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The Closeting of the American Dream

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Abstract:

Drawing from Ursula K. Le Guin’s parable of the “child in the closet,” this chapter describes how a dynamic of broadening equality and shifting extraction has played out across US history, as American conceptions of universal political rights have evolved. The “American dream,” a powerful expression of principles of equal opportunity, was only popularized in the twentieth century, yet its ideological origins can be traced to the republic’s founding documents. From the outset, bestowing rights and opportunities upon white male property owners depended on the subjugation of other groups. Over

time, however, the American dream's ideals—rooted in Jeffersonian philosophies of political equality—have provided moral leverage to push forward resistance and reform. Popular conceptions of the American dream have shifted, in turn, from desires for a freedom-loving and virtuous community to aspirations for individual material success. As the tenor of the dream has changed, so too have the moral arguments used to excuse the exploitation that permits the extending of opportunities more broadly. Racial entitlement, for instance, has been replaced by meritocratic entitlement, reflecting popular understandings of individual advancement and efficient markets as superior routes to economic growth benefitting all. Such a perspective distracts from the ongoing erosion of social mobility and the offloading of the costs of opportunity creation onto new and international groups. Recognizing these changing patterns of resource extraction and opportunity hoarding helps make sense of modern-day inequalities and the reasons they persist amid the uneven advancement of America's founding ideals. It also offers insight into how the current system might allow for something different from a Faustian bargain of underwriting dreams of glory and self-growth for some upon the collateral suffering of an increasingly amorphous and obscure group of others. An alternative path would require not just positive liberties of economic security, but also a change in the prevailing cultural beliefs of who is deserving and undeserving of grace.

Keywords (5-8):

American dream, capitalism, equal opportunity, grace, imperialism, meritocratic morality, negative liberty, political equality

In her short story "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," the American novelist Ursula K. Le Guin (2004) describes a summer festival in the "city Omelas, bright-towered by the sea." Here, she writes, life is idyllic, and people have all they need or want. There are no kings. There is no slavery. And the people of the city are content. That is not because they are "naive and happy children" or "bland utopians," Le Guin points out—indeed, they are not any "less complex than us." They, too, are passionate and intelligent, yet in their city, all find fulfillment and joy in lives that are "not wretched."

Except for one. In a dusty cellar of one of Omela's beautiful buildings is a cramped, windowless closet. In that closet, behind a locked door, is a young child. The child huddles in a corner—sitting in filth, covered in sores, naked and alone. Infrequently, the door opens and a happy resident of Omelas enters—to set down a half-ration of food, or ogle the famished child, or kick them. The child begs to be set free, but the visitors walk away. Some feel pity. Some feel only loathing. Others are outraged at what is going on, but they do nothing. This is because all of the city's residents have learned that, somehow, inexplicably, the tortured state of this child makes possible their own state of grace: "Their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies, depend wholly on this child's abominable misery."

Le Guin's story has been variously interpreted as an allegory for capitalism and imperialism and a critique of Christ-like service through suffering (Collins 1990). This chapter argues that the American dream—a powerful set of ideals about the possibilities

for individual fulfillment and universal opportunity—became a realistic vision for many Americans in part due to the marginalization and exploitation of others—groups closeted away and kept from the bounties of American democracy and expansion. Such suffering does not invalidate the country's foundational ideals of individual uplift and self-determination. Indeed, the American dream continues to resonate deeply with people around the world because of the moral vision it puts forward, and because of the long-run progress—however delayed, deferred, and even, at times, retrograded—that the nation has made in expanding the circle of people welcomed into the inner sanctums of its city on a hill.

That said, the republic was built not solely through ambition and drive, but also upon a mountain of misery. In his second inaugural address (1865), Abraham Lincoln spoke of "all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil"—an exchange of blood for treasure that was "righteously" repaid, Lincoln said, with yet more blood "drawn with the sword." Colonial societies perpetrated other original sins, such as the subjugation of women, even as they were establishing democracy in the New World—a heavily circumscribed form of democracy, but one not previously realized. The eradication of indigenous peoples and the enclosure of their land, in turn, gave white settlers a stake of property and wealth upon which to clamor for more in the way of rights and say. When that western frontier closed, the American republic pursued imperial ambitions, projecting power upon weaker nations to pry open markets and further its geopolitical goals—again, with benefits largely for the lucky chosen circle of the republic's citizens.

Throughout all these episodes, the freedom and prosperity of America's bright-towered city hinged upon the suffering in its cellars. Over the decades, some of those locked below found their way out. But the bargain first struck—exacted from certain groups—has persisted, even if the players have been somewhat shuffled. The dream still enthralls, and a lucky segment of the population can still pursue it with confidence. Yet the immiseration below continues, in payment for the party above.

This chapter describes how a dynamic of broadening equality and shifting extraction has played out across various stages of US history. What follows is not a comprehensive account. For the sake of brevity, it focuses on selected events and trends especially relevant to past and present cycles of extraction. Nevertheless, a pattern is clear. On the one hand, the long arc of history has raised up some groups from the worst of exploitation, with the American dream's ideals—rooted in Jeffersonian philosophies of political equality—frequently providing moral leverage to push forward resistance and reform. On the other hand, a parade of changing populations has been led through the global economy's basements, as elites have sought out new sources of labor and resources to exploit. Popular conceptions of the American dream have shifted, in turn, from desires for a freedom-loving and virtuous community to aspirations for individual advancement and material success.

This perennial paradox in American history—the steady expansion of political rights amid continued extraction from vulnerable groups—has a number of explanations. One is that the unalienable rights that Thomas Jefferson and other founders secured at the republic's outset were largely "negative" liberties, in the way that the philosopher Isaiah Berlin (2002) described them. They protected against efforts to coerce individuals or

restrain them from actions they wished to take—expressing ideas or practicing a religion, for instance. Yet they could not, by themselves, grant self-determination—the ability to act as one wishes, which requires the capacity and resources to do so. This is no fault of the nation's founders: even tacking on a Bill of Rights to the Constitution sparked ferocious debate. Founding a republic for even a few was revolutionary; ensuring even more liberty for a confederation of upstart colonists would have seemed fantastical. Nevertheless, this "positive" liberty became increasingly decisive in American society, as the country developed a complex industrialized economy that distributed the rewards of growing productivity in a massively lopsided fashion.

