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Waking Up from a Dream: The American Myth of Social Mobility

This text deals with the myth of America as a country in which anyone who has any ability and passion to work hard can achieve a level of prosperity in accordance with his aspirations. I will refer to both faith in the American Dream, in light of not only historical but also the latest research on social mobility, and the universal belief that America is a more egalitarian country than the countries of Europe – which research has shown to be only a common belief, unconfirmed by facts. However, this well-worn belief not only motivates Americans to increase their efforts, but also continues to attract many immigrants from all over the world, including those from Poland.

The main aim of my article is to dismantle the myth of America as a country where everyone who has any abilities and who is ready to work hard may achieve a standard of living suitable to his or her aspirations. First I will make reference to historical and sociological research which questions the “from rags to riches” model, which casts doubt upon the uniqueness of the United States as a country of indeed unique possibilities and which calls into question the popular belief that the American society is exceptionally open and meritocratic. Then I will present the results of research concerning social mobility, especially economic mobility in the USA¹ (also in comparison with other countries of developed capitalism) which recently attracted the attention of the American media and which were quoted by the American press. In the final part of the article I will consider the question of why the citizens of the United States believed and still believe in the American Dream, even when it becomes clear that the latter belongs to the sphere of myth rather than reality.

The United States are considered by many as a country of great opportunities; the vision of the American Dream attracted and continues to attract immigrants like a powerful magnet. Here we should remark that the American Dream may mean different things to different people. For some people it may mean a spectacular career

¹ I construe social mobility after Henryk Domański (*Struktura społeczna* 194), whereas the broadly conceived economic mobility is the ability to change one’s position (upwards or downwards) on the ladder of economic stratification (Sawhill).

enjoyed by people like Andrew Carnegie, for many other people it may mean the achievement of middle class status (a good, relatively stable job, one's own house, the possibility of providing the children with an appropriate level of education). For still other people the American Dream means an escape from poverty which dominates in the country of origin.

The analyses concerning the condition of the American Dream usually focus upon intergenerational mobility conceived as the change of the position of children in relation to the generation of their parents in the income ladder (Sawhill, Morton). According to McMurrer, Condon and Sawhill, one supposes that the intergenerational mobility is affected mainly by two factors: the existence of the possibility of social advancement (*opportunity*) and economic growth. In this context works of scholarship frequently mention the ideas of circulatory and structural mobility (McMurrer, Condon and Sawhill).² In a society which has an open social structure (and the American society is considered a society of that kind), those who display the highest level of ambition and ability may achieve a high level of income and social prestige, regardless of their family background, class, race, ethnicity and cultural gender. On the other hand, social mobility arises not so much through the efforts of an individual, but it does so primarily due to structural changes. Economic growth, which leads to a general increase of salaries, the transition from an industrial to a postindustrial phase of economy or the influx of immigrants are examples of such changes. Moreover, structural mobility has to do with the transformation in the structure of professions which may seriously affect the employment possibilities of the representatives of various generations (McMurrer, Condon and Sawhill). An example of such a transformation in the USA is the decreasing number of work places in the industrial sector and an increasing number of available positions in the services sector.

The myth of the American Dream is founded basically on the belief that each successive generation will be able to achieve a higher standard of living than the generation of the parents. The Americans generally believe that even huge differences in the incomes of the rich and the poor are acceptable in so far as there are equal opportunities, i.e. if everyone regardless of his or her class, race, religious beliefs or sex has the opportunity to become richer, it means that the system works.

