

## **AMERICAN DREAM: THE AMERICAN HEGEMONIC CULTURE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS TO THE WORLD**

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### **ABSTRAK**

*Suatu bangsa menjadi besar oleh karena ia mempunyai mimpi-mimpi yang besar pula. Amerika adalah contoh paling bagus tentang hal ini. Melalui perjalanan sejarah yang cukup panjang, bangsa ini berhasil mewujudkan mimpi-mimpinya untuk menjadi penguasa dunia. Berdasarkan hal ini, kita dapat menyatakan bahwa “Mimpi Amerika” adalah salah satu fitur paling signifikan bagi tumbuhnya sebuah budaya “selalu ingin menjadi pemenang” di Amerika Serikat. Budaya inilah yang di kalangan para ahli Pengkajian Amerika di sebut sebagai “budaya hegemonik” di mana norma, nilai dan praktek budaya Amerika dianggap sebagai yang paling unggul di seluruh dunia. Globalisasi budaya menjadi mesin paling efektif untuk menyebarluaskan seluruh nilai budaya Amerika dan menentukan peradaban global. Melalui pendekatan American Studies, tulisan ini mencoba untuk mengulas sejauh mana Amerika Serikat dengan “Mimpi Amerika” nya tersebut berhasil melakukan proses Amerikanisasi, serta bagaimana budaya hegemonik tersebut telah mempengaruhi banyak kehidupan umat manusia di seluruh dunia melalui budaya populer.*

**Kata Kunci:** *Amerikanisasi, American Studies, budaya hegemonik, budaya populer, globalisasi budaya, mimpi Amerika*

### **ABSTRACT**

A nation could be a great one as long as it has a great dream. The best example for this is America. Through its long history, it manages to realize a dream to be a superpower. It can be said that “American Dream” is one of the most significant features for the growth of a “constantly eyeing for winner” culture. American Studies experts call it as a “hegemonic culture” in which American norms, values and cultural practices are considered superior against the world culture. Globalizing the culture has been the most effective engine to spread American cultural values and to shape the global civilizations. Using American Studies perspective, this paper attempts to review the extent to which the “American Dream” has successfully established Americanization, as well as how the hegemonic culture has influenced the lives of peoples across the world in the form of popular culture.

**Keywords:** Americanization, American dream, American Studies, cultural globalization, hegemonic culture, popular culture

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## INTRODUCTION

American dream on American Studies has long been an innermost element of America's cultural understanding. Dream for many Americans is an integral part of their own identity and it has vital functions within American culture. America is said to be a "... *dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone*" (Adams, 1931:404).

The spirit of the dream has been set in the American mind since the early days of America as a new nation. It is easy to understand why it was stated in the draft of the Declaration of Independence of the United States. When Richard Henry Lee proposed a resolution for the freedom of the thirteen American colonies the Continental Congress on June 7, 1776, the Congress appointed John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Robert R. Livingston, and Roger Sherman to draft a Declaration of Independence. The opening clauses of the second paragraph become the key to the Declaration of Independence, which illustrated the American dream. It says:

*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 dream can also be traced from the statements of prominent people living in the early America. A French writer Alexis de Tocqueville, upon his visit to the country in 1831, asserted that America was an exceptional nation with a special role to play in history (Bossy, 2011). It expresses American identity that America is 'second to none in the world' both as a nation and as a culture, from which *American exceptionalism* is derived (Crockatt, 2007).

This idealism characterizes American strong desire to equalize her own history to the history of the New World, i.e., above all the nations as the commandment of the Lord (Madsen, 2010). A Puritan leader John Winthrop also declared *America as a City upon a Hill* in 1620 projecting it as a

world model country, center for world civilization which plays a big role in human history (Minderop, 2006).

