

Book Review

RUGGED INDIVIDUALISM AND THE MISUNDERSTANDING OF AMERICAN INEQUALITY

By Lawrence M. Eppard, Mark Robert Rank and Heather E. Bullock
with Noam Chomsky, Henry A. Giroux, David Brady and Dan Schubert
Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press, 2020

Review by Timothy Madigan

The authors laboriously review several strands of research on the perceptions of inequality among Americans. These perceptions are contrasted, where possible, with the perceptions of people in developed European and other countries. Differences in poverty levels between countries and attitudes on how to best address poverty are also examined. The book's greatest strength is its summary of all this research and in its careful documentation of the patterns leading to beliefs about individualism and their connection to the minimalist welfare state in America. The authors also address the biased and false views that many white Americans have regarding the behavior of blacks and how racist and individualistic views often operate together, stymying the possibility for structurally based policies to emerge. Several chapters describe their targeted data collection efforts to drill down and answer some pressing theoretical questions. Why do blue-collar workers not develop class consciousness despite all of the ideal conditions being present for it to emerge? The answer is because they see themselves as being successful if only in a relatively limited way. Several chapters report the opinions of leading inequality experts on the above matters. The book is a page turner because of all the interesting stratification information flowing from the pages, of the kind that runs through decades of sociological research on the topic.

The authors make abundantly clear several research findings on inequality. First, individualism as a value and way of thinking runs rampant in America. Quoting Pew Research Center findings, 57% of Americans strongly disagree that success in life is largely determined by forces outside of their control. This level of belief in the strength of the individual is the highest compared to people in other advanced societies where the average is only 38%. On the flip side, Americans are less likely to see structural forces at work on the lives and fates of individuals. This outlook results from several factors that make America different from European countries such as having no feudal past, no monarchy, a wide-open Western frontier and so on. The adoption of individualistic type explanations and downplaying of forces beyond the individual's control compose what the authors term the "inequality palette". It is a cultural

Sociological Viewpoints

Volume 34, Issue 1, 135-138

Copyright © 2020 by Pennsylvania Sociological Society

All rights of reproduction in any form reserved

ISSN: 1060-0876/doi:10.26908/3412020_016

resource and, as such, is capable of being changed. Poverty and welfare are examined throughout the book. The entrenched individualism ideology leads Americans to blame the individual for failure and falling into poverty. This occurs even though a majority of Americans experience some kind of spell of economic insecurity, varying from short length to long and severe, a condition Europeans are much less likely to experience. It also affects the solutions deemed acceptable to confront poverty: acceptable policies tend to target the individual as opposed to fighting the structural causes of poverty. Americans, the authors conclude, are skeptically altruistic. However, the authors do carefully show this tendency does not extend to all groups in the American population, especially African Americans.

The authors believe that the reluctance of Americans to embrace state efforts to reduce poverty could be driven by an inadequate vocabulary; it is underdeveloped in the area of structural explanations and evidence. The authors show that social class impacts peoples' life chances. The invisibility of structural explanations and the saturation of the vocabulary with individualist terms could be understood as a form of symbolic violence imposed by the dominant culture on ordinary citizens. The distortion produces a misrecognition of the arbitrary as the natural, using some concepts from Pierre Bourdieu. The book, according to the authors, is a challenge to the dominant way of thinking and the legitimacy of inequality in the United States.

Some of the most important and robust findings from the sociology of education are covered. Family background predicts various dimensions of school success: grades, test scores, being held back, graduation rates, and college enrollment rates. Low educational credentials correlate with lower incomes which correlates with more spells of poverty, shorter life expectancy, less home ownership, more crime victimization, less happiness, and shorter marriages. Many or most of the processes through which rich families can increase the chances of educational success of their offspring are misrecognized as meritocratic. The overall educational success of Asian Americans is not, however, addressed in the book.

Several key findings stand in almost unbelievable contrast to each other. First, the authors thoroughly document that Americans reject structural explanations for success and failure in the United States. At the same time, however, they also show from various studies that Americans have a severely biased view of who receives welfare. Whites believe African Americans are the people who mostly draw welfare. They believe that their lower work ethic is partly to blame along with immorality. In a word, whites conflate race and welfare. The reader is left to realize, intentionally or not, that those who reject structural explanations for failure seem to be imposing, through their collective misunderstandings, a structural barrier on the lives of a large subgroup in society, one in which the majority of members support government policies to alleviate poverty because of its structuralist causes, but receive less of it than people in other countries. Indeed, racism and individualism reinforce each other, according to the authors, and can have social consequences.

