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# Society's Perpetuation of Oppression

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The American dream was responsible for the period of personal refinement throughout the 1930s that many people experienced. James Truslow Adams, the father of this elusive ideal, defined it as "That dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement"(214-215). The dream was just as much a psychological ideal as it was a tangible aspiration-it was a state of mind. The outcasts, such as those faced with social isolation, poverty and perceived inferiority were forced to accept the realization that their desires were unattainable. Those who were classified as real Americans-white, Anglo-Saxon males, were the ones who reaped the benefits of America. While America blossomed into the dream for some, it became an inescapable reality ironically coined the land of opportunity, contingent on how truly American an individual was. Is American society itself responsible for the creation of psychological and social constraints that dictate oppression? The reality of American life did not line up with the utopian world the American dream envisioned for all.

Social mobility is the true soul behind the American dream that continues to keep it alive. Upward social mobility is the concept of climbing the success ladder economically and class wise. There was no barrier too hard to overcome; working hard and clean would pay off for the future. The three classes being upper, middle and lower allow for a fluidity among themselves. Each class is marked by distinguishing economic and social features. Class fluidity is the endless vertical movement among the classes people in a society are faced with. The rags to riches lifestyle became possible and popularized by this sociological concept. The idealistic dream of far advancing beyond what you began at started off as nothing more than desiring something better. Not only is desire rooted in human nature, but it is the foundation for achievement.

The desire for achievement has been replaced by a new found sense of entitlement among Americans. Fluidity among the social classes or the lack of is demanded. The structures of class fluidity and social mobility that were the frameworks of the American dream have been turned into the building blocks of structural oppression. This condoned oppression was used to confine specific groups or individuals to categories, while select people-true Americans manipulate the country. Categorical confinement prevented certain groups and individuals from any mobility. It allowed Americans to steal from each other physically and mentally. Essentially, stealing the American dream from those deemed confined. The 'true Americans' monopolized the achievement of dreams.

Lefebvre's ideology of a conceptual triad includes the perceived, lived and conceived spaces. These spaces are intersecting visions of time that differ in reference to consciousness. Social space is a social product (Lefebvre 27). Environment and behaviors of people are reciprocal products of each other. Louis Althusser states "in order for any social system to survive, the condition of production must be reproduced in the individual psyche"(1). The existing space serves as a base for thoughts and actions of the people living in it. The social structures of society working together as a cohesive unit are known as perceived spaces. The maintenance of order in a given setting are the lived in spaces. Spaces that are physically touched and are an active part in its inhabitants lives are called conceived spaces. Each space is reliant on one another and carry a butterfly effect; what happens in one space is reciprocated and effects another. Inevitable because of the intersectionality of each space, they assist in the continuation of varied oppressions based on the current state of society.

“Ideology has the function(which defines it) of ‘constituting’ concrete individuals as [social] subjects”(Althusser, 1970, 171, as cited in Tyson, 1994, 1). Ideology consists of a set of beliefs or thoughts held by an individual or group that assists in the formation of guidelines for existence. The basis for consciousness is heavily formed upon socially acceptable norms and values. An individual is not a sole representative of a sample or an exclusive social product-the individual and society itself are separate entities that are push and pull forces. Gradually people subconsciously develop cognitive ways of thinking, organizing and perceiving information known as schemas. External stimuli is interpreted and processed and then it is made to fit in a designated category. Schemas are interrupted when new information is encountered and the brain can not make it fit into a pre existing category. When an interruption occurs the brain’s cognitive capacity either forces it to fit in by an means or rejects it, since the information does not align with certain ideals. Schemas are designed to be expansive and accommodating to new knowledge, but when a rejection occurs they become frozen. Large masses of people with outwardly constricting ways of thinking and schemas are what creates discrimination and breeds negativity in society.

