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THE ENDURING MYTH OF THE AMERICAN DREAM: MOBILITY, MARGINALIZATION, AND HOPE

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ABSTRACT. The American Dream functions as a myth within our political discourse by providing hope to citizens and reinforcing beliefs in the protestant work ethic and meritocracy. This article examines the myth through categories of mobility, marginalization, and hope. Elite theory and institutional isomorphism are used to explore business privilege within Public Administration. The ability to reframe the American Dream is considered through an examination of select speeches at the 2008 Democratic National Convention. Despite evidence of declining mobility and structural inequality, citizens cling to the myth. One explanation is that marginalization perpetuates the American Dream by crowding out issues of social class through various methods of institutional isomorphism. Another explanation is that the dream endures because it can be re-conceptualized.

INTRODUCTION

As discourse or narratives about human nature, myths function to form or reinforce social and cultural values. Early scholars of American studies proposed that recurring dominant myths existed within our society and helped to established national identity (McClennen, 2008). One myth that has shaped the United States is the American Dream, interpreted through material wealth and class ascendency. As a major feature of class discourse, the American Dream functions as a myth by appealing to and reinforcing the protestant work ethic, protecting our system of government, perpetuating existing class structure, and providing hope among

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citizens. The ability to achieve success regardless of origin and obstacle is an essential component of the American Dream. Americans are more likely to believe that success is based on individual efforts and accomplishments rather than the class structure into which they were born. As long as there is anecdotal evidence of class ascendency the American public is less inclined to challenge the great disparities between children born into wealth compared to children born to working class or low income parents.

This article examines the myth of the American Dream along the lines of mobility, marginalization, and hope. First, the American Dream is challenged by examining rates of mobility among Americans. It is argued that class ascendency is a myth, however, as long as there are anecdotal rags-to-riches stories of the American Dream we are less inclined to challenge it because it reinforces the protestant work ethic and perceptions of meritocracy. Second, the American Dream as economic success results from the privilege of business, which in turn marginalizes issues of social class. From a Public Administration perspective, explanations for this marginalization are explored through Elite and Institutional theories of organization and society. Third, the myth of the American Dream endures because it can be re-conceptualized and gives us hope. The ability of President Barack Obama to reframe the American Dream as well as provide hope for the field of Public Administration is considered.

MOBILITY: THE MYTH OF CLASS ASCENDENCY

The American Dream as rugged individualism is illustrated in the numerous fictional stories of class ascendency written by Horatio Alger in the late 19th century. Although he wrote about class ascendency, Alger attended privileged schools including Harvard. Although his stories are characterized as portraying the achievement of success through hard work, the protagonist is typically rescued by an older, wealthy man (American Folklore, 1978). Regardless, the stories of class ascendency are deeply ingrained in the American psyche as each generation has examples of individuals who have moved up from rags-to-riches. The probability of class ascendency, however, is much lower than we like to admit and not all who exhibit a strong work ethic in any given profession will achieve economic success.

Class analysis via a structural approach typically measures social class through indicators of socioeconomic status such as income, occupation, and education and allows one to examine mobility, the extent to which one generation has increased relative earnings above the previous generation. It is important to note that unequal distribution of income in any given year matters less if individuals are moving up the economic ladder over a lifetime. An inter-cohort comparison of men between the ages of 25 and 34 in 1974 to men between the ages of 25-34 in 1994 found that the median income for men during 1974 was $30,000 (in 1994 dollars) compared to the median income of $23,000 in 1994 (Sawhill & McMurrer, 1996). Approximately one-quarter to one-third of the population moved into a new income quintile in any given year—indicating that although Americans continued to move up and down the economic ladder of income distribution, rates of mobility had not changed. Others have found that the lower a group's average earnings, the more likely they are to stay in the bottom quintile (Gittleman & Joyce, 1995; Sawhill & Condon, 1992). Of those in the lowest quintile in 1974, 68% were still in the lowest quintile a year later while 90% were still within the lowest two quintiles. Furthermore although an individual may experience an increase in income in one year, many will fall back a few years later, "Of those who started in the lowest quintile in 1974, 42.1% found themselves in the lowest quintile 17 years later" (Gottschalk, 1997, p. 36). One recent study by Isaacs (2007) found that of the children born to parents at the bottom of the income distribution, only six percent rise to the top of the income distribution. Furthermore, income distribution to families in the bottom 40 % decreased by one-fifth, the distribution of families in the top 5% increased by one-third, and the distribution of income to the top one-tenth of one percent quadrupled between 1970 and 1998. Essentially, “the 13,000 richest families in America had almost as much income as the 20 million poorest households” (Krugman, 2002, n.p.).

