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### A Tale of Two Americas: The American Dream in *Cobra Kai*

**Abstract.** Which different conceptions of the so-called “American Dream” are still alive or gaining ground in the increasingly polarized social climate of the United States during the Trump era? I intend to shed light on this question by analyzing the different types of success ethics presented in the highly popular Netflix series *Cobra Kai* (2018 - present). This will include an investigation into notions of merit and masculinity and how they are intertwined in the principal conflict between the two main characters: the blue-collar Johnny Lawrence and the affluent Daniel LaRusso – both of whom operate their own respective karate schools. I will embed this conflict within a theoretical framework undergirded by Michael Sandel’s observations on contemporary definitions of “meritocracy” and the associated “rhetoric of rising.” In addition, I will lean on George Lakoff’s linguistic concepts of the “strict vs nurturant parent,” and Lauren Berlant’s notion of “cruel optimism.” In doing so, I hope to illuminate the deep-seated workings of competing philosophies on what “it takes to get ahead” in today’s United States. One of my main findings is that Lawrence’s brand of hard-bodied, Reagan-era masculinity is mutually reinforced with LaRusso’s incremental and cosmopolitan approach, thereby perpetuating polarization and antagonism. The fact that both karate teachers are keen to impart their vision on a younger generation is also indicative of how this enmity represents a battle for the “soul of America.” Given ongoing trends toward increasing social, economic, and cultural divides within the U.S., it is of great importance to examine how these developments are negotiated in popular culture. *Cobra Kai* offers fertile ground for addressing this question.

**Keywords:** success, American Dream, merit, masculinity, popular culture, Netflix, polarization, meritocracy, bodies

## 1. Introduction

The series *Cobra Kai* (2018 – present), which is produced by Overbrook Entertainment, is currently among the most-watched shows on Netflix (Porter 2021). The story revolves around the renewed rivalry between two middle-aged residents of the San Fernando Valley outside of Los Angeles, California: Daniel LaRusso and Johnny Lawrence. Both have ruffled feathers in 1984, when their personal animosity towards each other culminated in a youth Karate championship fight, which saw LaRusso come out as the winner (as portrayed in the 1984 blockbuster movie *The Karate Kid*).

*Cobra Kai* picks up 34 years later and offers a complex and multidimensional look into the current struggles of both protagonists. The updated rivalry between LaRusso and Lawrence is impacted by a wide array of social, economic, and cultural developments, which put a new twist on what was once a straight-forward Reagan-era popcorn action movie. The socioeconomic gap between the two, in conjunction with their conflicting outlooks on competition, masculinity, and overcoming adversity, provides fertile ground for a discussion on how this rivalry also represents a struggle over the “soul of the nation”.

In my paper, I will focus on the question of the so-called “American Dream.” My goal is to investigate the different visions of meritocracy, which are formulated within the series, and why and how they clash with each other. In my central analysis, I contrast the competing philosophies of the karate dojos opened by Lawrence and LaRusso, which reveals that both are wedded to the “cult of the individual”, illustrating that the animosity between them does not stem from a fundamental critique of meritocratic mythologies but instead from the diverging ideas on how to properly implement meritocracy. Lawrence’s dojo, *Cobra Kai*, is notable for its espousal of a hard-bodied, masculinity, whereas LaRusso offers his students a more benign and cooperative view of “rising”.

In my final observations, I conclude that the right-wing “last-stand”-fantasies offered by Lawrence appear powerful on an emotional level, especially due to their nostalgic appeal to an imagined “world loss” (Berlant 2011, 16–17), but effectively serve ideological ends that continue to reinvigorate neoliberal and neoconservative projects within the U.S. and worldwide (Jeffords 1994, 193). This not only has far-reaching implications for a global environment within which U.S. hegemony is more and more challenged, but it also evidences the malleability of Reaganite success ethics, which continue to be re-narrated in (post-)ironic forms without losing their appeal to large numbers of viewers, who feel that larger structural shifts over the last 40 years have robbed them of a sense of dignity. The series therefore finds itself at the next of nexus of a blue-collar-oriented, hypermasculine, and jingoistic understanding of the “American Dream”. One that was formulated by Reagan during the original film franchise and has now been rebooted by Trump in the late 2010s.

## 2. Who dreams which “American Dream”?

Defining the “American Dream” in a precise manner has always been an ambitious task, as the concept has been subject to numerous revisions, conceptual drift, and intersectional challenges. For the purposes of my paper, however, I refer to a basic conceptualization drawn from the writings of James Truslow Adams, who coined the very term “American Dream” in his 1931 book *The Epic of America*. Adams wrote that:

It is not the dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain 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 (Sandel 2020, 225).

