Rugged Individualism and the Misunderstanding of American Inequality

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Chapter Four

In Conversation

In chapter 2 we summarized the relevant research on the dominance of American inequality beliefs. In this chapter we take a different approach, allowing leading scholars, in conversation, to discuss this research and reflect on what it all means for American society. We sat down for interviews with David Brady, Heather Bullock, Peter Callero, Henry Giroux, Sharon Krause, Michael Lewis, Stephen McNamee, and Jamila Michener. Each of these scholars has conducted academic work with important implications for the questions posed in this book concerning inequality beliefs and social policy. The interviews were conducted separately with each of the scholars and have been brought together for this chapter. What follows are highlights from our conversations, edited with input from the scholars themselves, and arranged thematically. Brief biographic sketches are available at the end of this chapter.

AMERICAN PRECARITY

As we discussed in chapter 1, the U.S. ranks poorly among wealthy countries on measures of overall poverty, childhood poverty, economic inequality, and social mobility, among others. The U.S. also stands out for the comparatively less generous and more individualistically oriented nature of its social policies. We begin our discussion by focusing on the uniqueness of American precarity in the wealthy world.

David Brady: The U.S. stands out as an exceptionally unequal country compared to other rich democracies. Across the board the U.S. is consistently one of the worst in terms of poverty, inequality, polarization of resources,

disadvantages, etc. The U.S. really sticks out on all of these measures as being exceptionally and unusually and consistently unequal.

Why does the U.S. have twice as much poverty as most Western European democracies? What you find, I argue, is that it is really the generosity of the social policies. We have decided to have these high levels of inequality and it is reflected in everything we do. The generosity of a country's social policies really is the driving factor that explains why some rich democracies have low poverty and some have high poverty. Now, this is different from saying it's the demography, that there are more single parents, or there are fewer people working. Those sorts of explanations don't really explain the big differences. It is the generosity of social policies that really matters.

Henry Giroux: Economic inequality is getting worse; it is at levels that are obscene. Four hundred families own most of the wealth in the country. We see a massive shift of wealth away from the general population to the upper one-tenth of one percent. Twenty percent of all kids in the United States live in poverty. The welfare state is under enormous attack due to neoliberal ideology politics. People at the top are consolidating power in ways that we haven't seen since the first Gilded Age. The repercussions are horrendous in terms of public goods being defunded, everything from public transport to public schools.

One could say the United States has reached its limit point in terms of whether or not it wants to call itself a democracy. I think what is different between the United States and Europe, with some exceptions, is that the United States is totally unapologetic at this point about its inequality, its accelerating culture of cruelty, and its politics of disposability and racial purifying. Rather than something a government should be ashamed about, racism has become a signature feature of the current administration. Extremist ideologies have migrated from the margins to the center of power. This represents more than a crisis of values, ethics, and compassion. It is a dark political moment that is totally unapologetic about the divorce of economic activity from ethical considerations, which amounts to a politics emptied of any sense of moral and social responsibility.

Jamila Michener: We should be thinking about why the United States is doing as terribly as it is on any number of metrics. We can think about poverty more generally, we can think about child poverty, we can think about outcomes like infant mortality. Across a range of measures, the theme is that the United States is not performing well, especially not relative to countries that are anywhere in the same realm as us economically.

For a country that is as tremendously wealthy as we are, the number of people who are living in poverty or some degree of economic precarity

is pretty astounding. The distribution of poverty across the populace is also troubling. We're much more likely to see Black, Latino, and Native Americans living in poverty, more likely to see women living in poverty, and more likely to see children living in poverty. There are identifiable subsets of the population that are more heavily affected by the patterns of poverty that we see in the U.S., and that's not as much the case among our international peers.

The United States is especially bad at providing people who are not wealthy with economic security. We are especially bad at making sure that people who are disadvantaged economically are not disproportionally coming from a handful of groups. We're not doing well. The important questions are about why and how to change that.

