دراسات معاصرة
Contemporary Studies
مجلة علمية دولية محكمة نصف سنوية
تصدر عن مخبر الدراسات النقدية والأدبية المعاصرة بتيسمسيلت/الجزائر
ISSN 2571-9882 EISSN 2600-6987
https://www.asjp.cerist.dz/en/PresentationRevue/297
Contemporary Studies is a bi-annual open access International double-blind journal. It is published by the University of Tissemsilt, Algeria.
Volume: 10 / N°: 01 June (2026), p 25.-33

Depression-Era America in Song: A Qualitative Content Analysis of "Brother Can You Spare a Dime?" (1932)

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Received: 15/02/2026 *Accepted: 19/04/2026* *Published: 02/06/2026*

Abstract:
This study employs Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) on "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" (Bing Crosby, 1932) to examine manifest and latent meanings in the lyrics. The analysis considers instrumentation, historical context, and juxtaposes the song with James Truslow Adams's *The Epic of America* (1931) which coined the term "American Dream." The paper suggests that contrary to Adams, who used his book as an idealizing narrative to give Americans a sense of hope, Crosby's song serves as a social critique highlighting the abandonment of the common people in the U.S. The song thus works as a musical counter-narrative, expressing anger and disappointment over promised prosperity during the Great Depression.
Keywords: American Dream; Bing Crosby; disillusionment; Great Depression; Qualitative Content Analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION

During the autumn of 1929, the Wall Street stock market crashed as share prices on the New York Stock Exchange collapsed. This led to the Great Depression, one of the worst financial crises that hit the U.S. economy in the 20th century. Additionally, the Dust Bowl completely destroyed the crop throughout the Great Plains during the 1930s. Consequently, a significant portion of American workers became unemployed and struggled to feed their families.

There were people who believed that the economic crisis was temporary. One of them was the American historian James Truslow Adams who depicted an idealistic picture of the U.S. in his prominent book *The Epic of America* (1931). Perhaps, Adams wanted to instill some hopefulness into the Americans, although, according to other artists and intellectuals, this positive version was unrealistic.

One year later, in 1932, after Adams published his famous book about the American Dream, Yip Harburg and Jay Gorney published the song "Brother Can You Spare a Dime?" which addresses the Great Depression. It became popular when Bing Crosby performed it.

This article examines the impossibility of fulfilling the American Dream during the Great Depression through the analysis of "Brother Can

You Spare a Dime?" a popular song recorded in 1932 by Bing Crosby. The study employs qualitative content analysis, combined with an examination of musical instrumentation, tropes and symbols, to reveal the song's themes and significance. It also contrasts these findings with Adams's book in order to draw valid interpretations.

The content of the song does not correspond to the utopian image of America promoted in Adams's book. However, it is impossible to determine whether the song's composers had actually read *The Epic of America*. The fact remains that the song protested against the conditions of people living in poverty as a result of the Great Depression, and by the time Adams published his book, most Americans were already experiencing economic hardship.

This study is guided by the following research questions:

- How does "Brother Can You Spare a Dime?" represent America and its people during the Great Depression?
- To what extent does it contradict the optimistic portrayal of the country presented in Adams's book?

After providing a brief historical and theoretical background of the Great Depression and the American Dream, the paper explores the different components of Crosby's song by using Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) to examine manifest and latent meanings in the lyrics. Then the song will be contrasted with Adams's arguments about hope and optimism in the United States. The paper argues that "Brother Can You Spare a Dime?" stands as one of the most significant American popular songs of the twentieth century, as it criticizes the failure to achieve the American Dream and highlights the abandonment of the common people by the U.S. nation.

2. Literature Review

The literature review is divided into two sections. The first section outlines the economic conditions of the 1920s and 1930s, while the second section examines how the Great Depression and the American Dream have been represented in historical, literary, and musical works.

2.1 Economic Context of the 1920s and 1930s

This section provides a general overview of the Wall Street Crash of 1929, the Dust Bowl, and the New Deal which shape the song's background.

America witnessed unprecedented economic prosperity and growing consumerism during the twenties. That period was referred to as the Roaring Twenties since Americans lived a good life through hard work and determination.

In 1929 millions of Americans experienced poverty and hardship after losing their farms and jobs because of the Great Depression. This financial collapse began on October 24, 1929, and was considered one of the worst economic downturns in U.S. history. The country also experienced severe dust storms known as the Dust Bowl, which destroyed the environment and agriculture of the High Plains in Oklahoma, Kansas, Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas. This natural disaster obliged thousands of American families to leave their farms and relocate to California in search of jobs and better opportunities.

