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The race for the White House 2012: The new American dream

The third in our series on the race for the White House features Professor of Cultural Studies, Toby Miller, who argues that the American dream has long since become a nightmare.

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James Truslow Adams invented 'the American Dream' seventy years ago. The Latino writer argued in his *Epic of America* that US immigrants were attracted by the 'hope of a better and freer life'. The 'American dream' promised 'opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement.' It defied class barriers.

How does that dream look today, and will the upcoming election affect it?

For many US residents, both long-term and recent, life is getting worse. The capacity to exit poverty has diminished over the last four decades of neoliberalism and suburbanization. A gigantic clumping of wealth at the apex of the nation, atop a poor, unskilled, and unhealthy base, has occurred under Democratic and Republican Administrations alike.

All ethnic groups—no longer just white ones—have fled the inner cities. The nation recently became the first in the world with more than half its people living in suburbia. A quarter of them are minorities, and 75% of new office space is constructed there.

This shift from rural to urban to suburban living sees middle-class people increasingly disarticulated from cultural difference, class conflict, and public transportation. They reside in quietly sectarian, private worlds.

Meanwhile, the public sphere that matters to the working class, women, and minorities is often not politics. It's the courts.

They are the sites of successful activism by civil-rights attorneys, who use tort law through class-action suits to gain redress against environmental racism, labor exploitation, and the like. Not surprisingly, it's there that abortion was legalized-not in Congress or the Executive branch. That makes tort lawyers natural financial and ideological allies of the Democrats.

And it means tort law is loathed by Republicans. They prefer corporate attorneys, fictive financiers, land speculators, and so-called entrepreneurs, who in fact rely on the military and the government buying and subsidizing weapons, drugs, and minerals.

In voting terms, the vast majority of states are already decided. California and New York, the wealth-producing and knowledge-generating centers of the country, are full of cosmopolitans, migrants, and unionists. They vote Democrat.

By contrast, most southern and several western states are full of people dependent on land-grabbed wealth or the military. The country's largest employer of young people, the Pentagon adorns these solidly Republican regions with massive public expenditure designed to prop up the empire and ensure domestic support.

This type of welfare is vital for the rural working-class white men who oppose the Democrats and, hypocritically, deride the state. Other areas hit hard by de-industrialization, such as parts of the mid-West, remain up for grabs, torn between these tendencies. In addition to such spatial distinctions, women and men are also divided. Women tend to vote Democrat. Men, especially white ones, tend to vote Republican.

And the American Dream?

For James Truslow Adams, the Library of Congress exemplified the dream because of its location at 'the heart of democracy'-a public entity serving the population through freely available knowledge.

Adams ended his book by quoting an impoverished migrant, Mary Antin, perched on the steps of the Boston Public Library. For Antin, its treasures embodied a 'majestic past' and a 'shining future'. Those treasures proliferated across the country over the past century and a half through libraries and universities.

Today, Governor Romney favors slashing public expenditure on higher education. President Obama seeks minor increases. Polling indicates the general public wants to double the tertiary education budget, and make monumental cuts to the Pentagon. But don't hold your breath waiting for these changes, no matter who wins:

Obama is as imperial a President as Romney aspires to be. Both are weak men, tools of the prevailing political economy. They are as vulnerable as they are imperial.

A renewed American dream is possible, if the country rejects the death throes of a global power that reduces corporate and death taxes, redistributes income upwards, and buys off the poor through nationalism.

US residents have seen their Dream turn into a recurring nightmare of loss and fear. They know they must pressure the victor of this election to change direction: to invest in knowledge and disavow empire.