The more that individual socioeconomic status is dependent upon the socioeconomic status of parents, the lesser the degree of opportunity and mobility, evidence of the injustice of structured inequity—the fact that a child born into poverty or among working class parents will experience considerably more obstacles to upward mobility than children of higher socio-economic status (Oldfied, 2007). In contrast, a society with a higher degree of opportunity would be one where children born into wealth have no greater advantage than children born into poverty or working class households.

Mobility observed during the first half of the 20th century was driven by growth in structural mobility as the labor market shifted from agricultural employment to industrial and white collar employment (Sawhill & McMurrer, 1996). Improvements in productivity and increased wage levels made children better off than their parents. However, by the mid-1970s structural mobility declined; the economy grew at a slower rate than it did during the first half of the century as the United States shifted from a manufacturing sector to a service sector, resulting in lower wages and limited opportunities for lower skilled employees (Bok, 1996). As large companies restructured and relocated overseas, real wages have fallen for lower skilled employees. The U.S. Census 1998 March Current Population Survey (CPS) reported that in 1987 men between the ages of 25-34 were the first to experience a lower median income than their fathers. The same findings were also reported in the 1997 CPS.

Organizations are also structured in ways that reflect class distinctions. Morgan (1997) attributes our tendency to establish hierarchies and distinguish between production, supervision, and ownership to historic hierarchical societies. The segmented labor markets within our society and within organizations reflect the power to affect social mobility. Within society, segmented labor markets are understood in terms of primary and secondary labor markets, whereas primary labor markets consist of occupations categorized as professional careers and secondary labor markets consist of jobs that require less skill and provide less favorable working conditions (Morgan, 1997). Within organizations, segmented labor markets are established through core and contingent employees. Core employees enjoy the privileges of full-time employment including better pay and benefits, some degree of job security, and organizational investment in professional development. In contrast, contingent workers typically receive lower pay without benefits and have no expectation of job security. There is also a common misperception that contingent workers are only employed on a temporary or part-time basis for a short period of time, however, many temporary workers work full-time and sometimes maintain a temporary status for many years. For example, from 1991 to 2000 the majority of temporary employees within the federal government worked full-time. Furthermore, many temporary employees within the federal government had maintained contingent status for many years (GAO, 2002).

In 2001, the number of contingent workers throughout the United States ranged from 2.3 million by the narrowest measure to 5.4 million by the broadest measure (BLS, 2001). However, an examination of employees in alternative working arrangements reveals that the numbers were much higher. There were 6 million contract company workers, 8.6 million independent contractors, 2.1 million on-call workers, and 1.2 million temporary agency workers (BLS, 2001). Alternative working arrangements also tend to have a negative impact on groups that have previously experienced disadvantages in the labor market, evident in the underrepresentation of women and minorities in the higher skilled, higher paying categories of contract company worker and independent contractor. Of the 1.2 million temporary agency workers, respondents were more likely to be minorities and high school dropouts. In comparison, respondents categorized as contract company workers were predominantly male, held a bachelors degree, and 1 in 10 were employed in public administration (BLS, 2001). Similarly, in the primary labor market in 2007, underrepresentation of women and minorities is evident in the fact that among the CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, only 4 were African American and 13 were women ("Trading Action," 2008).

Class differences are inherent in the hierarchical structure of organizations, particularly in terms of compensation and decision-making authority. Farazmand (1999) demonstrates this difference in the context of downsizing, "People do not downsize themselves; organization elites do. Common people do not privatize government functions; public organization elites do" (p. 322). For well over a decade, executives have engaged in brutal downsizing while simultaneously accepting astronomical pay increases. In 1990, total compensation for corporate executives was 100 times that of the average worker compared to 350 to 570 times that of the average worker a decade later (Harris, 2006). During this same time period major job losses occurred for average workers—74,000 at GM and 60,000 at IBM (Morgan, 1997). The position that a cadre of elite individuals are making decisions that promote their own self interests at the expense of working class employees is supported through research demonstrating that the practice of establishing executive compensation is under the purview of a "small network of executives who to a great extent have social connections or acquaintances in common—and that these board ties have a big impact on issues of corporate governance" (Harris, 2006, p. 73).

