

THEORETICAL-METHODOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE AMERICAN DREAM AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY IN AMERICAN FICTION

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The American Dream may be defined as a historically produced ideological narrative that promises individual upward mobility through merit, labor, and moral virtue, while simultaneously functioning as a cultural script that legitimizes unequal outcomes by translating structural constraints into personal responsibility. The mechanism through which this narrative operates is discursive: it organizes social perception by linking work ethic to deserved reward, naturalizing market distribution as “fair,” and framing setbacks as temporary or self-caused rather than structurally patterned. A canonical fictional example is Jay Gatsby’s self-invention in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “The Great Gatsby” (1925), where the dream’s aspirational grammar is dramatized through reinvention, consumption, and romanticized status acquisition, yet the plot shows how old money and inherited privilege circumscribe access to legitimate recognition. Empirically, mobility research consistently complicates the dream’s promise: estimates of intergenerational income persistence in the United States often yield an elasticity around 0.4–0.6, implying that 40–60 percent of economic advantage transmits across generations, while the probability of moving from the bottom quintile to the top quintile is commonly reported in the single digits. Scientifically, this gap between narrative and reality is explained by the interaction of “opportunity structures” (education, networks, neighborhood effects) with “closure mechanisms” (credentialing, discrimination, capital inheritance), producing patterned inequality that fiction registers as plot constraint, character fate, and symbolic economy (Bourdieu, 1984; Hochschild, 1995).

The concept’s historical-philosophical genesis begins with antiquity, where foundational debates about justice, virtue, and the good life prefigure later American formulations of deserved success and moralized prosperity. Plato’s Republic articulates justice as a harmony of classes and functions, where each part “does its own work,” a vision that can be read as an early template for linking social position to moral order, though Plato’s model emphasizes hierarchy rather than mobility. Aristotle’s “Nicomachean Ethics” frames flourishing (eudaimonia) as the activity of virtue within a polis, introducing the idea that excellence is practiced and cultivated, not merely inherited; this ethical developmentalism becomes philosophically relevant for later merit narratives. A literary analogy emerges when American fiction depicts protagonists training themselves into “worthiness,” often through self-discipline and performance, yet encountering institutional ceilings that resemble Aristotle’s recognition that virtue needs external goods and stable civic conditions. Quantitatively, ancient city-states were small and stratified; the proportion of enslaved persons in some Greek poleis reached substantial levels, reminding that classical ethics coexisted with structural exclusion. Scholarly interpretation thus stresses that merit and virtue in antiquity were embedded in bounded citizenship, anticipating how later “dream” rhetoric can universalize promise while materially restricting membership.

Medieval philosophy reframes prosperity and social order through theological teleology, shifting emphasis from civic virtue to salvation, charity, and the moral evaluation of wealth. Augustine’s “City of God” distinguishes earthly and heavenly orders, encouraging suspicion toward worldly glory; this yields a tension later visible in American fiction between material success and moral emptiness, a tension Fitzgerald dramatizes through Gatsby’s glittering yet

hollow parties. Thomas Aquinas in *“Summa Theologiae”* integrates Aristotelian ethics with Christian doctrine, treating property as permissible but morally constrained by the common good and just distribution, a position that resonates with later critiques of inequality grounded in moral economy. The mechanism here is normative regulation: wealth is acceptable when ordered toward virtue, yet greed is vice, creating a language for condemning predatory accumulation. Historically, feudal Europe exhibited rigid estate structures with limited mobility, and wealth concentration in nobility and church institutions was pronounced, making “dream” mobility largely unthinkable as a mass ideal. Scientific historical work therefore reads medieval thought as providing ethical vocabularies—sin, stewardship, charity—that modern literature repurposes when exposing the moral costs of inequality.

Early modern and modern transformations from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries provide the direct philosophical scaffolding for the American Dream as an ideology of self-making. John Locke’s *“Second Treatise of Government”* (1689) develops labor theory of property, suggesting that mixing labor with nature generates rightful ownership; this becomes a central mechanism for moralizing accumulation as earned and legitimate. Adam Smith’s *“An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations”* (1776) recodes self-interest as socially productive under market coordination, enabling a conceptual bridge between private striving and public prosperity that later fiction both celebrates and satirizes. Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *“Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men”* (1755) counters with the argument that property institutionalizes inequality and corrupts natural freedom, an antagonistic strand that informs American literary realism and naturalism in its portrayal of structural constraint. Historically, the nineteenth-century United States experienced rapid industrialization and territorial expansion; the rise of wage labor and urban poverty created new forms of inequality even as political rhetoric highlighted opportunity. Quantitatively, late nineteenth-century wealth concentration increased sharply in the Gilded Age, producing a socio-economic landscape that literary works like Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner’s *“The Gilded Age”* (1873) stylize as moral spectacle. Scientifically, the modern genealogy shows how liberal property theory and market moralization produce a narrative of deserved outcomes, while critical traditions expose how markets generate systematic inequality that fiction encodes as tragedy, irony, or critique.