The dream, according to Minderop (2006), has inspired the nation in building the international relation. It is in line with James Truslow Adams (1931) who introduced the term firstly in 1931, as he wrote:

*That dream or hope has been present from the start. Ever since we became an independent nation, each generation has seen an uprising of ordinary Americans to save that dream from the forces which appeared to be overwhelming it* (Cullen, 2003:4).

The above statements show that success becomes the key value of American dream, and the dream is similar with the *hope of success* and *victory*. These features come into American mindset and develop a specific culture of North American, which is then called as a hegemonic culture. It can be seen as the main reason of the birth of the United States of America as a world superpower. As stated by Mann, the hegemonic ideas and actions, in fact, have driven America to be a country serving as an imperial power, not only as a continental empire (1783-1883) and hemispheric empire (1898-1941) but also a global empire since 1945 up to the 2000s (Mann, 2008).

As a world superpower the United States has the ability to establish preferences of others. According to Nye Jr. the ability is called soft power or the ability to entice and attract which tends to be associated with intangible power resources such as attractive culture, ideology, and institutions. The values of democracy, personal freedom, upward mobility, and openness that are often expressed in American popular culture such as film affect the preference of others (2002:9-11).

In this respect, a thinker Antonio Gramsci has long understood and highlighted the cultural aspects of consumption or reception, as well as investigated the importance of the cultural production or how they are produced. In short, hegemony refers to the central system of practices, meanings, and values that are experienced as practices and appear

reciprocally confirming (Juan Jr, 2002:296). It requires subordination of other group to the ruler of the system (Pramono, 2013:153) and tends to lead others to accept its cultural meaning, value and products in their lives.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

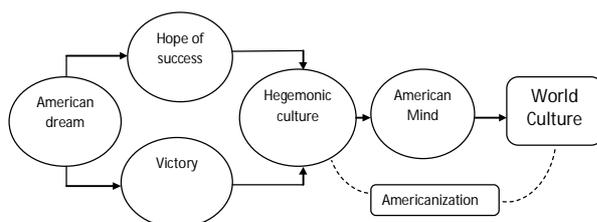
The American dream is a starting point and the main analysis in this paper. The dream is traditionally understood as an American myth to have success, fame and wealth through hard work and thrift. In this paper, the writer will analyze two key characters of the American myth, — *hope of success* and *victory* — to describe the American dream as discourse materials.

The hegemonic culture in this paper is defined as “a set of values, beliefs, ideas and cultural practices that are always willing to dominate, defeat and manage other cultures within the circle of its power.” This meaning relates to and is based upon the new perspective of American Studies, which developed critically to explore the US culture and discuss American role in a changing world order (Fluck, Brandt, and Thaler, 2007:1).

When the American hegemonic culture comes to the world, it automatically brings the American mind. It can be found in many varying degrees. For the sake of studying the cultural hegemony, this paper puts it in the scope of Americanization, which points to the United States as a purveyor of world culture models.

The causal linkages among these components are displayed in Picture 1.

**Picture 1**  
**The Implication of American Hegemonic Culture Design**



This paper sets out to investigate the causal linkage among the American dream as the antecedent variable, the hegemonic culture as the intervening one, and the world culture as the consequent one.

## HEGEMONIC CULTURE IN AMERICAN STUDIES

The term ‘*hegemonic culture*’ has been used in some works of the American Studies experts, such as West (1982), Jacquemond (1992), Cherniavsky (1996), Wood (2001), Murphy (2003), Bronner and Kellner (1983) and Rojas (2005), which specifically focused on the cultural aspects of the hegemony. Pease (2007:108) explained that “*the founders of American studies as an academic discipline or interdiscipline reappropriated the term in the 1930s in an effort to portray the United States as destined to perform a special role in the world of nations.*” This happened when “*the new societies in the nineteenth century looked to the United States as a prototype... because they viewed it as the first, the largest, and the most advanced among freshly emerging yet diverse cultures*” (Kammen, 1993: 4).