Despite evidence of declining mobility and structural inequalities, the American Dream is so entrenched within our culture that 71% of Americans continue to believe that personal motivation is more important to mobility than the state of the economy or socioeconomic circumstances as a child ("Americans Optimistic", 2009). Armed with economic analyses providing evidence of gaps in mobility for minorities and those in the bottom quintile of the economic ladder, the project manager of the Pew Economic Mobility Project asserted, "People's perception of their ability to get ahead may not necessarily coincide with reality" ("Americans Optimistic", 2009, p.6). What leads a reasonable person to embrace an idea that is contradicted by evidence and sometimes by their own lived experiences? Two explanations are offered in the proceeding pages. First, issues of social class have been marginalized within our society. Second, the American Dream has been recast to offer hope during desperate times. Both explanations perpetuate the myth of the American Dream.

MARGINALIZATION

Business privilege marginalizes issues of social class and perpetuates the myth of the American Dream. Elite theory and institutional isomorphism provide explanation for how this marginalization occurs in public administration discourse. This section explores how culturally embedded values, organizational practices, professional norms, and cooptation crowd out issues of social class, increasing the potential for greater inequality.

Business Privilege

The elite theory of government and organization is a starting point to examine the dominant discourse of business privilege. C. Wright Mills (1956) identified the power elite as those individuals who "run the machinery of the state" through control of public and private organizations. While the power elite are not necessarily aristocracy, they do represent the upper class:

> They derive in substantial proportions from the upper classes, both new and old, of local society and the metropolitan 400. The bulk of the very rich, the corporate executives, the political outsiders, the high military, derive from, at most, the upper third of the income and occupational pyramids. Their fathers were at least of the professional and business strata, and very frequently higher than that (Mills, 1956, p. 279).

The elite theory extends to political and economic institutions as power is exercised through organizations and the will of the power elites is achieved through key positions within those organizations (Farazmand, 1999). Bureaucracy, therefore, becomes a method of social control as domination is achieved through administration, and reliance on the system strengthens “the pre-established harmony between the interest of the big public and private corporations and that of their customers and servants” (Marcuse, 1964, p. 35). Institutional isomorphism provides explanation for homogenization between the public and private spheres in relation to the marginalization of social class issues. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) define institutional isomorphism as, “a constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions” (p. 149) that result from coercive, mimetic and normative mechanisms.

Coercive Isomorphism

Coercive isomorphism results from external pressures, both formal and informal, and includes cultural expectations within society which are less explicit, yet just as forceful (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Our embedded cultural values linking democracy and liberty to private enterprise influences citizen’s perceptions which, in turn, influence public organizations. The economic and political sources of power throughout American history extend corporate hegemony as both conscious and unconscious dominant meanings and values privilege business in American society.

> Hegemony is then not only the articulate upper level of ideology, nor are its forms of control only those ordinarily seen as manipulation or indoctrination. It is a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of living: our senses and assignments of energy, our shaping perceptions of ourselves and our world. It is a lived system of meanings

> and values—constitutive and constituting—which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming. It thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society, a sense of absolute because experienced reality beyond which it is very difficult for most members of the society to move, in most areas of their lives. It is in the strongest sense a culture, but a culture which has also to be seen as the lived dominance and subordination of particular classes (Williams, 1977, p. 110).

The historical account of the influence of capitalism and the protestant work ethic by Weber (1904/1958) offers insight into how the American Dream came to be defined as economic success. The shift to Protestantism during the 16th century served as a catalyst for capitalism and economic rationalism. The very struggle for existence provided favorable conditions for the development of a work ethic reflecting capitalist values. Although economic traditionalism was a factor challenging religion, the pursuit of wealth was no longer considered an enemy of religion. "Reformation meant not the elimination of the Church's control over everyday life, but rather the substitution of a new form of control for the previous one…Reformers within the commercial aristocracy complained "there was not too much supervision of life on the part of the Church, but too little"(p. 37). As a result, the concept of economic success as piety emerged. During the founding of our country, labor and enterprise were essential for growth and considered to be moral conduct (Weber 1904/1958).