David Brady: We used to believe that the U.S. was the land of opportunity. Sure, we had high inequality, but that's okay because there was also lots of mobility. Working-class people could be rich, and rich people could fall into poverty. Whereas in some other countries there was less inequality but also less mobility. We know now that was wrong, that is certainly false. The U.S. is certainly not a high-mobility country.

Henry Giroux: People used to talk about getting ahead and social mobility. Now many people aren't talking about getting ahead anymore, they're talking about surviving. This is the great distinctive feature of the neoliberal age. Wages have gone down over the last thirty years, they are lower than they were in the 1970s. There are fewer jobs for young people. There's more inequality. The tentacles of the punishing state hover over students, depriving them of any safe spaces. You have massive social atomization because you don't have public spheres that bring people together anymore. They are all being defunded or basically eliminated.

David Brady: It is easy to see why economic elites might want to live in a place like the U.S. If you are rich, it is hard to beat living in the U.S. because it is easier to live an opulent life. It is easier to buy a house, and you can live a very private existence. The transportation infrastructure is in place, taxes are lower, there is less regulation, there are lots of private goods that you can consume, etc. So it is easy for me to understand why rich people want to keep the American system the way that it is.

For poor people, it is hard to argue that living in the U.S. is better for them. You live a very fragile, precarious existence. There are so many ways in which the poor are more economically insecure here. In other rich democracies, people may not be rich—I don't mean to imply that the poor in Sweden

are living a life of opulence—but they are secure. They are taken care of. They know that they need not worry about these fundamental things.

Especially before health care reform was passed in the U.S. with the ACA, it was a real thing that people could become bankrupt because of a medical bill. That was a real thing. And that is unimaginable in Western Europe. Just unimaginable, absolutely never going to happen there. And that is a good example of the insecurity, the fragility, the precarity that working people suffer from here. Something like a health crisis could throw your family into economic crisis in the U.S., which is much less likely to occur in Europe.

Now, plenty of working-class Americans are able to make their house payments and have some modicum of economic comfort, but the risk factors are so much higher here. There is so much more uncertainty. You have a certain social insurance that exists with the generous social policies of Europe. There are also ways in which the working class and the poor are just socially excluded from mainstream American society, from participating in mainstream middle-class institutions, whereas in Europe they are much more integrated. It is not perfect; Europe is certainly not a utopia for the working class. There is a danger in slipping into that argument. There is inequality there as well, that is important to acknowledge. But in the U.S. there is so much more insecurity and vulnerability, and that leads to forms of extreme deprivation that you just never see in many other rich countries. You don't see the levels of homelessness in Europe, for instance, that you see in the U.S. Where is this same problem in Europe? That says something about their community, about public intervention in vulnerable people's lives to make sure that extreme deprivation doesn't occur. The insecurity and the extreme deprivation, you don't see that in other rich democracies.

Jamila Michener: I think that poverty and economic deprivation are political choices. They're a reflection of political choices that we have made and that we continue to make over and over again as a society. Are there people who sometimes don't work as hard as they should? Sure. But the idea that cultural deficiencies or individual character attributes explain the contours of poverty and economic deprivation in the U.S. just doesn't have solid empirical grounding. That's especially the case if we think about the U.S. in comparative context. A lot of the things that we claim are causes of poverty exist in other countries but just don't lead to the levels of poverty and inequality that we have here.

The argument that this is cultural or it's about individual people not doing what they need to do just doesn't hold up. Instead, I would say the proximate

reason for poverty in the U.S. is about decisions that we make, or sometimes fail to make, about social policy and resource distribution and redistribution. When people don't have access to affordable health care, access to jobs that pay living wages and allow them to take care of their families, or access to affordable housing, we end up in a situation where there's dramatic economic inequality and significant levels of economic deprivation. That's the exact situation that we are in, and those things—health care, housing, employment, and so forth—are a reflection of policy decisions that we make or fail to make.

