

The Media of OUR Dreams — Interview with Ilan Stavans

Verena Dolle

Ilan Stavans is one of today's most vocal public intellectuals on issues of immigration in the US. His commentaries are regularly featured in *The New York Times*, National Public Radio, and other outlets. He is Lewis-Sebring Professor of Humanities, Latin American and Latino Culture at Amherst College, the publisher of Restless Books, and the host of the National Public Radio podcast "In Contrast". Verena Dolle is Chair for Spanish, Portuguese and Latin American Literatures and Cultures, Justus-Liebig-University, Gießen, Germany.

The following exchange via email took place in November 2019. The point of departure are theoretical reflections concerning migratory movements from Latin America to the global North in the last few decades, discussed at an international conference called "*El sueño europeo, o ¿del sueño americano al europeo? La articulación de Europa como espacio anhelado de los flujos migratorios en productos culturales y mediales latinoamericanos (2001-2015)*". Hosted by Justus-Liebig-University, Gießen, Germany, Stavans was the keynote speaker.

The American Dream is a myth that has been highly influential for decades for Latin American countries, with the consequence that the United States has constituted the desired place to be, *el espacio anhelado*. But due to fundamental changes in US-American society, policy and economy in the last decades, even aggravated under the government of Donald Trump (since January 2017), a crisis has been diagnosed, according to Jeremy Rifkin in his book *European Dream* (2004). According to this critique, the awareness of such a promise —the "pursuit of happiness"— cannot be realized, given that inequality, e.g. racial unbalance, is still persisting.

At the same time, in the last decades, from the 1990s till the first decade of the third millennium, migration from Latin America has shifted in a considerable amount from the US to countries of the European Union, especially from Colombia, Ecuador, Brazil, and Argentina. The question is, if Latin American mass media, especially those media that design fictional

worlds, are forming a European Dream as a master narrative that competes with the American Dream, or at least takes over certain of its elements.

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Verena Dolle: In the book *Modernity at Large* (1996), anthropologist Arjun Appadurai defines *mediascape* as a “landscape of collective aspirations [...] mediated through the complex prism of modern media”, one capable of forming and substantially influencing ideas and underlying master narratives. After living more than three decades in the USA, what’s your impression of such a master narrative as the American Dream and its media representation in recent years?

Ilan Stavans: America —I use this contested term *in tandem* with its ubiquity in the nation’s media— is obsessed with media. No sooner does one arrive from abroad to an airport, the torpedo of images and sounds becomes overwhelming. Nothing exists outside TV, radio, movies, the internet, and social media.

But the American media is, in and of itself, broken into territories: mainstream and peripheral, right- and left-wing politics, urban and regional, white and multiethnic, and so on. The American Dream, as refracted in the *mediascape*, is polyphonic. For immigrants in particular, that dream still holds enormous power. To be an American is to imagine oneself a traveler in a socially-mobile hierarchy, where opportunity is everyone’s capital.

Verena Dolle: Do you believe there is such a thing as the European Dream, e.g. the idea of making it in Europe? Does it carry similar weight as the American Dream?

Ilan Stavans: I’m skeptical. The American Dream is geographically-specific. It has to do with social mobility. The reason why the US attracts immigrants is because of a promise, true or false, to climb up, have a better life than your parents, in other words, it endorses ideals of justice, equality, and the pursuit of happiness. Staring with Europe, most societies are far more rigid in terms of that mobility. That’s why the Puritans are said to have escaped the Old World: religious intolerance. As an immigrant from Mexico, I remember reading, a few years after my arrival in New York, the “English” novels of Henry James. In short, life in Europe tends to be stiff, rigid, and formal. Of course, Europe has changed dramatically in the last century. But does it allow for more mobility? Is there room for critical thinking?