My statement that the American Dream is rather myth than reality is confirmed by the results of much research, both historical and very much so by contemporary research. And so William Miller, a historian, demonstrated on the basis of the analyses that he conducted that the spectacular careers of the "from rags to riches" kind even during the Gilded Age were rather exceptions than a rule. According to Miller, during the 19th century only 2% of American industrialists originated from families who belonged to the working class. Moreover, at the turn of the 20th century only 3% of the chief executives and financiers were children of poor immigrants or farmers,

² According to the authors: "Circulation mobility (sometimes called exchange mobility) is the independent association between (a) an individual's occupation or socioeconomic status (often referred to as the individual's 'destination'), and (b) the occupation or socioeconomic status of the individual's parents at an earlier time (the individual's 'origin'). The lower the association between the two, the more intergenerational mobility exists, all else being equal. Structural mobility refers to overall shifts in the occupational mix, which affect the job prospects for individuals from different generations."

whereas 95% of them originated from families who represented the upper class or the upper middle class (Loewen 209). Edward Pessen, another historian, researched the class and social background of all of the American presidents up to Ronald Reagan. According to Pessen's analyses more than 40% of the presidents had an upper class background, mainly its upper stratum, 15% had a background which may be located between the upper and upper-middle class and 25% had an upper-middle class background. The background of only six presidents (15%) may be located between the middle and lower-middle class, and only one president, Andrew Johnson, had a lower class background (Loewen 206).

Sociologists also belonged to those who questioned the reality of the American Dream for a long time. Thus Pitirim Sorokin, in his classic study *Social and Cultural Mobility* which was published in 1927, based on the results of historical research and statistical data concerning social mobility in many countries, claims that the former is not only a feature of democracy. Social advancement or degradation also occurs in feudal societies or in systems which are based not on class but on caste (Sorokin). Not only does Sorokin cast doubt upon the popular belief that America is a country of unique opportunities, but he also indicates that despite the fact that there are no barriers of a religious or legal kind in the USA which could hinder social mobility, there are other limitations which hinder social advancement. Therefore spectacular careers are rare here as well. The sociologist claims that "In theory, in the United States of America, every citizen may become the President of the United States. In fact, 99,9 percent of the citizens have little chance of doing it as 99,9 per cent of the subjects of monarchy have of becoming a king" (Sorokin 153-154). Lipset and Bendix are other researchers of social mobility who question the belief about America's uniqueness as a country of unusually great opportunities of social advancement (Lipset, Bendix).³ According to these authors during the process of industrialization the intensity of social mobility in the USA and in the European countries that were analyzed was quite similar, therefore the "from zero to hero" careers are possible not only in America. Moreover, Lipset and Bendix, who looked closer into the results of research concerning the American business elite, concluded that careers of the "from rags to riches" kind are rare in this sphere. Much more frequent, though less publicized, are the stories of people who were successful in business not by fighting poverty but by fighting social discrimination which they faced because those people did not belong to the elite of WASPs. Moreover, according to the aforementioned authors, social advancement, both in the USA and in other countries, means mainly a passage from the working class to the middle class. The assumption that one can climb to the very top of the social ladder from its lowest rung during his or her lifetime is certainly not a goal which may be deemed realistic (Lipset, Bendix 278).

In their influential work entitled *The American Occupational Structure* which was published in 1967, Blau and Duncan, although they seem to confirm the reality of the American Dream, they nevertheless call it into question. Blau and Duncan admit that the United States is a country with a relatively open social structure, where

³ Bendix and Lipset claim that social mobility accompanies industrialization, therefore it should basically increase with the progress of industrialization. This thesis is contradictory to Sorokin's idea who claimed that social mobility is not a process of a linear character, but that it is affected by casual fluctuations (Domański 234).

individual merit is more important than social background; they do notice, however, that the intergenerational social mobility of American men as a rule has to do with slight movement on the ladder of the 17 professional categories distinguished by the aforementioned authors, and that spectacular shifts in the position from the lowest rungs to the very top are unlikely. Blau and Duncan notice (what is later confirmed by many other works of research) that education, especially the achievement of a college diploma, is crucial for intergenerational mobility (Blau, Duncan).

Numerous later works of social research which indicate the actuality of such barriers to social advancement as race or ethnicity, gender or the fact of growing up in a poor neighborhood, challenge Blau and Duncan's thesis that the USA is meritocratic country with an open social structure.