What might read as an endorsement of a classical liberal notion of meritocracy, reveals a few core suppositions that might clash with late capitalist and contemporary ideas concerning striving and success: Adams underlines that the “American Dream” is not primarily defined by material possessions or high-income status, that it does not purely revolve around ideas of absolute self-reliance<sup>1</sup>, and that it implies a more unconditional understanding of social recognition (“for what they are”). This points to a wider sense of solidarity, which can be tied to what Michael Sandel dubs the “dignity of labor” (2020, 205–214). The mythical promise of the U.S. appears broken whenever certain kinds of personal striving are culturally depreciated. This is critical for understanding how myths of meritocracy are intertwined with positionality (e.g., in terms of race, class, gender, space, ability) and the indignation felt when a perceived notion of meritocratic promise fails to materialize.

In his 2020 book *The Tyranny of Merit*, Michael Sandel lays out how the contemporary “rhetoric of rising” amplifies deservedness for accomplished individuals while sidelining questions of solidarity or structural inequities (2020, 64–71). The result is a complacency among credentialed and materially well-off strata of society, which find legitimacy in limited empathy for the perceived “losers” (59). In other words: If wealth and success are earned, then misery and poverty are earned as well, leaving the down-trodden with little access to social esteem (74–75). Sandel points out that prevailing success ethics in the current United States – be they liberal or conservative – indeed line up with the neoliberal interpretation of the “American Dream” put forward by Ronald Reagan in a speech to a group of business leaders in 1983:

This nation was not built on a foundation of envy and resentment. The dream I’ve always believed in is, no matter who you are, no matter where you come from, if you work hard,

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<sup>1</sup> The phrasing “shall be able to attain”, as opposed to “is able to attain”, signifies an unfinished project.

pull yourself up and succeed, then, by golly, you deserve life's prize. And trying for that prize made America the greatest nation on Earth (2020, 70)

Reagan's interpretation of an already-existing "American Dream" defined by "pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps" and "winning a prize" is of vital importance for my analysis, because Reaganite success ethics are precisely what sets the main conflict in motion in *Cobra Kai*.

### 3. Between Pontiacs and bonsais – success ethics in *Cobra Kai*

The first season of *Cobra Kai*, set in 2018, revisits the lives of the main characters from the *Karate Kid* film universe of the 1980s. In the first episode, the protagonist Johnny Lawrence fits the description of the proverbial frustrated, blue-collar, middle-aged, white male – a.k.a. the quintessential Trump voter according to numerous journalistic and academic discussions (Carnes & Lupu 2021, 58–60; Lempinen 2020). After a particularly difficult day, which sees him laid off from his job, attacked by teenage bullies, and demeaned by his affluent and uncaring father, Johnny appears to have hit rock bottom. However, while sitting in front of his TV at night, he is exposed to two different visions of what it means to succeed in the "American way".

Lawrence watches a rerun of the 1985 military-action movie *Iron Eagle* – a cheap *Rambo*-knock-off notable for its racist portrayals of Middle Easterners. Consuming this Reagan-era display of hard-bodied, white masculinity appears to lift his spirit (Jeffords 1994, 35). For a nostalgic moment, testosterone-driven competition and unpolished language appear to be in fashion. He attentively listens to the following pep talk during the film:

A bunch of things must have gone wrong, if you're listening to this. Whatever happened, I know you must be real scared. Right now, you're probably filled with all the doubts in the world. But I'm gonna tell you something Duggie: God doesn't give people things he doesn't want them to use. And he gave you the touch. It's a power you have inside of you. Down there where you keep your guts, boy. It's all you need to blast your way in and get back what they took from you.

[Cuts to a commercial for LaRusso Auto]

Banzai! Daniel LaRusso here from LaRusso Auto bringing you specials on all of our inventory. We have an excess of Jeep Grand Cherokees priced to go. Get a lease for only... nah. Make that... chop! Yes, we are chopping prices on all of our Hondas, Nissans, Acuras, and Audis. So come visit any of our locations in Tarzana, Woodland Hills, North Hollywood, or Sherman Oaks. And as always, every customer leaves with their very own bonsai tree. LaRusso Auto Group. We kick the competition.

This viewing experience leads to Lawrence embarking on a driving trip, presented in a style of a stereotypical 1980s-style montage, which sees him reminiscing about his “glory days” and eventually reopening the *Cobra Kai* karate dojo.

What is interesting about these two different clips in the context of success ethics, is that they represent seemingly disparate, yet also similar ideological subtexts. In *Iron Eagle*, the right-wing fantasy of a restorative comeback after years of prominent social progressivism (e.g. the civil rights movement) comes to life for a moment. In the context of meritocracy, Lawrence is presented with a pop-culture invocation of the ideals that he held true throughout his life – and even though they appear not have served him well in today’s world, his commitment to this reactionary version of “winning” remains unshaken (Berlant 2011, 24). Leaning on the language of divine providentialism (Sandel 2020, 41–45), Lawrence feels reignited in this feeling that he can re-enter the rat race of life. After all, his karate talents – his touch – must have been given to him for a reason.