West (1982:119), for example, observed that the hegemonic culture encourages people to identify themselves with the habit, sensibilities, and world views supportive of the status quo and the class interests that dominate it. According to West, a hegemonic culture is “a culture successful in persuading people to ‘consent’ to their oppression and exploitation.” It always performs itself as a champion in any battle.

The success of the hegemonic culture to persuade others also depends on how it constructs the meaning. Jacquemond (1992:139-158) summarized four conditions as follows: (a) a dominated culture will invariably translate far more of a hegemonic culture than the latter will of the former, (b) When a hegemonic culture does translate works produced by the dominated culture, those works will be perceived and presented as difficult, mysterious, inscrutable, esoteric, and as requiring a small cadre of intellectuals to interpret them, while a dominated culture will translate a

hegemonic culture's works with a view to easy accessibility for the masses, (c) a hegemonic culture will only translate those works by authors in a dominated culture that fit into the former's preconceived notions of the latter, and (d) authors in a dominated culture thriving for a larger audience will tend to write for translation into a hegemonic language, and this will require some degree of compliance with stereotypes.

In the hegemonic culture, the Western values, consumption patterns and way of life spread around the world through a number of strong influence channels of globalization (for example: trade, tourism, cultural exchanges, print and electronic mass media, a partnership or alliance). This process is believed to bring the impact of changes in the mindset and culture of social life resulting in homogenization of the world, a flat, globalized world (Kroenig and Ratner, 2007).

### **CULTURAL GLOBALIZATION: THE ENGINE OF AMERICAN DREAM**

It is exactly true that the United States as the world superpower takes advantages of the moment of globalization. As the growth of worldwide networks of interdependence, globalization has several dimensions which are indeed dominated today by activities based in Wall Street, Silicon Valley, and Hollywood (Nye, Jr., 2002:79). Cultural globalization, to the full extent, is the effective engine for expanding the American dream around the world. It has become a very powerful weapon to force the poor and developing countries into the range of cultures, markets and power of America (Mishkin, 2006:131). It can also be identified as the process of Americanization or "being American". It has been seen as an aspect of the nature of imperialism (Tomlinson, 1997:174).

The worldwide spread and dominance of American consumer culture and products has been complained by many nations. They claim that their local cultural traditions and values are eroded by American mind. Thus, the issue of cultural imperialism raises both questions of cultural

identity and government policy (Rauschenberger, 2003:1-2).

American dream is the content of the cultural globalization. It is expressed in many ways of popular culture, such as movie, food, fashion, sport, literature etc. The power of American products is "*easy to shift production to low-wage, high-repression areas of the world....and...easy to play off one immobile national labor force against another*" (Chomsky, 1994:305). Those products are potential to be American imperial power.

In relation to the imperial power, as expressed by the dominance of American cinema, the first thing to note is the achievement and strong dominance of the production, distribution and demand for American films. Moretti (2001:90-103) calculates that "*between 1986 and 1995 only four non-American films enjoyed a large international success*". He also noted that the American domination of world cinema at the end of the twentieth century have in common with the novel dominance era of European colonialism in the nineteenth century.

One phenomenon of globalization which brings cultural resonance and getting lots of attention from the public, activists, observers and experts of culture is '*the McDonaldization*', an idea that is considered useful to describe many things ranging from religion, the university and museums. Drane (1998), for example, argued that Church in America has been *McDonaldized* in the sense that it develops homogenized and rigidly structured culture. He called it as "*a McDonaldized way of being church*." A surprising poll indicated that almost all American children were familiar with Ronald McDonald after Santa Claus in name recognition.

McDonaldization has also influenced the higher education system. Ritzer (1996) put the idea of Weber's rationalization into McDonald as the main features adopted by higher education management. "*This adoption of business management and marketing principles by academia has placed faculty under growing pressure to be*

*more accountable and more productive, to maintain longer office hours, to assume greater teaching loads, to publish more, to compete for grants, and to submit to posttenure review,”* wrote Quinn (2000:249). Overall, it is *“the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as of the rest of the world,”* said Ritzer (2004:4).