The new birth of old Enlightenment ideals in America failed to end the cycle of extraction for another reason. The moral justification for reaping wealth from woe changed, in step with the victims' shifting ranks. Today, the "white man's burden" has been replaced by meritocratic entitlement. As various groups have won state recognition and protection, the populations that still suffer on behalf of societal progress are those who lack the positive liberty to refuse exploitation—that is to say, those without the autonomy made possible by various forms of capital (Bland and Chen 2021; Chen and Hatton 2025). With privilege increasingly entrenched, people's life chances depend more on the luck of birth. Advantages endowed by their families—from wealth to connections to cultural sophistication—mean that all are not, in practical terms, created equal. Yet an antiquated preference for ensuring basic rights, and nothing more, has blocked further progress. Everyone is equal before the law. Everyone has a shot at success. Any remaining inequalities, then, are due to individual failings alone. Much like belief in America's "manifest destiny" justified the uprooting of indigenous tribes, an

extreme belief in meritocracy justifies the debasement of the precariat. The child in modern capitalism's closet deserves to be there.

Acknowledging this context is important because the modern economy and modern-day strivings in pursuit of happiness are often portrayed as inherently innocuous. In a free market, buyer and seller willingly enter each transaction, and both benefit. The division of labor yields greater efficiencies and generates greater wealth to be shared, improving the lives of everyone. To the extent these conditions were true, capitalism did succeed in moving societies away from the brutal extraction by force that chiefly characterized other eras: elites taking what they could, merely because they could. Yet, across periods of US history, it often proved more expedient to reject free competition in favor of singling out certain groups for extraction. As described later, liberal principles of political equality equipped many of these groups with tools to eventually—through dogged struggle and demand—throw off their yoke. Yet the focus of ongoing exploitation continually shifted, in step with changes in cultural understandings of who could be rightly exploited, and who was deserving of socioeconomic uplift.

Recognizing these changing patterns of extraction and exclusion helps make sense of modern-day inequalities and the reasons they persist amid the uneven advancement of America's founding ideals (Tomaskovic-Devey and Avent-Holt 2019). It also offers insight into how the current economic and political system might allow for something different from a Faustian bargain of underwriting dreams of glory and self-growth for some upon the collateral suffering of an increasingly amorphous and obscure group of others. An alternative path would require not just positive liberties of economic security,

but also a change in the prevailing cultural beliefs of who is deserving and undeserving of grace.

Slavery, Westward Expansion, and Jacksonian Democracy

In 1965, James Baldwin and William F. Buckley, Jr.—prominent voices on the American left and right, respectively—squared off in a televised debate about American race relations. The discussion, held at the Cambridge Union in the UK, focused on a provocative proposition: "The American dream is at the expense of the American Negro." Baldwin made the case for that connection, arguing that the enslavement and exploitation of his African ancestors had made the dream possible for white Americans:

> From a very literal point of view, the harbors and the ports, and the railroads of the country—the economy, especially of the Southern states—could not conceivably be what it has become, if they had not had, and do not still have … cheap labor. I am stating very seriously, and this is not an overstatement: *I* picked the cotton, and *I* carried it to the market, and *I* built the railroads, under someone else's whip, for nothing. For nothing.

The work of a number of scholars has since substantiated this claim that the economic dynamo of "cheap" enslaved labor helped create a society so wealthy that it could extend rights and privileges to its white male residents of little or no social station (Morgan 1972; Patterson 1991). Resources acquired through slavery made the armed uprising of the American Revolution possible in the first place: slave colonies like Virginia and South Carolina provided substantial financial backing to the rebel cause and put forward key leaders and soldiers (Klarman 2016). Slavery later buttressed and bankrolled the

early American republic and its democratic aspirations. The country became a manufacturing powerhouse in the nineteenth century, steadily expanding voting rights for white men under the political program of Jacksonian democracy. Even then, however, it continued to rely heavily on a booming commodity economy borne on the backs of enslaved labor. For instance, an analysis of historical records by economist Mark Stelzner and historian Sven Beckert finds that slavery drove a substantial portion of the country's growth in output over the two decades leading up to the US Civil War—increases comparable to those that occurred in New England's manufacturing sector (Stelzner and Beckert 2023; Zickuhr 2021).

Beyond its financial impact, slavery also shaped the worldview of the leaders who espoused and later promulgated policies that allowed white men to obtain political voice and economic uplift. A majority of the signers of the Declaration of Independence and almost half of the delegates at the Philadelphia constitutional convention were slave owners (Maloy 2020). The chief architect of the constitution, James Madison, had his plantation lands in Virginia tilled by enslaved workers; later serving as an elected representative, he noted his role to represent constituents "greatly interested in that species of property" (Klarman 2016:264; Madison 1791). The omission of the term "slavery" from the Constitution in favor of euphemisms like "Person held to Service or Labour" was one of many concessions to this powerful constituency. Such moral compromises led the founders to a decidedly constrained humanistic vision, and the US constitution that eventually emerged was implemented in various ways that favored the freedoms of white, male, property-owning Protestants.

The irony that a revolution spurred by desires for political freedom was tightly linked to local slave economies was not lost on observers at the time. In a 1774 letter to her husband, Abigail Adams, herself a principled advocate for women's rights, called out the "iniquitous" hypocrisy that tainted the colonists' desires to "fight ourselves for what we are daily robbing and plundering from those who have as good a right to freedom as we have" (Adams 1774). For their part, the Southern colonies sent some of their enslaved workers to fight on behalf of the revolution, although many of these individuals ended up fleeing to British-controlled cities or turning on their masters in the largest slave insurgency prior to the Civil War (Nash 2012:253–54).