This tale of “spiritual regeneration” (Brown 2009, 153), presented in both *Iron Eagle* and in the first episode of *Cobra Kai* itself, bears the hallmarks of a jeremiad, in which a threatening scenario of national decline is counterposed with nostalgic images of a “glorious past”, a past which is now to be restored through the exercise of self-discipline and “regeneration through violence” (Slotkin 1973, 8). The image of the pilot of a fighter jet, who is (visually) alone in the world, lends itself to a play on emotions invoking “the frontier narrative and the notion of America as Rooseveltian Rough Rider” (Brown 2009, 163).<sup>2</sup> The high-tech return to the so-called “frontier” in the Reagan Era is thereby reactivated in a time when smartphones and streaming services abound – technologies which Lawrence still lacks in the first episode.

Ultimately, Lawrence is finally presented with a vocabulary he can relate to. He evidently feels understood and – for a change – spoken to in an encouraging way. The reassuring, right-wing message that “things were taken from him” affirms his underlying worldview that – over the last 34 years – he competed fairly and diligently, but that other competitors must have “cut in line” and not abided by the playbook of hard-bodied, straight-talking, and casually racist competition (Wilkerson 2020, 181). This impression is cemented on the spot by the LaRusso commercial.

LaRusso offers a different take on success and striving, which borrows much more from the habitus and tone of the college-educated and professional-managerial class. In this sense, he appears like a reflection of the quintessential suburban Obama or Biden voter (Bitecofer 2020, 507–510). LaRusso performs as a polished and well-spoken professional, which includes immaculate dress and a care-free smile. Evidently, he is not going through the type of painful soul-searching portrayed in *Iron Eagle*. On the contrary, he appears to be doing well, as he can afford to offer special deals on leas-

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph Franklin Brown Jr. makes a parallel observation in his analysis of the 1984 action movie *Red Dawn*, which mirrors the explicit jingoism and hypermasculinity of *Iron Eagle* (2009, 163).

es and still gift every customer with a bonsai tree. Such a (public) persona is a ripe target for right-wing pundits in the US, who frequently interpret “elitist snobbery” as a function of (educated) affect and socio-cultural habitus (Davidson 2016, 237–238). Pre-existing discursive configurations already sow the seeds for challenging LaRusso’s performance as a carefree and likeable local businessman.

The bonsai tree itself exposes further ideological layers to LaRusso and his success story. Viewers of the original *Karate Kid* movies know that Daniel LaRusso owes his martial arts skills and much of his personal victories to his sensei Mr. Miyagi, a fact very much known to Johnny Lawrence. A larger contextual analysis makes it possible to see this as a clash between notions of cosmopolitan globalization and regressive nationalism (Barber 1996, 10–18). Even though both, LaRusso and Lawrence, practice a Japanese form of martial arts, LaRusso gained his skills through the patient and diligent mentoring from the Okinawan immigrant, Mr. Miyagi. Lawrence was taught by the white, male Vietnam War veteran, John Kreese, who embodies a particularly merciless brand of toxic masculinity. Within the context of Japanese and East Asian competition on the global economic stage, LaRusso can be seen as a benefactor of globalization – back in the 1980s as well as today. This represents a fortunate circumstance for which he can claim no credit (Sandel 2020, 17–22).

This is amplified by the fact that LaRusso mainly offers foreign car brands in his commercial, while Johnny Lawrence’s only prized possession is a U.S.-made Pontiac Firebird. In a literal fashion, this prominent aspect in the lives of both characters runs counter to James Truslow Adams’ admonition to not overfocus on vehicles as markers for the “American Dream”. However, it also ties the series’ take on meritocracy to discourses surrounding deindustrialization, the decline of the Rust Belt, and the disappearance of job opportunities in selected regions across the U.S. The parallels between the “red state vs blue state divide” and the rivalry between LaRusso and Lawrence reach across many levels, showcasing that this is not merely a personal rivalry based on revenge, but indeed a metaphorical struggle over the question whether the United States is “great” and what it takes to make it “great (again)”.

There are clear parallels between LaRusso’s public persona, and a neoliberal cosmopolitanism as espoused by Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. In this framework, LaRusso is not only a winner, because he has cultivated a progressive attitude toward race, multiculturalism, and environmentalism – after all, the bonsai tree can be seen as a nod to green policies. But he is a winner precisely because he is successful as an entrepreneur on the terms of neoliberal globalization. Michael Sandel fleshes out this notion by quoting from a speech Hillary Clinton gave at a conference in Mumbai in 2018, in which she referred to the 2016 election: “I won the places that represent two-thirds of America’s gross domestic product. So I won the places that are optimistic, diverse, dynamic, moving forward” (2020, 26–27).