Sexual discrimination was ingrained into the bones of America starting with the Declaration of Independence in 1776. The first sentence states, “When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation” (US 1776). The voluntary decision to use the pronoun mankind was to make the distinction of woman

as separate from men explicit. The succeeding crucial statement that supports the previous claim above is as follows “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”. The casual, but deliberate use of the gender categorizing term ‘men’ states that they are all deemed as equal and deserving of those things written and woman are not. If it was not a deliberate, but purposeful word choice then the preceding statement would have been written as people or humankind are created equal; a gender neutral statement that applies to both females and males. A portion of the following sentence states “Governments are instituted among Men”, which implies the only gender in consideration to politics is male as well as that females can not establish governments. If this document was written inclusively, then word choice would of not been overlooked, since the time period of attempting to gain independence from England was crucial.

Throughout the Declaration-one of America’s first legal pieces regarding the establishment of the country, a casual, but deliberate choice was made. This choice was to consistently use masculine terminology. ‘He’ is a small word, but statement-making pronoun because it links the independence and success of the country to the male gender exclusively. The first sentence of the document already excluded women in means of consideration and the tentative future endeavors of the birth of a new, independent country. This was also the beginning of accepted and legal gender discrimination; coined accepted and legal discrimination because it was written in a legal document by authority figures. What started off merely as a word choice blossomed into a deliberate, societal choice to blatantly exclude woman that would

follow the country for the duration of existence. America was created on the basis of gender inequality before it was officially independent.

Another instance of sexual discrimination throughout the country faced by women is profiled accidentally in *By Motor to the Golden Gate* written by Emily Post. She is a famed woman author for her cross-country journey documented in her travel guide *By Motor to the Golden Gate* published in 1916. Her automobile trip occurred in 1915, which was a time when cross-country exploration was popularized and dominated by white men. The first and very crucial detail before the 27-day journey even began is that Post's editor was a male. Her journey was supervised and inspired by a male, essentially created by a man with misogynistic perspectives. He stated, "After all your object is merely to find out how far you *can* go pleasurably! When you find it too uncomfortable, come home!"(emphasis on *can* written originally by Post), (20). This statement, along with the use of the deliberate word *merely*, already early on had diminished the impact and accomplishment Post's story could possibly have had on women's advancement nationwide. Another key word in that statement made by her editor is the emphasis on the word *pleasurably* in relation to the journey. Men were not held to the menial standard of just making road trips pleasurable. It was expected that on these trips men would encounter the rough-also known as 'roughing it'; her editor stated, "Men who themselves could sleep on the roadside or on a barroom floor. You may think 'roughing' it has an attractive sound, because you have never in your life has the slightest experience of what it can be" (Post 19). He already forwardly excluded a woman from even thinking about sleeping on a barroom floor by use of the term *men*. The term used in place of *men* if her editor was trying to be gender inclusive would of been *people*. *People* would have been a gender-neutral term encompassing

either gender in speaking on who is capable of sleeping on barroom floors. Another casual, but deliberate word choice that reflects the views of society.

African American men and women have faced legal and social oppression since the early colonization of America. Enacted in 1868, the 14th amendment to the constitution was the first legal protection of equality for African American men. Up until 1868, there were no legal protections for an entire group of people that made up a portion of the population. Lawmakers, authority figures and average citizens did all that they could in an effort to dehumanize a whole race. Half of the states that made up the country were southern slave states or territories while the northern states were free. Having received approximately more than half of the northern votes and a mere 4% of southern votes it was clear which states supported Lincoln's ideas. He was an outspoken figure in the 19th century for the fight for equality and the eventual abolishment of slavery nationwide. The economy and social structure of the south were heavily reliant on slavery, so most southerners did not support Lincoln because he would bring negative changes to a prospering territory (in the eyes of the southerners). This was the created environment from the beliefs, thoughts, and actions of the inhabitants of the south.

