

The American Dream and the Power of Wealth

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The American Dream and the Power of Wealth. Heather Beth Johnson, Routledge, 2006.

Heather Johnson joins two streams of scholarship in her recent book *The American Dream and the Power of Wealth*. The first is the now-familiar story that family wealth plays a central role in the stratification of U.S. society, and that social class and race inequalities are magnified due to their association with the intergenerational transfer of wealth and its advantages. The second, more interesting argument is that everyone recognizes that wealth matters, but that this knowledge does not dislodge a deep and abiding belief in the American Dream of meritocracy. Johnson refers to this variously as a “paradox,” “contradiction,” “unresolved conflict,” or “disjointed logic.” Whatever we might choose to call it, the book focuses on the juxtaposition of a sociological truism—that wealth matters in access to good schools and in getting ahead in U.S. society—and a belief system that she refers to as the “American Dream.” How, she asks, can rich and poor alike acknowledge that wealth matters in providing advantages, yet cling so passionately to an ideology that says that anyone can make it, regardless of their social origins?

Johnson draws on in-depth interviews with 232 black and white parents of school-age children in Boston, Los Angeles, and St. Louis, most of whom were middle class. She supplemented these data with interviews of the members of 20 wealthy white families in Washington, DC and New York City. The volume and vividness of the data are impressive: the interviews ask important questions about how wealth works, the nature of the ideology of meritocracy, and how parents strategically choose schools for their children to attend. In demonstrating that poor and middle-class families alike recognize that wealth matters, but cling to the American Dream, Johnson invites the reader to join her in illuminating an opportunity structure that is unfair and unjust, and reflecting on the policies and practices that sustain the reproduction of social inequality across generations.

In spite of the power and passion of Johnson’s prose, I am not persuaded by her account of the phenomenon she seeks to understand. I have three major reservations, which I develop below. First, I think that

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Johnson imposes a definition of the American Dream on her audience and her respondents that equates it with meritocracy. Second, I am not sure that beliefs about the American Dream and the power of wealth really *are* paradoxical, contradictory, conflicting, or disjointed. Third, an analysis rooted in the writings of Pierre Bourdieu offers a way of making sense of the seeming contradictions in the views held by rich and poor alike about wealth and opportunity in U.S. society.

Before proceeding to these points, I want to be clear about what I am *not* challenging in Johnson's argument. I am *not* challenging her contention that wealth structures opportunities for success, nor that wealth affects the choices that parents make about where to send their children to school. Nor am I challenging the presence of a powerful ideology that allows the wealthy to assume that they have earned their advantages, and that propels the poor to attribute their lack of success to personal inadequacies such as a lack of effort or talent. Wealth and ideology are very powerful forces that serve to perpetuate and legitimate structured social inequality that persists and cumulates across generations.

Just what is the substance of the American Dream? Hochschild and Scovronick describe it as follows.

I am an American, so I have the freedom and opportunity to make whatever I want of my life. I can succeed by working hard and using my talents; if I fail, it will be my own fault. Success is honorable, and failure is not. In order to make sure that my children and grandchildren have the same freedom and opportunities that I do, I have a responsibility to be a good citizen—to respect those whose vision of success is different from my own, to help make sure that everyone has an equal chance to succeed, to participate in the democratic process, and to teach my children to be proud of this country. (2003:1)

They go on to write:

Most Americans believe that everyone has the right to pursue success but that only some deserve to win, based on their talent, effort, or ambition. The American dream is egalitarian at the starting point in the 'race of life,' but not at the end. That is not the paradox; it is simply an ideological choice. The paradox stems from the fact that the success of one generation depends at least partly on the success of their parents or guardians The paradox lies in the fact that schools are supposed to equalize opportunities across generations and to create democratic citizens out of each generation, but people naturally wish to give their own children an advantage in attaining wealth or power, and some can do it. When they do, everyone does not start equally, politically or economically. This circle cannot be squared. (2003:2)

Hochschild and Scovronick speak of freedom, opportunity, hard work, and personal responsibility. "Everyone has the right to pursue success," they write. There is no guarantee of equal outcomes, just of an "opportunity to make whatever I want of my life." Some people, upon hearing this, might think that Hochschild and Scovronick are invoking the

ideology of meritocracy as the heart of the American Dream. Johnson explicitly equates the two. To her, the American Dream *is* meritocracy, an argument that she develops in the second chapter of her book, which includes a section entitled “The American Dream of Meritocracy.” In this chapter, she writes:

The American Dream rests on the idea that with hard work and personal determination anyone—regardless of background—has equal opportunity to achieve his or her aspirations. The American Dream promises that our system functions as a *meritocracy*. Within a meritocracy people get ahead or behind based on what they earn and deserve rather than what circumstances they were born into. This notion is central to the American Dream and is the central logic of how our system is supposed to operate. The American Dream, in many ways, defines us and sets our system apart from others. (p. 20)

There are two parts to Johnson’s conception of the American Dream. The first is that merit matters—through hard work and personal determination, anyone can “make it” or get ahead. The second is that social background *doesn’t* matter—that the circumstances that individuals are born into do not enable people to get ahead. For Johnson, as I read it, the American Dream requires both these parts to hold: merit must matter, and class must not.