These unresolvable tensions between twin institutions of antebellum America, democracy and slavery, might very well have sunk the early republic. In a hermetically sealed society, the "cheap labor" that slavery supplied could have pushed to the side any needs among elites to consider the well-being and voice of the unpropertied white population. However, as the historian Frederick Jackson Turner (1893) famously argued, the western frontier provided an escape valve for these pressures. It gave ordinary white settlers the chance to seek out economic mobility and decamp from established communities that may have calcified by class lines more quickly without such an exodus. From these seeds of opportunity sprouted a widespread conviction in the possibility of individual advancement, a so-called right to rise that leaders like Abraham Lincoln—himself a child of the frontier—saw as the just reward for Americans' honest labor (Boritt 1994).

Meanwhile, public figures applied Christian doctrine and constitutional principles to justify the ongoing extraction, by force, of African labor and indigenous land. To support

westward expansion, the popular—though politically contentious—belief in "manifest destiny" convinced white settlers that they were bringing much-needed civilization and industry to benighted locales. Colonizing the frontier was a moral obligation, according to this ideology, ensuring both the proper use of "virgin" terrain and the cultural and spiritual uplift of heathens (Smith 1970). In turn, the Monroe Doctrine, a US position first articulated in 1823 that European powers must not intervene in the hemisphere, carved out the most fertile lands for the use of white American settlers alone.

The US federal government opened up the western frontier for settlement through treaties and military force—slim carrots dangled on the heaviest of sticks. Policies of ethnic cleansing like the Indian Removal Act of 1830 cleared indigenous lands for the use of whites. In Texas, US colonists and Tejanos successfully rebelled against Mexican rule, with US soldiers eventually stepping in—in a fashion eerily similar to Russian incursions in eastern Europe in the early twenty-first century—to secure the annexation of lands populated by allied settlers sympathetic to US rule. Once again, the hypocrisy of US policies violating US political principles was glaring to contemporary observers. The Cherokee Nation, one of five tribes sent on a forced march along the Trail of Tears that killed thousands, had been consciously modeling itself in the image of its colonizer—writing a similar constitution, negotiating directly with the US Congress, and running plantations with enslaved workers it had purchased (Immerwahr 2019). In 1836, former president John Quincy Adams denounced the coming conflict with Mexico over Texas, asserting that in this struggle Mexico held "the banners of freedom" while the US hoisted "the banners of slavery" (Grandin 2019:86–87). Later, efforts to redistribute land to those freed from slavery at the end of the Civil War—such as Union general

William Tecumseh Sherman's 1865 "forty acres and a mule" wartime order—faltered in the face of entrenched opposition (Foner 2014). In this way, a newly freed agrarian working class was deprived of the opportunities for wealth creation that a large portion of their white counterparts had earlier obtained at the expense of indigenous tribes.

Even before Andrew Jackson took office in 1828, small-scale farmers and a growing urban working class had successfully rolled back property and tax-paying requirements for voting in most states (Engerman and Sokoloff 2005). As suffrage for white men opened up, the reforms enacted also disenfranchised black men in some states (Blair 2019)—an example of the retrenchment at the expense of some that occurred amid steps toward equality for others. Even so, the push to empower the lower classes during the Jacksonian era rattled the country's elites. The merchants and large landowners who had largely led and financed the revolution expressed dismay over the rampant superstitions and uncouth culture of the masses. By incorporating propertyless white men into the democratic process, Jackson's policies let materialism, desires for conquest, and other sordid popular impulses go unchecked, his critics alleged (Wood 1993). They railed against a vulgarized democracy that was steadily expanding political rights according to the incontrovertible, yet now tawdry, logic of Jefferson's categorical imperatives.

This, however, was the inclusive republican spirit that Alexis de Tocqueville commented favorably upon in *Democracy in America*, the result of the French writer's travels within the young republic in 1831 and 1832 (Tocqueville 2010). In Tocqueville's admittedly romanticized account, the country's citizens—carpenters, shopkeepers, tradesmen alike—interacted with their fellows as equals. Civic engagement ran deep, and prosperity

was widespread. If that democratic spirit was fundamentally rooted in the bigotry and jingoism of American expansionism, it was a political achievement that Europe had never seen.

Extending Rights at Home and Projecting Power Abroad

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the Jeffersonian ideal of the yeoman farmer was receding into history, reduced to a motif of democratic dignity for pastoral poems. A new class of factory workers had risen in its place, frantically toiling on the shop floors of industrial towns like Lowell, Massachusetts. According to the labor historian Norman Ware, during this period of early American industrialization the "liberal spirit" of the eighteenth century waged war with "the exploitative spirit of the nineteenth" (Ware 1990:18). Ultimately, Ware writes, capitalist exploitation won—at the expense of the "dignity and independence" of the factory worker, who "objected to his cage" (1990:78). As Tocqueville had prophesied, a new aristocracy was consolidating power on the continent, "one of the harshest that has appeared on the earth"—the "manufacturing aristocracy," who employed "industrial science" to "lower" the working class and "raise" their own (Tocqueville 2010:985, 984, 982). And as with "manifest destiny," another ideology of upward mobility was springing up to account for these social transformations and legitimize the inequalities they produced. The worker-run newspaper *Voice of Industry*, later based in Lowell, decried this new "Spirit of the Age" as a selfish individualism, whereby people "get gain … gain wealth … forgetting all but self" (Ware 1990:25).

This outlook was intertwined with the existing culture of racial domination that had evolved to justify slavery and colonization. Such beliefs allowed working-class whites to

feel a sense of superiority—a "public and psychological wage"—that drew them closer to white elites and blunted any broader-based opposition to worker exploitation (Du Bois 2013; Roediger 2007). Newer immigrant groups like the Irish leveraged these founding principles of white superiority, distancing themselves from African Americans and refashioning themselves as members of the nation's chosen people, worthy of the full bounties of capitalism and democracy (Ignatiev 1995). The racialized character of capitalism, ever present, became increasingly glaring (Go 2021; Robinson 2021).

If elite authority was ascendant, however, so was resistance to it. "Power concedes nothing without a demand," the anti-slavery activist Frederick Douglass (1857) said, and as the turmoil triggered by industrialization rippled outward, marginalized groups embarked on fierce and often bloody struggles to demand greater rights and opportunities. Even if the evolution of capitalism had made political equality a more complicated and fraught reality, the founders' broad statements of principle—however constrained in their earliest formulations—could be creatively harnessed as weapons of the weak (Roseberry 1994; Scott 1987). Universal moral laws supplied an ideological arsenal that groups could use to resist their subjugation, much like the founders had first used them to resist British subjugation.