Sure there is, although to different degrees. I remember a Nigerian friend of mine who moved to London telling me that, after several decades living there, she was now British but could never be English. That division doesn't exist in the United States. The same applies to other European countries, from France to Germany, from Italy to Spain. Obviously, there are elites in the US; in fact, the division of haves and have nots is among the most extreme. But the ruling elite is hardly made of old money exclusively. W. E. B. Du Bois, author of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), believed the twentieth century would be about the color line.

It takes no effort to realize that the twenty-first is about immigration. Climate change, political turmoil, economic inequality, and limited resources all contribute to massive movements each and every day. This accommodation of people, while inevitable, is explosive. Matters will only get worse. Spinoza, no scholar in immigration, intrinsically understood the reason, which he articulated in his *Political Treatise* (1677): "He who seeks equality between unequals, seeks an absurdity".

Verena Dolle: Spinoza's treatise appeared about three and a half centuries ago; and Du Bois's is more than a hundred years old. Don't you think things have improved regarding social mobility in Europe, or more particularly, in the European Union since then? Furthermore: yet Europe does show up as a utopia in a recent Mexican-German drama film on migration, *Buen día, Ramón* (2013), by Mexican director Jorge Ramírez Suárez, and Mexican *telenovelas*, which I know you're passionate about—your father was a prominent actor in them—.

Ilan Stavans: Not because a book is old does it lose its validity. The classics speak in new ways to new generations. Latin America entered modernity in 1492, when Columbus stumbled upon it. A decade later, Amerigo Vespucci described it as 'the new world'. Obviously, the place is as old as any other. Yet Europe's dreams were projected on it as a land where people could get a new start.

More than five hundred years later, that projection has been inverted: for a Mexican, a Colombian, a Venezuelan, a Puerto Rican, a Cuban, etcetera, anywhere else is *el paraíso*, paradise. Or, I should say, *almost* anywhere: Haitians dream of moving to Santo Domingo the way Dominicans dream of moving to New York City and Argentines to London. Europe hardly appears in Latin American *telenovelas*. So you will ask: is there an alternative to the US?

The answer is: while migration is unavoidable, the allure of the American Dream isn't necessarily replaced by another 'master narrative', as you call it. This, of course, doesn't mean people don't go to other places. They surely do. But they don't see those places under the same kind of prism. There isn't an equivalent to the Statue of Liberty in Europe. For better or worse, America is a magnet for the pursuit of happiness, in large part because of its social mobility.

Verena Dolle: Is it possible to estimate the impact of mass media in presenting fictitious worlds, that is, forming fresh images of what's possible, changing attitudes, making destinations desirable?

Ilan Stavans: Scientists have studied the invasive quality of media on the psyche. I take a less critical, more open-ended approach. As far as I'm concerned, there has always been media. The painted images on a cave in pre-historic times, Greek myths, the Bible as a book that defined human conduct in the Middle Ages, the serialized novels of Honoré de Balzac, were all media manifestations shaping the way humans saw themselves, what their anxieties were, how they perceived their future.

Obviously, nowadays media is a multi-billion-dollar industry capable of controlling people's need for satisfaction. We cannot live without stories, though. Telling stories, listening to them, becoming part of stories is both an essential component of our biology as well as an unalienable right. The *mediascape* enables us to insert ourselves into a larger narrative, connecting us to others in fundamental ways. I love the fact that the verb 'to dream' has two definitions: to aspire to something different; and to be visited by a narrative while we're unconscious.

Verena Dolle: This means that you concede quite a high importance to stories and narratives, as human beings are a "storytelling animal", as Salman Rushdie put it. Apart from that, and in order to continue your suggestion, not dreaming at all (in the second sense) is extremely harmful to human health. Coming back to the impact of modern *mediascapes*: How far do the mediatic stagings of 'a caravan of migrants' from Central America approaching the U.S.-Mexico border or boatloads of people from Northern, sub-Saharan Africa and from Syria on the Mediterranean Sea influence the master narrative of an American or a possible European Dream?

