

The Myth of American Dream

Jacek Tittenbrun

Chair of History of Sociology, Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences,
Adam Mickiewicz University, Wieniawskiego 1, Poznań, Poland
Telephone: +48 61 2977510

E-mail address: jacek@amu.edu.pl

ABSTRACT

The American Dream is a deep-seated element of collective American consciousness. Yet, contrary to any culturalist approaches, there is a need to go beyond the subjective to consider the relationship of the former to the objective social relations. And from this point of view it turns out that the U.S. society fares very poorly on the scale of social mobility and equality. In other words, the said doctrine is but a myth bearing no correspondence to reality.

Keywords: American Dream; social stratification; social mobility; income gap; wealth gap; subjectivism

1. INTRODUCTION

There is scarcely any other component of popular culture and mass consciousness that could be said to rule over such a multitude of minds worldwide, not only in the U.S., though it is in the latter country, sure enough, where the American dream is most widespread.

At the same time, from a social-scientific viewpoint, the said collective representation, to use Durkheim' term, constitutes a dramatic example of a deep disjunction between consciousness and reality.

2. DEFINITION

“The American Dream is supposed to mean that through hard work and perseverance, even the poorest people can make it to middle class or above” (Hargreaves 2013).

Let us comment on the spot on the fundamental, yet unrecognised incongruence of the above statement – “the poorest: and the like expressions refer to social stratification; meanwhile, the continuation of the claim suggests it concerns the purported middle **class (my**

emphasis). It is only social stratification that can be described in hierarchical terms (as "above" in the above citation), socio-economic class structures are usually far more complex systems which cannot be reduced to such simplistic images (cf. Tittenbrun 2015).

3. EVIDENCE

Meanwhile, such a belief is not supported by evidence-it's actually harder to move up in America than it is in most other advanced nations.

It's easier to rise above the class you're born into in countries like Japan, Germany, Australia, and the Scandinavian nations, according to research from University of Ottawa economist and current Russell Sage Foundation Fellow Miles Corak.

Among the major developed countries, only in Italy and the United Kingdom is there less economic mobility, according to Corak.

The research measures "intergenerational earnings elasticity" - a type of economic mobility that measures the correlation between what one's parents make and what one makes one generation later- in a number of different countries around the world.¹

No wonder that the aforementioned pair of economists delving-as they did-in the issue of economic inequality- are keen to debunk the myth concerned: "For decades, we believed that hard work and an education would get us ahead and catapult ourselves to a better life. We indulged ourselves with illusions of growth, and the idea that most of us, if not all of us, would continue to achieve a higher and higher standard of living. We did not understand that we were being fed economic fairy tales. If we had paused before taking another slug of the kool-aid, we might have thought to ask who among us were truly benefiting" (Esposito, Tse 2014). In a word, If America is a ladder, the rungs have been moved further apart.

4. CAUSES

The answer to the question why some countries have a greater degree of mobility than others, is not that difficult. At the heart of the matter is inequality. The greater disparities in wealth and income, the wider differences of life chances between children of the various classes and estates.² The privileged classes and estates are in a position to pay for tutors or extracurricular activities that poorer families cannot. The disadvantaged classes are also handicapped as far as their possession of cultural resources is concerned, which is likely to impact on the educational performance of their children as well. And this is all the more relevant that today education matters a lot more than it did in, say, the generation of our grandparents in terms of getting a good job.

"The rich can pump a lot more money into their kids' future," said Corak.

This helps explain why countries like China, India and many South American nations also exhibit relatively little economic mobility.

¹ To be fair, another study (presumably based on a different methodology) found that the United States isn't any less mobile than it was in the 1970s. A child born in the poorest 20 percent
A child born in the poorest 20 percent

of families in 1986 had a 9 percent chance of reaching the top 20 percent as an adult, the study found — roughly the same odds as in 1971" (RUGABER, Boak 2014).

² Under socio-economic structuralism, as the author's general analytic framework is termed, the concept of social estate refers to a unit of social differentiation in the non-economic sphere, based-by analogy to socio-economic lasses-upon non-economic property relations (cf. Tittenbrun 2011a, 2011b).

Families: having a stable home life is also associated with the ability to climb the economic ladder, said Corak. The United States tends to have higher rates of divorce, single-parent homes, and teenage pregnancy than many other industrialized countries.

While single-parent families are less likely to ascend the social ladder, thereby worsening socio-economic inequality, another factor having such effects is sort of (class-estate)endogamy: "men and women with college degrees and high pay are more likely to marry each other" and thereby amplify income gaps (RUGABER, Boak 2014).

Social policies: Countries that redistribute wealth - through, say, higher taxes on the rich and more spending on the poor - tend to have greater social mobility, said Francisco Ferreira, an economist at the World Bank.

This is especially true when it comes to education spending. Critics have long contended that the U.S. system for funding education - where school funding is largely based on property taxes - perpetuates inequality far more so than a system that taxes the whole country for schools, then redistributes that money to the districts that are most needy" (Gilbert 2011). From an ownership point of view, this curtails the role of all-national income and wealth redistribution, and thus this level of social ownership.

The factor of education has been also singled out for particular attention in a historical explanation offered by another commentator, who however, in failing to name the type of politics at work is bound to end up in usual commonplace generalities condemning "politics and politicians in general": "In the middle of the 20th century, it seemed like we had figured it out. The post World War II GI Bill of Rights provided veterans the opportunity for a college education, for home ownership and for what came to be defined as the middle-class life.