The 14th amendment was intended to be a means of legal protection for African American men until a period of regression occurred and the Jim Crow era was born. Gilda Graff states on page 253, "Thus, Reconstruction, a time of "unparalleled hope "(Taylor, 2011, p. v), was followed by a rewriting of history, and by the Jim Crow era, both of which helped to create a new sense of inferiority and degradation within the Black community (Taylor, 2011, p. vi)". This discounted all of the progression African Americans had made in American society. Inferiority and degradation are synonymous with the Jim Crow period, which lasted roughly 100 years and

was marked by lynchings, severe acts of violence and total dehumanization of a race. 100 years of being referred to as colored, not being allowed in certain buildings, not being able to comfortably provide for a family and much worse occurred than this. White authority figures of the southern states created, written and enforced these laws as a method of regaining control, which legalized discrimination. Socially, these laws were enforced by brutal acts of violence committed by other citizens on African Americans. Since it was a legalized discrimination they had no other options than to endure it. Creating the space of a society in an outwardly hateful manner reinforces the act of discrimination.

John Williams was an African American author recruited by Holiday Magazine to explore the journey of cross-country travel from the African American perspective in a country plagued by racial tension. Before he even began the road trip William posed the question “does a white American have to psychologically orient himself for wandering around the country?”(Williams XIX). This question was stated after he decided to bring his guns to the south for hunting and, if necessary protection. Williams makes the clear distinction of not only American but white. He is aware that the country was designed for white Americans and not him, but he is still willing to make a potentially dangerous journey. On page 64, Williams wanders into the wrong restaurant for dinner in Louisiana while looking for the ‘colored restaurant’ and the bartender refused to take his order inside. The bartender motioned him to the window where his order could be taken while he could stand outside and wait until the food is passed through the window. The racial tensions, which were the results of the southerners attitudes, would not even allow for William’s order to be placed inside. Williams comes to the conclusion that a large census of white people will not voluntarily share a piece of the American



dream(169). Nothing can ever be truly shared voluntarily or involuntarily when it was not created with the consideration of the entire human race in the first place.

Native settlements used to be expansive throughout the whole country before the first American settlement was formally established by white, Europeans. Between 1776 and 1887 more than 1.5 billion acres of land was forcefully taken by the United States for various expansion and trade purposes from Native Americans. This forced the relocation of Natives to confined areas called reservations that would be considered their new home. In 1830 the Indian Removal Act was signed into effect with the purpose of even more white, American expansion. This caused the death of an unfathomable amount of Native Americans due to the far journey to areas beyond the Mississippi River that were designated 'Indian territory'. Europeans did not want anyone to interfere or steal the country they claimed as home, even if it meant stealing America from the first Americans.

Black Elk is a Lakota Native American holy man born of the Ogalala band tribe. Being of Native minority he and his people first hand experienced discrimination from the incoming white, Europeans. In addition to discrimination, the entire tribe faced and took an active part in bloodshed. The bloodshed was not instigated by the Natives, it was a forced reaction for protection. One battle occurred at Wounded Knee Creek and the outcome was dead and wounded men, children, babies and women lying everywhere. Civilians and Lakota Native American warriors were the casualties. Black Elk states "When I saw this I wished that I had died too, but I was not sorry for the women and children. It was better for them to be happy in the other world, and I wanted to be there too"(163). His statement means it was better to be dead than to exist in the world with the current conditions. Europeans made sure by any means possible to cause

destruction in their path and devastate an entire tribe. Black Elk knew any encounter would be bloody and unfriendly, but the Lakota still did all they could do to defend themselves.

Psychologically, the Europeans destroyed the Natives; the realization and acceptance that death was better than the current conditions meant that they cycle of oppression would continue.

The irony of the United States is that it is supposed to be the land of the free. It is called the land of the free, but for whom? The system of the country was originally intended for and only took in consideration one group of people; white, anglo-saxon males. The existence of African Americans, women and Native people were completely overlooked, merely thought of as a hindrance to society. Through looking at these various groups of people it is evident that oppression begin internally and then is materialized to demean. The demeaning nature of societal views of other Americans is used to restrict the achievement of others so the true Americans stay on top. Existing psychological and social constraints in the mind of many Americans are directly caused by the society itself, which creates the oppression at hand.

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