This meritocratic rhetoric takes on a further layer, given that for winners to exist, losers are necessary. The smiley-face success stories pushed by both Clinton and LaRusso leave little room for those, who find themselves at the receiving end of neoliber-

eral, pro-corporate policies. They – by definition – cannot be optimistic, diverse, dynamic, or moving forward, implying a lack of social recognition as espoused by James Truslow Adams in his definition of the “American Dream”. In *Cobra Kai*, the path toward recognition starts with the self and the optimization of the self to fit a pre-existing notion of deservedness.

This aligns with an observable trend in contemporary pop cultural productions which have reamplified the “rhetoric of rising”, celebrating those who “overcome the odds” without interrogating the social functioning of structural barriers to rising (e.g. the play *Hamilton* or the 2014 film *Whiplash*). The fact that notable films and TV series make specific reference to an (imagined) 1980s setting (*Wonder Woman 1984*, *Stranger Things*, *The Americans*) brings up important questions as to how early invocations of neoliberal success ethics are now being resuscitated to serve a contemporary neoliberal ideology in crisis (Camp, 2020). Both inside and outside of the world depicted in the series, there are clear trends toward addressing the questions of the present through a recourse to the 1980s.

It is worth noting that LaRusso’s commercial and the scene from *Iron Eagle* display remarkable similarities as well. In both cases, it is white, straight men who are the protagonists. Both agree that it is necessary to “kick the competition” and do so through the (metaphorical) performance of self-confident physical confrontation. Both make use of (apparently) innate and individualized talents and both “go from the gut” (in the commercial, LaRusso’s makes a seemingly improvised decision to cut prices further than initially expected). Ultimately, the centrifugal conflict in *Cobra Kai* involves two characters whose ideas of striving for success are not entirely diametrical. And this could precisely be one of the leading causes as to why the conflict persists and finds new iterations over the course of the series.<sup>3</sup>

The irony and self-referentiality in how LaRusso and Lawrence are framed within the first series (both have their core identities introduced through a form of kitschy TV entertainment) signals how both men have built their notions of advancement on deficient promises of social mobility, which can be attractively packaged in a home entertainment environment.<sup>4</sup> The appeal and the inconsistencies of the success ethics presented in *Cobra Kai* are repeatedly celebrated and called into question throughout the series, which calls for a closer look at the coaching philosophies that LaRusso and Lawrence espouse as sensei of their respective dojos.

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<sup>3</sup> In the 1980s, the original *Karate Kid* franchise had seen several instalments, constantly revolving around the relaunching of old rivalries. *Cobra Kai* generally differs from these sequels in that it centers the “original villains” in more elaborate and sympathetic background stories. The recontextualization of characters continuously underlines the irresolute quality of success ideologies in the series.

<sup>4</sup> This perfectly complements the format of Netflix as a purveyor of binge viewing opportunities and perpetual entertainment universes (Jenner 2020, 269–276).

## 4. Two Dojos – Two Americas

### 4.1. The Case of Cobra Kai

Throughout the first two seasons of *Cobra Kai*, several conflicts erupt between the two dojos. Under the motto “Strike First, Strike Hard, No Mercy”, Lawrence instructs his students that the world is a dangerous and competitive place, and that “losers” deserve no sympathy. He places great emphasis on hardening his protégés, and he eschews what he considers a detrimental modern-day trend towards non-discriminatory or non-violent language. Instead, he views verbal abuse and taunting as a necessary part of his curriculum to create hard-bodied competitors, who obey traditional authority. This is demonstrated in a scene in the sixth episode of the first season, in which a group of newly joined karate students learn how to follow the instructions of their sensei:

Johnny Lawrence: “Hey Lip! [Motioning to a student] Yeah, you the one with the freaky lip. Who do you think I’m talking to?”

Demetri: “Excuse me, Mr Lawrence.”

Aisha Robinson [to Demetri]: “Sensei Lawrence!”

Demetri: “Okay.... [to Lawrence] You really shouldn’t make fun of someone’s physical appearance.”

Johnny Lawrence: “Oh is that so? So, I’m not supposed to mention his lip at all?”

Demetri: “Yeah.”

Johnny Lawrence: “Yeah, maybe that’s what they teach you in school, but in the real world you can’t expect people to do what they’re supposed to do. Right, you hear that, lip? You can’t handle someone making fun of you, how you’re gonna handle an elbow to the teeth?”

Demetri: “By calling the police?”