Social Security, a benefit that began in the 1930s, helped lift the elderly out of the poverty that was a near certainty for prior generations.

Americans dreamed of far more than a chicken in every pot. They envisioned two cars in every garage. A bright future seemed inevitable for the middle Class - until it wasn't" (Haupt 2014).

Then a fairly usual set of lamentations follows, rather well exemplifying a rather desperate state of mind of the advocates of what in our terms is a myth rather than a reflection of reality:

"Today's stagnant wages, lost homes, crushing education debt and constant partisan bickering speak of the collapse of the middle class and the end of the dream. There is the sense that Americans are powerless against forces beyond any individual effort, and that there is no need for citizens to work together through our civil government to patch up the dream.

The American Dream has not been battered solely by economic forces or cultural changes. What happened is that we bought into nonsense. The Economist magazine summed it up: "The seeds of today's disaster were sown in the 1980s. College graduation rates kept soaring for the affluent, but for those in the bottom half, a four-year degree is scarcely more attainable today than it was in the 1970s. And because some colleges actually hinder social mobility, what increasingly matters is not just whether you go to college but where."

Prior to the '80s, an educated electorate was considered a public good, something worth the taxes that paid for it. Some voices, however, began to point to the higher wages earned by the college educated and declared that education is a private good. They argued that the public shouldn't have to pay because students could shoulder loans and pay them back later. The same voices trumpeted lower public budgets, opposed the minimum wage and cut public pension benefits.

In campaigning for the presidency in 1980, Ronald Reagan often proclaimed that government was not the solution to our problems but was itself the problem.

His attitude has been perpetuated and continues to be a tenet of faith of government leaders at every level.

That unquestioning faith, along with a divided Congress that pays more attention to the needs of the wealthy than the middle class, is hamstringing the nation by making political faith more important than the facts of middle-class decline". (Haupt 2014)

Along similar lines, economist Steven Fazzari of Washington University in St. Louis contended that with the existing socio-economic disparities, achieving the American Dream isn't realistic anymore.

"The idea that if you work hard and play by the rules, you should have a decent, normal life and fairly secure economic life, and there's a sense that a larger share of Americans are prevented from reaching that," Fazzari said.

Statistically, the middle includes households that make between \$35,000 and \$70,000, Fazzari said. But that often doesn't align with ideals for a comfortable life.

"Having a median income for a family of four might not do it for you anymore," Fazzari said.

Fazzari says the ability to move up economically isn't easy anymore with one of the key gateways, education, difficult to access when wages are low.

"If education is the ticket into the middle class, and you can't afford it because your wages are low, family wages are low, then where does that mobility come from?" Fazzari asked (Jacoby 2014).

A new report out by the Center for American Progress (CAP) highlights the divergence between the ideal and the present-day reality. According to the aforementioned report, for a typical middle class married couple with two children, the combined costs of health care, day care, housing and savings for college and retirement increased a staggering 32 percent between 2000 and 2012.

As a consequence, it has become extremely difficult, if not impossible, for middle class families to satisfy some of the most basic needs, including having a place to call home.

The fact of the matter is that housing costs have increased 28 percent over the past 12 years, meaning that fewer and fewer families can afford to purchase a home, used previously as kind of insurance policy against retirement.

Another reason for substantial difficulties in financing housing is the Americans' debt trap: it takes them 20 years to pay off the mountains of student loan debt.

The Cap points out that while owning a house has become next to impossible for the American middle class, renting one constitutes a substantial financial burden as well.

Over half of renters in American spend 30 percent or more of their total income on housing, meaning that less and less money remains for other essentials. This is far from being the end of the story, as Americans are also struggling to save up for their children's college education.

According to the CAP report, between 2000 and 2012 the average amount of money that a middle class family with two kids has to save for college education skyrocketed by 39 percent. Moreover, the cost of an education from a four-year public college or university increased by a staggering 86 percent during that same time period.

According to the report, however, the high costs of housing and higher education for middle class families pale in comparison to the outrageously high costs of health care in America. (Hartmann 2014). And there are many other factors that bear on the credibility of that specifically American value system, which-as many claim-has however its counterparts in other countries: from China to the U.K.

5. SOCIO-ECONOMIC DIVIDE

Compared with European social-market economies, the U.S. tax system is highly skewed in class terms, by at large epitomising the so-called Matthew effect: the name comes from the biblical passage: "For to everyone who has will more be given".

To make the matter worse, in 2013 in the deal he cut with congressional Republicans, "the president not only agreed to extend the Bush tax cuts for the highest earners but also to eliminate the estate tax for all but the microscopic percentage of people passing down more than \$5 million - causing inheritance tax proponent Ray Madoff to declare the battle lost for good.

And despite the role skewed financial rewards played in cratering the global economy, the Obama administration's policy response has failed to address outsized Wall Street and CEO compensation in any meaningful way. Bonus season is upon us, and with the big banks now liberated from their TARP obligations, the general attitude seems to be, 'What financial crisis?' Class war, prosecuted from above, is depicted as a threat from below. A Billionaire private equity manager Steve Schwarzman had the gall to compare the Obama administration's attempt to tax 'carried interest' at the same rate as other forms of income to when Hitler invaded Poland in 1939'.