This is a very stringent standard, because it requires that there be a zero correlation between class and merit. I am not persuaded that the correlation between class and merit is, or even could be, zero. To be sure, part of the correlation between social class and measures of scholastic performance or potential reflects an arbitrary imposition of the cultural practices and values of the dominant class on the institution of education, but I am doubtful it’s all arbitrary. For example, I have a hard time viewing Hart and Risley’s (1995) findings of huge social class differences in children’s exposure to words as just a cultural arbitrary.

One reading of Johnson’s argument is that the ideology of the American Dream overwhelms rational assessments of the power of wealth. But an alternative view, which I derive both from her data and analytically, is that the American Dream is not simply a claim about meritocracy; instead, the American Dream articulates several different, *but not necessarily incompatible*, ideas, and what people say about the American Dream is an attempt to portray these different ideas. I suggest that it is not incompatible for individuals to believe that merit matters and also to believe that class and wealth matter. Critical to reconciling these two views is asking the question: *Matters for what?* And, as I argue below, it is at least possible that the “what” referred to by the wealthy and the poor are not the same thing.

To support my critique, I cite several quotes from the book. I do so knowing that I do not have access to the full corpus of data, and that

what appears in the book is a small sampling of the data that Johnson analyzed. Nevertheless, I think that the data are illustrative of my concern that Johnson was imposing a definition of the American Dream on her respondents, rather than allowing them to give voice to what the term meant to them.

At the outset of one interview, the interviewer invokes “research” as an authority for the definition.

Interviewer: Research has said that the American Dream is the idea that with hard work and desire, individual potential is unconstrained. They say that the American Dream promises that everyone, regardless of background, succeeds through their own actions. It’s the idea that we get ahead through individual achievement alone. That our family backgrounds don’t matter. What do you think of this definition?

Later in this interview, a father exclaims:

Jonathan: The American Dream is possible for everybody. It’s unfortunate that some people do have to start right at the bottom, but they can do it! (p. 155)

It’s not entirely clear what the “it” is that they can do, but the respondent says that the American Dream is *possible*, even if they *start right at the bottom*.

In the second and third examples, my interpretation is that the interviewer’s definition of the American Dream is sufficiently at odds with the respondents’ definitions that the interview more or less grinds to a halt. Here is the second example.

Interviewer: You also believe in the American Dream, that people get ahead based entirely on how hard they work. Am I right?

[*silent pause*]

Suzanne: Well—[*silent pause*—it’s not an absolute. Not everybody is where they are because of how hard they work. Money. (p. 141)

And the third:

Interviewer: Okay, now, what about the American Dream? The idea that with hard work and desire, individual potential is unconstrained, that everyone regardless of background gets equal chance to get ahead based on their own individual achievement. What do you think of that?

Daniel: That’s a very good definition. [*silent pause*] (p. 147)

Am I reading too much into these silent pauses? Perhaps, and it is certainly a risky exercise to impose my interpretations on these decontextualized quotes that represent a tiny fraction of Johnson’s data. So let me turn to a more analytical approach to the problem that draws on the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Like many U.S. sociologists with only a superficial knowledge of contemporary social theory, I have been seduced by

Bourdieu's theorizing about social inequality, and his holy trinity of class, habitus, and field. In reflecting on how both the wealthy and the poor can believe so fiercely in the two seemingly incompatible notions that merit matters *and* class and wealth matter for success, I want to suggest that the key is that the wealthy and the poor are engaged in different fields.

For Bourdieu, fields are social spaces in which actors are engaged in a struggle for advantage. There is a sense of head-to-head competition among actors in a field. In my view, fields are inherently local. We can't talk about *the* field of public education in the United States, for example, because parents in Philadelphia are not competing with parents in New York City for access to the same schools. Parents in Philadelphia may be competing with one another for access to schools in Philadelphia, and parents in New York City may be competing with one another for access to schools in New York City; and the fields may be *homologous*, which means that the rules of the game may be similar in both fields, and capital may work the same way in both as well.

The crux of my argument is that the wealthy and the poor are really not struggling for advantage in the same educational fields. They are not selecting themselves into competitions with one another. The wealthy would never consider the schools that the children of poor families attend and, for the most part, the poor would never consider the schools that the children of wealthy families attend. There is a small amount of overlap, but not much. Moreover, the fields themselves are organized hierarchically, so that even those less successful in the field of competition among the wealthy have greater socioeconomic opportunities than the "winners" in the field in which the poor compete.

