

The Once & Future American Dream

by Tim Morgan



United States history is a long litany of internal conflicts over rights and who gets them. We survived a war of independence with England freeing us to establish rights founded in the self-determination of its citizens, and not as a provisional gift from monarchs.

Our internal struggles started immediately with early insurrections like the Whiskey Rebellion. We were tested mightily before, during, and after the Civil War. Our struggles continued through every era. Today we see the forces of civil discord peaking again.

Our society seems like a vast pendulum swinging back and forth between conflict and uneasy union. Why do we struggle so mightily with ourselves? The answer lay embedded in the American Dream.

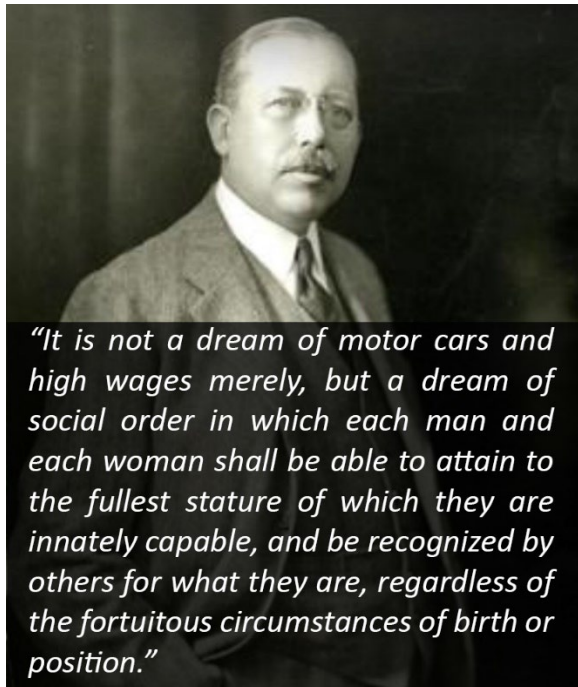
The Pattern of American Conflict over Rights



Shifting Values and a Shifting American Dream

The American Dream has guided us for its entire history. We built the Dream like a wall, brick by brick with each new struggle over Self-determination and Equality under the law. Each layer is built on the last, resting firmly upon the others. The Dream requires patching from time to time lest its gains fall to malice and neglect. It is a wall that is never finished, changing with each new era of the American experiment.

The American Dream has been defined and redefined uncountable times. Oddly it didn't have a name until popular writer James Truslow Adams coined the term in his book THE EPIC OF AMERICA. Almost instantly the American public eagerly grabbed the missing term for American's lasting vision of freedom.



Adams's definition emphasized that more than mere materialism drives American aspiration. Prosperity and ownership have always been a component of achieving the Dream, but not its core. The American Dream rests on the bedrock principles of Self-determination and Equality. The Dream counts effort more important than wealth, and fairness more important than status. The progression of American history has been interpreted by historians as the continuing struggle to advance society by advancing those twin freedoms of self-determination and equality under the law in an ever-widening circle.

Unfortunately, the drive to more Self-determination protected by more Equality has resulted in the swinging pendulum of conflict mentioned above. In every era, some believe extending more equality to others means less self-determination for themselves, and vice versa. Somehow the zero-sum idea that advancing one lessens the other established itself deep within the American psyche. It was present at our founding, and will likely be there at our fall.

Dreams Drive Values & Values Drive the Future

Each period of struggle adds new visions and new values to the American Dream. The conflict settles down as old visions adapt to the newer visions suited for the times. The Dream connects with deeper needs to address new complexities of life. Each era's Dream co-evolves with the values needed to address our individual and collective needs. These challenges shape a new vision of how things should be. They establish values which try to make that vision a reality. It works at all levels from individual dreams to the entire nation. The future is where the American Dream strives to live.

We are obviously living through a period of shifting values and conflicting visions. This is not new. We have seen this in past eras. We see it today. The term "Culture War" is an unsettling echo of the term "Civil War". It points straight to a conflict between worn American Dreams ill-suited to current conditions and newer dreams trying to open more equality and more self-determination to more people in more situations.

We are more divided now than we have been since the Civil War. Conflicting visions of what the Dream should be are breaking our unity. Past and Future are battling it out for control of the Present, to the harm of all Americans.

