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The American Dream is one of those terms that's often used but rarely defined, to the extent that we take its definition for granted, or at least assume that everyone shares the definition we know.

Growing up in Singapore, I always imagined America as a place where I would enjoy the freedom to define myself and my successes on my own terms. But when I actually arrived in America, I realized this definition was not by any means universal—and more importantly, that ideas like “freedom” and “success” do not exist in a vacuum. In an interconnected society, the American Dream is attained in relation to others.

The American Dream's malleability of definition is nothing new; the concept has constantly evolved over time. Today's definition of the American Dream typically includes some mention of upward mobility. But in the mid-1800s, Henry, Emanuel, and Mayer Lehman immigrated to the United States in pursuit of something simpler: a better life, with better opportunities. In their hometown of Rimpar, Bavaria, the Lehmans had lived under restrictive antisemitic policies. By contrast, in America, Jews could freely live and work while continuing their religious traditions.

The Lehmans came in search of a dream, but they would not have known to call it the American Dream. The first documented use of the term “American Dream” came much later, in 1895; moreover, it only became

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Steerage passengers on an emigrant ship toward America. (German Maritime Museum/Schiffahrtsmuseum Bremerhaven)

popular after James Truslow Adams published *The Epic of America* in 1931. (Adams' publisher actually objected to titling the book *The American Dream*, which further suggests that the term wasn't in vogue then.) That said, even though the Lehmans wouldn't have known the phrase itself, they would surely have understood the idea behind it.

After all, there has never been just one American Dream. There are many American Dreams, each born out of an individual's specific backgrounds and lived experiences. What these American Dreams share in common is a commitment to freedom and individual agency—concepts that lie at the heart of America's creation myth. Other nations were created through involuntary inheritance: you are a citizen by birth, assignment, association, etc. But America came about as a “nation of immigrants”: a nation created by people who chose to be Americans.

To be sure, this narrative is a white supremacist one; for starters, it conveniently erases the violent genocide of Native Americans. But I bring up this narrative not to endorse it, but rather to acknowledge how it has contributed to the enduring appeal of the American Dream. Creation myths aren't powerful because they're true; they're powerful because they provide a foundation, however flawed, for constructing a collective identity.

The other reason the American Dream endures is because it is ambiguous. On one hand, achieving success can be, in practice, uncertain and

challenging; on the other hand, the cost of actually succeeding is often ill-articulated.

For Bavarian Jews like the Lehmans, being in America would radically change their relationship to their cultural and religious identities. In pre-industrial Europe, their Jewish faith would have been defined by strict observance of religious laws and practices. In an increasingly industrialized America, ancestry and shared values would become more important to their Jewish identity than religious observance. The end result is a hyphenated identity, where they are too othered to be just American, and too American to be just Bavarian Jews.

But the cost of the American Dream is not merely confined to the dreamer. The Lehmans' financial legacy was built on labor exploitation. Not only is this kind of exploitation a structural feature of capitalism—a system that America had embraced by 1900—but it is also exacerbated by the reality of market flaws, where large companies have reduced their competition to the extent that they can raise prices (and profits) without comparably increasing their workers' wages. Besides, before 1900, the Lehmans were already building their American Dream on the backs of enslaved Black labor: Henry, Emanuel, and Mayer were not only slaveowners, they were also cotton brokers who profited off the Southern slave trade.

Is the American Dream worth what it costs? The three brothers may initially embody the good intentions behind every individual's American Dream, but the Lehmans' full legacy was only achieved in relation to American society itself. The ideas that created America—from its creation myth to its present-day capitalist structure—are, in reality, a zero-sum game. If every successful American Dream comes at a price, then to determine its worth, we must first ask: just who is paying the price?

Slaves loading cotton bales onto a boat along the Alabama River. (State of Alabama Department of Archives and History)