For example, Maria, a relatively affluent mother, said of her daughter, "I want her to get a good education, so ... I never even thought about sending her to public school. It wasn't an option at all" (p. 68). Glenda characterized public school as "kids loud, jumping off the wall and everything," but later admitted that she had never "really considered"—let alone seen firsthand—the public school options (p. 70). In commenting on the strategies of families experiencing "wealth poverty," Johnson writes: "In regard to educational decisions for their children, parents were competing with each other for what they viewed as a finite number of spots in the better schools" (p. 99). But these "better" schools were not the ones being chosen by the wealthy, and this competition was not head-to-head with wealthy families.

Conversely, there was evidence that the wealthy were engaged in competitions with one another, not with the poor. For example, Johnson writes that "some interviews pointed to the possibility that parents were using their children's education as a proxy for what actually seemed to be

a sort of jockeying for social status on the part of parents themselves ... While they were clearly concerned with making sure their children received a high-quality education, they were exorbitantly *more* concerned with the caliber, social standing, and family backgrounds of their children's potential classmates" (pp. 47, 65). That jockeying is taking place *within* class categories, and *within* educational fields.

Beyond the class segmentation of education fields that I am proposing, it is at least possible that there is additional class segmentation of work as a field, such that the poor are competing with one another for the chance to move up, and the wealthy are competing with one another primarily to avoid moving down. The asymmetry between upward mobility on the part of the poor and the fear of falling on the part of the wealthy is an important part of the story. Breen and Goldthorpe (1997) have argued that the logic of educational decision making is governed by what they refer to as "relative risk aversion," the tendency for individuals to make educational choices that minimize the risk of attaining a class position lower than that of their parents. This logic is also evident in Boudon (1974) and Ehrenreich (1989).

What are some implications of transposing the class segmentation of education fields to the field of work? Here, too, we need to recognize that there are multiple fields of work that have minimal overlap. The most important implication, in my view, is that terms that we may think of as having a constant meaning across social class groups may mean very different things. That is, terms such as "making something of yourself," "getting ahead," "achieving your dreams," or a "chance for success" may mean different things to the poor than to the wealthy. For the poor, these terms may translate into an opportunity for upward mobility relative to one's family of origin, based on a competition with others with similar starting positions. For the more affluent, these terms may translate into not skidding from one's starting position, based on a competition with others of similar class backgrounds. In both cases, no head-to-head competition between poor and wealthy is implied.

So with this as a backdrop, let's take a look at some of the data Johnson reports.

Interviewer: So, comparing two random individuals, one of which is from an upper-class family background and one of lower class, do you think they both have the same chance to make something of themselves?

Lily: Yes. But I also feel that one has a little bit of an advantage, the wealthier one [*silent pause*]. Okay, the other does have more obstacles, I suppose. But it shouldn't prevent him from achieving his dreams. There is no reason why they can't eventually realize their dreams. But I will have to admit I think it is a little bit more difficult for them. (p. 110)

Here is another example:

Interviewer: Does the financial help in terms of wealth that some people receive from their families give them certain advantages?

Joel: Not advantage, but it helps. It will help. (p. 112)

And yet another:

Interviewer: How essential, if at all, do you believe family wealth is in attaining success?

Emily: I think it certainly helps. I think more people who have money tend to excel than people who have no money. It gives you the education, it gives you the contacts, it gives you the clothes, the way of talking. The things that make life easier. Can you do without it? Yes. Is it as easy? I don't think so. (p. 116)

Carter: ... I think that some people have a better chance than others. But everybody has a chance. For instance—like you asked the question about wealth—if you come from a wealthy family, you have a better chance. There is no such thing as equality, even in the American Dream! (p. 119)

What I draw from these quotes is the possibility that the disadvantaged do not see the wealthy as competing in their fields, and vice versa. In particular, Johnson argues that “many of these parents had no direct experience with wealth privilege ... they had no awareness of the extent to which wealthy families are using and extending intergenerational transfers of assets, [and] they did not know for sure how much others are advantaged by unearned resources” (p. 132). But *within* a field, competing against others of similar class origins, hard work and effort certainly *do* matter.

Where I wind up, then, is with the conclusion that there isn't just one, undifferentiated American Dream. Instead, there are several American Dreams, which pertain to class fractions competing in different, hierarchically organized, fields. If this is true, I suggest that what Heather Johnson casts as a paradox melts away, leaving the structured social inequality produced by cumulative processes of advantage and disadvantage across generations as the main phenomenon of interest.

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