Still, there is hope. We see signals of change accelerating in response to our discord. The new Dream has spawned a turning away from material success for individuals to material security for all, and from trusting only a few to lead at the top, to trusting everyone to lead from the bottom up.

Professional futurists look to drivers of change to understand the paths we may take to different plausible futures. They look to what is changing today and how uncertainties may shift us from our preferred path. They reveal a heartening fact. Visions empower us to shape future change. The American Dream is how Americans shape their future, step by dogged step. We are blessed the American Dream evolves over time. If not, we would stop striving to make the future better than it is now.

The New American Dream is Already Building America's Future

So, what drivers of change are shaping the new American Dream? There are several but most boil down to two complementary themes, **Democratization** and **Decentralization**.

Democratization drives individuals and small groups to work together to solve problems or make things better. It is fueled primarily by frustration that many issues could be easily and inexpensively addressed at the local or regional level. Instead, progress is caught in state or federal bureaucratic limbo. Many of these addressable problems are actively being created by corporate or private agendas agnostic to the needs of communities their actions impact.

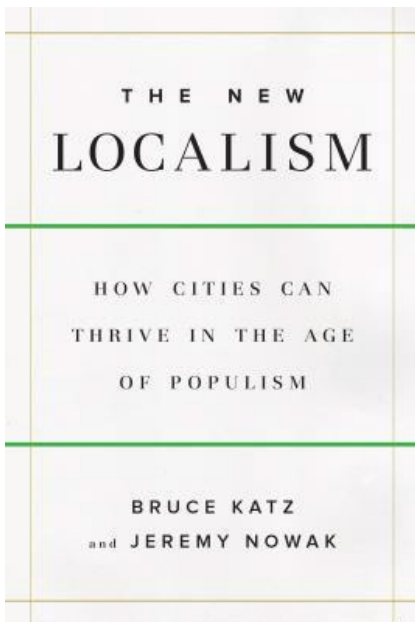
Typical Americans of all stripes are taking up the latest technological tools like smartphones, the internet, social media, and other essential early 21st century tech to make their communities better places for the poor and prosperous alike.

They are democratizing solutions using bottom-up organization of shared resources to focus on local problems. They are finding that focused targeting on small problems is much easier, cheaper, more effective, and faster than grand top-down plans. They value that they can help people near them,

making their community a better place for themselves and others at the same time. It is enlightened self-determination at its finest.

The list of such localized experiments is growing quickly. Apps have sprung up linking restaurants to volunteers who deliver excess meals to the food insecure. Volunteer community composting services reducing smelly trash-dump emissions. Participants complete the virtuous circle by buying locally produced fresh food grown in compost created from their own food waste. Regional Community Sponsored Agriculture & Enterprise co-ops are guaranteeing local farmers and crafters higher prices by selling them direct to customers, some even in supermarket-like stores.

New Localism inspired public-private partnerships collaborate to restore the economic and cultural health of struggling neighborhoods and communities. Non-profit movements like Strong Towns engage legions of volunteers to persuade local leaders to transform car-choked communities into safe, prosperous walkable cities. The list of bottom-up Democratization efforts goes on and on and on.



This App Delivers Leftover Food To The Hungry, Instead Of To The Trash

Goodr has created a system that has diverted nearly a million pounds of food in Atlanta from landfills—and into kitchens.



In earlier eras citizens gathered in associations or joined unions to effect needed change. This emerging era builds Knowledge Communities, crowd-sourcing strategies and solutions without waiting on laws or regulations or budgets or bureaucratic red tape that are too little or too late.

Where 20th century industrialism sought to standardize and commodify everything, tech-savvy Makers are choosing a different more personally rewarding path. Many pool their resources into local Makerspaces to build bespoke designs using shared tools from lathes to laser cutters. They teach each other fabrication technologies both old and new. Makers reflexively share knowledge and tools to create whatever they need or want.

Many makers advocate for “Right to Repair” laws. These laws are intended to break the monopolistic grip of companies who seek to lock consumers into endless (and obscenely profitable) dependency on their products and services. They employ barriers to repair like trade secrets, patents, copy protection, and designs which cannot be fixed by anyone except the manufacturer. The maker response to this is their defiant unofficial motto, “If you can’t open it, you don’t own it.”

