

America's dream

Ramin Jahanbegloo, Richard Rorty

Ramin Jahanbegloo who invited R. Rorty to Tehran responded by letter to Rorty's lecture. His letter and Rorty's rejoinder were published in the journal *Open Democracy*.



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Dear Richard,

For some years, I have been asking myself why in my country, Iran, America is considered a land of hope and success. Your recent trip to Iran gave a new dimension to my questioning and made me more determined to write you this letter and to share with you my viewpoint on the adequacy and legitimacy of what is known today even by non-Americans as the "American Dream".

It is difficult to live through the opening years of the new millennium, symbolised tragically by the nightmare of 11 September 2001 and the two American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, without stumbling on the concept of "The American Century" formulated in a 1941 Life magazine article of that title by Henry Luce.

This lengthy article is devoted to what Luce calls "American internationalism". Its last paragraph is not very distant from my own current fears and anxieties concerning the real face of the American dream in our world:

"The other day, Herbert Hoover said that America was fast becoming the sanctuary of the ideals of civilization. For the moment it may be enough to be the sanctuary of these ideals. But not for long. It now becomes our time to be the powerhouse from which the ideals spread throughout the world and do their mysterious work of lifting the life of mankind from the level of the beasts to what the Psalmist called a little lower than angels. America as the dynamic center of ever-widening spheres of enterprise, America as the training center of the skilful servants of mankind, America as the Good Samaritan, really believing again that it is more blessed to give than to receive, and America as the powerhouse of the ideals of Freedom and Justice - out of these elements surely can be fashioned a vision of the 20th century to which we can and will devote ourselves in joy and gladness and vigor and enthusiasm." Henry Luce's appeal could be, and was, seen by some as a call for United States imperialism and the creation of a capitalist and militarist century. What is more significant, however, is that it sees the American dream as the typical expression of the American century.

The prospect that Luce glimpsed in 1941 has, over six decades later, become an unavoidable reality: America is the only superpower left free to define and impose its dream in the new world order.

The American dream is the centerpiece of a national intention, which holds the country's citizens tightly together. But it also has multiple meanings for people elsewhere in the world. To some, it represents a chauvinistic cliché, to others a symbol of good life and achievement. Some, meanwhile, believe that the dream has proven to be the most effective tool ever invented for the subversion of other cultures.

In short, people in many countries have a stake in the American dream. The American dream is not only the dream of the Americans, but the dream of others to become American. From the very beginning, America, the land of freedom, has also been the world's dream: a society built on new foundations, held together not by traditions, but by the idea

of a generous and hospitable country open to any experience.

I believe that the secret of the American dream's power of attraction lies in the "invention" of America as a dream. 1492, after all, marks something deeper than the arrival of Columbus after a trans-oceanic voyage; it enshrines the American dream as the founding principle of the nation.

The idea that Columbus's journey represented a dream rather than mere arrival has had many consequences. It defined America as a "new world" and cast its past into an imaginary time. In the centuries after Columbus, fresh images of America both perpetuated and expanded the narrative of the American dream. A central part of this narrative has been a persistent faith in the values of democratic individualism as the indispensable guardians of personal dignity and individual opportunity.

The narrative found a ready echo in the experience and aspirations of generations of non-Americans too, for whom America came to represent a new world where anything can happen and any dream can become reality. Millions of them (including many Iranians) have followed Columbus, moving to America to seek their own place in the narrative of the American dream.

This conjoining of origin, values and journey is both anticipated and universalised by John Locke in his Second Treatise of Government: "In the beginning all the world was America".

The American dream, then, is not exclusively American. But Locke's words are a reminder of the other dimension of this truth: that America also "belongs" to the world. Can this universalising potential today be released in newly generous, enlarging ways, even for those who will remain forever beyond America's shores?

Martin Luther King stressed that Americans cannot themselves be free unless people are free in the poorer nations of Africa, Asia and Latin America. I believe that today such an inclusive, interdependent awareness is essential in helping us initiate a dialogue which will establish a plural globalisation as a paradigm for understanding and reshaping the world order.