At Seneca Falls in 1848, for example, women's rights activists invoked the self-evident truths of the Declaration of Independence, declaring that "all men and women are created equal" (Stanton 1848a). Movement leader Elizabeth Cady Stanton appealed as well to America's deep-rooted conviction in its own ethical exceptionalism: "The world has never yet seen a truly great and virtuous nation, because in the degradation of woman the very fountains of life are poisoned at their source" (1848b:6). Over the next

seven decades, activists used every lever of the machinery of democracy available to them to push for the extension of political rights—even running for federal office (as Kate Richards O'Hare did in Kansas and Missouri) in elections in which no woman could vote (Hochschild 2022). (The Nineteenth Amendment, ratified in 1920, finally allowed for women's suffrage.)

If the start of the nineteenth century unleashed free enterprise and industrial innovation, by its end key markets had been tamed by monopoly power. Railroad tycoons like Cornelius Vanderbilt (at his wealthiest, the owner, at least on paper, of one out of every nine US dollars) not only accelerated the country's westward expansion (Stiles 2010), but also granted consumers almost everywhere access to myriad fashions and tastes. Consumerism, in turn, remade the American dream in its own image, crowding out spiritual and political concerns in favor of material ones—that is, decisions about what clothes to wear, what food to eat, what home to purchase.

At the same time, the country was offshoring more of its exploitation to foreign lands. With settler expansion having hit the coast, the focus of federal policy shifted from westward land grabs to overseas resource extraction. In the Americas, the United States increasingly intervened in the affairs of its neighbors, in part to outflank European rivals within its own hemisphere (Potter 2011). That struggle came to a head in 1898, when America's swift war with a waning empire broke Spain's grip on various overseas territories. With the US occupation of the Spanish-held Philippines, suddenly the country's sphere of influence spread well across the Pacific, transforming America into a global power (Immerwahr 2019; Vine 2020).

By then, even critics of American-style capitalism and radical individualism were turning away from Jeffersonian principles of political equality. In his influential book *The Promise of American Life*, published in 1909, the journalist Herbert Croly (later a co-founder of the *New Republic*) argued that a Jeffersonian system of government that merely secured individual political rights—negative liberties—was not up to the task of regulating a modern industrial economy (Croly 2014). A powerful central state needed to intervene, in a Hamiltonian fashion, to promote the well-being of all its citizens. It needed to complement equality of rights with a set of positive freedoms that could guarantee equality of opportunity. And what republican democracy still existed needed to be wedded to the nation-state's interests abroad, given America's status as an emerging world power.

Croly's calls for strong leaders and a strong state shaped the thinking of Theodore Roosevelt and other major Progressive Era figures, even as they sparked criticism for their allegedly anti-democratic and totalitarian sympathies. For his part, Roosevelt was an especially stalwart believer in the projection of American power overseas. He had read US Navy captain Alfred Thayer Mahan's volumes on naval power—in particular, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* (1890)—and had the obvious example to emulate of the British empire's sweeping naval network of coaling stations and colonial ports (Kennedy and Marshall 2022; Padfield 2010).

Just as racial entitlement guided Americans westward, so did it urge them abroad, with political leaders arguing that the country's nascent overseas empire was justified by its moral superiority (Vine 2020). That said, it was the imperatives of capitalist growth—channeling the aspirations of the American dream—that ultimately chased America over

the entire surface of the globe. A democratic society in which ordinary citizens could seek their fortunes was inherently fragile. Even the republic's earliest generations of self-reliant yeomen farmers had struggled to get through the first few growing seasons and withstand the uncertain and brutish life of the frontier. Without technological advances and capital acquisition, economic security could not be assured, and such assurances demanded the country seek growth—in any available direction. There were vivid reminders at hand of the need for such security—above all, a desperate flow of immigrants from the Old World and elsewhere, fleeing poverty and political instability. Protecting the American way of life against opposing ideologies and competing forms of government required human flourishing and national success. And if perpetual economic growth was contingent on acquiring new resources, muscular foreign policy would secure such resources overseas. Thus, in spite of its supremacy in the Western hemisphere and the abundance of resources within its own borders, the United States continued on the path it had taken from its inception: expansion.

The Growing Inadequacy of Political Equality

In 1931, James Truslow Adams popularized the notion of the "American dream" in his book *The Epic of America*. This romance of national striving had long been embraced by the culture—as seen, for instance, in the popularity of the writer Horatio Alger's rags-to-riches stories at the end of the previous century—but Adams made an especially compelling case for it. Notably, he cast the concept in broad, and not necessarily material, terms, as the "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" (1931:404). It was "much more" than a "dream of merely material plenty, though that

has doubtless counted heavily," Adams wrote. At its best, it was about "being able to grow to fullest development as man and woman, unhampered by the barriers which had slowly been erected in older civilizations, unrepressed by social orders which had developed for the benefit of classes rather than for the simple human being of any and every class."

By then, however, the spirit of the age had shifted. Republican aspirations founded upon political equality had been transmuted, in the Gilded Age and its aftermath, to an American dream largely about economic opportunity. And thanks to the country's bounty of riches—the world's envy—an individual's ambitions could be rapidly realized: the California gold rush, the historian H. W. Brands (2003:442) notes, had ushered in "the dream of instant wealth, won in a twinkling by audacity and good luck." Some saw capitalism itself as the manufacturer of such dreams, its inherent dynamism and creative destruction making possible each individual's meteoric rise. Yet others, such as the social reformer John Dewey, saw it as inimical to the democratic ethos of the nation's origins. The exploitative workings of a laissez-faire market economy, Dewey argued, stood in the way of the individual dignity and collective interest that had first made America a land of promise (Ryan 1995).

