WE All FEEL drawn to the “American Dream.” For millions, immigrants especially, the phrase has evoked the full promise of the United States. What it means exactly, though, has shifted significantly over the years, and that accordion-like expansiveness has only increased its usefulness. Like a utility player on a baseball team, it’s a slogan that can play nearly any position, helping writers, politicians, activists, and academics talk about ways our society builds expectations — and occasionally delivers on them.

But there can be a downside to a phrase that tries too hard, and in his new book, “Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis,” Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam ultimately turns the notion on its head, arguing that the dream has become “a split-screen American nightmare.” In Putnam’s hands, the phrase lingers as a jab to conscience, a reminder that we can do better — and often have.

The man credited with first crafting the “American Dream” had, in some ways, lived it out himself. James Truslow Adams’s story was not one of rags to riches, but he did reinvent himself mid-career, becoming a writer after an unfulfilling stint in finance. Ironically, however, Adams’s new life landed the inventor of an all-inclusive phrase as a specialist in a very cloistered niche, the Colonial history of New England, for most of his writing years. There he seemed a familiar type: the antique New Englander...
writing about New England antiquity.

That was not a type normally given to wild-eyed celebrations of immigration, especially in the 1920s. At the time, the trial of Italian anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti had awakened intense local controversy, admissions quotas were widely in place at local universities, and prominent Bostonians dominated a national organization, the Immigration Restriction League, whose purpose was all too clear from its name.

But Adams routinely defied expectations. Indeed, this seeming Yankee was not a Yankee at all, but a Brooklynite — with a Venezuelan grandmother to boot. As Adams wrote his acclaimed histories of New England, he did it in a way that subtly recast the familiar story, teasing out democratic elements that were not always in the earlier versions.

Adams was not, at first blush, much of a dreamer. A sober young man, he dutifully found work on Wall Street, but in 1912, having made his pile, he abruptly quit to pursue his passions. Surprisingly, they were extensive. Near the end of World War I, he answered a call to public service and served the peace commission doing the painstaking work of preparing maps for the post-war settlement. (He would later advocate for the inclusion of maps in the discipline of history.)

In the 1920s, Adams circled back to the beginnings of America’s global might, which he located in the first settlement of New England. The time and place were well known, but he found a way to enliven them, with some emphasis on the backsliders who did not fit squarely into the Harvard-centric version of New England’s past. Specifically, he did not disparage Rhode Island and New Hampshire — as so many earlier historians had — and even found much to praise there, including a higher level of religious freedom and a strong democratic ethos that often resisted Boston’s demands. His approach would eventually be called social history, and find favor later in the 20th century, even if he was a bit too rarefied to be completely at home with the raffish elements he celebrated.

Adams’s books were a critical and popular success. In 1921, he won the Pulitzer Prize for “The Founding of New England,” the first in a trilogy of New England histories. He never strayed far from this region, eventually moving to Southport, Conn., and creating some confusion by writing about the Adams family, to which he was not related.
But his own family was interesting enough, particularly the fact that his father was born in Caracas. That strand of DNA must have helped. Unlike some peers, he saw economic and social factors as essential to the story and disdained the traditional emphasis on Puritans fleeing persecution. In other words, he saw the earliest New Englanders as immigrants, seeking their version of the American Dream. He created a precedent for the New England historians to come who would celebrate immigration as vital to the American experience — Arthur M. Schlesinger Sr., Oscar Handlin, Bernard Bailyn, and John F. Kennedy, among others.

In 1931, amid the Great Depression, Adams wrote another bestseller, “The Epic of America,” published in Boston by Little, Brown. This was the launch pad for the immortal quote. In a burst of democratic enthusiasm, he praised “the American dream, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement.”

Adams was careful to separate the dream from mere prosperity — it was not a “a dream of motor cars and high wages,” but “a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.” It was a dream that could not exist in the older parts of the world, with their class structures, but needed, by definition, to be available “for the simple human being of any and every class.”

Other New Englanders in other centuries had said similar things — John Winthrop’s “City upon a Hill,” though that was more a collective than an individual dream, or Benjamin Franklin’s relentless schemes for self-advancement. But Adams improved upon them with a succinctness that fit the 20th century.

Like any great expression, it has enjoyed a life of its own — wildly beyond the expectations of its creator, and often beyond his specific instructions as well. Despite his attempts to define it carefully, the American Dream has been identified with wealth, over and over again, by marketers, media, and the masses. Brian De Palma’s 1983 film “Scarface,” in which Al Pacino portrays a murderous drug dealer in Miami, included the tagline, “He loved the American Dream. With a vengeance.” Donald Trump often attacks
antipoverty programs for destroying the American Dream. But getting it so wrong is, in a way, a tribute to the idea’s hold on our imagination.

Thankfully, it has also been beautifully reinterpreted in a way that keeps its higher meaning alive. No one spoke more hauntingly about the American Dream than Martin Luther King Jr., a New Englander by education and a keen student of American history. In his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” and then, more famously, in his great oration at the Lincoln Memorial, he couched the dream of African-American equality inside the broad story that Adams had first painted. As he said, “It is a dream deeply rooted in the American Dream.”

Today, the phrase still holds resonant possibilities for politicians on both sides of the aisle. As he sought the presidency, Barack Obama often urged his followers to “reclaim the American Dream.” But Republicans love it, too — this August, a “Defending the American Dream Summit” will take place in Columbus, Ohio, where Ted Cruz, Rand Paul, Rick Perry, and Mike Pence will defend the American Dream by attacking Barack Obama. On rare occasions, the American Dream is even bipartisan, as when Orrin Hatch and Richard Durbin introduced legislation for the Dream Act in 2001, a bill to facilitate immigration. That bill is still pending but unlikely to pass in a Republican-controlled Senate.

As we approach yet another presidential election, we can expect “the American Dream” to once again be up for grabs. Especially since so many Americans today feel disconnected from it. A number of recent polls and media studies have indicated a drastically flagging confidence in the dream. That loss of optimism and opportunity, so contrary to our character, lies at the center of Robert Putnam’s depressing, mesmerizing
new study. If the American Dream is defined by educational access, or upward mobility, or homeownership, then it’s true, we are in some trouble.

In 2000, Americans were second in the world in the proportion of adults with a college degree; we are now fifth and dropping. Income inequality is greater in the United States than anywhere else in the developed world. Recent studies by the Pew Charitable Trusts, asking whether the American Dream is still viable, confirm significant numbers of respondents feel it is not, with low levels of confidence in the future, heavy dependence on part-time work, and inadequate savings. In a 2013 survey by the polling firm YouGov, 41 percent of respondents said it is impossible for most to achieve the American Dream (38 percent disagreed). It is hardly comforting to learn that the “Chinese dream” — or “Zhongguó mèng” in Mandarin — has been on the rise since 2013, linked to President Xi Jinping and his frequent speeches about prosperity and sustainable development.

Could it be the moment for a new phrase? The timing might be right. It was another time of frustration — 1931, at the height of the Depression — that led to the rise of Adams’s egalitarian quote. Adams did not especially approve of FDR and the New Deal, but it didn’t matter, the idea matched the time. It would have been hard to find a less likely source than the prim historian of Colonial New England. But somehow it worked, because so many of America’s themes had been worked out here, in miniature. The dream comes from many parts of the United States — it would not be American if it did not. But to a surprising degree, this tiny corner has often come up with the best slogans.

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