When it comes to raising working-class incomes, Obama has been similarly ineffective. As it is implemented over time, [...] Obama's health care reform may become a significant factor both in reducing the burden of medical costs on middle-income families and in promoting social equality. From 2008 to 2009, however, the number of people without health insurance rose from 46.3 million to 50.7 million. In the longer term, the key to combating inequality is upgrading the education and skills of American workers. But with the Republicans [...] in charge of the House, Obama's hopes for major new investments in worker skills seem more elusive than ever. In particular, his goal of every American receiving some higher education is going nowhere. [...] Statistics show the problem is getting worse. According to a study by Emmanuel Saez of Berkeley, the top 1 percent of earners captured two-thirds of all income growth between 2002 and 2007. [...] The bottom 20 percent of the population - which earned 5.4 percent of national income in 1967 - earned just 3.4 percent of it in 2009. The highest 20 percent went from 41.5 to 49.4 over the same period. The Gini Index - the standard measure of income inequality - ticked up again between 2008 and 2009, from .451 to .458. According to the CIA World Factbook, this figure puts the United States ahead of Russia and Turkey in inequality, and on par with Mexico and the Philippines.

Why is income inequality proving so intractable a problem? [...] On the one hand, Obama is up against macro forces like globalization and a system that has grown highly effective at transmuted economic privilege into political power. Somehow, wide majorities have come to support tax law changes that benefit only tiny minorities" (Banu 2010).

For example, according to the new bill mentioned above, "for the first time, wealthy individuals can make gifts of up to \$5 million during their lifetime to anyone, including grandchildren, and pay no tax."

It's like the old Steve Martin routine about how to be a millionaire and never pay taxes—except that instead of "I forgot!" you now say, 'I'm allowed!'

It is an American peculiarity that rich people want to be thought of as middle class, while those in the middle class identify with the economic interests of an upper class they have only a remote chance of joining. The United States, the land of opportunity, now boasts the world's second-lowest level of intergenerational income mobility.

Meanwhile, the people most alarmed about the rise of new economic dynasties seem to be the enlightened superrich themselves, people like Bill Gates and Warren Buffett.

Obama deserves fault for failing to articulate this abstract threat in a way ordinary people can appreciate. Like the deficit, income inequality never killed anybody—it merely has the potential to sap the entire country's health and spirit. Moving toward an income distribution like Brazil's threatens individual happiness, social peace, and American values. But so far, the president hasn't figured out how to get the public to relate to the issue.

Obama told a group of frowning bankers at Cooper Union, "There is no dividing line between Main Street and Wall Street." But there is, and it is growing deeper every year" (Banu 2010).

Given the foregoing, it is not surprising that many social thinkers come to the conclusion that it is certainly far more easy to explain why Americans have a harder time making it into the middle class than why Americans cling to the belief that it's still easy to do, which is really baffling.³ "Even though there is no clear consensus among economists, sociologists, or Americans themselves for a single definition of the term, most Americans [...] identify themselves as middle class and consider membership in the middle class synonymous with achieving the American dream" (McMahon 1998).

To put it another way, "public opinion data suggests that a strikingly large proportion of Americans, and particularly young Americans, believe they have a reasonably good chance of becoming rich in their lifetime. [...] Analysis of PSID data demonstrates the actual level of opportunity for upward income mobility over the life course and shows that Americans overestimate their chances of being rich. The overestimate is considerable even when subjective definitions are used, and is very large if conventional definitions such as top 3%, top 1%, or top 0.1% are used for the threshold" (DiPrete 2007).

To return, then, to the aforementioned question, "it could be because, during the late 1800s and early 1900-suggested Jason Long, an economist at Wheaton College in Illinois-the United States was a much more mobile country than Britain.

While not denying the role of such historical experiences, it appears that one should not leave out the factor pointed out by Gilbert (2011): "the American middle classes have been fed a very different line of propaganda, emphasizing individualism and the American dream of social mobility.

Consequently, they tend to view in individual terms experiences that a European might interpret from a class perspective". Similar factors are pointed out by other scholars, too: "it seems that everyone wants to think of themselves as middle class, even if that's not the case. 'The reality created by the commercial mass media is one in which everyone is middle class', Kate Ratcliff, professor of American studies at Marlboro College, told U.S. News. 'Advertising, television and movies all convey a world in which middle-class affluence is an American birthright'.

As for developing countries, they like to claim middle class status for their own reasons, Birdsall told Slate. 'Developing countries that are growing fast take pride in that they're getting richer', said Birdsall. "Part of the discussion for them is, 'We also have now a middle class. We're not just poor" (Anderson 2014).

³ All the more so that there is a cognitive dissonance here at work—for instance, "Recent bi-partisan polling by CNN found 63 percent of voters expressing the belief that our nation is in decline. Only 18 percent view the country as on the right track. Most Americans reportedly see both their government and their economy as a rigged system" (2013).

6. DECLINE OF THE MYTH

It should be pointed out, however, that this traditional American mindset has been not immune to the processes in the real world. Michael Snyder reckons that the current median income of "\$27,520 a year will not allow you to live 'the American Dream' in this day and age. After taxes, that breaks down to a good bit less than \$2,000 a month. You can't realistically pay a mortgage, make a car payment, afford health insurance and provide food, clothing and everything else your family needs for that much money.