The camera work in this scene is telling in relation to power and hierarchy. In most scenes in which Lawrence speaks, he is shot from the front in a lower angle, which makes him appear more imposing. A U.S. flag – displayed prominently on the way directly behind him – accents his sense of authority and his role as a paternal “law-giver”. His black dress and headgear serve to drive home his dominant posture. Demetri, on the other hand, is usually presented at eye-level with the camera. When delivering his line about calling the police, he is situated at the edge of the frame – giving the impression

that he and his opinions are outliers. Him sporting a mostly red and green hoodie offers plenty of room for popular associations with left-leaning and/or pluralist movements.

This scene exposes numerous conflicting attitudes towards the nature of masculinity, competition, and individual striving. For Lawrence, the proper coaching of this new generation involves the hardening of both the physical body and the mind. Reading this entire dojo as a metaphor for contemporary society, Lawrence appears as the preacher of a gospel of reactionary cultural revivalism as a necessary component for the competitiveness of the nation in today's global environment. His rhetorical construction of two different spatial spheres: "school vs the real world" reproduces a dichotomy between "bureaucracy and free markets" (Jordan 2003, 70–71, 84–85). The juxtaposition between a supposedly protected space and a merciless reality unbound by rules of civility is evocative of a social Darwinist worldview, one which casts rugged individualism and ruthless competition as the normalized state of affairs. According to this logic, administrative institutions, such as schools, are incapable of fully preparing youngsters for a life of struggle and overcoming adversity. The scene's implicit denunciation of state institutions is amplified by Demetri's ineffective objection that the police could intervene in the case of violence occurring. This represents a throwback to a Reaganite neoliberalism, in which bureaucracy and state intervention are constructed as an impediment to economic freedom (Thompson 2007, 8–10).

Despite its clear association with whiteness (halter 2016, 118–121), Lawrence's Rambo-style does not only appeal to white, straight males in this series. On the contrary, his first two students are the Latin-American Miguel and the African American Aisha, who both have been bullied and discriminated against at their respective high schools. Despite Lawrence's machoism, Aisha quickly gains his respect – but more importantly, she gains a personal outlet for her frustrations and rage. This is exemplified in episode 5 of the first season in which she viciously overpowers fellow student Miguel in a sparring match – much to the surprise but also to the applause of Johnny Lawrence. Within the logic of the series, the Cobra Kai ethos does appeal to downtrodden individuals, who feel rejected and or snubbed by society in one way or another.

This aspect is conceptually conversant with Lauren Berlant's observation that "[p]eople are worn out by the activity of life- building, especially the poor and the nonnormative" (2011, 44). Within the framework of a "cruel optimism", this entails the formation of attachments to perceived objects and forms which signify stability in the face of a radical dissolution of the self (43–44). Losing the self, however, not only implies a loss of capital in a time marked by neoliberal self-optimization, but also a detachment from identity-based platforms through which the self can be inserted into societal discourse. After all, Lawrence's concept of winning is about gaining visibility in a society, which offers no meaningful redress for (perceived) grievances and feelings of indignation. To some degree, this basic impetus in Cobra Kai's success ethos offers a discursive interface with anti-oppressive struggles aimed at confronting the erasure of e.g. Black women through the trope of the "angry Black woman" (Jones and Norwood 2021, 2027). The multiple semiotic layers of this trope come to the forefront

in Aisha Robinson's character, whose range of emotional and personal depth expands within the world of the series, despite submitting herself to a hypermasculine form of discipline permeated by notions of "white, male crisis".

Locating this within the concept of the "American Dream", the logical conclusion is that cultural and societal misrecognition of marginalized identities represents a breach of the fundamental U.S. promise of success through striving. Being enraged about this and insisting that the promise be kept is the kind of sentiment on which the *Cobra Kai* dojo thrives. And Lawrence skillfully directs much of that anger at the polite and East-Asian-philosophy-inflected discourse offered by LaRusso in his dojo, Miyagi-do (Sandel 2020, 71–73). In a sense, this show offers a glimpse into the much-speculated conservative, multi-racial, working-class alliance, which sees the college-educated, cosmopolitan classes as their primary foe (Cass 2020; Ajilore 2020) – a supposedly counterhegemonic discourse of the Gramscian type (Kasiyarno 2014, 12–16).

The series *Cobra Kai* thereby touches upon observable developments, which indicate that larger societal conflicts are increasingly parlayed into the terrains of socio-cultural tone ("civility"), education, and perceived fitness for a globalized and post-industrial economy (Goodhart 2017, 33–38). Michael Sandel writes in his discussion of credentialism as a form of prejudice about a recent study that has shown the "less-educated" to be among the most disfavored groups in the eyes of the college-educated (2020, 95). Given that access to educational attainment in the United States remains highly impacted by race, gender, and class – the discursive indignations brought about by meritocratic credentialism are not immune to the workings of systemic racism, sexism, and ableism. From this perspective, there appears at least some fertile ground for anti-oppressive discourses linking up with the fervent rejection of credentialism as offered by Lawrence.

