ideology on our society. Furthermore, he explains how the corporation's behaviour influenced the large masses, the academic environment, and mass-media. Their intrusive attitude led to a compromise which devastated people's lives and the concept of common sense and common welfare. Each promise of neoliberalists was in fact, a lie. Their reach of power and their access to positions such as the parliamentary positions gave them access as well to write laws. These opportunities were prolific in creating a mafia system, ruled by corruption and the “principles of the self-made me”. All of them led to an inverse pyramid of democracy. This version of the pyramid is the one, where the community interests became smaller such as a peak and the real peak grows larger and larger, guided by the demagogic principles. Therefore, the power is no longer an attribute of the people, is the attribute of the new “aristocracy”.

The American Dream as a therapeutic metaphor and its continuous dawn

In our paper, we observed various meanings and aspects of the American Dream in an American national and international context, many of them so antithetic or diverse that we are forced to return to the original questions: What is the American Dream? Is it a founding myth, a conceptual metaphor, a fable, a pluricultural and pluri-social reality? Jim Cullen observes the multiple reality of the American Dream, proposing the solution of individual American Dream:

“The American Dream would have no drama or mystique if it were a self-evident falsehood or a scientifically demonstrable principle. Ambiguity is the very source of its mythic power, nowhere more so than among those striving for, but unsure whether they will reach, their goals. Yet resolution may not afford clarity, either. (...) Beyond such considerations, a reckoning with the Dream also involves acknowledging another important reality: that beyond an abstract belief in possibility, there is no one American Dream. Instead, there are many American Dreams, their appeal simultaneously resting on their variety and their specificity.” (Cullen, 2004: 7)

Our solution is to define the American Dream as a therapeutical metaphor, destined to prevent and heal at the same time America's image in the collective mentality, both nationally and internationally. In a therapeutic context, metaphors facilitate new ways of thinking and behaviour. They can provide a key-mechanism to change the representation of the world, manage memories, prove points of view, create alternative realities, allow finding a direction, increase communication, guide reasoning, and improve the state of mind.

Churchwell (2019) equals the American Dream with an elastic concept destined to include multiple realities and conceptions. The elasticity of the American Dream as content, together with all the possibilities it opens in the collective mentality and to individual levels for Americans and the non-Americans guide us to define the American Dream as a vital national therapeutic metaphor, destined to prevent the death of a national image, within and outside the borders, and to heal in the same time.

Due to the same elasticity of the American Dream and contradicting the opinions affirming the American Dream's death, we consider that The American Dream has not one dawn, but a continuous one.

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