

Book Review: *Rugged Individualism and the Misunderstanding of American Inequality*

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Received March 18, 2020

Accepted for publication April 1, 2020

Published April 14, 2020

Publication Type: Book Review

Preferred Citation: Royce, Edward. 2020. "Review of *Rugged Individualism and the Misunderstanding of American Inequality*." *Sociation* 19(1): 29-30.



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The United States occupies an outlier status. Compared to other rich countries, we have an exceptionally high level of inequality in the distribution of income and wealth; an exceptionally large poverty population, including about one out of every five children; and, attesting to the decline of the American Dream, an exceptionally low rate of social mobility. We rank at or near the bottom on measures of infant mortality, life expectancy, access to health care, and health equity. Wage growth for most workers has been anemic since the 1970s, full-time jobs with benefits and regular schedules are increasingly scarce, and too many Americans are vulnerable to economic deprivation and hopelessness.

What accounts for this American exceptionalism? Why, specifically, are levels of poverty and inequality so much greater in the U.S. than in other wealthy countries? Though we typically fail to see it, the answer to this question is quite simple. As authors Lawrence Eppard, Mark Robert Rank, and Heather Bullock (along with contributors Noam Chomsky, Henry Giroux, David Brady, and Dan Schubert) convincingly demonstrate, this pitifully low ranking is a political phenomenon, a product of explicit social policy choices. The rate of poverty in the U.S. is exceptionally high because, as the cross-national data reveal, safety net policies are exceptionally ungenerous. European countries, by contrast, spend more money on social programs and, mindful of the underlying structural causes of poverty, they spend it more wisely.

The authors' analysis of the cross-country link between the level of social spending and the rate of poverty, supported by an abundance of evidence (Chapters One and Seven), is among their noteworthy achievements. This finding, however, raises another question. Why are "American-style" social policies so stingy compared to "European-style" social policies? Why has the U.S., the richest country in the world, done so little to alleviate poverty, prevent homelessness, ensure economic security, and combat runaway inequality? The distribution of political power, skewed toward the interests corporations and the wealthy, and the status quo bias of American political institutions, the authors acknowledge, are a very important part of the explanation.

But another exceptional feature of American society—its uniquely individualistic culture—is an essential part of the story. On this topic in particular *Rugged Individualism* makes a singular contribution. Compared to their European counterparts, Americans, the authors show, are more individualistic in their thinking—more inclined to attribute poverty to personal rather than systemic problems, to the failings of the poor themselves rather than the failings of political and economic institutions. The "dominant inequality beliefs" in the U.S. stand out in their affirmation of personal responsibility, self-help, and small government. We are drawn toward a language accentuating individual initiative over structural constraints. We regard the U.S. as a unique land of opportunity where economic success is available to anyone willing to put in the effort. And while we recognize that some people face obstacles in their lives, we believe that everyone has it within themselves to overcome any barriers to achievement they might encounter.

It follows from this individualistic ideology that if people remain stuck in poverty, they have only themselves to blame. They must be insufficiently motivated, careless in their choices, deficient in grit and resilience, or held back by character flaws—and are therefore undeserving of government assistance. These ideas, in turn, are bound up with and reinforced by racist and sexist stereotypes about Black single mothers, unemployed Black men, welfare recipients,

and others falling outside the “mainstream.” When the white majority suspects that “undeserving” racial/ethnic minorities will be the primary beneficiaries of government assistance, they show little sympathy for the poor and little eagerness to sign on for additional social spending.

To the extent they endorse the individualistic ideology, Americans are less supportive of efforts to fight poverty through government intervention, redistributive policies, or the strengthening of the welfare state. Though not unsympathetic to the plight of the poor, Americans, as the authors argue in a clever turn of phrase, are “skeptically altruistic.” Combating poverty is a worthy endeavor in principle, most Americans believe, but they question the deservingness of many of the poor, their willingness to help themselves, and they are dubious about the need for and effectiveness of “big government” interventions. The “skepticism” side here, the authors emphasize, is to a significant extent rooted in racial resentment and the stigmatization of the poor.

Seemingly in contradiction to their own experiences and interests, even many low-income people themselves attribute poverty to the defects of the poor. Their adherence to this view, the authors argue, attests not only to the cultural power of individualism, but also to its psychological power, its allure as an account of how society works, and to the “palliative” functions it performs. By expressing agreement with dominant inequality beliefs and values, the poor affirm their own self-worth, certify their membership in society, endow their lives with “a sense of control over and hope for the future,” and comfort themselves with the soothing illusion of a just world where everyone gets what they deserve and deserves what they get (Chapter Three).

The authors carefully document the many conceptual and empirical “shortcomings of individualism” as both an explanation for poverty and a guide to social policy (Chapter One). But what makes this an outstanding book is the depth of its investigation into the inner workings of American individualism—how it plays out in people’s lives and in their thinking about social issues; how it operates as a “default explanation” for existing inequalities; how it informs Americans’ assessment of which remedies for poverty and other social problems are deemed acceptable; how its hegemonic position in the culture limits the language and cognitive resources available to people when prompted to talk about poverty and the poor; how it serves as a legitimating ideology, justifying the economic status quo, even in the eyes of those on the short end of the stick; how it maintains its strength vis-à-vis more institutional or structural perspectives; how it inhibits collective efforts to create a more just and equal society; and, ultimately, how it shapes Americans’ political preferences and the social policy decisions of public officials.

Not every American embraces the ideology of individualism, the authors recognize, or at least not to the same degree, but it has sufficient force in the culture to limit popular support for the more “robust and structurally oriented social policies” typically found in European countries. If we hope to win a war against poverty, a necessary first step is to fight back against the dominant individualistic ideology and persuade Americans to see the merit of a more structural perspective on poverty and inequality. How this objective might be accomplished remains uncertain, but this book has the virtue of clearly laying out the challenge we face.

Rugged Individualism is a uniquely collaborative undertaking, with contributions from several of the country’s leading experts on poverty and inequality. The chapters in this book are not organized in a conventional sequential manner. Instead, each chapter explores the individualism/poverty nexus from a different vantage point, drawing on a different well of data, and using a different approach for conveying the argument. It brings together a wide range of quantitative and qualitative research, both macro and micro; and it offers a revealing assortment of cross-national data, essential to the thesis of the book. It also includes two chapters (Chapters Five and Six) presenting original interview studies carried out by the authors themselves. These chapters give readers a close-up look at how individualism infuses the thinking of, respectively, white custodial workers and social work students concerning issues of poverty, inequality, and welfare. Finally, in a particularly illuminating chapter (Chapter Four), it presents excerpts of conversations among academic experts.

The result of this multipronged effort is a well-crafted, insightful, and highly readable book, one in which the whole is much greater than the sum of its parts, and each part itself is a stand-alone gem.