Translated into the context of the Trump era, Lawrence's vision of a successful United States aligns very much with shedding the polite habitus of the professional-managerial class. Seen through this prism, Trump's uncivil rhetoric and obnoxious posturing offers a much more valuable and honest initiation into the so-called "real world", which is populated by merciless foes, who themselves have no intention to "play by the rules". Hardening one's own body to properly enter this social Darwinist arena yields not only competitiveness on the individual scale, but (imagined) overall strength for the entire nation. This type of discourse is based on ideological premises that reflect much of George Lakoff's concept of "strict vs nurturant parents".

In his book *Thinking Points – Communicating our American Values and Vision*, Lakoff explains that among the fundamental elements of popular conservative rhetoric is the concept of the "strict father", who discerns between right from wrong, punishes the undisciplined and rewards the disciplined: "This "tough love is seen as the only way to teach morality. Children who are disciplined enough to be moral also use that discipline as adults to seek their self-interest in the market and become prosperous" (2006, 58). This links up to Lawrence's performance as a paternal and unpolished authority in critical ways. In connection with his feeling that he has been deprived

of things that are rightfully his, an ideological narrative emerges, which allows him to cast himself as the victim of social forces, which have undermined authority and roughness in society – and pulled him further away from his pursuit of the “American Dream”. However, this feeling of betrayal does not lead him to a broader and more structural evaluation of meritocratic mythologies (e.g. growing income inequality or stagnating wages; Wyatt-Nichol 2011, 260–263), but instead fortifies his belief that he must become more competitive and more focused in his pursuit of happiness (Frank 2004, 157).

This kind of “last-stand-ism” demonstrates the limiting ideological scope of neo-liberal conceptions of meritocracy in that they trap individuals in emotionally appealing, yet ultimately unrealistic success expectations, which – when unfulfilled – trigger binary epistemologies suitable to fester vitriolic rage and “hatred of the other” – a kind of “old Custerism” for the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Holtzman & Sharpe 2014, 398). *Cobra Kai* largely accepts this as a given, portraying this self-perpetuating cycle as a function of both Lawrence’s and LaRusso’s unwillingness to leave the past behind. Yet, structural shifts do play a role in reigniting old rivalries, as the growing diploma divide in the show’s suburban setting intensifies mutual disdain and feelings of individual “obsolescence”, which imply a dissolution of the self.

This is, however, now paired with a sense of evangelist and community-focused zeal, as Lawrence sees the need to instruct young minds in his way – hoping to rear a generation that would come to appreciate his style over LaRusso’s. Effectively, this becomes a “battle for the soul of the nation” with the goal of defining what makes not only the individual successful, but also what makes the nation seemingly “strong” and “prosperous”. Linking back to Reagan’s quote on the meaning of the “American Dream”, the mythology that individual striving and self-discipline generate larger beneficial effects for national projects (“greatest nation on Earth”) is noticeable in Lawrence’s quest for recognition. Eclipsing any structural or ideological critique of neoliberal success ethics leaves Lawrence and his followers with no other recourse than demanding that society starts to re-appreciate their ways of achieving recognition. Any resistance to this project will undermine *Cobra Kai*’s efforts to retain their merit and social worth within a capitalist framework.

The relational dynamic between members of *Cobra Kai* and their idealized, reactionary aesthetic creates the proverbial “double-bind” described by Lauren Berlant (2011, 23–25). Only through being challenged can self-worth be conferred. At the same time, the challengers are denigrated and constructed as worthy targets for elimination. In addition, selected conservative fantasy-practice clusters need to be reinvigorated, so that those who feel that they are “losing out” can reassert their perceived centrality in a society that has already (partially) shifted away from these paradigms. In other words: If individual success cannot be achieved then society must alter its definition of “success”.

Based on this, I posit that the conservative success ethics cultivated by Lawrence represent an ideological and socio-cultural vicious circle, a in societal context marked

by growing inequality, deindustrialization, social isolation, systemic oppression, and numerous identity-driven struggles. Social mobility has become less and less attainable over the last forty years (Sandel 2020, 75). Yet, the Reaganite-Trumpian version of the “American Dream” imparts on its adherents that the solution lies in more self-discipline, less solidarity, fiercer opposition to forces perceived as threatening, and disdain for the notion that civil and diplomatic composure can create a better society. “It’s on” for Johnny Lawrence and his followers.

#### 4.2. The Case of Miyagi-Do

Despite their many differences, Daniel LaRusso’s own concept of striving displays critical elements of a white, masculine, neoliberal capitalism. He owns a successful car dealership in the San Fernando Valley, and lives in a luxurious suburban home together with his wife and two children. Despite belonging to the winners of the last three decades, LaRusso feels compelled to start his own karate dojo after learning that Johnny Lawrence has already converted several youngsters to his philosophy. The “battle for the soul of the nation” is inescapable for the professional-managerial LaRusso, who has come to value his habitus as an expression of true meritocracy and as a norm to aspire to. In the third episode of the first season, LaRusso makes it clear to Lawrence that he will not accept the mere existence of the Cobra Kai dojo in his neighborhood. He confronts his old nemesis in a school hallway.