Democracy has been and continues to be linked with market economies (Inglehart, 1990). This was particularly evident in the early part of the 20th century as the success of U.S. corporations and a rising standard of living were tied together. Business appeals to concepts of personal liberty and democracy through comparisons of private enterprise. "Americans are taught that democracy means our free enterprise system. Any challenge to business autonomy is equated with a challenge to the liberty of all Americans" (Hudson, 1995, p. 201).

Even during periods of potential vulnerability prior to the Progressive movement, and later the New Deal, the privilege of business remained impenetrable. Middle class progressives, as advocates of workers' rights, social justice, and professional government administration, viewed bureaucracy as a mechanism for social reform. Simultaneously, however, progressives cultivated support among big business because it had resources to command government response and big business viewed the progressive movement as a way to develop and expand a relationship with government—cooptation to preserve their own interests (Weibe, 1967). Similarly, although FDR advocated an economic bill of rights and expanded the role of government, many of the New Deal initiatives were established to strengthen free enterprise (Hartz, 1955).

The strength of the American Dream has become more tightly coupled with business interests over the past few decades. During the Reagan administration, preference for the market was demonstrated through deregulation, privatization efforts, tax cuts, and reduced spending on social service programs. Reagan was adept at utilizing the American Dream rhetoric and often referenced "extraordinary/ordinary" citizens to highlight the importance of individual responsibility while simultaneously minimizing the role of government (Rowland & Jones, 2007). The preference for market values continued through the Clinton administration via an emphasis on reinventing government and market globalization and under the Bush administration through an emphasis on tax cuts for the wealthy and domestic program cuts for the poor.

In addition to embedded cultural values linking democracy to private enterprise, coercive isomorphism might also occur through direct lobbying of Congressional members for deregulation of various industries, overreliance on technical expertise within the industry, and a revolving door of top industry officials and regulatory agency employees (Perrow, 1970). Over the past several years, deregulation has proliferated as the goal shifted from protecting society to protecting the market from society (Box, 2004). Partial explanation is found in the privileged position of business, reflected in the basic ideological assumption that government regulations interfere with market performance and that industries will self-regulate. In addition, direct pressure to reduce regulations was exerted by lobbying groups. In 2004 there were over 1,600 corporate PACs in Washington, D.C. (Reason, 2004). Financial institutions aggressively lobbied to reduce regulation and oversight: "From 1998 to 2008 over $600 million was spent on lobbying to get rid of regulations, to get rid of capital requirements on banks" ("Debate", p. 31).

As a result of coercive isomorphism, public institutions are also culpable for the greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression. The Federal Reserve Board contributed to the housing bubble by reducing the federal funds rate. The Securities Exchange Commission allowed leverage in banking systems to expand from 12-to-1 to 30-to-1. Adequate supervision of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac was absent among members of Congress, and President Bush consistently favored deregulation and failed to intervene in a timely manner ("Debate," 2009). That Washington and Wall Street are simultaneously responsible for the *Great Recession* is not surprising given the fact that prevailing values and beliefs in the market have become institutionalized. "The union of big capital and the state is the most immediate and overt: the notion of a conflict between private interest and public government is no longer taken seriously, and, if necessary, can be abolished by administrative fiat" (Marcuse, 1972/2001, p.176).

Mimetic Isomorphism

The tendency to imitate organizations perceived as successful results in mimetic isomorphism. In the public sector, mimetic isomorphism occurs through continuous pressure to "run government like a business," as noted by DiMaggio and Powell (1983, p. 152), "The history of management reform in American government agencies… is almost a textbook case of isomorphic modeling, from the PPPB of the McNamara era to the zero-based budgeting of the Carter administration."

During the Reagan Administration, casting government agencies as "the problem" placed business as the preferred alternative. As a result, business practices were imposed on public agencies, and when possible, services were contracted out or privatized—certainly an advantage for the business community. Less than a decade later, the concept of entrepreneurial government jettisoned, particularly after Osborne and Gaebler's (1993) publication of *Reinventing Government.* Borrowing heavily from the private sector, the authors maintained that government was too large—bogged down by excessive rules and regulations, public agencies were no longer efficient or effective in the provision of services. Instead, contracting out or privatization were advocated as alternative service delivery options. During that same year former Vice President Gore's reinvention initiative was established through the National Performance Review with the overall goal to create a government that "works better and costs less" through strategies such as downsizing and performance- based measurement. The preference for private sector business practices continued under the Bush administration.