That is one of the reasons why both parents are working in most families today. In fact, sometimes both parents are working multiple jobs in a desperate attempt to make ends meet. Over the years, the cost of living has risen steadily but our paychecks have not. This has resulted in a steady erosion of the middle class. Once upon a time, most American families could afford a nice home, a couple of cars and a nice vacation every year. When I was growing up, it seemed like almost everyone was middle class. But now "the American Dream" is out of reach for more Americans than ever, and the middle class is dying right in front of our eyes.

One of the things that was great about America in the post-World War II era was that we developed a large, thriving middle class. Until recent times, it always seemed like there were plenty of good jobs for people that were willing to be responsible and work hard. That was one of the big reasons why people wanted to come here from all over the world. They wanted to have a chance to live "the American Dream" too.

But now the American Dream is becoming a mirage for most people. No matter how hard they try, they just can't seem to achieve it.

And here are some hard numbers to back that assertion up. The following are 15 more signs that the middle class is dying...

#1 According to a brand new CNN poll, 59 percent of Americans believe that it has become impossible for most people to achieve the American Dream... block quote.

The American Dream is impossible to achieve in this country. So say nearly 6 in 10 people who responded to CNN Money's American Dream Poll, conducted by ORC International. They feel the dream — however they define it — is out of reach. Young adults, age 18 to 34, are most likely to feel the dream is unattainable, with 63% saying it's impossible. This age group has suffered in the wake of the Great Recession, finding it hard to get good jobs. block quote end

#2 More Americans than ever believe that homeownership is not a key to long-term wealth and prosperity... block quote.

The great American Dream is dying. Even though many Americans still desire to own a home, they are losing faith in homeownership as a key to prosperity. Nearly two-thirds of Americans, or 64%, believe they are less likely to build wealth by buying a home today than they were 20 or 30 years ago, according to a survey sponsored by non-profit MacArthur Foundation. And nearly 43% said buying a home is no longer a good long-term investment. block quote end

#3 Overall, the rate of homeownership in the United States has fallen for eight years in a row, and it has now dropped to the lowest level in 19 years. This is not surprising given that "the average price of a newly built home nationwide has reached \$320,100 — a 20.5 percent jump since 2012 began. That puts a typical new home out of reach

for two-thirds of Americans, according to government data. Yet many builders have made a calculated bet: Better to sell fewer new homes at higher prices than build more and charge less—which provides an example of the aforementioned class bias present in the relationship between demand and supply. Their calculation is partly a consequence of the growing wealth gap in the United States. Average inflation-adjusted income has declined 9 percent for the bottom 40 percent of households since 2007, while incomes for the top 5 percent exceed where they were when the recession began that year, according to the Census Bureau. Buyers have historically paid about 15 percent more for a new home than for an existing one, a premium that’s reached 40 percent today, according to the real estate data firm Zillow. An average new home costs about six times the median U.S. household income. Historically, Americans have bought homes worth about three times their income. The high prices and sparse construction are no help for a still-subpar U.S. economy. With new-home sales well below their historical average, construction firms need fewer workers. The economy remains 1.49 million construction jobs shy of its total in December 2007, when the Great Recession began. After 60 years of migrating to car-dominated suburbs, polls show more Americans want out of long commutes in favor of neighborhoods where jobs and stores are nearby. Stuck with pay that’s barely budging, many face a tough choice: Keep renting. Pile up huge mortgage debt to buy a home near their job. Or buy a cheaper home that requires a lengthy commute.

“Middle-class Americans are [being] squeezed out,” said John McIlwain, a senior fellow at the Urban Land Institute. Low mortgage rates have eased some of the pain from rising prices. But the desire to live near town centers on costlier land could depress home ownership rates to as low as 60 percent, McIlwain estimates. That would be down from 65 percent today and 69 percent during the housing bubble. About 40 percent of Americans still live in a suburb “where most people drive to most places,” according to a new poll by the American Planning Association, a trade group for community planners. But just 7 percent say they hope to stay in car-dominated neighborhoods. Those findings mesh with a March report on the preferences of millennials by Nielsen Holdings. The construction business thrived for decades by bulldozing cheap farmland into suburban networks of streets and houses. But as farmland grew costlier, land prices in cities and towns with attractive amenities soared, says Christopher Leinberger, a professor at George Washington University and an industry strategist.” (Morici 2014).

#4 52 percent of Americans cannot even afford the house that they are living in right now... block quote.

“Over half of Americans (52%) have had to make at least one major sacrifice in order to cover their rent or mortgage over the last three years, according to the “How Housing Matters Survey,” which was commissioned by the nonprofit John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and carried out by Hart Research Associates. These sacrifices include getting a second job, deferring saving for retirement, cutting back on health care, running up credit card debt, or even moving to a less safe neighborhood or one with worse schools (Snyder 2014).”

block quote end

#5 According to the U.S. Census Bureau, only 36 percent of Americans under the age of 35 own a home. That is the lowest level that has ever been measured (Snyder 2014).

#6 Right now, approximately one out of every six men in the United States that are in their prime working years (25 to 54) do not have a job.

#7 The labor force participation rate for Americans from the age of 25 to the age of 29 has fallen to an all-time record low.

#8 The number of working age Americans that are not employed has increased by 27 million since the year 2000.

#9 According to the government's own numbers, about 20 percent of the families in the entire country do not have a single member that is employed at this point" (Snyder 2014). And the analyst adds a couple of further factors whose significance does little to ameliorate the gloomy picture depicted so far:"

#10 [...] 25 percent of all American adults do not even have a single penny saved up for retirement.