According to data from the U.S. Department of Labor, nearly twelve million Americans were unemployed in 1933 (Bernstein, 1985) and between 1929 and 1933, the real GDP decreased by almost 30%. Also, joblessness climbed to roughly 25% (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, n.d.) and one out of every three farmers walked away from their land, with prices for key crops such as wheat and corn fell by around 60%. (Hausman et al., 2020)

To tackle the crisis, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the New Deal, a set of programs to boost the economy, and used his rhetoric in the 1933 inaugural speech to tell American citizens that they had "nothing to fear but fear itself."

Millions of Americans were affected by the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl until the United States entered World War II in December 1941, when full employment was achieved by the military industrial sector.

2.2 Representation of the Great Depression and the American Dream

This section reviews how artist and scholars have examined the gap between the promise of the American Dream and the realities of the economic crisis.

Academics, novelists, filmmakers, and musicians have explored the Great Depression and its impact on American citizens in their books and artworks. They highlighted the gap between Americans' expectations and the harsh realities they faced during the thirties. Studs Terkel's *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (1970) presents the life stories of over 130 Americans during the economic crisis, whereas Richard Hofstadter's *The Age of Reform* (1955) investigates the rise of populism and social movements from the late 19th century until the New Deal. By the late 20th Century, several economists analyzed the era's structural causes and consequences, with Romer (1990) questioning the idea of a complete collapse in consumption during the early 1930s, and Fishback et al. (2005) examining how New Deal programs affected different areas in different ways.

A number of literary works provide insight into the widespread disillusionment resulting from the failure to achieve the American Dream during the Great Depression and beyond. The dream represents the freedom to achieve prosperity and success through hard work, dedication, and opportunity. The idea of the American Dream is embodied in the Declaration of Independence which explicitly mentions that Americans have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Cullen (2004, p.54) summarizes the American Dream as the idea that anything is possible if one wants it badly enough, whereas Hertzke and Gunter (2022) view the American Dream as a structure of competition, arguing that "the predominant underlying mode of existence in the United States will be a competition for whatever elements constitute the measure of success" (p. 51).

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) depicts the corruption of the American Dream and serves as a prophecy of the coming Depression. Also, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) portrays the Joads'

disillusionment and struggles during the Dust Bowl. As a result, the family moves from Oklahoma to California in search of economic stability.

Similarly, a number of musicians like Woody Guthrie, the Carter Family, Skip James, and Bing Crosby, to name but a few, sang songs about hardships and failed expectations. Woody Guthrie, in particular, composed folk ballads about the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl, inspiring contemporary singers such as Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, and Ani DiFranco.

Cinema also represented failed expectations in movies such as *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969), *Amreeka* (Cherien Dabis, 2009), and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (Mira Nair, 2012) which portray characters attempting to realize the American Dream while facing social and political challenges.

The Great Depression affected millions of American citizens; in contrast, the American Dream continues to attract immigrants worldwide today. According to the U.S. Department of State Diversity Visa 2025 selected entrants list, the DV-2025 program received approximately 19,927,656 qualified entries worldwide, and Algeria had 5,526 selectees in the program (U.S. Department of State, 2025). This shows the enduring appeal of the dream as a motivating ethos for people from different countries seeking success and economic prosperity in the United States.

3. Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) of "Brother Can You Spare a Dime?"

3.1 Overview and Analytic Objectives

This section applies qualitative content analysis (QCA) to the lyrics of "Brother Can You Spare a Dime?" using categorization, coding, and contextual interpretation in order to examine the themes and meanings conveyed in the song.

Qualitative content analysis is "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts to the contexts of their use." (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 30) It allows a systematic reading of the lyrical material. The aim is to uncover both the manifest content (explicit themes) and latent meanings (ideological critiques) embedded within the lyrics of the song. The intention of content analysis is to deliberately move from the original text to analysis of the information extracted from it, focusing on the meanings of texts and their constituent parts. (Gläser & Laudel, 2013, p. 13)

3.2 Methodology

A hybrid inductive-deductive QCA approach was employed to allow for both theory-based and data-based interpretations. The unit of analysis was the entire lyrical text (32 lines), with each line regarded as a discrete unit. The analysis followed a structured sequence:

1) close reading and contextual familiarization with the socio-historical setting of the early 1930s;
2) creation of a coding framework through an iterative process of identifying recurring themes;
3) systematic coding of all textual units;
4) And interpretation of patterns to synthesize overarching themes.

3.3 Coding Framework and Results

The results are displayed in Table 1, which presents the coding process applied to the lyrics, the conceptual categories, operational definitions, and illustrative examples from the lyrics.