1975 saw the appearance of another significant theoretical proposition which questioned the uniqueness of America as a country of great opportunities of social advancement. Featherman, Jones and Hauser formulate a thesis which is known among sociologists as the "FJH hypothesis". According to this hypothesis, circulatory social mobility is similar "in industrial societies with a market economy and nuclear family system" (Featherman, Jones, and Hauser, after Jones 233-237). The hypothesis was further elaborated upon by Erikson and Goldthorpe who claim that although there is one dominant model of circulatory mobility, differences in the openness of the social structure in various countries are possible. Thanks to the high level of economic development the United States are one of the most open countries of the 13 countries that were analyzed by the aforementioned authors (Erikson, Goldthorpe).⁴

And what is the condition of the American Dream at the beginning of the 21st century? On the one hand, it might seem that the social elites are opening up: anyone who has the appropriate level of education has the chance to become a chief executive of a great corporation or a judge of the Supreme Court (Scott, Leonhardt 3). David Brooks, the author of a much-discussed book entitled *Bobos in Paradise* claims that in the present times we are witnessing an unusually significant change in the composition of the cultural elite of the United States. The latter no longer predominantly consists of WASPs – today it consists of *bohemian bourgeois* (or *Bobos* for short) i.e in general well-educated children of upper-middle class parents (Brooks).

The American media still propagate the myth of "from rags to riches": when they present the careers of stars they frequently emphasize their tough beginnings. Examples of such legendary stories are Madonna's first arrival in New York when she appeared in the city of her dreams with only \$30 in her pocket ("Madonna: Biography") or the tough young years of J. Lo in the Bronx where she was an ordinary "Jenny from the block". Lists of billionaires published in glossy magazines contain numerous examples of impressive careers of contemporary "self-made men". Thus in the June 2007 issue *Forbes* claimed that "[a]lmost two thirds of the 964 billionaires from around the world made their fortunes starting from scratch thanks to their courage and determination, not thanks to their good genes" (Serafin). In 2004, only 37 people from the list of the 400 richest Americans published by *Forbes* inherited their fortunes as compared with almost 200 people in the mid-1980s (Scott, Leonhardt 3-4).

⁴ The hypothesis of *common fluidity* which was created by these authors is discussed by H. Domański (236-238).

Are such spectacular careers a reflection of broader trends? Unfortunately not. According to research, at the beginning of the 21st century the Americans have a greater chance of remaining in the same class that their parents than 30 years ago (Scott, Leonhardt 4). Moreover, according to the data published by the Economic Mobility Project, in 2004 the median of men's income in the 30-39 age bracket, corrected by inflation, was lower by ca. 12% than the median of men's income of the generation of their fathers in the same age group, corrected by inflation (Sawhill, Morton; Sawhill).⁵ In other words, a hypothetical 30-year-old's income in 2004, corrected by inflation, was lower by 12% on average than the income of his father in 1974. However, in 1974-2004, despite the fact that men's income decreased, the income of families increased by 9%. The simplest explanation of this seeming paradox is the fact that many wives who were until that time job-passive took up a job in order to make their families retain a standard of living they were accustomed to (Sawhill, Morton 5-6). According to Julia Isaacs from the Brookings Institution, during the last few decades the income of women increased, whereas the income of men was generally in a state of stagnation (Isaacs, "Economic Mobility of Men and Women" 61), so the financial boost offered by the wife's income was an important contribution to the family household economy. However, according to Isabel V. Sawhill from Brookings, other factors also considerably influenced the receding but still increasing income of families. One of such factors is the decreasing number of people who are a part of an average American family. This means that the income of the family increases because a smaller number of children requires financial support. On the other hand, when more and more wives work professionally there is a need to salary hired workers who could assume at least a part of their obligations, for example ones related with the raising of children. Moreover, in the USA for many years statistically fewer and fewer marriages are contracted. This is very important if we consider the fact that it is exactly the double income (of the mother and the father) that protects the average family from the fall to lower rungs of the income ladder (Sawhill 3). However, it is the popularity of the family model in which both parents have a steady source of income that exposes the average American middle class family to the risk of bankruptcy. According to Elizabeth Warren, a professor of law from Harvard who researched the problems of families, debts and bankruptcy for over 30 years, reliance on a second source of income constitutes a serious risk for middle class families because if one partner loses his or her job this may bring about the collapse of the family budget (Potier). In a book co-authored by her daughter, *The Two Income Trap: Why Middle-Class Mothers and Fathers Are Going Broke*, Warren challenges the popular belief that excessive consumption constitutes the main financial risk of American families (Warren, Warren Tyagi). In reality, contemporary middle class families spend less money on food, clothes and various appliances than the previous generation because after deducing steady expenses such as paying off rates of loans for the apartment and the car, health insurance, the costs related with the caring for children and their education, there remains less money in the family budget as compared to the budget of an average family in the 1970s, and the latter was usually a family which had only one steady source of income. According to Warren, middle