Critics contend that the dominant value of efficiency emphasized in the entrepreneurial model of public administration dangerously ignores the struggle for equity during the era of New Public Administration. As governments are drawn into competitive markets through such methods as contracting out and privatization, it is imperative to acknowledge the distinction between means and ends in both the public and private sectors. In the private sector there is greater emphasis on the ends- the bottom line profit. In the public sector it is important not only to focus on the ends (producing quality results), but also on the means through which we achieve those results. As Frederickson (1999, p. 317) notes, "Fairness is not a concept or idea that fits into the logic of either perfect or imperfect markets. But fairness, both procedurally (as in due process) and in outcomes, is often the core issue in government."

Normative Isomorphism

Normative isomorphism occurs through professional norms resulting from formal education and professional networks across organizations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Starting at an early age, the American Dream as economic success is reinforced through our educational institutions which seek "to develop positive attitudes about the economic system and about economics" (Farmer, 2005, p. 715) while marginalizing issues of economic disparity. Analysis of textbook coverage of social class/ socioeconomic status at the high-school level reveals that history textbooks typically ignore issues of social class and income inequality and present "the American past as 390 years of progress, and portray our society as a land of opportunity in which folks get what they deserve and deserve what they get, the failures of working-class Americans to transcend their class origin inevitably get laid at their own doorsteps" (Loewen, 1994, p. 201). Similarly, within the field of Public Administration, issues of social class have received minimal attention. A content analysis by

Oldfield, Candler, and Johnson (2006) demonstrates that while *Public Administration Review* published five articles on social class in the 1960s and eight in the 1970s, only one article on social class was published in the 1980s, two articles in the 1990s.

The integration and internalization of organizational values upon the individual is another process of normalization. Marcuse (1964) maintains that opposition is absorbed through integration of the individual with the organization. Were social mobility nonexistent and the occasional 'rags to riches' story absent in the public discourse, the legitimacy of the system would be challenged. Legitimacy is ensured by cooptation through the selective incorporation of individuals who represent groups that would otherwise threaten the stability of the organization or system (Farazmand, 1999; Perrow, 1970). From a social class perspective this includes providing access to individuals in the lower quintiles of the economic ladder to create the perception of meritocracy, thereby reinforcing the myth of the American Dream, and minimizing challenges to structural inequality. Some studies reveal that individual members of socially disadvantaged groups who have gained access are more likely to believe in meritocracy if they are upwardly mobile ("Trading Action" 2008). As a result, inequality is attributed to personal failure, pushing it to the realm of individual responsibility for those who have been less successful.

The Consequences of Marginalization

Scholars of Public Administration have yet to provide adequate attention to the injustice of structured inequity. The consequence of marginalizing issues of social class is the potential for greater inequality. The widening income gap provides evidence of increasing social inequality, described as a regressive value that has been exacerbated over the past few decades as government "abandoned the idea of a systematic approach to problems of inequality" (Box, 2008, p. 1

The disparities among the rich and poor, the shrinking middle class, and the economic decline of the *Great Recession* have a direct impact on the level and quality of public services available (it is here where social class and socioeconomic status become particularly relevant to the field of public administration). Socioeconomic status is often reflected through economic segregation of neighborhoods, which also reflects racial and ethnic segregation since a disproportionate number of minorities are poor (Pebley & Sastry, 2004). Economic segregation affects revenue bases, the level of services cities or counties are able to provide. Other related issues that public administrators must address include attracting and retaining public school teachers in inner city neighborhoods or poor rural communities, providing adequate levels of police services to address violent crime, and providing legal representation for those who cannot afford an attorney.

Several studies have also demonstrated that poverty stricken neighborhoods are more likely to have residents with health problems, as well as delinquency and academic problems among school age youth (Pebley & Sastry, 2004). Neighborhood socioeconomic circumstances also influence the availability and quality of child and family- related institutions including childcare, schools, and after-school programs. Nevertheless, Americans perceive equality of education as the great equalizer even though studies consistently provide evidence of inequality in education. There are major funding disparities between low-income and minority students in comparison to middle and upper-class students (Education Trust, 2002). These inequities at the primary and secondary public schools spill over into institutions of higher education as progress has been slow for young people from families with low incomes and low occupational status, even with funding made available by the Federal Student Loan Program (Bok, 1996).