Classical theoretical schools deepen the conceptual apparatus by specifying how dreams, ideology, and inequality interlock in cultural texts, and multiple foundational thinkers clarify distinct mechanisms. Alexis de Tocqueville’s *“Democracy in America”* (1835–1840) analyzes equality of conditions as a democratic passion, yet warns that the pursuit of material well-being can create conformism and new forms of dependence; his relevance lies in explaining why the dream persists as a collective desire even amid inequality. Karl Marx’s *“Capital: Volume I”* (1867) conceptualizes exploitation through surplus value extraction, providing a mechanism for reading labor and wealth in fiction as class relations rather than personal morality; Gatsby’s fortune, from this lens, becomes less an individual miracle than an outcome of capital flows, illicit markets, and class boundaries. Max Weber’s *“The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism”* (1905) connects ascetic religiosity to capitalist rationality, clarifying how moral discipline becomes a cultural engine for accumulation; American fiction repeatedly stages this ethic as both motivational and dehumanizing. Émile Durkheim’s *“The Division of Labor in Society”* (1893) and *“Suicide”* (1897) interpret modernity through anomie and social integration, enabling readings of dream failure as normlessness and disconnection, which resonates with characters whose status striving erodes

communal bonds. Thorstein Veblen's "The Theory of the Leisure Class" (1899) introduces conspicuous consumption as a status mechanism, directly illuminating Fitzgerald's material symbolism and the semiotics of luxury. Georg Simmel's "The Philosophy of Money" (1900) theorizes how monetary abstraction reshapes social relations, explaining why fictional worlds of exchange and debt often portray value as unstable and identity as commodified. Pierre Bourdieu's "Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste" (1979; Eng. trans. 1984) adds cultural capital and habitus, clarifying how "taste" and embodied dispositions reproduce inequality beyond income; this is pivotal for interpreting how characters "fail" despite effort because they lack coded cultural competencies. Each theorist's dialectical relation emerges in conflicts between liberal optimism (Tocqueville), structural critique (Marx), cultural-religious mediation (Weber), social cohesion theory (Durkheim), and symbolic/status dynamics (Veblen, Simmel, Bourdieu), producing a layered framework in which fiction becomes both evidence of lived ideology and a laboratory for its contradictions.

John Rawls's "A Theory of Justice" (1971) and Amartya Sen's "Development as Freedom" (1999) are often positioned as modern-classical bridges, yet they retain foundational status in debates about fairness and opportunity, and their presence clarifies what the dream presupposes as "just" distribution. Rawls's difference principle legitimizes inequalities only if they benefit the least advantaged, offering a normative metric against which fictional societies can be evaluated; the mechanism is hypothetical contract reasoning that turns fairness into institutional design. Sen's capability approach shifts focus from resources to substantive freedoms, enabling interpretations of dream narratives as capability expansions or deprivations, especially where characters have money but lack voice, security, or dignity. A concrete example occurs in Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman" (1949), where Willy Loman's dream is not only economic but recognitional, and his lack of stable capabilities—mental health support, dignified work, social respect—drives collapse. Statistically, American inequality has widened since the late twentieth century: top income shares and wealth concentration have grown, and real wage stagnation for median workers has been frequently documented, undermining the empirical plausibility of universal mobility. Scholarly synthesis thus treats Rawls and Sen as providing evaluative criteria for literary critique: when fiction shows that institutions channel benefits upward while offering symbolic consolation downward, it exposes the dream's normative deficit.