Code	Category	Operational Definition	E.g. from Lyrics
Unfulfilled Dream	American Dream	Promised prosperity and progress later contradicted by reality	"They used to tell me I was building a dream"
Productive Labor	National Contribution	Labor framed as national progress and modernization	"Once I built a railroad, I made it run"
Military Sacrifice	National Contribution	Wartime service described as patriotic duty	"Half a million boots went sloggin' through Hell"
Labor Exclusion	Capitalist Exploitation	Abandoned after labor or service	"Now it's done"
Economic Deprivation	Poverty	Explicit unemployment and hunger	"Why should I be standing in line, just waiting for bread?"
Identity Loss	Social Exclusion	Loss of identity and personal recognition	"Say don't you remember? They called me Al"
Fraternal Appeal	Moral Appeal	Direct plea to shared humanity and responsibility	"I'm your pal. Say buddy, can you spare a dime?"

Table 1: Results of the Qualitative Content Analysis

3.4 Thematic Interpretation

The analysis reveals that the lyrics move from the promise of the American Dream (unfulfilled dream), through documented contribution (labor and military service), to a state of dispossession (economic and identity loss), concluding in a direct moral appeal (fraternity and brotherhood).

This structure transforms a personal lament into a broad critique. The main argument of the song is that a social agreement was established ("building a dream" in return for labor and sacrifices), the protagonist fulfilled his duties, but the nation has broken its promise. The repeated request for a "dime" operates as a powerful symbol, illustrating the devaluation of the worker-citizen's contribution. The song expresses anger and protest against the economic abandonment of the common people, yet its rhetorical power comes from appealing to the core American ideals of the dignity of work, the sacred value of patriotic service, and the idea of fair reward. The protagonist does not reject his national identity; he claims it more than those who have forgotten him. In doing so, "Brother Can You Spare a Dime?" articulates a powerful counter-narrative to the era's dominant myths of success, exposing the false promises of the American Dream during the nation's deepest economic crisis.

3.5 General Discussion: Adams's Idealistic Dream vs. Crosby's Afflicting Reality

This discussion contrasts Adams's optimistic vision of America with the disillusionment expressed in the song.

In 1931, James Truslow Adams coined the concept "American Dream" in his famous book *The Epic of America*. He defined it as the "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, 1931, p.404) The QCA code 'Unfulfilled Dream' illustrates that the promise of "building a dream" has been broken.

Adams published his book in the midst of the Great Depression and its main objective appears to have been to provide millions of Americans with a sense of hope as their lives were ruined because of the economic recession. He wanted to comfort Americans that the crisis would be over and that their living standards would be reestablished. He wrote that "it is probable that the extreme depression will pass in a year or two" (Adams, 1931, p. 405). This comment shows that Adams aimed to spread optimism. However, his prediction of getting back to normal life proved inaccurate, as reflected in the song's 'Economic Deprivation' code, exemplified by the phrase "waiting for bread."

"Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" was written in 1932 by authors Yip Harburg and Jay Gorney. It was created for *Americana*, a Broadway show which ran from October to December 1932 and was not a success.

New York Times journalist Clyde Haberman (2007) points out that "Mr. Harburg wanted to write about the bread lines that were part of New York cityscape. Mr Gorney had the right tune, a melody inspired by a Russian lullaby." Haberman adds that the two songwriters "were approached in the park by a rather nice-looking young man, nicely dressed…Not looking the songwriters in the face, the man asked, 'Buddy, can you spare a dime?'"

The book of Adams traces the origin of the American Dream as it has always been embedded in the minds of all Americans from the first English settlement of the New World until the twentieth century. The author refers to the Declaration of Independence and Thomas Jefferson's version of the dream and also asserts that "that dream or hope has been present from the start" (Adams, p. 9). But the analysis of the song reveals that the main character did his part for this dream as embodied in the codes 'Productive Labor' and 'Military Sacrifice' and received nothing.

The song's title, 'Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?' evokes a sense of brotherhood while emphasizing the narrator's desperate socioeconomic position. The use of the word 'brother' reflects a collapse of social formality in the face of economic hardship. Also the word "dime", in the United States usage, is a ten-cent coin of the U.S. dollar. The denomination was first authorized by the Coinage Act of 1792 (See figure 1 below).

Fig.1. Mercury Dime (1916-1945)



Source: © USA Coin Book

The figure depicts a young Liberty who stands as a national personification of the American nation. The composers of the song chose to use the word "dime" because the man begging money on the street used to be respected and now his pride is affected as he became poor during this economic depression. So the protagonist of the song questions American patriotism and does not feel at home. This profound loss of status is captured by the code 'Identity Loss' and its example in the lyrics, "Say don't you remember? They called me Al."

The narrator uses the pronoun "I" to tell the story from his perspective. He criticizes the impossibility of fulfilling the dream for the people at the bottom of the social ladder. The sounds of the violins in the introduction in addition to the deep voice of Crosby create a gloomy atmosphere which fills listeners with strong emotions.