#11 56 percent of all Americans have "subprime credit" at this point.

#12 more than one out of every five children in the United States is living in poverty in 2014.

#13 According to one recent report, there are 49 million Americans that are dealing with food insecurity right now.

#14 Overall, the U.S. poverty rate is up more than 30 percent since 1966. It looks like LBJ's war on poverty didn't work out too well after all" (Snyder 2014). The above argument, deploying-as it does- by and large a stratification perspective, would benefit from shifting to an alternative, class approach which lurks behind his final conclusion.

"Sadly, it does not appear that there is much hope on the horizon for the middle class. More good jobs are being shipped out of the country and are being lost to technology every single day, and our politicians seem convinced that "business as usual" is the right course of action for our nation. Unless something dramatic happens, it is going to become increasingly difficult to eke out a middle class existence as a "worker bee" in American society. The truth is that most big companies these days do not have any loyalty to their workers and really do not care what ends up happening to them" (Snyder 2014).

Of course, it would be too much to demand from a columnist of Wall Street magazine not to miss the forest for the trees, as manifested in individual observations made at the end of his argument: to see, that is, that the phenomenon mentioned above is not accidental, but constitutes part and parcel of a specific model of capitalism, distinct from stakeholder capitalism.

In a similar vein, a person who is entitled to claim he is in the know-as a manager of a trillion dollars he has a first-hand knowledge about the subject: "The American Dream never really existed. It was a marketing scam. And it was. The biggest provider of mortgages for the past 50 years, Fannie Mae, had as their slogan, "We make the American Dream come true." It was just a marketing slogan all along. How many times have I cried because of a marketing slogan. And then they ruined it (Altucher 2013).

Some other researchers concur also with the aforementioned point about the misrecognition of one's own, including class, interests. In the 2010 midterm elections, its voters rejected a ballot proposition that would have given the state an income tax applicable only to individuals making more than \$200,000 per year and families making over \$400,000.

That 1.2 percent of the state's population evidently had a lot of less-prosperous friends, since 65 percent of the voters opposed the tax.

This prompts the question why do the politicians' solutions for the problem of inequality so often leave so indifferent, or worse, those who ought to be most interested in tackling the problem head-on. In 2008, Bonnie Snodgrass cleaned a television studio in the evenings after working days as a receptionist in Columbus, Ohio, bringing home a little more than \$40,000 a year. The New Yorker's George Packer interviewed her for a story about Barack Obama's difficulties with working-class voters. Obama's pledge to let tax rates revert to higher levels for families with incomes exceeding \$250,000 was prominent throughout his 2008 campaign but seemed "incredible" to Snodgrass, even though she had always voted Democratic. "How many people do you know who make two hundred and fifty thousand dollars?" she told Packer.

"That's a joke! If he starts at a hundred thousand, I might listen. Two hundred fifty - that's to me like people who hit the lottery."

Packer understood Snodgrass to be saying that Obama's promises to increase government spending and reduce the deficit, while raising taxes on families making more than \$250,000 and no one else, would be impossible for him to keep and were, therefore, impossible for her to believe. "He'll keep going down, and when it's to people who make forty-five or fifty thousand it's going to hit me," she said. "I'd have to sell my home and live in a five-hundred-dollar-a-month apartment with gang bangers out in my yard, and I'd be scared to death to leave my house."

Such raw skepticism, coming from exactly the sort of voter liberals devise five-point programs to impress, is no less dismaying a problem for being a chronic one. In 1972, George McGovern's plan to impose a 100 percent tax on any inheritance over \$500,000 got a hostile reception from voters unlikely ever to bequeath or inherit enough money to be affected by it. (Half a million dollars in 1972 would be worth about \$2.6 million today). According to Richard Dougherty, McGovern's press secretary, the problem was "the dream factor - every slob in the street thinks that if he hits the lottery big, he may be able to leave half a million to his family; it wipes out dreams."

In 2004, Thomas Frank expanded on this assertion that working-and middle-class voters can't or won't understand their own best interests in his book *What's the Matter with Kansas?* In Frank's view, voters who would benefit from leftist redistributive policies are beguiled into opposing them because of an induced "derangement" Rather than supporting Democrats, who really are trying to address their economic problems, too many of them wind up supporting a Republican Party that conceals its plutocratic agenda behind a pageant of cheap, meaningless gestures of solidarity on peripheral cultural issues: God, gays, and guns.

Most recently, Slate's Timothy Noah has echoed Dougherty and Frank, writing that "even mild economic populism" has been "a loser for Democrats." This lament came in a 10-part series that ran in September, examining what Noah called 'the most significant change in American society in your lifetime.' The "Great Compression" of the post-World War II era, when the gulf separating the rich from the rest was unusually small, has given way since the 1970s to the "Great Divergence," as the gulf has done nothing but grow. There "probably was no better time to belong to America's middle class" than during the Great Compression, Noah writes. As for the Great Divergence? Noah's "gut-level feeling" is, "I do not wish to live in a banana republic," since societies "starkly divided into the privileged and the destitute" are "repellent." (Voegeli 2010)

Noah's series ranged over the possible causes for the Great Divergence, only to conclude that a convincing theory of the case is as elusive as the list of suspects is extensive.

