

The Self-Made Man & The American Dream

"Self-made men are the men who, under peculiar difficulties and without the ordinary helps of favoring circumstances, have attained knowledge, usefulness, power and position and have learned from themselves the best uses to which life can be put in this world, and in the exercises of these uses to build up worthy character."

Frederick Douglass. 1872. "Self-Made Men"

How has the "self-made man" myth, a typically American invention that reflects the country's values and beliefs, expanded to become the archetype of the American dream ?

I. THE ORIGINS OF THE SELF-MADE MAN



A) THE ORIGINS OF THE SELF-MADE MAN: COLONIZATION AND WESTWARD EXPANSION

- A moment that gave rise to American values and the importance of individualism
- America was a new word, a place of opportunity and new beginnings where the social distinctions and excesses of the "old world" did not exist.
- Also a religious origin : "God helps those who help themselves" and The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism
- The Frontier also had a role in the construction of this concept : "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" by Frederick Jackson Turner



B) THE POPULARIZATION OF THE "SELF-MADE MAN" : INDUSTRIALIZATION AND 19TH CENTURY

- With the American Civil War (1861-1865) and the Industrial Revolution came the first great examples of self-made men
- A concept that has been popularized by a wide variety of people and fields: politics with Benjamin Franklin, philosophy with Ralph Waldo Emerson and literature with Horacio Alger.
- Self-made men vary according to historical and economic circumstances
- The 19th century industrial robber barons and social darwinism.

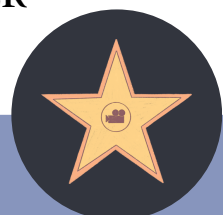
II. A MODERN EXAMPLE OF THE SELF-MADE MAN : ARNOLD SCHWARZENEGGER



A) A JOURNEY REPRESENTATIVE OF THE SELF-MADE MAN



- The epitome of the American dream :
- An immigrant from an underprivileged Austrian family with \$20 in his pocket.
- An example of hard work through sports : an activity open to all.
- He succeeded as a bodybuilder, as an actor and as a politician.
- An image of the American man and values.



B) THE IMPACT OF CULTURE ON THE REPRESENTATION OF THE SELF-MADE MAN

- The example of Schwarzenegger shows how the Self-made man and American dream myth are spread through art, sport and media.
- In literature and cinema : the list of examples is endless : The Great Gatsby, Rocky, The Godfather, Scarface, The social network...
- These myth are spread by Hollywood, a place where "self-made men" appear and are depicted.
- It is an element of soft power.

A controversial concept : an illusion ?

By Schwarzenegger himself : "I didn't make it that far on my own. (...) The whole concept of the self-made man or woman is a myth."

A myth that can generate social tensions and the devaluation of those who don't measure up : as there is a denial of social factors they are not taken into account to explain the failure of individuals, it's always the failure of the individual himself.

"There is nobody in this country who got rich on his own. Nobody" US Senator Elizabeth Warren



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