

ing collective effort that has revitalized American society as a whole in ways that range from more eclectic restaurant cuisine to better legal protections.

Nowhere has this collective effort been more obvious than in the American academy, where for the last twenty-five years a large body of scholarship has explored the ways various Americans have struggled with—and, in happier cases, overcome—legacies of racial, ethnic, sexual, and other forms of discrimination. Taken as a whole, this work has not only sharpened our national awareness in ways that even the most dedicated conservative cannot ignore, but has also broadened the prospects for new generations of Americans who may enjoy a greater sense of possibility—what Renu calls “independence”—than their predecessors.

But for a variety of reasons that relate to these developments, as well as resistance to them, many Americans of all varieties believe themselves to be living in a time of social fragmentation. One can't help but wonder whether the nation can be infinitely elastic and can incorporate people and traditions that are not necessarily democratic, or even pluralistic. In such a time, it may be useful—actually, it may be essential—that the skeptic of diversity as well as the true believer identify and seek to strengthen, any sense of truly shared ground.

In writing this book, I hoped to show that the American Dream has functioned as shared ground for a very long time, binding together people who may have otherwise little in common and may even be hostile to one another. Which is not to say that the Dream should be uncritically upheld as a kind of miracle glue. Indeed, I have also hoped to show that all too often it serves as a form of lazy shorthand, particularly on the part of those who use it to ignore, or even consciously obscure, real divisions in American society.

Instead, what I would hope is that the American Dream could serve as a rigorous standard that we can use to ask a series of searching questions. What does it really mean, for example, to leave no child behind? How have we defined equality in our everyday lives, and are widely accepted terms like “equality of opportunity” more than empty abstractions? What is the price of any given American Dream, and who pays it? Are some dreams better than others? To ask, and begin to answer, such questions can transform the Dream from a passive token of national identity to a powerful instrument of national reform and revitalization.

“What happens to a dream deferred?” asked the great American poet Langston Hughes in his oft-cited 1951 poem “Harlem.” The problem, he suggests, is that when dreams deferred are perceived as dreams denied, an explosion may erupt, one that will blow away living as well as dead aspirations. In an age when the American Dream still seems alive, even well, his troubling question remains as insistent as ever. The survival of our society depends on addressing it seriously, and addressing it seriously requires a willingness to work with the energy of a Puritan. This is a job for all of us. Not even the best child care can spare us the exertion.