Now, those policy decisions are themselves a reflection of politics, of political coalitions, and of political attitudes and behaviors among the American populace. And so part of this is about who has political power in this country, who organizes most effectively politically, and who the rules of the game benefit most. Politics is at base about the rules of the game. Who are the rules structured to benefit in this country? People who are wealthy, overwhelmingly men, and overwhelmingly White. When taken in combination—not just individually, but in combination—the rules of the game are structured to benefit those folks. The design of our politics is such that the people who are most disadvantaged by inequality and poverty have the least power in our political system.

All of those things cause the outcomes that we're talking about. So, what needs to change? A lot. But ultimately, we need a serious reorientation of our political system in a number of different ways before we're going to see substantial reductions in economic and material deprivation.

INDIVIDUALISM AND SOCIAL POLICY

One important factor that influences the generosity and orientation of a country's social policies is dominant culture. Research suggests that a number of cultural beliefs impact our support (or lack of support) for robust and structurally oriented social policies—not only beliefs about the causes of economic disadvantage, but beliefs about who "deserves" our help, beliefs about different social groups (such as African Americans and single mothers), and beliefs about the proper role of government, among others. Later in this chapter, we will explore the role of racism in shaping support for social policies. Here we discuss the relationship between American individualism and support for social policies.

Heather Bullock: Beliefs are absolutely pivotal because they inform the kinds of policies that we have. They inform what we see as the problem and what

we see as the solution. From my perspective, beliefs are absolutely pivotal to informing the kinds of systems that we have and the kinds of policies that we will or will not support.

Obviously beliefs are only one piece of the puzzle, but I think they're a really pivotal piece. There is a lot of research that looks at the relationship between people's beliefs and a whole range of policies, such as redistributive policies, welfare policy, tax policy, a whole host of policies and issues that are related to socioeconomic position. What a lot of that research shows is that individualistic beliefs—seeing the individual as responsible for her or his socioeconomic situation—are related to the types of policies that someone supports. Those individualistic beliefs tend to be related to more restrictive welfare policies, spending less on welfare programs, and work requirements, among other things.

David Brady: Considering the literature that has existed for decades about why some welfare states grow and are more generous than others, I would point to two broad factors. One is the ideologies, the belief systems, the culture, and the values that exist within a society. The other is the collective political actors in that society.

It matters that Americans are more individualistic and are more skeptical of social policies. It matters that Americans are more believing in the capitalist system. That really matters. It is a fundamental sort of baseline that influences the kinds of social policies that we get.

It also matters how strong your labor unions are, how strong the leftist parties are, and the way your electoral system is set up. I think of institutionalized power relations theory as exploring the power of these collective actors, mixed in with a set of ideologies and beliefs that shape both the power of those collective actors and shape the social policies themselves. All of this funnels through the generosity of the social policies, and that is what explains poverty and inequality.

Peter Callero: American society is saturated with the holy waters of individualism. We honor the self-reliant, praise the independent thinker, and worship the initiative of the entrepreneur. Cultural representations of individuals who have succeeded against great odds are common in American films, television, literature, and sport. And this overarching cultural narrative is often reinforced in educational, religious, and governmental institutions. But I would say the most important sustaining force is capitalism. More than any

other economic system, capitalism promotes and advances the myth of radical individualism.

Most of us can agree, on both the left and the right, when there are certain problems, and when there are certain facts that can't be ignored. There is a fact of homelessness. There is a fact of wealth concentration at the top. Those things can't be denied. If we agree to certain facts, then where the disagreement lies is in the explanation or interpretation of that. If we have an individualistically oriented interpretation of the causes of the problem, then the solutions and the policies that come of that are going to be rooted in that. Maybe the interpretation is that we don't need to respond as a state or collectively because it is solely a matter of individuals. Then you get a radical individualism, radical libertarianism, and radical individualistic economic solutions. And in my opinion, they actually make the problem increase rather than decrease when you take that strategy.

Heather Bullock: A way that people think about individualism a lot of times, particularly in relation to socioeconomic position, is that the person, the individual, is responsible for their economic position. You might think of this as the "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" mentality, the notion that the individual is the master of her or his own fate. It's really the idea that the person is responsible for their socioeconomic position. In the United States, that kind of belief is connected to the American Dream, it's connected to meritocracy. It's really embedded in our culture in very deep ways.