The authors provide a plethora of findings on values from comparative research between Americans and Europeans. Other countries, it is made clear, have far less individualism. Research on this topic leads to the conclusion that Americans are among the most individualistic people in the whole world. The beliefs people hold about the government's role in society align with their beliefs about individualism. Thus, Europeans are far more agreeable to the notion that government has some responsibility for people's jobs,

standard of living and incomes. Countries with less individualism also have less poverty because the state takes effective steps to ameliorate it. Sweden is shown as an example. It cuts the number of people who would be poor by 80%. Overall, other countries reduce their numbers of poor by 63% on average. The United States does engage in anti-poverty efforts. But it only nets a 35% reduction—far lower than other states. This is a failure, they argue, at the political and policy level. Focusing on the individual creates conditions for inaction at the structural level to effect significant poverty reduction. It is noted, however, that the United States is effective at lifting 75% of its elderly out of poverty. The variability in poverty reduction within and between countries seems to be the reason for part of the book's title: "misunderstanding of inequality".

After showing how the United States, despite being the richest country in the world, has the highest poverty rate among advanced countries, the authors grapple with a tough theoretical question: why do those who are located at the bottom not develop a "class-for-itself" type consciousness? Why are they not seeing the obstacles that are in the way of poor people as being removeable if society choose to do so? Consequentially, they conduct a qualitative study of custodial workers at several universities, asking in-depth questions about stratification and mobility. The histories they obtain of the childhood and young adult lives of such workers are unsettling but not new to those studying poverty: extreme poverty, spouse abuse, family breakup, drug and alcohol abuse, and sexual molestation. Despite surviving some of the worse childhood and adolescent stages of life, the respondents revealed that they are satisfied with their current station in life. How is this outcome possible? Because they compare themselves with those who are unable to overcome personal deficiencies such as drug and alcohol abuse or to hold down a job. This comparison to those below makes them feel somewhat proud and successful.

As the reader pages through the book, many interesting bits of information appear. These tidbits provide instructors with perhaps the best up-to-date research findings with which they can incorporate into their classroom teaching. They also enrich students of stratification with fresh studies that address areas of interest. For example, page 50 directs readers to a study of children from prenatal to early childhood years. It shows the cumulative effects on children of being raised in environments with subpar caregiving and resources. This is an important piece of information for teachers of stratification who want to illuminate the ways that children in their early socialization experiences do not have an equal opportunity in the game of life.

The book has an obvious unconventional layout. One result is that the reader is neck high in a variety of interesting information from the first page. Then the reader is placed in the middle of interviews with well-known inequality experts who affirm the interest in and importance of grappling with the main topics of the study. This is followed by actual research findings from two studies, one a convenience sample of janitorial staff and the other of social work college students. Then it returns to quantitative results from the literature painting the macro level picture followed up with an informative afterward written by Henry Giroux who does not seem to delve into the book's specific findings but instead compliments or extends them. Some passages and bits of information presented in the book are repetitive. If I were one of the authors I might have voted for including a chapter on theory and one connecting the project to more of the classical research on the topics covered such as pioneering research by

Peter Blau and Otis Dudley Duncan on social mobility and Wisconsin status attainment research.

Bourdieu's theorizing provides some theoretical glue to the study. Additional political sociology theory is only slightly used at best throughout the book. The pluralistic perspective seems to be prevalent in the minds of Americans: they see themselves and others as living in a plural society where everyone has equal access to the fruits of society. This outlook is in stark contrast to the ideas posed by the elite or statist managerial and class conflict perspectives. William Domhoff, a well-respected expert on stratification and power, is not referenced. He argues that the class domination theory of power explains America's stratification system better than the pluralist, power elite and historical institutionalism theories (2010). All of these theories and more are at play one way or another in this book. Political sociology offers the concept of "framing", or how to subtly steer people's thinking and the larger discourse about social issues. Ronald Reagan's effective use of the image of a "Welfare Queen" to undermine support for welfare aligns with this concept. The book contains hints of connections to this body of sociological thinking (ex. p. 265). The rich theoretical literature in this area should have been incorporated more thoroughly throughout the work and it should be clear where the authors situate their study and conclusions within it. It suggests that broad policy changes might need more than the backing of a better-informed general public; the whole policy planning network and campaign contribution system would need to be impacted or altered significantly as well.

Overall, the authors sorted through and summarized an impressive amount of research on attitudes towards inequality from the United States and Europe. They also conducted some insightful studies of their own to aid in evaluating the conclusions emanating from their extensive literature reviews. Their multi-pronged approach will contribute to the literature on inequality, poverty, American values, culture and racism. Together, their findings and conclusions will serve as a resource for theorists and others studying and hoping to improve the American polity and society. At stake is the worthiness of competing justifications for the legitimacy versus the deviant nature of America's unique stratification system.