⁵ Research demonstrates that the income of men in the 30-39 age bracket is a good indication of what their lifetime income will look like (Sawhill, Morton 5).

class families feel financially endangered and frequently fall into a spiral of debts because they make every effort to live in a house located in a safe neighborhood and to provide their children with the best education they can afford. On the basis of research that was conducted Warren claims that the best indicator of whether someone is to "go broke" is the fact of his or her having a child (Potier). A Pew Research Center report, published in April 2008, i.e. five years after Warren's book was published, announces that modern Americans who are caught in the spiral of loans and expenses declare that today it is considerably more difficult to maintain the middle class living standard than as early as five years ago (Taylor, et al. 5).⁶

Financial insecurity and the fear of falling to the lower rungs of the economic ladder is an experience partaken in by many middle and lower class Americans since the 1970s, despite the fact that a steady growth of the national economy was discernible. However, during the last 30 years the economic growth was slower and the benefits of the increase of productivity were felt mainly by the group of those who were already the richest (Sawhill, Morton 6). According to a recent Pew Research Center report "Since 1983 until 2004 the median of net value of families with high income increased by 123%, whereas the median of net value of income of families with average income increased by only 29%" (Taylor, et al. 5). Moreover, during the last few decades many Americans did not feel the positive effects of economic growth because since 1947 until 1974 the productivity and the income increased at a similar rate. Then a gap appeared between both curves of growth. This gap increased dramatically in the years 2000-2005. Here it is worthy of note that because since the end of World War II the incomes systematically increased and the children usually achieved a higher living standard than their parents, the majority of the inhabitants of America believed in the American Dream. This belief was considerably shaken by the changes brought about by the process of globalization: the disappearance of many lucrative places of work in American factories and their replacement by less lucrative places of work in the services sector, fusions and downsizing in corporations. The results of the most recent polls are alarming: according to the aforementioned Pew report from April 2008, today more Americans than in any period in the last 50 years declare that their living standard is not improving. 25% of the respondents claim that their status did not improve during the last 5 years and 31% of the respondents claim that their status even worsened. However, if we consider a longer perspective of time, we may discern that the majority of Americans continue to believe in the universality of social and economic advancement: more than two thirds of the respondents consider their living standard as higher than the one which was achieved by their parents when their parents were at the same age. The majority of the respondents express a belief that their children will do better than they did themselves (Taylor, et al.).

Is this belief rooted in reality? It is in this case as well that research shows that this may not be so. According to an Economic Mobility Project report published in

⁶ According to the report 53% of Americans declare their membership to the middle class. In contradistinction to Warren, the authors indicate a considerable increase of the size of single-family houses and an increase of the expenses of contemporary Americans: many products and services which were unknown 20 years ago are now widely accessible (e.g. fixed internet connections or TVs with high-resolution screens) (Taylor, et al. 6).

February 2008, about one third of Americans manifest an upward vertical mobility by achieving both higher income and a better economic position as compared to that of their parents. On the other hand, another one third of Americans manifest a downward vertical mobility by earning less and achieving a worse economic position as compared to that of their parents (Sawhill 7). Moreover, according to the report, not only is the economic growth divided more unequally than in the 1950s and the 1960s, but also, contrary to popular belief about equal opportunities in the American society, family background considerably affects the chances of achieving economic success (Sawhill 7-8). Only 6% of the children of parents who occupy the lowest rungs of the income ladder go to the very top. Thus "the 'rags to riches' story is much more common in Hollywood than on Main Street" (Isaacks, "Economic Mobility of Families Across Generations"). Whereas the children with a middle class background have identical chances of both upward and downward social mobility (Isaacks, "Economic Mobility of Families Across Generations").