Altered family structures, changes in race and gender relations, education, immigration, technology, foreign trade, politics and policies, the decline of unions, to which list one could add globalization as a key driver of capital and labour power movements, as well as income redistribution. An extreme effect of the latter is destitution-the author cited points in this context to workers who have to devote such a large portion of their income to rent that they wind up skipping lunch because it's too expensive. (Voegeli 2010)

Be that as it may, "it's clear that Americans still believe that America has exceptional mobility, and that's not true," said Long, calling it "vexing" that "lots of people could be systematically mistaken about verifiable, factual information" (Hargreaves 2013).

Those facts in the eyes of some are so ominous that serve as a basis for far-ranging conclusions: "The United States was built on the assumption that a rising tide lifts all ships. That has not been the case for the past generation, and there is no indication that this socio-economic reality will change any time soon. That means that a core assumption is at risk. The problem is that social stability has been built around this assumption - not on the assumption that everyone is owed a living, but the assumption that on the whole, all benefit from growing productivity and efficiency.

If we move to a system where half of the country is either stagnant or losing ground while the other half is surging, the social fabric of the United States is at risk, and with it the massive global power the United States has accumulated. Other superpowers such as Britain or Rome did not have the idea of a perpetually improving condition of the middle class as a core value. The United States does. If it loses that, it loses one of the pillars of its geopolitical power" (Friedman 2013). The author has done us a service, demonstrating again what cognitively harmful consequences the concept of the middle class can involve-in this case it is a historicity, manifested in the author's searching for the said "class" in the ancient Rome. Secondly, it should be recalled that those sweeping generalisations refer to what-at the end of the day-is but a statistical category, which means that it suffices to shift financial boundaries of the latter, and one might arrive at very different conclusions, and most relevantly, there is nothing either in the nature of the definition itself or in the form of any external authority to rule out certain shifts in the meaning rather than some others-which is but one example of the inherent arbitrariness marking virtually all stratification approaches (cf. Tittenbrun 2015).

7. THE BRITISH CASE

As far as the aforementioned United Kingdom is concerned, it is useful-given both societies' systemic affinity-consider whether there is such a thing as a British counterpart of the American dream, comparing underlying relevant real-world processes in both countries.

That we are not wasting our time can be seen from from this introduction by a British commentator:

"For the first time, swaths of middle-class voters, who for generations were given to understand that the system was fashioned for their benefit, feel it is rigged against them. In such a climate, the conventional messages - the appeal to aspiration and the promise to reward enterprise - ring hollow. Yet the current generation of party leaders doesn't know any other kind of middleclass politics" (Behr 2012).

The author then, unsurprisingly, invokes "the American experience [that] is instructive. The US middle class has followed the same pattern of stagnant wages, shrinking opportunity and squeezed living standards but for even longer. The "Death of the Great American Middle

Class" is a well-established trope in the US media, debated in newspaper op-ed pages and dissected by political scientists.

A new book by James Carville and Stan Greenberg, two veterans of Bill Clinton's presidential campaigns, charts the phenomenon in depth. *It's the Middle Class, Stupid!* argues that the mechanisms for delivering the American dream to the average citizen - access to quality education, affordable housing, jobs that pay decent wages - have broken down.

"There's a presumption that you will do better and better, have more disposable income and more savings, and you'll have a decent retirement, that your kids will get a college education and be able to do better than you," says Greenberg. "If you look at the period 1945-80, that's what happened in America.

We now know, looking back from 1980 onwards, that it largely stopped - the story is now a myth" (Behr 2012).

When discussing the parallels between the American and British predicaments, Greenberg pointed to one vital distinction: "in the United States is a much broader category. Those who aspire to the status automatically expect to acquire it and so pre-emptively identify themselves with it.

"In the US, working-class people who are clearly not middle class by the standards we're talking about here [in Britain] consider themselves middle class, and they do so because they believe they will have rising incomes" (Behr 2012). Now, the fact of American authorship of that opinion does not prejudice that it is correct - from other publications of the present author the reader can get to know an alternative treatment of the same issue, which constitutes yet another manifestation of the protean quality of the construct under consideration.

Anyway, to come back to the above-mentioned thread, Behr argues that:

When that expectation is disappointed the result is rage. It shows itself in the banners held aloft at last year's Democratic National Convention saying "Middle Class First" (a slogan that would invite satirical sneers about easier access to organic vegetables in the UK). It is also a force driving the rise of the radical conservative Tea Party movement. Although the Republican fringe is better known in Britain for its Christian fundamentalism, it channels a sense of betrayal at the hollowing out of the American dream - the feeling that the Washington and Wall Street elite have stolen the country from the people.

As Greenberg sees it, the common belief is that America is "hard-wired" to furnish opportunity, so if it doesn't happen, some conspiracy is to blame. "So we end up with a morality tale - who are the bad guys that are blocking the natural forces? It's class conflict in the context of an assumption that we just need to take away the distortions that rig the rules" (Behr 2012).