All the verses are filled with grief, disillusionment and sadness. The first line of the song "they used to tell me I was building a dream" includes a direct reference to the American Dream although it is unclear whether the composers of the song Harburg and Gorney were influenced by Adams' text where he coined his concept.

The protagonist of the song is struck by the fact he contributed to the development of his country by building highways and skyscrapers only to find himself, as he asserts "standing in line, just waiting for bread?"(8).

American composer Rob Kapilow (2008) explains that one of the key elements of the success of the song is its minor key. "It does not start in a major key like most Broadway songs, but appropriate to the Depression in a minor key."

But for Adams (1931), U.S. citizens can make their dreams come true; a dream of a social order in which each one can attain the fullest stature of which they are innately capable and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the circumstances of birth or position. (p. 404)

Thus Adams's book can be considered as an idealizing narrative, which contrasts with the song's documentary realism. In fact, the former helped the federal government embellish the grandeur of the American nation, while the latter told the listeners that millions of Americans were unemployed and stood in line waiting for bread in soup kitchens.

"Brother Can you Spare a Dime?" is a cry of anger that comes from the depths of the soul of a patriotic American who is confronted with the harrowing realities of America of the thirties.

The anger of the protagonist is emphasized in the last stanza of the song when he says: "Say don't you remember, they called me **Al,** It was Al all the time, Say don't you remember, I'm your **pal**, Buddy can you spare a dime?" (29-32)

The rhyme /al/-/pal/ (emphasis added) serves as a powerful mnemonic device facilitating the memorization of the lyrics and clarifying the metrical structure for the listeners. It also gives us the idea that the protagonist is a typical American everyman. His name is Al and he could be Ed, Jay or

Tom. He represents the millions of angry Americans who are dissatisfied with their country.

Kapilow (2008) notes that in Broadway songs the beginning is usually repeated, but here the song shifts from depression to hope in the first verse and ends with anger. While the earlier repetitions use "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?", suggesting a harmless brotherhood of man, the song ends with "Buddy, Can You Spare a Dime?", reflecting the anger of its socialist creators, Gorney and Harburg, and the enduring complaint that the working man does not receive his rewards.

This musical choice reinforces the themes of economic deprivation and disillusionment derived from the qualitative content analysis. In short, "Brother Can You Spare a Dime?" was able to capture the hard times of the U.S. recession of the thirties by illustrating the discrepancy between the American Dream and American real life for millions of people who had to survive for almost a decade.

4. CONCLUSION

The Great Depression was the worst economic downturn in the U.S. history of the twentieth century. During the years of the recession, achieving the American Dream was almost impossible for ordinary people, until economic conditions began to improve in the early 1940s.

James Truslow Adams's *The Epic of America* narrates the glorious achievements of the WASPs who created a nation after running from religious persecution. It celebrates the deeds of the Founding Fathers and gives an idealistic version of the American nation by praising the Frontier Thesis, the City Upon the Hill and, above all, the American Dream. Nevertheless, the book seems to be decontextualized from the American reality of the thirties, as millions of U.S. citizens were trying to earn a piece of bread rather than chase the American Dream.

On the other hand, "Brother Can You Spare a Dime?" reported the realities of the thirties and came to be viewed as an anthem of the Great Depression. (Kapilow, 2019, p. 70) Far from making American auditors feel less troubled by the Great Depression, the song composed by Harburg and Gorney gave them a sense of hope and optimism. Harburg even mentions that American politicians were afraid of the impact the song's positive reception might have. (Terkel, 1970, p. 21) It must be added that Bing Crosby was not the only singer to record the famous Broadway song, as it was covered by 52 artists, including Judy Collins, Tom Waits, and the late British pop singer George Michael. (Haberman)

Music, novels, photographs, paintings and films teach us experiences and events that we do not find in History. They depict not only aesthetics and the sublime, but also the tragedies and traumas of the past. The feelings and moods of people who lived in poverty are not found in manuals or books, but Crosby's song illustrates what it meant to be an American living out of the American Dream during the Great Depression.

In conclusion, this paper analyzed "Brother Can You Spare a Dime?" as a relevant song from a humanistic perspective. The analysis demonstrated the plight of ordinary Americans who were on the street waiting for a bowl of soup and a piece of bread.

Finally, the theme of gauging the achievement of the American Dream is still valid in today's America. Thousands of American families had their lives ruined by the subprime financial crisis of 2007, which prevented them from paying their home loans. In this context, contemporary singers such as Ani DiFranco, Public Enemy, Steve Earle, and Kendrick Lamar remain important voices in addressing issues of inequalities, social injustice, racism, sexism, unemployment, and the impossibility of fulfilling the American Dream.

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