Most Americans believe that in today's globalized world the achievement of appropriate education strongly influences the chances of achieving economic success. And indeed, research indicates a strong correlation between education and income (Haskins, "Education and Economic Mobility" 91). At the same time, however, education at all levels strengthens inequalities resulting from the family background (Haskins, "Education and Economic Mobility" 101). Parents who belong to lower classes do not have the necessary amount of free time, economic and cultural capital to prepare their children for being accepted to a college as in the case of parents of upper classes. As a result of this, many women study at the elite American universities; many representatives of racial, ethnic minorities and various religious beliefs may also be found there - only one group is underrepresented: students with a low income background (Leonhardt). Moreover, the colleges which accept students with a non-wealthy background usually cannot be proud of an impressive number of graduates. In 2004 the Department of Education published the results of research according to which only 41% of the students from the low income group graduated from a four-year college during five years as compared to the 61% of students from the high income group (Leonhardt 89). According to the journalists of the *New York Times* who conducted research concerning the social classes in the USA, the fact that education strengthens inequality overtly contradicts the belief that the American society has a meritocratic character. The journalists write that "merit, it turns out, is at least partly class-based. Parents with money, education and connections cultivate in their children the habits that the meritocracy rewards. When their children then succeed, their success is seen as earned" (Scott, Leonhardt 4).

It is not only class background that affects mobility. Race is also a crucial factor. The results of analyses concerning the Afro-Americans became news all across the country in November last year (Katz, Stern). The report presented by the Brookings Institution which was based on the research of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics during which 2367 Americans from the whole country, including 730 Afro-Americans, were interviewed, claims that the status of almost a half (45%) of Blacks whose background may be referred to as solid middle class is currently located at the very bottom of the graph of the income distribution. A similar situation concerns merely 16% of Whites (Fletcher). The results of this research were so shocking that, according to *Washington Post*, "skeptical researchers reviewed their results multiple

times before they reached the conclusion that the results were correct as far as statistics are concerned" (Fletcher). The Brookings report also indicates that in comparison to the Whites there is a lower degree of possibility that the Afro-Americans will reach a higher economic status in all income groups and that the Blacks manifest a smaller upward mobility and a greater downward mobility (Isaacs, "Economic Mobility of Black and White Families," in: Isaacs, Sawhill, and Haskins 76). Moreover, the report indicates that since 1974 until 2004 the income gap between the Black families and the White families continued to exist. In 2004 the income median of the Black family was only 58% of the income median of the White family (in the 30-39 age group). Moreover, in 1974-2004, although the income of Black women increased, a similar process did not occur in the case of Black men, which in combination with a low rate of contracting marriages among the Afro-Americans without doubt had an influence upon the inequality of the income of the Black and the White inhabitants of the USA (Isaacs, "Economic Mobility of Black and White Families". Web.).⁷ Michael B. Katz and Mark J. Stern, who sought the answer to the question why the American Dream is merely a daydream for so many Afro-Americans, reached the conclusion that the lack of the equality of Blacks is a process of a cumulative character. It was less frequent for Afro-Americans to receive college diplomas. It was more frequent for Black people to experience destitution, they earned less money than White people (Black women with a level of education comparable to White women achieved a similar level of income), Black men more frequently found their way in prison. Afro-Americans were less frequently owners of houses compared to White people, and the houses that they owned were of lesser value; they lived in racial ghettos and died earlier than White people. Moreover, contrary to popular belief, it was not globalization and a decreasing number of decent salary places of work in factories that hurt the position of Blacks the most. Instead of this, Katz and Stern indicate the reductions in the public sector, employment in which earlier constituted a significant channel of social and economic advancement for the Afro-Americans (Katz, Stern).