When *The Epic of America* was published, America was already two years into the worst economic catastrophe of its history. Suddenly, the inadequacies of political equality—of negative liberty—became painfully evident. Embracing earlier prescriptions for an interventionist state, Franklin D. Roosevelt embarked on New Deal policies that poured government funds and energies into the direct support of those dislocated by the Great Depression. Rather than merely safeguarding rights, the federal government now had an

active role to play, Roosevelt argued, in promoting people's welfare and ensuring opportunities were available to all. In 1941, he enumerated "freedom from want" as one of the "four essential human freedoms," placing this notion of positive liberty on an equal moral plane with two Jeffersonian principles—freedom of speech and freedom of religion—as well as national security—"freedom from fear" (Kennedy 1999; Roosevelt 1941). "Necessitous men are not free men," Roosevelt argued in his 1944 State of the Union address, consciously connecting Jeffersonian political equality and Rooseveltian economic welfare and underscoring the moral importance of both. With the expansion of an industrial economy, Roosevelt (1944) noted, "these political rights proved inadequate to assure us equality in the pursuit of happiness."

While Roosevelt talked about the "four freedoms" as being rights for all people, "everywhere in the world," the reality was that the United States had been steadily expanding its "pointillist" empire (Immerwahr 2019:357). It had already extended a lattice-like network of bases to Hawaii, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Guam, Cuba, and elsewhere. Everywhere, it exercised its diplomatic and military power to boost US commercial interests. The nature of this colonization was somewhat distinct from European models, a softer despotism that was more interested in securing safe waterways and pacified workforces for capital than in managing the extraction directly (Wood 2003). To the extent that the republic's aspirations had become largely economic in nature, however, the intensified focus overseas made sense: what was good for American business was good for the American dream.

Back at home, racial conflict was brewing. Slavery had been replaced by the de facto debt bondage of sharecropping and tenant farming. Meanwhile, the experience of

waging America's wars abroad proved transformative for many black veterans. Approximately 380,000 African Americans served in World War I (Keene 2002)—a conflict that, US president Woodrow Wilson (1917) declared, was necessary to make the world "safe for democracy." Seeing first-hand what life might look like without de jure segregation further eroded the legitimacy of the status quo stateside. Upon returning, however, black veterans found themselves caught up in a wave of racial violence. In 1919 alone, at least 70 African Americans—17 of them veterans, three of whom were in uniform at the time—were lynched, the most in over a decade (Hochschild 2022:251). A tool for subjugating black communities, racial "terror" lynchings peaked during this period (Equal Justice Initiative 2017). Race riots ignited across dozens of cities, with white rampages resulting in killings and burnings of black churches, businesses, and homes—including the razing of Tulsa's "Black Wall Street" district in 1921. In the NAACP's magazine *The Crisis*, sociologist and civil rights activist W. E. B. Du Bois seized upon the travesty of fighting foreign wars for democracy while suffering oppression at home: "By the God of Heaven, we are cowards and jackasses if now that that war is over, we do not marshal every ounce of our brain and brawn to fight a sterner, longer, more unbending battle against forces of hell in our own land" (1919:13).

During World War II, more than a million African Americans served in the military (Clark 2020). After fighting abroad once again to defend democratic forms of government, many black veterans returned to states where Jim Crow laws nullified their voting rights. For instance, in 1944, seven states charged poll taxes—fees to exercise one's right to vote, often cumulative for each year a person was on the rolls. Such voter

suppression measures drove turnout in those states down to just 18 percent, compared to a national average of 69 percent (Anderson 2018).

Popular discontent had been steadily building, and after World War II, it swept through the streets. Langston Hughes's poem "Harlem" (1951)—about an American dream, too often deferred, that would one day "explode" in rage—turned out to be somewhat prophetic. Riots spread across the country, but so did boycotts, sit-ins, and marches—organized defiance that tapped into older American traditions of political protest, including consumer-driven protest. A day after deploying National Guard troops to enforce court-ordered desegregation at the University of Alabama, US president John F. Kennedy publicly endorsed the moral legitimacy of ongoing demands for equality of opportunity: "We cannot say to 10 percent of the population that you can't have that right—that your children can't have the chance to develop whatever talents they have—that the only way that they are going to get their rights is to go into the streets and demonstrate" (Kennedy 1963). A few months later, Martin Luther King, Jr., would lead the March on Washington. In the shadow of the Lincoln Memorial, King gave his "I Have a Dream" (1963) speech, the era's most eloquent argument on behalf of equality of opportunity, a startling oratory that delved deeply into the nation's ancestral ideals. Addressing the sacrifice that had gone unnoticed and uncompensated, King singled out the unfulfilled promise of the American dream: "America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned."

While a subsequent string of judicial rulings and legislation extended fuller political rights to African Americans and other marginalized groups, a reluctance to secure positive liberties again stymied more far-reaching reform. Today, more than a half-

century since King's "I Have a Dream" speech, many racial gaps in economic outcomes remain wide, according to a number of analyses (Derenoncourt et al. 2022; Gooden 2014). The typical white family has eight times as much wealth as the typical black family, a ratio that has changed little over three decades (Maye 2023). Going back to the unhonored promissory note of "forty acres and a mule," a failure to address the wealth gap through redistribution meant that African Americans struggled to attain and maintain a higher standard of living even as labor markets gradually opened up to them. Meanwhile, discriminatory practices like redlining and housing covenants and the initial exclusion of large numbers of African Americans from government assistance programs kept households from amassing assets that, in time, might have helped them catch up financially (Wilson 2010). This lack of positive freedom—stemming from government inaction to guarantee that freedom—was a concern that King, at the end of his life, fixated on. "What does it profit a man to be able to eat at an integrated lunch counter if he doesn't earn enough money to buy a hamburger and a cup of coffee?" he said, a month before his assassination (King 1968).

The Fading American Dream

The policy victories of the women's rights and civil rights movements—and, subsequently, the LGBTQ rights movement and others—steadily expanded the scope of the political equality initially enshrined in the country's founding documents. Yet even as marginalized groups forced their way into the circle of American political protection, segments of those communities—and vulnerable members of other communities, particularly those abroad—continued to pay the price for others' progress. When looking back on American history, any expansion of negative political liberties from their

original domain—propertied white men—must therefore be weighed against the diminution of positive economic liberties for other classes.

