

HAMILTON

AN AMERICAN DREAM

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“Rise up!” - it is a phrase, and theme, repeated throughout Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton: An American Musical*. In the nearly four-minute-long opening number, “Alexander Hamilton,” listeners understand they are about to embark on a journey that is the embodiment of the American Dream. For the next three hours, the listener follows Miranda down the rabbit hole that was Hamilton’s life,¹ and the audience feeds off the rags to riches story of this young, scrappy, and hungry² individual rising to the height of one of George Washington’s most trusted aides.

If one took *Hamilton* at face value, they’d believe the American patriot came from absolute obscurity, and through his superhuman work ethic wrote his way out³ of his circumstances, and the West Indies. While he was mainly self-taught - due to illegitimate birth he was not admitted to the church’s school - Hamilton did receive tutoring which wasn’t something available to just anyone. He also worked with Beekman and Cruger, a trading company, as an errand boy, and eventually was able to rise up to be a clerk, (Newton, 2015, 46). Hamilton was unhappy in this position, writing to a friend he “would willingly risk (his) life... to exalt (his) Station,” and “I wish there was a war,”⁴ because, in war, one could prove themselves with heroic acts to rise above their social rank or die in glory. In the end, when young Alex was sent to New York to study he went with sugar from his trading company as payment, and letters of recommendation from his employers who were New Yorkers originally. This gave him a huge leg up when

¹ Sort of. *Hamilton: An American Musical* is a work of historical fiction, with a lot of creative license taken.

² Reference to the track “My Shot”.

³ Reference to the track “Hurricane”.

⁴ Letter from Hamilton to childhood friend, Edward Stevens, who was in New York.

applying to Queens College (Princeton), and later Kings College (Columbia). The musical covers half of this story, the rest is not mentioned which follows the movement known as Founder's Chic.

H.W. Brands first coined this historiography in a 2003 issue of *The Atlantic*. Brands argued that in revering the Founders, people undervalue themselves and sabotage their efforts to make improvements in their republican experiment. Love for the Founders could leave one to abandon, or betray, the principles they fought for.⁵ Founder's Chic glorifies, and it glosses over the rough and messy edges of the colonial elite who played a role in the making of America. As Brands stated "the Founders were anything but demigods," yet the early American people were quick to treat them as such then by celebrating Washington's birthday, or attending his levees - like one would do for a King. In the past fifteen years, America has turned to Founders Chic, again.

A version of Founder's Chic can be found whenever the nation appears divided, like after the Civil War - which was also around the time of the country's centennial. When America is torn Americans look to the Founders, whose writings shaped their home, for inspiration of unification. It is fitting, then, that this term came around in the early 2000's, on the heels of September 11th, as historians like Joseph Ellis, David McCullough, and Ron Chernow were writing about Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Alexander Hamilton, respectively. In 2015 as tensions rose from increasing reports of police brutality and xenophobia, *Hamilton: An American Musical* hit the stages in New

⁵ From *The Atlantic*.

York City, not only giving the public the chance to relate to the Founders again but putting an immigrant's story at the forefront.

This desire to understand the Founders was undoubtedly a contributing factor to *Hamilton's* success. Not only did the musical about the framers of the country debut in a time of turmoil, but it also framed the framers in a contemporary way. Miranda said in an interview with CBS Sunday Morning that *Hamilton* "is the story of America then, told by America now"⁶ which explains the mash-up of traditional colonial garbs and contemporary hair and make-up. In the same interview, Miranda said he saw the hip-hop narrative in Chernow's biography on Hamilton. "The hip-hop narrative is writing your way out of your circumstance. All my favorite hip-hop songs are really good musical theater 'I Want' songs... 'I want to get somewhere else; I want to get my corner in the sky.'"⁷ Therefore, *Hamilton* is not only typical of Founders Chic but typical of musical theater, as well.