*McDonaldization* clearly brought new cultural values for Asians, especially on the model of business organization, style of consumption and consumerism. It is the process by which the principles of fast-food restaurant comes to dominate more sectors of American society and world society (Ritzer, 1993:1), and because fast food, style of dress, entertainment, and the language of the West brought hidden cultural communication about values which are considered more important in the aspect of morality, identity and life (Marsella, 2005:3).

The spread of American dream to the rest of the world has been also supported by television network with various information and entertainment programs to introduce a taste of American popular culture. In 2001, the most popular TV show in the world is “The Bold and the Beautiful,” with 500 million viewers in 98 countries (Blakley, J. 2001:5). In 1996, a survey of “*New World Teen Study*” conducted by DMB & B’s Brain Waves division, found that of the 26,700 middle-class teens in forty-five countries surveyed, 85 percent watch MTV every day (Galeota, 2004:23).

Hollywood, MTV and McDonald are three icons among other cultural agents of the American dream. They have created the way other people feel and taste; and more than that is the way to dream. Its message is very clear: you should go to America as a dream island or at least keep American fantasy into your dream. Many adults and teens around the world imitate American life-style as directed by the cultural globalization agents. So it is obviously a strategy to generate demand for American products with the economic interest of the same country (Mackay, 2004:61).

The cultural globalization brings obvious advantages for American popularity in the hearts of people around the world. According to Hubert Vedrine and Dominique Moisi in Nye, Jr. (2002:78), Americans get great benefits from globalization for a large number of reasons: because of their economic size; because globalization takes place in their language; because it is organized along neoliberal economic principles; because they impose their legal, accounting, and technical practices; and because they are advocates of individualism. The benefit of cultural globalization for maintaining American hegemonic culture is also stated briefly in Ssenyonga’s following expression (2006) *“... Globalization has the ability to alter much more than just the movies or food consumed by a society. And the results can be powerfully positive, devastatingly negative, or (more often) something in between.”*

#### **AMERICANIZATION: WHEN AMERICAN DREAM CHANGES THE WORLD**

Indeed, the message implied by the American dream has changed many people of the rest of the world, especially in the third world. Bush Senior, for example, described it precisely:

*“America is not just the nation, but an idea, alive in the mind of people everywhere..... This nation, this idea called America, was and always will be a new world—our new world.”*

No matter how poor the people are, the way of their life has been Americanized. In this respect, Oha (2008:70) clearly described:

*“Americanization is mainly a transformation of cultural identity, which may result from an admiration of American civilization and subjectivity or from a circumstantial imperative to conform to American lifestyle so as to benefit more meaningfully from what America offers. The first case mainly applies to individuals outside the U.S., who may want to reinvent their identities with the assumption that the American is the new, desirable citizen of the world. The second, on the other hand, seems to apply mainly to individuals who have already found themselves under U.S. influence*

*and have no choice but to accept American norms of behavior.”*

Oha further explains that Americanization is a result of admiration which is continuously injected by the American dream to the people. Luxuries, glamour, heroism, freedom, and so on, are the goods sold in the dream. Here is a little illustration as written by Friedman, Alice T. (2010):

*In a recent interview at his Miami Beach home, Lapidus emphasized to me a point that he frequently makes in his writings: had learned a great deal from the movies about what luxury and glamour might look like and how they might be staged. Mansions filled with antiques, statues made of ebony and gold, jeweled tiaras and blazing chandeliers—these were the stuff of Hollywood dreams.*

In this case, the concept of glamour as pictured in Hollywood films has been developed as a professional reference for American designers. “Miami” has been a commodity for Hollywood movie makers to sell the luxurious image. A film made by Ian Flemming entitled *Goldfinger* (released in 1964) took Floridiana Hotel in Miami as “*the perfect setting for a gathering of American millionaires and secret agents, gamblers, gangsters, hitmen and prostitutes,*” (Flemming, Ian. 2002:26-27).

Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau (2013) claimed that “*overnight visitors to Greater Miami and the Beaches increased +3.5% to a record-breaking 13.9 million overnight visitors in 2012 fueled by a +5.2% increase to a record 6.8 million international visitors and an increase of +1.8% to a record 7.1 million domestic visitors.*” This great number of the international visitors to Miami should be linked with the image of Miami as *Alpha-World City* after being ranked as “America’s Cleanest City” in 2008 by *Forbes* magazine. Hence, it can be said that the interest of the visitors are actually not only for holiday, but also for cultural visit, that is to see the luxury style of America. The movie-maker has taken so many advantages from this reality.

Besides luxury, American dream also expresses the excitement to be a hero. Winckler (2003:6) defines it as the one “who confronts extraordinary adversaries and also superhuman difficulties to save his life or someone’s life or to defend universal values.” The hero is a manifestation of American dream as a belief that America is the Chosen People to inherit the leadership for saving the world.

In the *Golden Age* of comics, -from 1938 when *Superman* was firstly introduced to 1961, when the *Fantastic Four* was created- American comics creators expressed the hero in the ideas of independence, autonomy, certainty, supremacy, and cultural hegemony (Mills, A. 2013:23). These heroes then emerged in Hollywood industry and hit record box offices in the world.

A fantasy to be an undefeated creature clearly represents the American dream stuck into many world citizens. In Japan, the American fantasy has influenced the *manga* (the Japanese comic book) and the anime (the Japanese animated film). One of the famous *mangaka* (manga writer) is Masakazu Katsura, who was influenced by an even more famous American Superhero: ‘Batman’. In Indonesia, *Penerbit Bumi Langit* published Harya Suramita’s comics in 1970s. Suramita introduced *Gundala Putra Petir, Godam, Maza, Pangeran Mlaar, Kalong and Labah-labah Merah* as Indonesian heroes which are adapted from American comics.

American hero as reflected in films is really symbolizing American victory. Therefore a superhero always depicts the one who possesses power to save human life. As a consequence of its winning in the Cold War, America becomes “the World’s only Superpower”, and therefore, Hollywood superhero characters are also intentionally created to promote the messages of the American world role. They act as if America had a right to utilize its dream to build American-based world culture. This is what we call as “*the American mind*”, a declaration of the height of

the American culture and nation. By accepting the American mind, the world culture will hopefully embrace American cultural dominance with no reserve.

However, the spirit to be a problem solver especially in human destiny has a positive effect to children. An interesting study conducted by Dr. Brian Wansink, Dr. Mitsuru Shimizu, and Guido Camps (2012) found that children who identified admirable models such as Batman or Spiderman would consume healthier fast food choices. Inspired by the spirit to be a problem solver, a coaching clinic in Jakarta shared “*Petualangan si Hebring*” with parents to use comics as reading material for children character development (Kidzania, 2011).

## CONCLUSION

There is no idea more fully symbolic of American cultural idealism than the American dream, which has, time after time, expressed the paradigmatic structure for national and individual achievement in the United States. Understanding its prevalence in popular discourse is the way to catch the essence of American national character. It considers the nation as a Chosen People to rule and save the world.

American Studies learns that the United States has used cultural globalization to spread the dream through popular culture. The culture has effectively influenced the way people on earth live. The American cultural dominance has been accepted in a smooth process, so that it has maintained the American power around the world. *Hope of success* and *victory* are the main icons of the American dream for the emergence of the hegemonic power.

After all, Indonesians can take a very good lesson from this case: that our children should be brave to keep their dream in order to develop our state as a great country. It is very wise to adapt the dream in the positive side as well as to filter the negative one to our nation. Preventing children from the wide spread of the negative impacts of American culture is inevitable for parents and other institutions.

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