Ilan Stavans: They simultaneously feed and subvert it. In the collective consciousness, we don't see these stagings, as you call them, in personal terms; that is, we have difficulty individualizing each of the immigrants in those boats or caravans. By collapsing all of them into a crowd, we see

them as a menace. That's what conservative groups want: to dehumanize the phenomenon. In doing so, the plight of those immigrants is less about Honduras, Syria, or Eritrea than about Greece, Italy, or the United States.

These countries are under threat, we are told. Their identity, conservatives argue, won't survive if they accept all those foreigners. Thus, we need to organize, we are told, in order to resist the 'interlopers'. The larger problems —again, climate change, limited resources, economic inequality—aren't contemplated in this view.

Verena Dolle: In the second edition of *The Riddle of Cantinflas: Essays on Hispanic Popular Culture* (2012), you've written that the Statue of Liberty is now "an empty vessel," that it doesn't speak to Latinos the way it did to Jewish, Italian, Russian, and German immigrants.

Ilan Stavans: All immigrants to America today either come by plane, cross the U.S.-Mexico border, or arrive from Cuba and elsewhere in the Caribbean Basin as *balseros*. Lady Liberty as a symbol doesn't greet them anymore. Instead, they are welcomed by police, helicopters, Minutemen, and the like.

Verena Dolle: Apart from the fact that ways of immigration have changed substantially in the last few decades, has the self-concept of the US as country for immigrants changed?

Ilan Stavans: Internally, there is a heated debate. The Trump Administration only endorses immigration by the wealthy. In other words, if someone comes to the US with an investment portfolio, they are more than welcome, it doesn't matter if their country of origin is India, Germany, Colombia, or the United Arab Emirates. But the government's approach doesn't mean the entire country endorses it. Progressive voices across the political, economic, and social spectrum continue to fight for a more open policy.

Verena Dolle: Let's talk about *telenovelas* as one form of mass media with an incredibly high impact. Do you watch them regularly?

Ilan Stavans: I do when time permits. I'm fascinated by their 'complexity'. As you might know, that isn't a noun people use to describe them. They are seen as simplistic, stereotypical, and overemotional. All of this is true. But in my mind, there's extraordinary complexity in simplicity. Why do we use stereotypes?

In Plato's opinion, in order to be able to process thoughts: without abstraction, we are incapable of processing ideas. As for the overindulgence in emotions, the Hispanic civilization thrives in it. Indeed, each culture

has its own *mediascape*. In Latin America, it is made of comics, TV shows, radio, operas, *zarzuelas*, and the like. In style and content, these artifacts are unique.

Rather than a large *panopticum* that applies to everyone at all times, it depends on context. In other words, each society has the media it designs for itself, intentionally and otherwise. We dream based on who we are and on the circumstances that surround us.

Verena Dolle: Is that culturally-specific *mediascape* democratic? You just said it is made by society.

Ilan Stavans: A complex question. Needless to say, corporations are at the helm. Yet the *mediascape*, to exist, requires endless quantities of content, which are produced by specific individuals reacting to particular stimulation. I don't believe corporations are ogres. While there are large amounts of money behind them, shaping stories is a delicate, minute affair done by people. For better or worse, we consume stories we respond to.

Verena Dolle: How is change possible in the *mediascape*?

Ilan Stavans: Through internal subversion. The twentieth century was about broad-stroke revolutions that, as their mission, sought to expropriate media outlets. In Latin America, think of Cuba, Chile, Nicaragua. But the media that resulted from those revolutions was equally oppressive. In my opinion, the best changes always originate in the inside. The best way to tame the beast is by speaking to it in its own terms.

Verena Dolle: In the last few years, I've been noticing a reluctance in political discourse to accept Germany and the European Union as a desired destination for immigration or to give a vision of the European Union as a territory of Enlightenment, human rights, solidarity, etc. As German cultural scholar Aleida Assmann shrewdly points out, the stars in the flag of the European Union "are orbiting a void". There is, according to her, no internal vision of what the European Dream might be, only projections from outside.