LaRusso: “I just don’t know why you would ever bring back Cobra Kai after what your sensei did to you.”

Lawrence: “Because I’m not Kreese. And the lessons worked.”

LaRusso: “Strike first, no mercy. Real good lessons. If you think I’m gonna let you fill these kids’ heads with that garbage you’re nuts, man.”

A closer look at the cinematography in this scene reveals that the camerawork is constantly shaky when cutting between the faces of both characters confronting each other; hinting at an inherent volatility and likelihood of conflict. A red chair is visible behind LaRusso in the hallway, which underscores the tension between a sedentary position and the passion and activism, which the color commonly connotes. On the other side, is Lawrence, whose Cobra Kai flyer is clearly visible on a locker next him. The framing ensures that the yellow flyer remains discernible every time Lawrence speaks, as if to make clear that his new project is now inexorably connected to his destiny.

The dialogue itself illustrates not only a clash about competing philosophies on how to teach karate, but also a dispute over what belongs in the past (and is deserving of contempt, as the word “garbage” indicates). LaRusso embraces a widespread notion of a linear progression in time, which would cast him on the “right side” of history

(Sandel 2020, 51–53). His brand of open-mindedness and civility won him a karate championship and popularity in the San Fernando Valley back in 1984 – and it has served him well since. Within the rhetoric of rising, he can deservedly feel like a proper object of admiration and respect. Much like many centrist and liberal pundits in the run-up to the 2016 U.S. presidential election, LaRusso is convinced that the arch of history bends towards the expansion of cosmopolitan and liberal middle-class values (Littler 2018, 6–7). The re-entry of the Cobra Kai dojo into his mix upends this linear narrative, and forces LaRusso to reevaluate his own ideas on success, especially given his role as an active community member, who volunteers for the local high school.

Subsequently, LaRusso enters the arena and draws attention to his new karate school. The promotion for this new dojo showcases that LaRusso is ready and willing to step up the game when it comes to impressing young minds. He introduces his new school via a YouTube ad:

Inner peace, focus, balance. These are just some of the skills that you will master when you join Miyagi-Do Karate. (...) And all lessons are free. That's right, free. Because at Miyagi-Do, it's not about the money. It's about the karate.

It becomes clear that the Eastern-philosophy-inflected vision of Miyagi-Do offers a fresh alternative to Cobra Kai in numerous respects. Unlike Lawrence, LaRusso exhibits the characteristics of what Lakoff dubs the “nurturant parent” (2006, 52).

In Lakoff’s conceptualization of the family as a metaphor for the nation, “nurturing has two aspects: empathy and responsibility, both for oneself and for others. (...) Nurturant parents are authoritative without being authoritarian. Obedience derives from love for parents, not from fear of punishment” (2006, 52). From these two core elements, empathy and responsibility, a set of progressive values emerge, such as fairness, equality, community, and fulfillment in life. This aligns with a liberal vision of the “American Dream”, in which self-help is inextricably linked to the common good and collectively helping others. These notions can be found in LaRusso’s teaching style.

He does not start on the premise that the world is a dangerous place, and he does not share the pessimistic outlook that external threats are lurking around every corner. LaRusso does not traffic in moral absolutes, either. Instead, he emphasizes personal self-exploration and flexibility in nurturing the individual potential of each student. This is exemplified by his mentoring of Demetri, who at first seems slow to adapt to the ways of karate. In a key scene, the sensei imparts on his student that: “This isn’t about who is fastest and who is strongest. This is about instincts. It’s about using what’s in here”. Subsequently, Demetri finds his inner potential, gains confidence, and proceeds to this to defend himself against bullies at this school.

It is interesting to note that the two different teaching philosophies in both dojos seem to attract a remarkably similar kind of clientele. In fact, allegiances continuously switch from one school to another among the individual members of each dojo. This offers space for numerous interpretations in terms of success ethics. LaRusso’s brand

of karate-as-spiritual-self-fulfillment-journey also appeals to the marginalized and mistreated. It does offer a way towards social recognition and a path towards accomplishment. Yet, both dojos feud bitterly over the right interpretation of what it means to be a winner, indicating that their principal attitudes toward striving are fundamentally at odds with each other.

