What Happened to the American Dream?

Date: Wednesday, March 5, 6:00 p.m. - 7:30 p.m.
Location: Museum of Northern Arizona
Facilitated by: Dr. Jona Vance, NAU Department of Philosophy

6:00 p.m. Welcome and Introduction
Andrea Houchard, Director, Philosophy in the Public Interest

6:15 p.m. Dr. Jona Vance, NAU Department of Philosophy
- What does the American Dream mean to you?
- Is the American Dream harder to achieve now than it once was? If so, for whom?
- Should the American Dream define success?

7:20 p.m. Recap of discussion

The Hot Topics Cafe is made possible by the Arizona Humanities Council, the McKenzie Endowment for Democracy, and the SBS Compassion Project.
What does the American dream mean to you?

The meaning of the phrase “The American Dream” varies across generations, races, and economic classes. The term was popularized by James Adams in 1931 but its idea has been present in our country since long before then. America is often described as a melting pot of cultures, held together by the promise of opportunity to achieve the American Dream. The Dream has been used to describe everything from the chance to harvest fertile farmland, to freedom from religious persecution, to winning the lottery. Conceptions of the Dream have evolved alongside the people of the country that it represents. However, every conception of the American Dream has two parts:

a) What a realization of the Dream looks like. (the end of the dream)

b) How one would best go about achieving it. (the means to the end)

Is the American Dream harder to achieve now than it once was? If so, for whom?

The American Dream is often associated with the idea that, in America, upward mobility is widely available to everyone. This is especially important in the case of immigrants. America has long been idealized as a place where immigrants and others can start poor but change their fate through hard work.

There is a growing belief in America that upward mobility has declined; politicians from Paul Ryan to Barack Obama echo this sentiment. However, a 2013 study by researchers at Harvard found evidence to the contrary. Researchers studied years of data concerning the chances that a child can escape from poverty. They found that upward mobility has not changed over time, however some factors do influence a person’s chances for success. For example, a child’s ability to escape poverty later in life was dependent largely on where they were born. The places that offered the best chances to escape poverty shared five characteristics: better schools, less segregation, greater social capital, more stable families, and less income inequality.

Should the American Dream define success in America?

Achieving the American Dream is sometimes taken to be the paradigm of success in America. There are, however, concepts of success and fulfillment other than what traditionally constitutes the American Dream. People value creativity, adventure, philanthropy and things other than the financial success commonly associated with the American Dream.

Additionally, the possibility that hard work will lead to success regardless of the situation you are born into is not unique to America. In fact, according to a 2006 study, a child born into a family that earns in the bottom 20 percent has a worse chance of escaping to higher earnings bracket in America than they do in the UK, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, or Finland. If we are not the most upwardly mobile country in the world, can we define success in our country by a phrase that relies on it? Should we look to other, non-fiscal metrics to determine success in America?
This map shows the average percentile rank of children who grow up in below-median income families across areas of the U.S. (absolute upward mobility). Lighter colors represent areas where children from low-income families are more likely to move up in the income distribution.

This figure plots the difference in average income percentiles for children born to low vs. high-income parents in each year from 1971-1993. On average, children from the poorest families grow up to be 30 percentiles lower in the income distribution than children from the richest families, a gap that has been stable over time. For children born after 1986, estimates are predictions based on college attendance rates.
“That dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement.” — James Truslow Adams

“The American Dream is knowing that you can create the life you want on your own terms. The American Dream is not about how much money you acquire—it’s about reaching the pinnacle of success, waking up every morning with a smile on your face and looking forward to the day.” —Mark Cuban

“The American Dream used to be the opportunity to freely create your own life and to honor the rights of all others to do the same, while understanding that to do so fairly there can be no guarantee for success. To live unshackled from the desires of those individuals who seek only guarantees so as to ensure the success of their desires. But the American Dream has changed—now I believe it’s a wish for freedom at no cost, an existence devoid of scarcity and free from judgment of any kind.” —Kurt Russell

Sources


http://www.verisi.com/resources/prosperity-upward-mobility.htm

http://www.equality-of-opportunity.org

Sedona Public Library
The “hot topics” in the Hot Topics Cafés are selected by community members representing diverse constituencies and viewpoints. We thank our committee for their participation.

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**Next Sedona Hot Topics Café:**  
**How should we compensate “women’s work?”**

**Date:** Tuesday, April 1, 2014  
**Time:** 5:30 - 7:00 p.m.