Most makers simply want to pursue their very personal loves of understanding how things work and making cool stuff. Many a successfully crowd-funded company started their life in a local Makerspace.

Plus, local Makers add resilience to communities. Makerspaces across the country rapidly spun-up during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. The impulse to help turned living-rooms, garages, and makerspaces into mini-factories supplying masks, face shields, and other personal protection equipment to medical personnel. This new Maker Medical Underground is growing, but largely unnoticed. They don’t care. What these Makers care about is creating a more resilient America while having a good time doing it.



We see the bottom-up Democratization theme growing in businesses too. Agile methodologies have surged into companies big and small over the past 20 years. Born in February 2001 from the “Manifesto for Agile Software Development”, Agile methodologies have expanded into every industry and aspect of business. Project planning, business processes, team management, and more are embracing bottom-up approaches. It turns out that hiring good people, trusting them to work with each other, and letting them make decisions for themselves is a good business model.

Decentralization is Democratization’s kissing cousin. Individuals and companies are increasingly switching to on-site solar power systems to both lower costs and ensure stable power. They don’t want an overloaded grid to threaten their safety or their income, as it did across Texas in the Winter of 2020.

Smart microgrids let neighborhoods share their power with each other increasing their resilience while freeing them from utility payments.

Farmers are experimenting with Agrivoltaics – putting solar panels above fields and growing crops beneath them. The plants thrive in the microclimate that panels create, and the plants passively cool the panels making them more efficient, a Win-Win synergy. The farmers get healthier crops, and a second source of income by selling power to aging, centralized grids.\



The pandemic accelerated the transition to remote work for many office workers. Zoom and other online remote collaboration tools give employees more flexibility, less wasted time commuting, and more choice in where and how they live. It also gives organizations another layer of resilience to localized threats like hurricanes and tornados, limiting the disruption to only employees in effected areas. Many under threat retreat to safe locations, never missing a meeting or a deadline.

Tech is not the only form of decentralization Americans are adopting. Raising backyard chickens, beekeeping, planting urban gardens, and a revival of cooking from scratch at home started well before COVID-19 lockdowns. Even home canning was making a comeback years before lockdowns.

If we throw in tech, we see even more signals of decentralized farming and gardening: open-source gardening robots, automated vertical farms built into shipping containers and warehouses, vat-grown meats, and 3D printed food. Americans started experimenting with decentralizing their food supply chain years before the pandemic and the war in Ukraine disrupted commercial supply chains.



Recent hype over rapidly advancing Virtual Reality tech also points broader opportunities for decentralization of businesses, organizations, and social events. Dynamic interactive virtual living and working spaces are expected to provide new avenues for both individuals and businesses to create new products and services customized for individuals. The advent of this new 'Metaverse' has been eagerly anticipated for decades in science fiction novels like SNOW CRASH and READY PLAYER ONE.

Blockchain and Decentralized Finance are another set of transformative technologies with the promise to enable bottom-up opportunities and solutions to local problems. Cryptocurrencies have already disrupted the traditional top-down financial world, although in unpredictable and sometimes predatory. Cryptocurrencies are not the most important development, though.

Smart-contracts and Distributed Autonomous Organizations (DAOs) will likely open new opportunities for increased self-determination for individuals and communities by decoupling projects from reliance on top-down financing and inflexible static contracts. Smartcontract tech creates self-executing "trustless" algorithmic blockchain-based contracts that enforce their own terms. They can be used for everything from raising funds for community projects to protecting natural local environments to automatically managing vehicle and building maintenance.

Even governance could be transformed. Proposals for using cryptographically secure smart-contracts to enable faster and safer electronic voting are already being explored. This would open voting to more people, more frequently. This would help build trust and participation by citizens grown cynical and apathetic from decades of social discord.

New Eras and New Challenges

Those are just a few examples of how the new American Dream's vision of Democratization & Decentralization are starting to shape America's future. The biggest challenges to the new Dream's success will be governments, businesses, and individuals resistant to new ways of thinking. Nostalgia for older versions of the Dream will see the new Dream as at best unfamiliar and at worst a threat to be crushed.