And indeed, LaRusso's insistence that "this isn't about who is fastest and who is strongest" can easily be read as a rebuke to notions of fierce competition and the quest for superlatives in order to fit into the "sorting machines" of society (e.g. the labor market). The words of James Truslow Adams, who cautioned against an "American Dream" merely defined by cars and high wages are within clear vicinity of this pep talk. Nevertheless, LaRusso also appeals to a naturalized view of survivalism (with "instincts" being the key word). In this sense, learning the ways of karate is about unleashing primal forces. And albeit these forces must be used in an intelligent and strategic way; they are an essentialized feature of human life. While uttering the words "It's about using what's in here", he motions toward Dimitri's head, signaling that it is his innate and individual qualities that can make or break his way in life. LaRusso stays mute on the question whether Dimitri's – or anyone else's salvation – could come from collectively addressing the structural causes of the social hardships that have befallen the youngsters in the San Fernando Valley.

This echoes the words of Lauren Berlant, who writes in their analysis of the films *Promesse* and *Rosetta* that "It is a scene of mass but not collective activity. It is a scene in which the lower you are on economic scales, and the less formal your relation to the economy, the more alone you are in the project of maintaining and reproducing life" (2011, 167). Anchoring this proposition within the fantasy work of meritocracy yields that the self is the only basic common denominator in social and economic relations. It remains both a starting point for relational desires as well as a vector for imagining societal change. Much like Michael Jackson's 1980's hit song *Man in the Mirror*, LaRusso preaches a gospel of self-optimization to deal with the social ruptures that threaten individual ideations. Effectively, the language used at Miyagi-Do is intimately intertwined with meritocratic mythologies. In her case against meritocracy, Jo Littler posits that

[t]he contemporary logic of meritocracy frequently (though not always) assumes that talent and intelligence are innate: it depends on an essentialised conception of intellect and aptitude. In other words, it primarily assumes an ability which is inborn and either given the chance or not to succeed. This notion of intelligence is overwhelmingly singular and linear (2018, 4).

Ultimately, succeeding at Miyagi-Do involves succeeding through internal capabilities, which does not radically stray from Reagan's invocation of "pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps" and earning merit and self-respect along the way. The notion espoused here is that individual effort and self-discipline do make a significant difference. Those, who have not cultivated these values, just have not been given a proper

chance yet. However, there appears no alternative to cultivating these precise values. Learning how to fight is indispensable in this society – and most importantly: It is free.

## 5. Conclusions

A critical take-away from these analyses is that both karate schools are wedded to the idea that self-improvement comes through internal discipline and competition. The rhetoric of rising, as described by Michael Sandel, is apparent in both – neither one wants to do away with the cult of the individual. However, at Miyagi-Do the principal nature of human beings is interpreted differently from of Cobra Kai. Miyagi-Do espouses a discourse of civility and empathy, underlining that karate should only be used in self-defense, thereby offering a vision of rising within the context of pre-agreed rules of fair-play. Cobra Kai, on the other hand, directs its focus on built-up frustrations and more instant gratification (“Strike first.”). Johnny Lawrence does not tell his followers that they need not be angry; on the contrary: he validates and recognizes these often-times pre-existing emotions.

While it might be seen as potent that Johnny Lawrence’s philosophy of 1980s hard-bodied action-heroism affirms and recognizes the frustration felt by his students, it is also important to place it in a larger political and historical context. In her 1994 book *Hard Bodies – Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*, Susan Jeffords notes that Rambo-style narratives of racist hypermasculinity continue to be narrated in more complex ways – sometimes even critiquing their earlier incarnations. However,

they are dangerous models, not only because they depend on the kind of nationalism and militarism that brought the country to military actions in Panama, Grenada, and the Persian Gulf but also because they seem not to represent the desperation of an ageing superpower that is reluctant, under a conservative framework, to relinquish its international status and influence and may (...) be willing to punish harshly those who insist it to do so (1994, 193).

This critical observation sheds light on how popular visions of reactionary body politics are driven by a lack of alternative visions to unfettered competition and how they are compounded by fears of downward social mobility. The fierce defense of hegemonic structures – at home and abroad – illustrates how naturalized social hierarchies both perpetuate conflicts and obscure visions for a more egalitarian world. The ascendancy of neoconservative militarism in U.S. foreign policy in recent decades offers an illustration for how the end of the Cold War was not only perceived as a validation of the democratic capitalist model, but also set the stage for increased anxieties over the status of the United States as the sole remaining superpower in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In this sense, the jingoistic, racist, and sexist overtones in the Cobra Kai dojo lend support to a worldview, which leaves little room for investigating power imbalances –

and much mythology for celebrating oppressive hierarchies as the perceived result of individual success. Being on the receiving end of this worldview is clearly undesirable (Wilkerson, 2020 178–182), which is why potential challenges are met with spectacular and visceral bouts of rage – interlocking all involved parties in perpetual strife. In this sense, the series *Cobra Kai* demonstrates how contemporary meritocratic visions of the “American Dream” struggle to cultivate a form solidarity that can shield large swaths of the population from indignation and contempt.

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