A comment is in order - the author forcefully imposes an utterly fallacious impression that conspiracy theories and class struggle are somehow intimately related to each other. Now, there is no such a necessary logical relationship between the two, not to mention the elementary fact that the former are untenable theories of history, whilst class struggle, class war, warfare, you name it is a social and historical fact and one does not need to be a Marxist to recognize it. This follows also from further Behr's remarks:

[...] Thus, in the US at least, the mainstream politics of class resentment, historically imagined to be a resource of the left, has been appropriated by the anti-government right. A significant observation in *It's the Middle Class, Stupid!* is that the raw evidence from opinion polls shows Democratic candidates do surprisingly well when they become unapologetic in demanding that wealth be shared more equitably. Yet they are often intimidated out of pressing the point home by a received wisdom - and a well-mobilised conservative

commentariat - which says that such messages are divisive, signal a drift away from the centre, represent "class war" and alienate independent voters with a whiff of socialism. (Behr 2012)

This illustrates well the fortunes, or rather misfortunes of the idea, and the very term "class struggle" (and its related forms) and the relationship of those with the ruling ideology. If anything the idea underlying the grand "American dream" ideology is one of social peace and order, where social change is by any means a collective advancement of a class, but instead nothing remotely that disruptive-individual efforts following a proscribed range of well beaten tracks. To be able to engage in so conceived individual mobility demands-or so the received wisdom goes-that any divisive, diverting attention from the set of goals one ought to follow, class struggle must be erased not only from social life, but also from the very language used to describe that life, which accounts for the hostility of mainstream politics, media and academia even to the term of class itself. "So instead of working class, we hear of 'working families' or 'blue collar' and 'white collar employees'.[...]

Instead of the capitalist owning class, we hear of the 'more affluent' or the 'upper quintile'. And at the opposite end of the societal spectrum, we hear of 'inner city poor' and 'low-income elderly'" (Parenti 2011).

Parenti implies that for the reader to see how the above account fits today's American practice, one needs not to look very far and "just listen to any Obama speech. Often Obama settles for an even more cozy and muted term: 'folks', as in 'Folks are strugglin along'" (2011). By contrast, the flip side of the "leaping" nature of the concept our analysis focuses on is that it has become the only "class" term whose use does not put one in the spotlight as a Marxist and "public enemy": "'Class' is used with impunity and approval only when it has that magic neutralizing adjective 'middle' attached to it. The middle class is an acceptable mainstream concept because it usually does not sharpen our sense of class struggle; it dilutes and muffles critical consciousness. If everyone in America is middle class (except for a few superrich and a minor stratum of very poor), there is little room for any awareness of class conflict" (Parenti 2011). The aforementioned thinker warns, however, that this happy state of affairs "may be changing with the Great Recession and the sharp decline of the middle class (and decline of the more solvent elements of the working class). The concept of middle class no longer serves as a neutralizer when it itself becomes an undeniable victim" (Parenti 2011). This brings us to a distinctive feature of Britain that, however structurally cognate to the U.S. capitalism, is nevertheless also -still-a member of the European Union, whose social model epitomizes stakeholder capitalism. A similar dynamic operates in Britain, though much moderated because we are less hysterical about the spectre of reds under the bed. The charge of sowing interclass strife is central to Tory rebuttals of Ed Miliband's attempt, laid out in his speech to the latest Labour conference in Manchester, to position himself as the leader of a "one-nation" party. Conservatives leapt on Miliband's scorn for David Cameron's quasi-aristocratic background, Eton education and cabinet staffed with millionaires as evidence that the call for national unity disguised a return to embittered socialism. Cameron addressed the point directly in his own autumn conference speech. "We don't preach about one nation but practise class war," he said. (Behr 2012)

Finally, much the same experience is shared by yet another nation included in the category of shareholder capitalism. Canada's middle-class is mortgaging its future to stay afloat, making the Canadian dream "a myth more than a reality."

That's the blunt assessment of an internal Conservative government report, an unvarnished account of the plight of middle-income families that's in contrast to the rosier economic picture in this month's budget. (Beeby 2014). "Middle-class families are struggling

economically, but at least one of them is doing quite well, thank you very much: the working parents with two kids who appear as a fictitious example in the federal budget each year.

Critics say the family's rapidly rising income is a complete fiction as well [-the] budget document introduced Blake, Laurie and their children, a made-up family pulling down \$120,000 in combined salary – and enjoying \$3,400 in annual tax savings, thanks to Conservative policies" (Beeby 2014a).

8. WHOSE DREAM IS IT AFTER ALL?

As hinted above, the phrases "American dream" and "the middle class dream" are treated as equivalent. In other words, the concept of middle class is an integral element of the notion under investigation. Therefore, attempting to draw some kind of theoretical lesson from the above, subjective treatments of the social group called "the middle class" around which the cultural imagery of American dream revolves are not successful on their own terms and shade over into the most common category of definitions: "middle class may refer to a group with shared values or views, but much of the time it is intended to refer to those who fall within a particular range of incomes" (Datta 2012). This slippage shows up clearly in the argument, whose point of departure is a usual subjective assumption, for the author's answer to the "**question:** What is the annual earning for a middle class family"?

is as follows: "This is sort of like that old adage that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. It seems 'middle class' also is in the eye of the beholder" (Ferguson 2014).

And the reader could be forgiven for being surprised by the justification offered for such an extreme subjectivism; ironically, we, Europeans, are told all the time that one of the chief distinctions of the U.S. model of capitalism lies in the widespread distrust in government of the citizenry. Meanwhile, the author being cited, who is American, after all, invokes precisely the state authority in order to vindicate his cognitive scepticism: "There's no official government definition of middle class, if that's what you're looking for" (Ferguson 2014). Be that as it may, one does not need wait long to see the effects of a subjective approach to the category concerned. The commentator in question admits willy-nilly that the said government social-scientific authority leaves something to be desired: "In fact, when I was researching this, I came across a CBS article from 2010 that talked about how the government itself was having trouble defining that as it wrestled with what were then the expiring Bush tax cuts and how they would affect the middle class. At that time, government-types were throwing around numbers like \$250,000 or \$500,000 as cutoffs for the middle class income in terms of taxes. Frankly, I laugh at those numbers" (Ferguson 2014).