This, perhaps, is the challenge of the new "American century" – to redefine the "American dream" as a renascent connection, a shared enterprise, a journey of exploration, a global commons. This is a dream of inventing a new world and a new America.

***Yours ever,
Ramin Jahanbegloo***

Dear Ramin,

The thought that America is a place where values and institutions are being nurtured that could eventually transform the world crystallised in the middle of the 19th century. Those were the days of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman. These two men played an important role in the formation of the American Dream. Whitman's Democratic Vistas is the ancestor of Henry Luce's musings on the American Century.

When he wrote that "(the) Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature", Whitman meant that Americans were more inclined than most to dream of a better world - a world at peace, in which social justice was reconciled with individual freedom. He encouraged them to believe that their country would help bring that world into existence. Whitman and Luce both hoped that the American dream would become (in your words) "the world's dream".

That dream has been kept alive by all those American intellectuals and politicians who have tried to convince their fellow-citizens that the important thing about their country is not that it is rich and powerful, but rather that its history embodies (again in your words) "a persistent faith in the values of democratic individualism as the indispensable guardians of personal dignity and individual opportunity". These men and women established a tradition of idealistic internationalism. Ever since Whitman's day, they have struggled both against the imperialists, who wanted to use American wealth and power to establish a global hegemony, and also against the isolationists, who wanted the United States to mind its own business and not meddle in world affairs.

The hidden agenda of the internationalists (one that they still cannot put forward explicitly, for fear of a chauvinist reaction from the voters) is to bring into existence what Tennyson called "The Parliament of Man, the Federation of the World". They want to do for the almost two hundred sovereign nation-states what the American Founding Fathers did for the thirteen original American colonies.

The internationalists dream of a world government that will bind Iranians, Chinese, Germans, Brazilians and Americans together in a single political community. For they think that only such a government, able to deploy an international police force, can ensure world peace. They share the hopes of Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Harry Truman (who always carried those lines from Tennyson in his wallet). These American presidents all took for granted, as had Emerson and Whitman, that it is America's destiny to bring peace and justice to the world.

Because the imperialists have recently wrenched control of American foreign policy from the internationalists, it has become more difficult for non-Americans to remember that the US is a country of idealistic dreamers as well as of chauvinist militarists. But it should be remembered that polls taken in 2002 showed that a great many Americans thought that America should not go to war in Iraq, or anywhere else, without United Nations approval.

The idealistic internationalists have, over the last six decades, worked very hard to persuade their fellow citizens that the UN is the hope of the world. They have had consi-

derable success. The attitude of the Bush administration - that the UN must be shunted aside so that the US can become the sole arbiter of world affairs - is by no means universal. On the contrary, this attitude has aroused as much vociferous, passionate and sustained protest within the US as outside it.

Nobody knows whether the internationalists' dreams are capable of fulfilment. It may be that the foreign policy of the US will never revert to the idealism of the immediate post-second world war period. The militarisation of the US - its transformation into a garrison state - may have made it impossible for idealists to regain control of the government. Chauvinists in the Pentagon may never yield control of foreign policy to the (still more or less internationalist) diplomats in the state department.

Even if the internationalists should regain control, however, it may be too late in the day for their dreams to be realised. For even if the Americans did elect a president willing to dilute United States sovereignty by signing binding international agreements, it still might be impossible to persuade Russia and China, and the growing list of lesser nuclear powers, to go along. But we shall not know whether such internationalist initiatives can succeed until they are mounted, and the US is the country best able to do so. America will not be the sole superpower for more than a few decades, but it is just possible that, while it still enjoys this status, it might regain the moral leadership that it enjoyed under Wilson in 1919, and again under FDR in 1945.

The willingness of the intellectuals of other countries to remind their fellow-citizens of what America once stood for, and might once again come to stand for, is very important. Walt Whitman helped convince the world that America was a place in which (as you put it) "anything can happen and any dream can become reality". The acclaim with which Whitman's poems were greeted in many different countries showed how widespread was the need to believe that the human future can be made very different from the human past. Reminding the world of what the US managed to accomplish is still a good way to encourage hope that every adult human will, some day, be a free citizen of a democratic, global, political community.

***Yours ever,
Richard Rorty***