However, newer American Dreams never fully replace older ones. The American Dream is a quilt composed of many aspirations, old & new. We will still want property of our own, prosperity through hard work and determination, and to simply to be a better neighbor. Adding a new layer to the Dream lets us face new challenges while pursuing new opportunities in new ways. The Dream always works to solve problems that gave rise to its latest incarnation. The latest expression of the American Dream is focused on fixing problems. Eventually it will calm the rising strife between Americans.

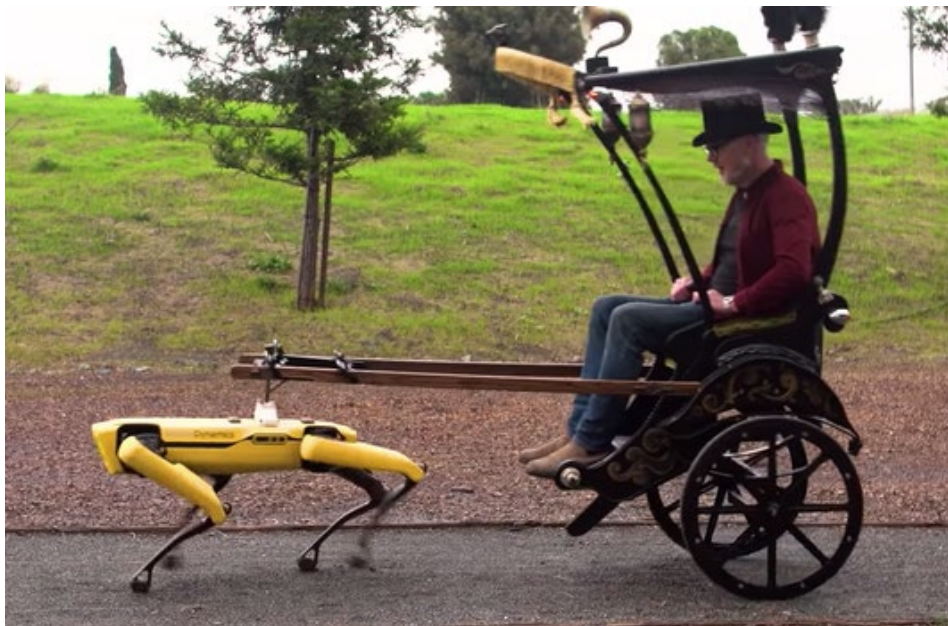
Every sector of American society will not come to grips with the updated Dream at the same pace. When and if our current discord fades back into the background, the new sector built on Democratization & Decentralization will seem to suddenly surge into existence, challenging institutions and organizations built to support the older versions of the Dream.

Federal and state governments along with big institutional businesses like banks and insurance will be challenged to be more flexible and concede more decision-making power as individuals and communities push for more decentralization and more local control.

Builders will learn that much of existing infrastructure will be abandoned or require radical updates to satisfy the desire for a walkable community embedded in a vast world of virtual connections.

Manufacturers will learn to open their products or see their customers route around them to find cheaper, better local substitutes created by bottom-up enterprises like Community Supported Agriculture cooperatives, locally fabricated goods created using freely shared designs found in metaverse demo spaces and online knowledge communities.

Car manufacturers may find that people have far less need to own personal vehicles in towns where the streets are clean, safe, and walkable to all the places they need to go regularly. Though those with mobility problems may choose to own their own autonomous rickshaw pulled by a very loyal robotic dog.



The American family farm will come roaring back as boutique operations using Greentech automation to produce more variety and higher quality than what automated neighborhood container gardens and local farming warehouses can produce.

Electric companies will struggle to find residential customers as more drop off their grids and onto neighborhood smart microgrids where each house supplies clean power and backup capacity for all the others.

Doctors may find themselves with more free time than they had in the old days as people walk more, eat better, and do more things that make them healthier and happier.

The homeless, the poor, and disaffected will still be with us, struggling with health or tragedy. However, it will be easier for renewed communities and local volunteers to help them lift themselves back up on their feet. Renewed communities easily supply themselves with locally created shelter, food, energy, and basic items for living. It is much easier than it used to be to help others lift themselves up.

The Once and Future Dream of Americans

America as we know it will eventually end as all living things do. Our current conflicts are not our end, no matter what pundits and prophets of doom proclaim. Though we struggle, we also strive.

That is and always will be the Dream Americans gave themselves, and the world.