

Waking up from the American dream

AN AMERICAN TEXT, A UNIVERSAL IDEA

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

—*United States Declaration of Independence, 1776*

These famous words hold within them the keys to a national folk ideology justifying the perpetuation of the "American dream." In the midst of today's maelstrom regarding citizenship, national security, immigration, and international labour markets, this concept of "equality" is glaringly unequivocal. The US project of democracy becomes not only one of policy and government, but one of differentiating the rhetoric of simple dreams from an *intentional expression* of pragmatic and complicated scenarios begging for courageous and engaged leadership.

As early as 1777, slaves in Massachusetts petitioned for the right to share in the inalienable right to freedom. Today, 232 years after Thomas Jefferson worked on the wording of the Declaration, the assumption that equality is an inalienable human condition rather than the privilege of the select continues to impel and drive the efforts to influence the definition and administration of justice in US courts of law. Many of the attempts are waged not by legitimized residents or legal citizens of the United States, but by residents who find themselves as legally defined aliens without legitimate claim to be in the United States. Yet, the rhetorical claims of our founding fathers speak to them as well.

Although it might have been a declaration of independence for the British colonies calling themselves the United States of America, its opening lines invite a universal audience of concurrence with the underlying assumptions that founded this nation. And today, in 2008, our electorate is wooed by whichever candidate-siren can sing a song that addresses this deep yearning while avoiding too deep an awareness of our contradictions.

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THE DREAM VERSUS REALITY

The *Declaration of Independence* was an instrument of formalized communication using the medium of the age—pen and ink. It was a response to the times. Fortunately for us, copies of the rough draft, from its editing, through to the formal Declaration and to its acceptance by the first US Congress, have been preserved, helping us understand the nature of what tensions birthed this

country. Take, for example, the opening lines in Jefferson's first draft:

When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for a people to advance from that subordination in which they have hitherto remained, and to assume among powers of the earth the equal and independent station to which the laws of nature and of nature's god entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the change.

As a communication scholar, I would argue that it is the conditions of subjugation that the 18th-century US colonists were facing that led to the crystal clear awareness of the denial of inalienable rights; however, the assumptions of taken-for-granted stratification of race, gender, and the working classes were as yet not questioned.

Not having owned the manner by which our prosperity depends on the abuses of those silently taken for granted as the labour forces for our food, housing, childcare, and support services, the formal rhetoric of our candidates today barely touches the nature of the deep structural inequalities that support our country. The immigration "problem" with Mexico is a reflection of a similar and insidious form of harsh socio-economic standards of living. The class-stratified culture of Mexico has long motivated mass migration from Mexico to the United States, a nation whose official policy enabled hard-working migrants (legal or not) to elevate their standard of living. A challenge today facing the United States, Mexico, and Canada, all of us North Americans, is the invitation to open our public discourse to an acknowledgment of the ways that outdated modes of coexistence have moved us to subjugate residents within our borders, legal or not.

The US founding fathers hid their tensions over social class and race by simply editing out Jefferson's acknowledgment of the dirty stain of slavery. Had

it remained there, perhaps the United States could have grappled more publicly with the contradiction of decrying certain practices while simultaneously benefiting from them, as Jefferson did through his ownership of slaves. Today, we must grapple with the hypocrisy of a standard of living to which we have become accustomed because of the existence of an enormous North American populace who through their labour have supported our lifestyle. Slavery may have been abolished, but the appetite for labour to accommodate tea parties, from the harvest to the dishwashing, remains unsated.

THE PUBLIC SCREEN

In the fortunate absence of totalitarianism, the United States cannot avoid “the elephant in the room,” the glaring presence of the contradictions between rhetoric and reality. The constitutive language of the United States’ inception has become part of the worldwide vocabulary for judging the country. It is widely disseminated and popularized in today’s media not only through such recent films as *National Treasure*, but also in the public speeches of US leaders and the equally public radical critiques from both the conservative right and the liberal left. These messages today no longer speak just to US citizens or an educated populace, but to the mediated global public.

Through print, image, and digitized representation, they function to create the public screen upon which people’s “home movies” of the world’s realities can be created. This public screen through which intensely media-bred publics come to understand their world(s) is the screen upon which we must today wield human influence and inspire the courage for real change. It is time for a candidate for president to have the courage not just to “speak pretty,” but to speak forthrightly and incisively, and to aim for collaborative discourse. What would we learn if we watched the candidates attempting to *collaborate* through discourse rather than one-up each other with no substantive support for their

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sound bites? Might we not be able to better choose whom we would vote for if given a chance to witness this?

The campaign teams of this year’s presidential candidates know how to use the public screen to get votes and attention through skilled use of the media machine and its games. We have been inundated with talk about the election facing us and find ourselves arguing about whether words are being plagiarized or whether photographs were “leaked,” but we have yet to hear anything of substance in the discourse. Today, as in 1776, the media is effective in rallying a disgruntled public toward *change*. In many ways, the US public has always preferred the pretty language over the harsh articulation of the realities. We seem to find it easy to critique the candidates who say things that are difficult to hear, preferring instead to “feel good” after we’ve heard a candidate speak. In 1776, many were ready to engage in a difficult and bloody war to guarantee change. Today, we allow only the most idealistic and socioeconomically needy to die for us in battle.

WAKING FROM THE AMERICAN DREAM

The immigration discourse forces Americans to face what has been avoided for a very long time. A tri-national effort to approach these problems as North Americans might be beneficial, if the alliance can empower the United States to face, not back away from, the difficult realities. The American dream has been a fanciful way to make success a magical construct devoid of an awareness of the structural realities that allow for some to “make it” and others not. If it were simply about hard work, the United States would

be rewarding the large majority of illegal immigrants with honorary citizenship; but the dream is much more complicated.

Can we choose to wake up enough not to be lulled by the hypnotic cadence of pleasant campaign rhetoric or habituated “us versus them” debate? Our role, as scholars serious about these issues, is to provide substance as often as possible and in concerted effort to those creating public policy and seeking public office. There are no more Thomas Jeffersons; today we must muster the authority together, rapidly and with an awareness of how little of what we say will actually make it into the official discourse. Perhaps today we should worry less about the American dream and more about setting our alarm clocks to ensure we are wide awake and ready to contribute. 

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