"In 2012, the Pew Research Center released a report that explored the topic of what it means to be middle class. The survey at the root of the report asked people how much money a family of four needs to lead a middle-class lifestyle.

"The median response among those who consider themselves middle class is \$70,000, meaning that half of middle-class adults say it would take more than \$70,000 annually and half say it would take less than that amount," the Pew report gives the Public's estimates of how much money it takes for a family of four to live a middle-class lifestyle are quite close to the Pew Research Center's analysis based on U.S. Census Bureau data that the median income for a four-person household is \$68,274," it continues. "As expected from the varying cost of living across the country, the annual family income seen as necessary for a middle-class lifestyle is a median of \$85,000 in the East and \$60,000 in the Midwest (with a median of \$70,000 in the South and the West).

“Similarly, the median among middle-class adults living in rural areas is \$55,000; among suburban and urban dwellers, it is \$75,000 and \$70,000, respectively.”

Now, weigh that against some numbers from the U.S. Census Bureau. The Census Bureau says between 2007 and 2011, the median household income in Texas was \$50,920, compared with \$52,762 for the whole United States. In Gregg County, the median income was \$44,608, and in Longview it was \$43,414" (Ferguson 2014).

9. CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to do two things. First, the aim has been to establish what the status of the "American dream" notion is, and, relatedly, to consider the lynchpin of the latter-the concept of the middle class. It has been argued that "the American dream" should be qualified as a myth, waning at that. The concept of middle class is a misnomer, referring in actual fact not to any class at all, but to a social stratum, as it is social strata that could be ranked along the scale of income gradation, as the most common approach to the concept involved STIPULATES.

References

- [1] Altucher, James. 2013. Choose Yourself. Book.
- [2] Awitia, Alex. 2014. THE MYTH, REALITY OF KENYA MIDDLE CLASS. The Star Kenya, Tuesday, March 4.
- [3] Anderson, Lane The Difference Between The Middle Class In the U.S. and Abroad. Deseret News National Edition. Tuesday, June 19.
- [4] Beeby Dean. 2014a. Average middle-class family income in Conservative budget called ‘make believe’. The Globe and Mail . Thursday, Feb. 20.
- . 2014b. Middle-class dreams a ‘myth’ in troubled economy: internal government report - The Globe and Mail . Feb. 23.
- [5] Banu, Kishwar. 2010. Obama's War on Inequality. MFB - Muslim - Islamic - facebook. December 27.
- [6] Behr, Rafael . 2012. The dying of the middle-class dream. New Statesman, 11/2.
- [7] Datta, Ray, B Ed. 2011. The emergence and role of middle class in North East India. Manipur: North-Eastern Hill University Press.
- [8] DiPrete, Thomas A 2007. Is this a Great Country? Upward mobility and the chance for riches in contemporary America. *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* Vol: 25 Issue: 1, 1st quarter, pp: 89-95.
- [9] Esposito, Mark, and Terence Tse. 2014. How to stop the middle class getting poorer and poorer. The Conversation.com. 29 May.
- [10] Fergusson, David M. 2008. The transmission of social inequality: Examination of the linkages between family socioeconomic status in childhood and educational achievement in

young adulthood. *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* Vol: 26 Issue: 3, September, pp: 277-295.

[11] Friedman, George. 2013. The Crisis of the Middle Class and American Power. Geopolitical

[12] FPJ Bureau. 2014. Save Them. Free Press Journal. July 14.

[12] Gilbert, Dennis. 2011. The American Class Structure: In An Age of Growing Inequality. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Value Walk.

[13] Hartmann, Thom. 2014. It's Time for the US Middle Class to Make a Comeback. Op Ed News. September 23-24

[14] Hargreaves, Steve 2014. Rich, really rich and ultra rich. CNN Money June 1

[15] Haupt, Nancy. 2014. Losing the American Dream . Idaho Mountain Express. March 7.

[16] Jacoby Kyle, 2014. As The Middle Class Dwindles, Is The American Dream Still Realistic? St. Louis Public Radio. Mon July 28.

[17] McMahon, Thomas L., Angelo. 1998. The disappearing urban middle class. *Social Policy*, Summer, Vol. 28, Issue 4.

[18] McMahon, Tamsin. 2014. Who belongs to Canada's middle class? Macleans.ca. February 26.

[19] Morici, Peter. 2014. Why rising inflation threatens America's middle class. Fox News. June 17

[20] Parenti, Michael. 2011. The Class Warfare Indeed.: www.MichaelParenti.org. accessed June 11.

[21] Rugaber, Christopher S 2014. America's middle class. The brutal recession's fallout is changing the way Americans think of themselves. USA Today. April 2.

[22] Snyder Michael, 2014. Middle Class Dying, American Dream a Mirage. Wall St. Sector Selector. June 4.

[23] Tittenbrun, Jacek. 2015. the Middle Riddle. vol. II. Class and Stratification in Scholarly Theory. New York: Nova Science Publishers.

[24] Voegeli, William. 2010. Americans Don't Hate the Rich. *Commentary*, Dec, Vol. 130, Issue 5.

(Received 15 April 2015; accepted 23 April 2015)