CHAPTER 9

Dreams, Class, and Opportunity at the *Fin de Siècle* and Beyond

One of the more compelling books written about the American Dream was first published, and then refined in successive editions, in the 1990s. Steven Messner’s (and, now, Messner and Rosenfeld’s) *Crime and the American Dream* (2007) adopted, revised, and reinvigorated Robert Merton’s (1938) paper on anomie theory by further developing its theoretical focus on the role of institutions in contributing to the criminogenic tendencies within the American Dream. Widely considered an important contribution within criminological theory, Messner and Rosenfeld’s argument has a number of implications for our more general consideration of the meaning of the American Dream.

Briefly, Messner and Rosenfeld accept Merton’s premise that excessive emphasis on success goals in American society and a correspondingly lesser emphasis on the legitimate means to achieve those goals leads to deviance, one form of which is crime. Moreover, Messner and Rosenfeld acknowledge Merton’s observation that opportunities to achieve economic goals within the USA are unequally distributed. Forced to compete, many do not have the wherewithal to compete successfully. Thus, the pressure to succeed—which universally applies to everyone under the theory of “equal opportunity”—meets with the limits of a social structure that cannot possibly deliver success for everyone. This is the “strain” that leads to crime (2007:57–59). Finally, Merton believed that “success” in American culture becomes dominated by the logic of the marketplace and therefore defined in pecuniary terms. Money is not merely a medium of exchange.
to the American mind but is accorded a special place by American culture: it is so highly sought after it becomes the metric—or measurement—for success (2007:70). Messner and Rosenfeld’s distinctive contribution to Merton’s theory is to suggest it is not only the strength of the cultural admonition to succeed at all costs that produces deviance but also the weakness of institutional controls. The fact that American institutions only weakly constrain nonnormative behavior facilitates deviation from legitimate means of achievement. In shorthand, this means that in a well-balanced, functioning society, political, familial, religious, and educational institutions will place constraints on the economic drive for unrestrained monetary success; when these institutions are weak, the failure of political, familial, religious, and educational controls will permit the American Dream, defined as an exaggerated emphasis on achieving material success, to permit individuals to seek success in any way they can (2007:74–87). The weakened American social structure thus imposes no limits on the runaway cultural imperative to succeed at any cost.

The above synopsis is altogether too brief and unreflective of the nuances of Messner and Rosenfeld’s insightful addendum to Merton’s (1938) anomie theory. It does permit us to make some observations useful to our goal of better understanding of the nature of the American Dream. Messner and Rosenfeld’s re-examination of Merton’s work leads them to affirm the critical role that individualism plays in our culture in supporting the success ethic embedded in the conventional, achievement-oriented American Dream. As Messner and Rosenfeld phrase it, “This obsession with the individual when combined with the strong achievement orientation of American culture…[and]…[t]he intense individual competition to succeed pressures people to disregard normative restraints on behavior” (2007:69). It is merely another way of saying that in American society, self-interest is given priority over virtually any form of shared or social interest, whether in the family or any other institution. Second, Messner and Rosenfeld’s recognition of the weakness of our institutions, and the contradictory messages our culture communicates, will help us understand some later analysts’ approaches to the American Dream and the sort of policy recommendations they offer. Thus, Messner and Rosenfeld criticize the lack of family support our country offers even though the USA is rhetorically committed to “family values.” As they point out, family leave, job sharing, flexible work schedules, employer-provided child care, and numerous other policies and practices one could name are decidedly less common and available in the USA in comparison with other First