This give-and-take is all the more striking in the present period, given that the promise of economic security that replaced political and religious liberty as the country's central organizing myth has become more doubtful. In a study provocatively titled "The Fading American Dream," economist Raj Chetty and his collaborators (2017) conclude that younger generations of Americans are much less likely than previous generations to achieve a higher standard of living than their parents. Other research finds that rates of social mobility in the United States are lower than those in Canada, France, Germany, and other rich democracies (Corak 2013a, 2013b). Life expectancy for Americans has plateaued, unlike in European countries (most of them with universal health care) that continue to experience the expected improvements in physiological well-being that ongoing technological advances make possible (Schwandt et al. 2021).

Class has become more decisive in determining whether individual Americans are experiencing progress or decline. For those without college degrees, life expectancy peaked in 2010 and has drifted downward ever since, driven in part by recent spikes in deaths from opioid overdoses, alcohol-related diseases, and suicides (Case and Deaton 2020, 2023). The economic well-being of the white working class remains higher than that of other racial and ethnic groups, but their progress has stalled, with white men without college degrees even experiencing drops in income, adjusted for inflation, over the last several decades (Tankersley 2021). In short, recent decades have testified to the declining significance of white racial advantage—to be clear, with those advantages remaining very real for the college-educated, but less so for the working class (Wilson

2012). This condition of relative deprivation and decline has proven to be psychologically and culturally combustible, leading to what might be called "Falling Down" syndrome (after the 1993 film that vividly captured this rage): a mix of anti-immigrant sentiment, backlash against elites, and extremist political views that has gained particular traction among working-class whites. For African Americans, key outcomes have also become heavily stratified by socioeconomic status, with gaps widening between lower- and higher-status households across measures ranging from housing access to standardized test scores to violent crime (Hochschild and Weaver 2015).

The labor market, in turn, has become increasingly polarized. At one end are highly skilled knowledge workers, viewed by employers as the chief generators of corporate profits and thereby lavished with rewards. At the other end is the growing precariat—workers with few protections, often little pay, and no certainty about the security of their positions, a second-class and peripheral workforce temporarily and contingently in place to serve the core (Standing 2016; Temin 2017). Nancy DiTomaso (2025) argues that the misery of the former props up the privilege of the latter. Not unlike how slavery made possible the freedom of America's European settlers, she writes, "companies have been able to manage their talent of knowledge workers, providing them with high wages, extraordinary benefits, and additional perquisites, only because of the cost savings made available by the externalization of work to a precarious labor force among subcontractors, global sweatshops, and an increasingly competitive labor market without the protections and regulations that are enjoyed by those employed in large corporations."

If the precariat fills up most of modern capitalism's closet of harvested suffering, other notable and relatively new groups—many overlapping with the precariat—have been squeezed into its confines. For instance, companies have been able to exploit a vulnerable workforce of immigrants with less in the way of protections and voice due to their illegal or second-class status (Korte and Chen 2020). The country's growing dependence on student loans has offloaded training expenses from employers, and public education costs from taxpayers, while saddling less advantaged individuals with new forms of debt peonage (Eaton et al. 2021). The digital economy distributes many technologies for free but preys upon a smaller number of paying users ("whales") vulnerable to carefully engineered incentives and marketing—many of them children, and some effectively addicted to such services (Balakrishnan and Griffiths 2018). Most egregiously, the incarcerated generate profits for private prison companies and supply cheap labor for corporations that contract with such facilities. The degradation of this disproportionately black and brown population directly creates jobs for the rural white communities where new prison facilities are often constructed. And thanks to the so-called carceral continuum between prisons and ghetto communities (Wacquant 2001)—a law-enforcement pipeline endlessly bringing new people to occupy cells and agree to work assignments—governments and corporations can essentially draw upon a renewable resource that incurs little cost for them, but continuous suffering for the affected communities.

Even in a purportedly postcolonial world, poor countries also continue to be reliable sources of cheap labor and resources. This extraction can reach lurid extremes reminiscent of colonial brutality—for instance, the sex trafficking of kidnapped women,

often from the global South, and "modern-day slavery" in the Congo, where even children mine the cobalt needed for green rechargeable batteries used in the North (Gross 2023). Multinational corporations show little compunction about eroding domestic political rights if doing so will lead to greater profits, such as when they lobby governments to set up economic zones more or less unfettered by state regulation or democratic oversight (Slobodian 2023). By establishing these laissez-faire lily pads, global firms have assembled a "pointillist" network of their own, one whose nodes are connected through commerce but shielded from political accountability. In addition to these complex offshoring arrangements, companies regularly engage in more mundane practices of outsourcing, which provide them with some degree of plausible deniability and legal cover to shirk moral and regulatory responsibility for their subcontracted underlings (Weil 2017).

The cultural power of the American dream—one that still resonates powerfully overseas—is that anyone, with enough effort, can achieve success. A person who has known only grinding poverty in their home country can rise to the middle class in America—or, at the very least, see their children attain that status. That is why the decline of social mobility and the growing polarization of Americans' life chances are so troubling, posing existential threats to the country's foundational myth. Yet for the time being, elites continue to enjoy the political cover of meritocratic morality—a belief that those who succeed do so based on their own efforts—which, according to polling, has largely persisted in America even in the face of growing economic inequality (Chen 2015; Mijs 2021; Sandel 2020). The modern zero-sum nature of the American dream is obscured by these ideological arguments, which also sap faith in democracy,

government, and collective organizing more broadly—seen as tools for those without talent or drive to extort the meritorious. Indeed, faith in democracy as a good way to govern has declined (Foa and Mounk 2017), along with trust in government and a wide range of other institutions.

Countering these ideological arguments has been made more difficult by the specific ways the American dream has evolved—as described, how its aspirations have narrowed to individual concerns about materialism and social status, epitomized by white-picket dreams of homeownership. Because the goal is not a "city upon a hill"—a democratic utopia or moral community (Selznick 1994)—but rather the advancement of each person's material well-being, economic growth is the key metric of success. The market economy can excuse any inconvenient inequalities—of outcomes, or opportunities—by gesturing to this goal. Securing a larger economic pie requires more or less tolerating the wildly unequal rewards of an unfettered market, as well as the wildly staggered starting positions of its competitors. Unhindered growth will open up further possibilities for upward mobility, making up for the travails of all.