Research suggests that the American Dream proved to be a reality at least for one significant social group, namely the immigrants who came from countries with a lower level of economic growth than that of the United States. According to a report published by the Economic Mobility Project in 2008 in recent years about 1.5 million immigrants arrive annually to the United States, one third of whom do it illegally. 75% of these immigrants come from Latin America, Asia and the Caribbean. As compared with an average American employee, an average immigrant from Latin America or the Caribbean is less educated, frequently unqualified and as a result he or she receives lower wages (Haskins, "Immigration: Wages, Education and Mobility" 81). However, for many of these people immigration to the United States means a significant advancement: for example, Mexican people with a secondary school education earn about seven times more money than they would in their native country (Haskins, "Immigration: Wages, Education and Mobility" 85).

⁷ The author emphasizes that the trials in longitudinal research concerning the households of the representatives of social minorities are relatively small, other research indicates similar inequalities between the Whites and the Blacks as the one described in the Brookings report.

According to George Borjas, the immigrants of the first generation who come from industrialized countries such as Canada, France or Ireland used to earn more than average non-immigrants, whereas the immigrants of the second generation usually earn more or less the same amount of money than average non-immigrants. In the case of the immigrants who come from less industrialized countries such as the Dominican Republic, Mexico or Jamaica we may discern a different process: the immigrants of the first generation usually earn less than average non-immigrants, but the level of income of their children approaches the level of income of non-immigrants (Borjas).⁸ As we can see, the immigrants from less industrialized countries experience upward mobility both in the first and in the second generation. However, over the last 30 years the level of wages of the immigrants in the second generation continued to fall in comparison with the level of wages of non-immigrants. Moreover, similarly as in the case of non-immigrants, the chances of economic mobility are strongly connected with family background. Thus the achievement of the level of income of non-immigrants may prove to be a serious challenge for the children of destitute and poor-educated immigrants (Haskins, "Immigration: Wages, Education and Mobility" 87). According to David Francis from the National Bureau of Economic Research, more than a half of the differences in social status which are discernible in various ethnic groups remain permanent in the subsequent generation. It takes a relatively long period of time for the immigrants with a different cultural background to assume the features which are valued by the American employer. Such features include: a good command of the English language, a diploma of an American school, the acceptance of the American culture of work or mobility which is associated with a readiness to leave one's ethnic enclave. According to this author, "If the historical patterns holds up, the grandchildren of today's Canadian immigrants will earn about 17 percent more than the descendants of today's Mexican immigrants towards the end of the present century" (Francis). Here we must not forget that for many of their grandfathers who were born in Mexico the "American Dream" did mean, however, a real improvement of living conditions.

Is the case of immigrants from countries less industrialized than the USA the only proof of the fact that the American Dream works? The Pew report which was published in April this year claims that "Since 1970, economic, demographic and sociological changes pushed certain groups up the income ladder and pushed other groups down" (Taylor, et al. 6). According to this report the social groups whose income relatively increased in 1970-2006 are: older people (65 years of age and more), married adults, Blacks and Latinos born in the USA. The groups which experienced a slump in real income at that time are: young adults (18-29 years of age), unmarried people, Latinos born outside the USA and people who had secondary school education or lower education (Taylor, et al. 6). However, according to my description above, longitudinal studies, although they were not conducted upon a representative sample, yet they indicate in a systematic fashion that the Afro-Americans are experiencing a downward instead of an upward mobility over the last 30 years. Moreover, we should remember that, as was demonstrated on the example of the middle class, over the course of time the increase of income is usually associated with more

⁸ The author compared the relative wages of immigrants in 1970 with the relative wages of the immigrants in the second generation in 2000.

and more expenses on health insurance, the education of children or on repaying loans. A serious economic crisis which is currently experienced by the United States will undoubtedly affect the limiting of the advancement of many significant social groups.