Ilan Stavans: As an outsider who frequently travels to Europe and whose ancestors come from the eastern parts of the continent, I still have trouble appreciating what Europe is *in toto*. If the United States is a union of states, is Europe a confederation of nations? I've followed closely the internal debate, in part because I'm captivated by the nineteenth-century dream by Simón Bolívar of Latin America as a sum of parts.

Alas, it was only a dream! The European Union also strikes me as a dream, one dramatically contested in the age of Brexit. Yes, the stars of

the flag have no centripetal force, thus the discordant nature of the union's arguments. It's a worthy effort, though, to want to be in community; I'm just not sure if it will survive.

Verena Dolle: I'd like to focus on your oeuvre. In 2001, you published *On Borrowed Words*, a fascinating "memoir of language", translated into Spanish in 2013 with the title *Palabras prestadas*. Simply put, it is, straightforwardly, a very personal history of your migration, that of your family, particularly your grandparents, and obviously your own one. In a certain way, it is paradigmatic of the trends of Jewish migration from Europe to America, in this case to Mexico, due to persecution, pogroms, expulsion, the Nazi terror and the Holocaust. Likewise, it is a reflection on your cultural roots as an Ashkenazic Jew, i.e. with European roots who spoke Yiddish first, Spanish second, Hebrew third, and then English. You describe the intertwinement of languages and identities, the change of roles, and the process that goes into translation as an existential act, one always accompanied by a profound "ongoing feeling of inauthenticity" (*eterna sensación de inautenticidad*). To me this evokes Vilém Flusser's notion of the migrant's creative liberty, due precisely to one's rootlessness. What struck me in your book is the genuine hymn of praise you deliver of the American Dream and the capacity of the United States to integrate people from different nations, religions, and cultures, which you develop in the chapter called "Amerika, América" about the naturalization ceremony and the pledge of allegiance to the flag.

Ilan Stavans: I love the United States, in spite of its imperfections. Or better, I love it *because* of its imperfections. I'm very grateful to it. America has been good for me; likewise, I have been good for America. Notice: not good *to* me or America but good *for* me and America.

Verena Dolle: Almost twenty years later, what have your experiences been since then?

Ilan Stavans: The age of Trump is dark. Its reverberations will last for decades. Still, I see myself as a full participant in this nightmare, just as Theodor W. Adorno, Hannah Arendt, and Walter Benjamin were actors in Nazi Germany. Sure, they sought to escape it. The situation in Trump's America isn't the same. My role as a public intellectual is to fight from within.

Verena Dolle: In your travel memoir *The Seventh Heaven: Travels through Jewish Latin America* (2019), you write that you and your children have acquired the Polish citizenship. I'm interested in knowing why. Is the

European Dream alluring to you? After all, Europe is where your Jewish ancestors had to escape from.

Ilan Stavans: I'm not attracted by the European Dream. As I state in the book, it is an exclusively pragmatic move. As Jews, we don't know where and when a diaspora ends and another one begins. I want my children to have options, although, I should say, they are very well adjusted to the United States.

As for me, I see it as a form of revenge. My grandparents would have been scandalized if they knew I'm now Polish, such was their animosity toward the country where their forebears had lived for generations. Yet I'm able to afford the bureaucratic payment.

Verena Dolle: Last but not least, we, your readers, know you as a prolific, multifaceted writer ready for incursions into countless fields. Do you still believe in the impact of literature and artistic media in general?

Ilan Stavans: More than ever. Given the bombardment of innocuous entertainment, the spaces of literature are painfully narrow these days. I've never believed in literature for the masses: the art of writing, inevitably, is for a select group. Yet even that small group is more besieged now. It is crucial for us to defend it, if only to remember that to be human is to be perplexed. Perplexity isn't part of the diet of any mainstream media. We need to continue telling stories. Not only to tell them but to make stories about complex people. That's why literature lasts.