Rather than level the playing field, Bourdieu (1989) contends that social class privilege is reproduced through education, evident in the disparities of social and cultural capital between the classes. Demonstrable evidence of stratification in education and position in French society is presented by Bourdieu (1989). In comparison, inspection of enrollment numbers at top universities in the U.S. reveals disparity among class as there are few working class and low-income students at the top universities in the U.S.

> Suffice it is to note that virtually all graduates of the top U.S. boarding schools (who comprise 1 percent of American high school enrollment) enter college, compared to 76 percent of students from Catholic and other private schools, and 45 percent of all public school seniors. These super- privileged students, nine in ten of whom are children of professionals

> and business managers (two-thirds of their fathers and one-third of their mothers attended graduate or professional school) are also much more likely to land on the most prized campuses, even controlling for scholastic aptitude scores (Wacquant, in Bourdieu, 1998, xiv)

Not surprisingly, the majority of students at Ivy League universities are from upper class backgrounds. Seventy-five percent of Harvard's freshmen class in 1999 was from families representing the top income earners (Raines & McAdams, 2006). Similarly, only 3% of freshmen among 146 selective colleges and universities in the U.S. represent families at the bottom quarter of income distribution (Oldfield et al., 2006). Fifty-three percent of children of the top fifth income earners will earn a college degree compared to only 11% from the bottom income quintile (Eckholm, 2008).

The preceding discussion emphasized how marginalization perpetuates the myth of the American Dream by crowding out issues of social class through various methods of institutional isomorphism, as well as the potential for increased inequality as a consequence. The following section considers the re-conceptualization of the American Dream and the hope for Public Administration.

HOPE

During times of economic crisis, working class and low-income families struggle to make ends meet. In recent months the U.S. economy has experienced a severe economic downturn, evident in the millions of home foreclosures, layoffs, and declining retirement portfolios. While it appears as if the economic crisis occurred overnight, there has been a gradual decline of the middle class—evident in declining mobility, increasing income inequality, and economic segregation. The fact that the American Dream is completely out of reach for many citizens has the potential to expose the dream as myth. Nevertheless, the dream endures as a result of carefully crafted messages and a change in administrative direction. By recasting the dream from one of individual responsibility to one that also incorporates collective responsibility, the role of Public Administration is extended.

Recasting the American Dream

The myth of the American Dream endures because it can be re-conceptualized. David Farmer (2005, 717) posits, "…retaining the American dream doesn't rule out tweaking. Isn't it possible to tweak the dubious equation of individual success with material success, or to tweak the debatable emphasis on self-interest as the best guide to life? Also, I do think that it's practical—and not un-American—to be open to each individual dreaming her own dream(s)." In addition to materialistic elements, the American Dream has at times been interpreted as having moralistic elements such as compassion, charity, and dignity (Rowland & Jones, 2007). For example, Franklin Roosevelt addressed the Democratic Convention in 1944 advocating an economic bill of rights which included the right to a living wage, education, and basic necessities of food and shelter (Alvez & Timney, 2008). Sixty years later, Barack Obama captured attention as a keynote speaker at the 2004 Democratic Convention by recasting the American Dream through a message of hope that invoked not only individual responsibility but collective responsibility among all citizens to establish a better community (Rowland & Jones, 2007).

Not surprisingly, the underlying theme at the 2008 Democratic Convention was that the American Dream was endangered as a result of eight years of Bush administration policies. On August 26, 2008, Hillary Clinton made numerous references to the declining economy evident in job losses, lower wages, and home foreclosures. She asserted, "To rebuild the middle class and sustain the American Dream, to provide the opportunity to work hard and have that work rewarded, to save for college, a home and retirement, to afford the gas and groceries and still have a little left over each month" ("Hillary" p. 2). Although she used the term "American Dream" once, she made four distinct comparisons between the privileged few and the average American and referenced the increased cost of living and job losses on four separate occasions. Her concluding four statements emphasized the importance of the election for future generations. The same message was delivered by Bill Clinton the following night when he declared, "The American dream is under siege at home…middle-class and low-income Americans are hurting" ("Bill", p. 1). He specifically used the words "American Dream" four times and "income inequality" three times throughout his speech. Within the context of the American Dream, references were made to the rising cost of living and declining wages four times and job losses three times.