Generally speaking, the existing sociological research indicates various reasons for the stagnation of intergenerational mobility which arose since the 1970s in the United States. First, the slower rate of economic growth combined with a more static professional structure exerted considerable influence upon social mobility (McMurrer, Condon, and Sawhill), especially considering the fact that due to the transition of the American economy into the postindustrial phase and due to the influence of globalization, many stable places of work in factories were replaced by underpaid places of work in the services sector. Globalization also affected the intensification of differences between the rich and the poor, the more so because since the 1970s the increased rate of productivity was not associated with an appropriate increase of the level of wages. Moreover, in recent years the maintenance of a lifestyle peculiar to the social class to which one belongs became especially difficult, as the basic expenses associated with the insurance, education or the possession of a house in an appropriate neighborhood rose considerably. Apart from that the changes in the dominant family model (a decrease in the rate of the marriages that are contracted, an increased number of women in the job market) and the increase of educational homogamy (Domański 269)⁹ which has been rising since the 1960s also considerably affected social mobility. Moreover, even though some authors think that since the 1970s the individual's opportunities for social advancement (McMurrer, Condon and Sawhill) are increasing, many research works indicate the constant existence of such barriers to upward mobility as race, ethnicity or gender.

However, perhaps the United States still are a country with a greater social mobility than other countries which are also well developed as far as the economy is concerned?

Also in this case research suggests that we are dealing here rather with a deep-rooted belief than reality. A growing number of comparative analyses demonstrate that the USA has a smaller social mobility than many other countries (Isaacs, "International Comparisons of Economic Mobility"). In her overview of research works which compare social mobility in various countries Julia B. Isaacs claims that "the United States stands out as having less, not more, intergenerational mobility than do Canada and several European countries" (Isaacs, "International Comparisons of Economic Mobility" 42) such as Norway, Denmark, Germany, Sweden or Spain (Isaacs, "International Comparisons of Economic Mobility" 39). Moreover, it is more likely that the American children will remain with a same level of income as that of their parents, in contradistinction to the case of children from many other countries. The data demonstrates that upward mobility is especially low in the case of Americans who were born in families which are situated at the bottom of the income ladder (Isaacs, "International Comparisons of Economic Mobility" 42). In the United States, a country which is widely associated with the possibility of advancement

⁹ I am grateful to Professor Domański for indicating to me the possible influence of the increasing trend which has to do with a similar level of education of both spouses upon the mobility in the USA.

“from rags to riches,” only 8% of the citizens in fact realize this model by making a transition from the bottom of the economic ladder to the very top during their lifetime, as compared with the 11-14% of the citizens in other economically-developed countries (Isaacs, “International Comparisons of Economic Mobility” 40).¹⁰ However, compared to the representatives of other countries, the inhabitants of the United States continue to manifest a more optimistic belief that hard work, ingenuity and the skills of an individual must eventually bear fruit in the form of an improvement of his or her social and economic position. In a poll which was conducted in 27 countries, almost 70% of Americans agreed with the statement that “people are rewarded for their intelligence and skills,” and this was the highest result in all of the countries that were researched.¹¹

The results of international comparative research seem to confirm Lipset’s and Bendix’s thesis according to which the United States are not an exception among other industrialized countries, if we consider the real possibility of social and economic advancement. What is indeed exceptional, however, is the belief which dominates among the Americans and which has to do with the likelihood of such an advancement and the importance that they attach to the climbing of the social ladder. The idea of equal opportunities and the belief that success is the result of the merit and efforts of an individual are significant components of American ideology (Lipset, Bendix; Kingdon; McMurrer, Condon and Sawhill). Many narrations which are present in the public discourse, ranging from stories constructed upon the “from rags to riches” formula described by Lipset and Bendix as ones “liberally embellished by wishful thinking” (Lipset, Bendix 127), to the figures of *self-made* billionaires presented by *Forbes*, exerted and continue to exert considerable influence upon the collective imagination. According to Sorokin’s view expressed in his classic study, the propagation of this type of stories could undoubtedly bring socially desirable effects, despite the fears and tension which accompany social mobility, undeniably performs positive functions. According to Sorokin, mobility stimulates social advancement and has a positive influence upon the emergence of economic well-being, reduces the limitation of the horizons of thinking, promotes the development of intellectual life and also facilitates discoveries and inventions (Sorokin). Moreover, according to what was already noticed by Lipset and Bendix: “[...] extensive publicity concerning famous cases of great mobility may sustain a strong belief in the availability of opportunities, even when there are few of them opportunities are scarce, and that such a belief may have a stabilizing influence on a society” (Lipset, Bendix 260). These authors also doubt that when people confront the hard facts concerning the reality of social inequalities and the differences in status the ideology of equal opportunity will be weakened. Lipset and Bendix think that although the differences in social status and economic inequalities are a part and parcel of many inhabitants of the USA, these people continue to believe in equal opportunity

¹⁰ In this specific analysis the USA and Great Britain were compared with Scandinavian countries (Sweden, Denmark Norway and Finland).