Seeing this common thread between hip-hop and history is why it made sense in Miranda's mind to write *Hamilton* as a predominantly hip-hop musical. Doing so also contributes to the musical's success, since now not only are the Founders looking vaguely similar to people one could see on the street, they are acting the way one would expect an entertainer to in the modern age. This takes them out of the dusty old history books, and out of dry high school classes, and places these larger than life figures in front of the audience, and both sides look and sound alike. It gives the audience the impression that Hamilton could jump off the stage and have a

⁶ Interview with CBS Sunday Morning

⁷ Interview with CBS Sunday Morning

conversation with them easily, commiserating with the average citizen about the endless uphill climb.⁸ It brings the Founders back to life; it makes them rise up. Additionally, as historian and Yale professor Joanne Freeman wrote for *Slate Magazine*, “*Hamilton* smooths over (Hamilton’s personal) inconsistencies, and for good reason. Hamilton’s striving, hungry spirit is the play’s heart and soul; it speaks to the present. His realpolitik qualms and fears dilute that message.”

Hamilton’s quest to not throw away his shot⁹ resonates with everyone. In every life, there are always opportunities one does not want to miss out on, especially if they are working on their own hustle.¹⁰ The word “hustle” evokes the sense of franticness, desperation, and a little aggressiveness, and it definitely comes to play in *Hamilton*. Our hero has nothing to lose, something to prove,¹¹ and refuses to take a break¹² opting instead to work relentlessly as if he will never be satisfied.¹³ The exhibited drive of ambition in *Hamilton* goes hand-in-hand with the American Dream, that if one just works hard enough anything is within reach - including social mobility.

A desire for social mobility shows there is a lack of equality, and that there is a class conflict, which brings us to Marxism. After all, there would be no need for mobility - or the American Dream ideology - if people were content wherever they found themselves. Arthur Berger in the *Media Analysis Techniques* defined ideology as “any

⁸ Reference to the track “Wait For It”

⁹ Reference to the track “My Shot”

¹⁰ “Hustle” is a 21st century slang term that is not necessarily a negative word, like the traditional meaning of scam. Today, the term means working desperately to achieve what one is after, whether that is to make ends meet or to reach a far off dream. See its’ use in *The Hamilton Mixtape* during the first verse of “My Shot (Rise Up Remix)”.

¹¹ Reference to the track “Wait For It”

¹² Reference to the track “Take A Break”

¹³ Reference to the track “Satisfied”

system of logically coherent and widely applicable sociopolitical beliefs,” (Berger, 2014, 44). Berger also wrote, “the ideas” - or ideologies - “of a given age are those promulgated and popularized by the ruling class in its own interest. Generally speaking then, the ideas people have are those the ruling class wants them to have,” (44). In short, according to Marxists, ideologies are spread by those in power, to keep their elevated social status and not have those below them question the status quo. Berger notes that “the mass media and popular culture are centrally important in the spread of false consciousness, in leading people to believe that ‘whatever is, is right,’” (44). In countries with capitalism, like America, the theory of false consciousness is key because if everyone is free and equal, then everyone has an equal opportunity to rise up - and if one does not rise, it is due to their personal fault, not the fault of the system or those in power.

After the Civil War, with the first resurgence of glorifying America’s Founders, Horatio Alger published over one-hundred books, following the, now cliché, rags to riches story model. These targeted young, working-class men and featured protagonists that struggled through adversity to gain notoriety. It does not seem to be a coincidence then that these were published when the nation was looking back to founding documents like The Declaration of Independence, which famously states “all men are created equal” (US, 1776) after reading President Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address in 1863. Even if writer Thomas Jefferson did not intend for *all* Americans to be unequivocally equal, the words used matter, and it became a banner of the country that people still wave and strive towards presently. In the mid-19th century, when Alger was

publishing his work, full equality was far from realized which could inspire resentment from the lower social classes. The solution, then, comes from this narrative of working one's way up.

The term "American Dream" was not officially coined until 1931 by historian James Truslow Adams, during another period of strife in American history. Adams wrote "life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement... (it is) a dream of 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," (Adams, 1931, 214-215). This echoes the unfulfilled promises, and false consciousness perpetuated, of The Declaration of Independence, Alger's stories, and even *Hamilton: An American Musical*.