Stephen McNamee: Our individualistic culture prevents more government intervention. In the U.S., the responsibility that the group takes for its members is minimal. The dominant ideology says that nobody owes you a living, you are responsible for being on your own. In our country, being in need of help is seen as a sign of a character flaw, a sign of weakness that you are unable to take care of yourself. You haven't been responsible, you haven't been self-reliant. So there is pushback and resentment. Americans resent the idea that their money, through taxation, should be used to provide for somebody else. Their impulse is to only want to pay for themselves and not for anybody else. I think that is all wrapped up with the hyper-individualism.

David Brady: The United States is really distinctive among the rich democracies for punishing people so severely for a few mistakes. It is unusual. In other countries, you might be a single mother, you might be uneducated, and you might be unemployed, but there is no absolute guarantee that you are going to be poor. There are government policies that help you. In the United

States we have the approach that if you have these characteristics, we are going to severely punish you and penalize you, and your odds of poverty are extraordinarily high. Why do we attach such strong penalties to these characteristics, whereas other countries don't?

Henry Giroux: Think about the things that make a democracy viable. Maybe this is the kind of discussion people really need to understand. Do you want to live in a democracy that provides certain kinds of protections, certain kinds of social provisions, certain kinds of public goods? Well, you can't live in a democracy when you have massive inequality. You can't live in a democracy when very few people virtually own and control the political process. You can't live in a democracy when corporations define everything about how life should be run. You can't live in a democracy without public institutions that provide the opportunities for people to think critically, to be healthy, to have access to resources that are absolutely essential to their own sense of agency. You can't live in a democracy when you have an economic, social, and political formation at work—call it what you want, market fundamentalism, casino capitalism, neoliberalism—all aimed at consolidating the power all in the hands of a small, limited number of people. That's not about democracy.

The argument that needs to be made is that people are going to suffer under this form of toxic mode of governance. All of the things that matter are going to be taken away from them—whether we are talking about pensions, health care, access to good schools for kids—all of these things are being privatized, commodified, or eliminated. We need a narrative in which people can recognize themselves. We need a narrative in which they can recognize the underlying causes at work in taking away their jobs, Medicaid, dignity, and the future itself. They need a narrative that enables them to assume a sense of agency and recognize that many of the problems they face have almost nothing to do with the scapegoating of undocumented immigrants, Muslims, African Americans, and those others considered disposable, and everything to do with a cruel, savage, and extreme form of capitalism. We need a new narrative here, one that says that capitalism and democracy are not the same. What does it mean for people to exercise the kind of power to reclaim their role as agents in a democracy in which they can learn how to govern rather than simply be governed? That they can have some control over the conditions that bear down on their lives?

David Brady: We vacate certain responsibilities that we could take on. We could decide as a society that children are important and that it would be re-

ally smart to make investments early in their lives, and they will pay off in terms of the productivity of those children and their potential and what they can achieve and what we collectively achieve as a society. We would probably save a lot of money as opposed to imprisoning them. We institutionalize a lot of the social problems we have by choosing not to invest in our children when they are young, whether that be investments in their health, their child care, their education, their development, and so on.

We also institutionalize inequality by creating extraordinary opportunities for rich people. We have all these ways that are built into our tax system, built into our governmental distribution of resources, etc. The classic example is that if you own a home, all of the interest that you pay on the mortgage from that home is deductible. It is a huge, gigantic tax advantage to people that are rich enough to own homes. This penalizes low-income people that don't have enough money to own homes and are forced to rent. So it's a massively regressive tax benefit for middle-class and rich people. It's clear that this costs dramatically more than what we spend on housing programs for low-income people or working-class people, and it definitely facilitated middle-class and upper-middle-class people getting much richer.

So there are a lot of ways in which the government contributes directly to making the rich even richer, and there are many ways in which we vacate our responsibility to lift up the poor.