¹¹ The countries which were researched include Australia, Austria, Bulgaria, Chile, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, the Philippines, France, Spain, Northern Ireland, Israel, Japan, Canada, Latvia, Norway, Germany, New Zealand, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden, Hungary, Great Britain and the United States. The research was conducted in 1998-2001 (Isaacs, “International Comparisons of Economic Mobility” 37).

(Lipset, Bendix 79). A similar opinion was expressed by Irvin Wyllie in his remarkable work concerning the concept of the "self-made man" in America which was published in 1954. Wyllie argues that researchers collected heaps of impressive statistical data to prove irrefutably that the majority of American rich citizens do not originate and never originated from the ranks of the poor. Over the course of American entire history the "self-made man" was an exception, not the rule and success was enjoyed by the few, not by many (Wyllie 174).

Today, social inequality is also an everyday experience for many Americans. A great number of them struggle in order to remain in the class to which they belong or not to "fall" to a lower class. The research results of the Economic Mobility Project concerning social mobility to which I referred in the present text were widely discussed in popular newspapers such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* or *Financial Times*, and therefore they are known not only to a narrow group of sociologists but also to a wide audience of readers.¹² However, neither knowledge nor personal experience seem to have any influence upon the optimistic belief in the American Dream. This is perfectly illustrated by the results of the aforementioned opinion poll published by Pew in April 2008.¹³ On the one hand, the majority of Americans declare that in recent years they are either doing worse or that they cannot see any progress in their life situation. On the other hand, most inhabitants of the USA think that they are doing better than their parents did when the latter were at the same age. A belief in an even brighter future of the children is also declared by the majority of the respondents.

Therefore the results of historical, sociological or economic research cannot shake the traditional belief that America always was and continues to be a place where gifted and hard-working individuals will achieve success in their life. Indubitably, a serious financial crisis which is currently experienced by the United States and whose discernible results are pessimistic opinions about the future state of the economy and a low rate of consumer optimism¹⁴ may affect the "American Dream" in a certain way. I will endeavor to express an opinion that this belief will rather be temporarily weakened instead of being completely shaken. I think so because the belief in the American Dream is deep-rooted in the American tradition and apart from that it may bring about positive results, both in the individual and social planes. The belief that anyone may experience social and economic advancement if he or she tries hard is strongly associated with such values as equal opportunity and optimism. Thus it constitutes a vital part of the "American Creed." Moreover, we must not forget that this belief is nevertheless based to a certain degree on realistic foundations: nevertheless, if we consider long-term trends, social mobility in the United States increases and social advancement was and continues to be an experience of a considerable group of Americans. Moreover, the propagation of the American Dream constitutes a significant element of American ideology as the belief in its reality facilitates the acceptance of the existing political, social and economic order. On the individual psychological level the challenging of such a well-established belief as the belief in the ability to achieve success, a belief unique for America, may bring

¹² See *inter alia* Morton; Fletcher; Eckholm.

¹³ See Taylor, et. al 9.

¹⁴ See "Gallup Daily" (Web.).

about cognitive dissonance.¹⁵ In order to avoid this uncomfortable feeling, many simply ignore the information which questions their former beliefs and even search for new ones to confirm that which they until now considered the truth. Moreover, the belief in the American Dream strengthens the hope for a brighter future and may have a stimulating influence upon the activity of an individual who makes efforts to improve his or her life situation. To paraphrase Irvin Wyllie quoted above, we may say that sometimes it is better to have dreams than to hold to the facts.

Translated by Artur Zwolski

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¹⁵ See Festinger.

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