Yet, as John Dewey predicted, the exploitation inherent to the capitalist engine of growth is corrosive to democracy, leading to the sorts of callous domination that erode any sense of community and shared destiny. The corrupting influence of money in politics means that popular sentiments can be blocked from being translated into policies that rein in corporate practices or redistribute wealth (Gilens and Page 2014). More broadly, an extreme faith in the infallibility of markets has degraded the voluntaristic spirit that Tocqueville once lauded. Such beliefs constrain people's abilities to pursue, or even imagine, ways of relating to and connecting with others outside of

market transactions. For instance, the idea of a "commons"—publicly accessible resources that all can draw upon, without regard to cost—faces continual pushback from laissez-faire ideologues, who see it as a barrier to extracting potential efficiencies and profits. Based on such reasoning, they argue that roads and schools should be privatized. From the postal service to police and fire departments, government should individualize its costs through unsubsidized fees and run its operations like any for-profit business would.

In his 1980 Democratic National Convention speech, "The Dream Shall Never Die," Massachusetts senator Ted Kennedy echoed FDR, using the language of the American dream to argue for collective, rather than individual, advancement. "The poor may be out of political fashion, but they are not without human needs," he said (1980). "The middle class may be angry, but they have not lost the dream that all Americans can advance together." Yet Kennedy's fiery call to return to communal conceptions of national progress failed to secure a lasting foothold, politically or culturally. It was followed by Reaganomics and the finance-fueled '80s—a doubling down on the narrow materialist impulses of the American dream—as well as the fracturing of the New Deal coalition along class and racial lines, with the white working class gradually turning against a liberal platform of cultural inclusion and collective uplift (Rieder 1987).

Recent decades have seen further growth in political tribalism (Beinart 2017). The collective identities that are now resurgent are conspicuously lacking in appeals to universal moral law—reduced, for instance, to the *Falling Down*-style bigotry of the white working class's impotent rage. Meanwhile, America's turn to economic success as the arbiter of its moral standing has opened the way for other countries to seize its

mantle of legitimacy. If the American dream is just about material well-being, then other major economies—above all, a rising China—may be able to serve that end more effectively. Indeed, Chinese president Xi Jinping has used the "Chinese dream" as a slogan to rally the country behind his economic platform (Chen 2021). While Xi paints the Chinese dream as a communal aspiration at odds with America's radical individualism, the totalitarian and venal nature of China's ruling party suggests that its dream is even narrower than America's—a desire for economic expansion shorn of any universalistic political and moral principle.

Conclusion and Future Directions

Explicitly connecting the American dream with Jefferson's earlier vision of a free and equal community, historian Joseph Ellis (2021) has called it the "the Jeffersonian dream writ large … a utopian vision of the ideal society that can never be fully achieved, but the goal that each generation aspires to approximate and more closely approach." Over centuries, the country's founding tenets of political equality had their charge broadened to include an expanding circle of Americans, who—through persistent struggle and demand—gradually secured greater degrees of equality under the law. However circumscribed they were first intended to be, these vague but stirring principles provided moral leverage that various social movements could use to expand the rights of marginalized groups. Another thread can be traced through the whole of American history, however: elites shifting the costs of republican inclusion onto the backs of vulnerable populations. This double movement (Polanyi 2001) of equality and extraction is not just a modern development. It stems from the country's original sins of the enslavement of African peoples and enclosure of indigenous land. It has continued

with the scientifically managed immiseration of communities domestically and abroad to secure cheap labor, far-flung resources, and easy profits.

The widening ambit of inclusion set in motion at America's outset slowly removed the arbitrary limitations placed on its principles of equality, allowing additional groups to make better use of their talents and achieve upward mobility. That said, the country's democratic aspirations soon confronted an intractable problem. The negative liberty that Jeffersonian rights had secured was too paltry a protection in a society where capitalist exploitation continually eroded the equality between individuals. Without policies in place to ensure positive liberty—a basic standard of living and truly equal economic opportunity—the circle of political equality would open for some even as extraction from others continued to occur without pause.

This reality makes clear the fundamental problems with the rights-based language that the founders first adopted (Agamben 2000). Efforts to protect rights do not necessarily challenge the underlying power differentials that lead to those rights being violated in the first place. While important, these negative liberties are insufficient to prevent people (even the members of protected classes) from becoming, or remaining, vulnerable to capitalist exploitation reinforced by state power. Indeed, market rewards often depend quite explicitly upon the suffering of particular groups—workers being underpaid and overworked, for instance. Meanwhile, capitalism has found ways to obscure this extraction, advancing an ideology rooted in meritocratic fundamentalism as well as the wishful thinking of neoclassical economics that everyone—buyer and seller—benefits from transactions in the free market.

These problems, therefore, needed to be tackled at both a policy level and a cultural level. A strong social safety net would ensure "freedom from want" and economic self-determination. It can take numerous forms—most minimally, a social democratic welfare state, but ideally a universal basic income or participation income that would provide a baseline living standard that can sustain a civically engaged populace able to interact as more or less equals (Atkinson 2015). The deep-seated antagonism, however, between democracy and capitalism cannot be addressed without some way of tempering the all-consuming focus of the latter on growth, which necessitates extraction and exploitation. As highlighted earlier, the current popular conception of the American dream implies endless growth: individuals have the right to rise by themselves, but there is no recognition of the tradeoffs suffered collectively as a result of the opportunities extended. Indeed, the growth imperative remains bipartisan in the United States, given that many on the left also clamor for innovation and the resulting productivity gains that can pay for social safety nets and other egalitarian policies (Bok 2011).

That said, more people nowadays are aware of the hard limits that climate change has placed on growth (Chancel 2020; Hickel 2020; Jackson 2017)**.** This recognition provides a powerful counterargument against ideological justifications for inequality. If economic growth has negative externalities, such as environmental damage not priced into transaction costs, continuing to grow the economic pie will not necessarily benefit everyone in the long run. Therefore, society should not fixate on economic growth as a cure-all for its ills. It should not allow the quantification of economic costs and benefits to be its sole yardstick for policy decisions. Instead, it should prioritize the weighing of substantive social and cultural values—and cultivate a free and democratic process that

inclusively arrives at such determinations. If politics is the art of the possible, then a democratic society must debate what possibilities truly make sense.