Contemporary scientific discussions in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries turn from grand theory to interdisciplinary paradigms that specify ideology, race, gender, and institutional reproduction, producing methodological pluralism. Louis Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" in "Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays" (1970; Eng. 1971) explains how institutions interpellate subjects, making the dream a lived identity rather than mere belief; fiction becomes a site where interpellation is dramatized through schooling, advertising, and workplace discipline. Antonio Gramsci's "Prison Notebooks" (written 1929–1935; various eds.) frames hegemony as consent manufactured through culture, clarifying why dream rhetoric persists even among those disadvantaged by inequality. Michel Foucault's "Discipline and Punish" (1975; Eng. 1977) adds micro-power and normalization, enabling readings of self-optimization and surveillance in modern narratives as disciplinary mechanisms of inequality. In American studies and sociology, Jennifer Hochschild's "Facing Up to the American Dream" (1995) empirically and conceptually maps belief in the dream across groups, showing ambivalence and conditional endorsement; her work supports the claim that the dream is resilient yet unevenly experienced.

Thomas Piketty's "Capital in the Twenty-First Century" (2013; Eng. 2014) supplies data-driven arguments about $r > g$ dynamics that fuel wealth concentration, giving contemporary fiction a macroeconomic context for its depictions of inherited advantage. Debates split among liberal institutionalism (reforming education, taxation), communitarian critiques (erosion of civic solidarity), deliberative approaches (democratic legitimacy and voice), and critical race and feminist paradigms emphasizing that inequality is intersectional and historically produced. Quantitative evidence, such as rising Gini coefficients and wealth shares, supplies the empirical substrate; scientific interpretation underscores that literary narratives function as cultural diagnostics of these measurable dynamics.

Critical analysis and synthesis require recognizing that the American Dream is neither pure myth nor mere lie, but a historically adaptive ideology that combines motivational power with justificatory function. Its strong side lies in mobilizing agency, encouraging investment in education and enterprise, and generating a language of aspiration that can be politically democratizing when linked to rights and inclusion. Its weakness lies in obscuring structural determinants—segregation, capital inheritance, labor market segmentation—and converting social failure into shame, a mechanism fiction frequently represents through internalized guilt and character self-blame. A synthetic position treats the dream as a "double-coded" narrative: it can be emancipatory when institutions expand capabilities and reduce barriers, yet oppressive when institutions maintain barriers while intensifying moral judgment. A comparative literary example is the contrast between Horatio Alger's "Ragged Dick" (1868), where the dream's mechanism is moral effort rewarded, and Richard Wright's "Native Son" (1940), where structural racism converts aspiration into catastrophe, demonstrating the dream's differential accessibility. Statistically, racial wealth gaps and neighborhood segregation indices remain substantial in the United States, revealing that opportunity is not evenly distributed even when formal rights exist. Scientific justification therefore supports an interpretive method that reads fiction as staging the dream's conditionality, where plot outcomes correlate with structural position rather than individual virtue alone.

The Uzbekistan and national context section reframes the American Dream as a comparative lens for examining aspirations, stratification, and cultural narratives in a post-Soviet developmental state, emphasizing how local institutions mediate mobility ideals. The "dream" concept can be translated into national modernization narratives around education, entrepreneurship, and social inclusion, yet the mechanism of inequality differs through state policy, regional disparities, and labor migration patterns. A concrete comparative example is the cultural valorization of education and professional prestige in Uzbek novels and media discourse, where success is often narrated through family honor and community recognition rather than purely individual accumulation, paralleling communitarian critiques in American theory. In policy terms, Uzbekistan's Constitution (adopted 08.12.1992, with subsequent amendments) affirms social rights and equality principles, and strategic development programs such as the "Action Strategy on Five Priority Areas of Development of the Republic of Uzbekistan for 2017–2021" (Decree PF-4947, 07.02.2017) explicitly prioritize social development, rule of law, and economic liberalization, shaping mobility structures. Additional policy documents, including the "Development Strategy of New Uzbekistan for 2022–2026" (Decree PF-60, 28.01.2022), emphasize human dignity, inclusive growth, and governance reforms, offering an institutional counterpart to the dream's promise. Scholarly perspectives from regional research traditions,

such as works by Olga Brusina on Central Asian social transformations, Russian sociological analyses of stratification in post-Soviet contexts, and Uzbek literary criticism addressing modernization themes, contribute to interpreting how aspiration narratives adapt to local cultural capital and communal institutions like mahalla, hashar, and charitable traditions linked to waqf. Quantitatively, labor migration and remittance flows have been significant in Central Asia, shaping household mobility strategies and producing new inequalities between migrant and non-migrant families. Scientific interpretation suggests that comparing American fiction's dream narratives with Uzbek modernization narratives clarifies how ideology, community, and policy jointly script mobility, while also revealing that inequality is culturally narrated through distinct moral vocabularies.