On August 28, 2008, Barack Obama took center stage to accept the nomination from the Democratic Party. He changed the language of the American Dream into the *American Promise* and specifically cited the word "promise" 24 times throughout his speech. The number of comparisons between the privileged few and the average American were more frequent, provided seven times throughout his speech. Consistent with the speeches each night prior, he made three references to declining income and the increasing cost of living, and three references to job losses, while simultaneously placing blame on the current administration for failing to identify and respond to the needs of economically disadvantaged Americans, "In Washington, they call this the Ownership Society, but what it really means is — you're on your own. Out of work? Tough luck. No health care? The market will fix it. Born into poverty? Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps — even if you don't have boots" ("Obama," p. 2). He also provided substantive strategies to eliminate policies that protect the wealthy at the expense of middle and working class Americans on eight different occasions throughout his speech, including eliminating "tax breaks for corporations that ship jobs overseas" (p. 2); changing bankruptcy laws; and "closing corporate loopholes and tax havens" (p. 3). As he had four years earlier at the 2004 Democratic Convention, Obama recast the American Dream as one that entails not only individual responsibility but also collective responsibility, "*That's the promise of America* — the idea that we are responsible for ourselves, but that we also rise or fall as one nation; the fundamental belief that I am my brother's keeper; I am my sister's keeper" (p. 4).

Characterized as the epitome of social mobility, Barack Obama gives hope, and by giving hope, perpetuates the myth of the American dream. Ultimately, he recognized the power of myth as both fluid and consistent by masterfully re-conceptualizing the American Dream as one of a promise yet to be achieved. Simultaneously, however, he reinforced the definition of the American Dream as one of economic success. The dream is the same—what has changed is how we get there.

The Hope for Public Administration

If one accepts the proposition that we have a duty and responsibility to look after one another, a consistent position of President Obama, the issue becomes "how to move policy and practice toward more progressive treatment of people and of human potential" (Box, 2008, p. 66). One hope is that issues of equity and social justice will reclaim attention within the field of Public Administration. Advocates of New Public Administration promoted the belief that administrators could be policy advocates and that organizations should be client-centered with an emphasis on equity and social justice. Within this perspective is the positive view of government—that administrative action is necessary to transform democracy from conceptual abstraction to reality (Gawthrop, 1998).

A second hope, within the context of public employment and service, is that public service will once again be viewed as honorable. President Obama has repeatedly appealed to the spirit of service and recently signed the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act which expands *Americorps* from 75,000 to 250,000 within the next ten years ("Remarks," 2009). Another hope is that public employees will no longer be cast as "the problem" and that "running government like a business" disappears from the lexicon of Public Administration. Do we really want to emulate the practices of failed corporations? The obvious answer is a resounding no! Within the White House, pay has been frozen for employees with salaries above $100,000. Individuals are also barred from working for an agency they had lobbied within two years, and employees who leave the administration are barred from lobbying the executive branch during his presidency ("100 Day Diary," 2009).

Within the context of the role of government in addressing issues of social class, it is hoped that balance is restored regarding the role of government—no longer will government be cast as too large with too many regulations, particularly when industries and individuals alike who once called for deregulation and cuts to numerous social programs emerged with hat-in-hand requesting government intervention during the *Great Recession*. President Obama rejected the traditional arguments about the proper role of government during his Inaugural Address when he stated, "The question we ask today is not whether our government is too big or too small, but whether it works—whether it helps families find jobs at a decent wage, care they can afford, a retirement that is dignified" (n.p). Nevertheless, since taking office he has introduced a variety of initiatives that have the potential to improve economic mobility, including the establishment of a Task Force on Middle Class Working Families; executive orders that promote union labor; the extension of unemployment benefits and health care coverage as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act; expansion of tax credit for first time home buyers and a housing plan to assist families facing foreclosure ("100 Day Diary," 2009). Ironically, however, the greatest beneficiary of government intervention is corporate America. To convince members of Congress and the American taxpayers to support a stimulus package worth billions of dollars in order to prevent complete market failure illustrates the ultimate privilege of business and is a true testament of the power of the myth of the American Dream.

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