A crucial element to *Hamilton*, besides the rising from "nothing" narrative, is the fact that he was an immigrant. Alexander Hamilton was not fully trusted by the elites he worked his way up to be with, because he was not born in the American colonies. In "Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down)," as Hamilton and the Marquis de Lafayette, a French aristocrat and military officer who joined the American cause in 1777, chat before the last main battle of the Revolution breaks out, they bond over the fact neither of them are from America. This is where Lafayette remarks "immigrants, we get the job done,"¹⁴ and the two high-five to resounding applause and cheers from the audience. The idea of the American Dream has always been attractive to immigrants,

¹⁴ Lyric from the track "Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down)"

seeking a better life for them and their loved ones in what many consider the Land of Opportunity. However, for immigrants, the climb to the top can be even harder because of nativism, which is defined as “a policy of favoring native inhabitants as opposed to immigrants,” and racial discrimination.

Debra C. Smith analyzed the social mobility of black families in reality-based television in her essay “Critiquing Reality-Based Televisual Black Fatherhood.” Smith mentions that, often in tales of the American Dream with people of color, the “social mobility was made problematic in that no attention was given to the economic disadvantages and deep-rooted racial discrimination that prevent most African Americans” - or immigrants - “from being socially mobile. As a result, the show contributed to a contemporary form of racism that is based on the idea that racism is no longer a problem in the United States, and that lack of African American success is caused by lack of effort and/or ability... The media glamorization of these individuals” - celebrities like Oprah Winfrey, or TV shows like *Snoop Dogg’s Father Hood* - “reinforces belief in both the availability and desirability of the American Dream,” (Smith, 2015, 526). She argues that these things act as proof that if one does not achieve upwards mobility, it is due to their own shortcomings alone.

Hamilton is celebrated by fans for putting an immigrant’s journey center stage during a rise in xenophobia and racial tensions. Without question, the American public needed the escapism, and most importantly the hope, which *Hamilton* provided in 2015 and 2016. However, despite not being natively born, Hamilton was still a white immigrant with ties to merchants - on top of being exceptionally smart - and so his

experience would have been vastly different if one of those factors had changed. Similar to the point Smith argued, one can see that *Hamilton* glamorizes the situation of an exceptional person who had the right connections and focuses still on the white elite, despite Hamilton being an immigrant. It ignores the struggles many immigrants were undoubtedly facing in the late 18th century. Furthermore, it erases that Hamilton was a contradiction, who distrusted immigrants occasionally despite being one himself. As Professor Freeman wrote for *Slate Magazine*, “he liked the idea of immigrant workers powering American industry, but he worried about their political and cultural impact on the young republic.” Perhaps this is not addressed because it detracts from the American Dream narrative that *Hamilton* is so firmly rooted in. After all, everyone must be equal to participate and strive, and if one has reservations about some of those participants then the equality does not exist, and the Dream is dead.

The American Dream is as old as the country it is named for, and like all ideologies, it must be repeated to continue onwards. For example, *Hamilton: An American Musical* would not exist without Chernow’s Founder’s Chic biography, *Alexander Hamilton*. So it fits that the musical has already contributed to the perpetuation of the narrative. On December 2, 2016, *The Hamilton Mixtape* was released, featuring songs by world-famous artists inspired by the musical. The *Mixtape* includes the titles “Wrote My Way Out” and “My Shot (Rise Up Remix)”; the former featuring Nas, Dave East, and Lin-Manuel Miranda explaining how they “picked up the pen like Hamilton” and wrote their way to fame, and the latter featuring The Roots, Joell Ortiz, and Busta Rhymes on the importance of a strong work ethic and seizing

opportunities to rise up. This album has already charted at No. 1 on the Billboard 200 chart, exhibiting the fierce loyalty of *Hamilton* fans, and the need for aspirational messages, even if they are not realistically attainable for all. Media like books from the likes of Chernow or Alger, musicals from *Miranda*, and songs from Nas keep the hip-hop narrative going strong, and as long as there are times of uncertainty, unrest, and inequality America will need the American Dream to make it through the darkness. Faced with these three things, deep down everyone is just like their country - young, scrappy, and hungry - and unwilling to throw away their shots.¹⁵

¹⁵ Reference to the track "My Shot".

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