There is still much work that can be done to deepen democracy in America (Anderson 2018)—from strengthening campaign finance regulations and reinstating federal oversight of state and local voting laws, to giving people time off to vote and expanding the number of House representatives (thereby hindering their easy capture by elites). More broadly, however, democracy can only be fully realized nowadays in a society that promotes positive liberties of economic self-sufficiency. Under modern capitalism, political equality alone no longer ensures that policies are reached through a fair process of shared decision-making, rather than according to the desires of a well-resourced elite. Extending genuine democracy will therefore require, among other things, a turn to cooperatives and other forms of participatory organization that give ordinary workers and consumers a say in economic decisions at every level (Chen and Chen 2021, 2022).

A very different set of policies that also challenge prevailing pieties have to do with the "right to be forgotten" and the cancellation of debts (Chen and Bland 2022). These notions harken back to the potent symbolism of the western frontier, which provided parcels of wealth that allowed ordinary white Americans to greatly improve their status and well-being—at the expense, as previously emphasized, of indigenous communities. Culturally, the frontier offered a fresh start: Americans could slough off their old identities and remake themselves in a new land. The closing of the American frontier meant the closure of such possibilities. In the digital age, people are similarly bound to their past records, both in terms of content and debts. The "right to be forgotten" that has been legislated in Europe and elsewhere allows people after a certain amount of

time to petition to have details about their past scrubbed from public records so that such disclosures no longer impact their employment or credit. This right could be applied widely, to the point that, like the frontier, it grants less advantaged individuals a second chance to improve their lives.

In a similar fashion, greater provisions for debt cancellation—which Jefferson himself advocated (Malone 1981)—are critical to leveling the field of competition, especially now that so many Americans have accumulated substantial amounts of student debt (Berman and Stivers 2016; Herrine 2020; Mettler 2014). Here, the overall policy approach would follow the biblical notion of the jubilee, which mandated that debts be forgiven and enslaved people freed after a certain number of years. If there are undoubtedly some who would take unfair advantage of such provisions pushed too far, the larger idea is to restore some balance within a society that relentlessly measures and tracks all aspects of people's lives.

These proposals to provide a safety net regardless of deservingness and clean the slate regardless of past wrongs fall into a larger moral perspective, the morality of grace (Chen 2015). Grace is an attitude of radical acceptance and forgiveness. It refuses to judge, rejecting categories of right and wrong, just and unjust. Unchecked, it can lead to an excessive permissiveness, but it can also counterbalance the excessive culture of judgment within present-day capitalist societies. It can cultivate compassion for the "losers" in the struggle for the American dream (Sandage 2006). Without a perspective of grace, a strong safety net cannot be sustained. The beneficiaries of such a support system will be cast as idle parasites (Hirsch 1999), and taxpayers will continue to see little reason to help those they perceive as undeserving. A morality of grace can play

another vital role by challenging the materialist conception of the American dream that now dominates. It can encourage more people to embrace a dream of "better and richer and fuller" lives that, as James Truslow Adams imagined it, goes well beyond the acquisition of things and statuses. It can help bring about a social system that supports struggling individuals without obsessing over their deservingness—in other words, an economy of grace (Chen 2017).

Even in the worst of situations, wrote the Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist Viktor Frankl (2006), people can find life worth living so long as they have a "will to meaning"—motivation to seek out some sort of purpose in life. Possessing the means to live is not the same as having meaning in one's life, and finding the latter is something that a free and democratic society can actually facilitate. Indeed, within Frankl's concept of an essential "will to meaning" rests another critical dimension of positive liberty. Positive freedoms cannot come from the state or market alone, as conservative and communitarian writers alike—from Edmund Burke to Amitai Etzioni—have long emphasized. As important as economic opportunities are for human flourishing, so too are moral and communal resources, along with the histories, traditions, rituals, and social bonds that animate them. Indeed, a desire for such rootedness can lead people to collective ideologies with a chauvinistic bent, forms of "fraternalism" that offer personal meaning through a narrow group identity—including, as noted, the ethnocentric antagonism that has flared up across rich democracies in recent years (Chen 2016; Weil 2001).

Grace offers an alternative. In this context, it speaks to the Christian concept—the idea that everyone is saved by God's grace, not just the deserving—and yet various religious

traditions have similar teachings about radical acceptance and the transcendence of the self. Grace also predates the Declaration of Independence in American thought, given that the very unmeritocratic implications of this perspective drove the earliest settlers from England to the New World. The Massachusetts pilgrims, for instance, sought to build what their leader John Winthrop called a "city upon a hill" in order to spread the good news that God's grace alone, and not good works, decided salvation (Heimert and Delbanco 1985). A broader notion of grace can be secular as well, as epitomized in the prose poems of the astrophysicist Carl Sagan, who, struck by the insignificance of Earth as photographed from space, noted with cosmic awe "our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another, and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known" (1997:7). Like fraternalism, grace taps into greater possibilities for moral purpose and transcendence. But rather than distinguishing between "us" and "them," deserving and undeserving, grace is an inclusive state of being, available to all. All human beings experience existence, and that fact alone, Frankl noted, grants them dignity—not what they achieve, nor how useful they are.

At the end of "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," Le Guin describes how, on occasion, one of those who see the child in the closet "does not go home to weep or rage, does not, in fact, go home at all." They walk alone out of the city, through its beautiful gates, across its farmlands, west or north towards the mountains. "They leave Omelas, they walk ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back," she writes. "The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist."

It is hard to imagine something other than the age-old cycle of suffering built into the American dream's promises of plenty. And it is possible that it does not exist. Every one of the world's utopias has, with time, become a dystopia. But if dreams are to endure, they need to adapt to new realities. Perhaps the dream of America can, too. A focus on existential meaning and gratitude for universal grace speaks to ambitions greater than a home with a two-car garage and manicured lawn. It signals a purpose larger than creed or caste, one that transcends the self. And it brings the dream back to its spiritual roots in republican virtue and moral community—the light of the world shining, for all eyes to see, from a city upon a hill.

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