Heather Bullock: One of the reasons it's really important that we think about our safety net programs is that those are the programs that can help people get a foot up and be able to survive in a country where we don't really have a level playing field. We like to think we have a level playing field, but we don't necessarily have one, so those safety net programs or welfare programs are really crucial to helping people survive.

I think one of the important things to do is to really think about even the word welfare, and what we associate with welfare complicates that term. In the United States, we really think of welfare policies as policies that benefit low-income groups, so we think about public assistance. Maybe we think about the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, SNAP or food stamps. But we could back up and we could think about welfare also as corporate welfare, as certain benefits and tax breaks that go to corporations or companies. We tend not to think about those kinds of programs as welfare in the United States, but we certainly could.

Peter Callero: If you have a particular emphasis on individualistic interpretations of the world, you are going to see our social problems through that lens of individualism. And that has consequences. It has consequences in terms of what kinds of solutions we look for, what kinds of solutions seem rational. It has implications for the kinds of politicians that we find attractive. It is going to shape our understandings of ourselves. If you take that and apply it to basic structural inequalities, then that gets reduced to the person as being the problem, as opposed to maybe certain economic structures and economic systems and political structures and political systems that create these kinds of patterns of gross inequality.

Michael Lewis: A lot of people think you can separate opportunity and position. You can't. So we need to get people out of the places they are locked into.

If you go back to the War on Poverty, there are certain things that you simply cannot propose and expect them to be given serious consideration. One of the great missed opportunities was the notion of a negative income tax or a guaranteed annual income to set a floor. Those proposals went basically nowhere. There were a few pilot studies, and when the results challenged some preconceptions that we had, Congress basically ignored the results.

Economists talk about what they call "policy space." It is a fictive space that has cultural boundaries, and for me those boundaries are locked into the importance of the individual-as-central sensibility. Things that fit within those boundaries, even if they don't work very well, can receive serious consideration. They fit the cultural preconceptions. And things that conceivably could work better than things that we are doing now, but are outside of those boundaries—and in the United States I would say those are the redistributive proposals that really deal with poverty—they're not going to get serious consideration because we see them as outrageous and outlandish. In some instances we see them as foreign, as stemming from Godless communism.

It is extraordinarily important to understand that problem solutions don't depend on how well they work, they depend on how well they fit. We need to understand that public policy determination is economic, it's political, and it is profoundly cultural. That's extraordinarily important.

David Brady: I think single-parenthood is a really good example. Americans think that if you are a single mother, the assumption is you are going to be poor. Especially if you are young and you are not working or you are not

highly educated. It is hard for Americans to think of a way that we can live in a world where single mothers are not going to be poor. Yet in most other rich democracies, the penalty attached to single motherhood is not as severe. Those countries make a choice, regardless of whether they like the idea of single motherhood or not, that doesn't matter. Because there is a child in that household, those countries believe it is important to supply public resources to that household, regardless of what they think about single motherhood. That child is important, that child needs investment. In fact, our society is going to be better off if we take care of this child and give them economic resources to develop well. As opposed to saying that their mother made a bad choice, whether it is a choice or not, and sentencing that child to low economic resources as a punishment for what we perceive as a poor or irresponsible choice by the mother. That is a very deliberate difference between us and other rich countries.

The United States is among the worst in its generosity to single mothers. But if you live in other rich democracies you are going to get a child benefit. You probably get some form of socialized health care so you don't have to worry about paying for your child's health care out of your pocket. If you live in these countries, you will get a more equal educational system. These educational systems, especially for early-childhood education, are going to be more egalitarian than the American system.

In the U.S. we choose to systematically underinvest in the children of single-parent families, and we pay for it as a society. Those children grow up to have more social problems, more health problems; they are more likely to be involved in deviant or criminal activities, and they are more likely to be incarcerated. We pay for the increased social problems, the cost of incarceration, etc., which is very expensive. We as a society pay for the consequences of all of that because we choose not to invest in people as children.

Other rich democracies make the choice that children are important, and people in those countries view their economic security as almost a right. So those countries just give economic resources to the people that are guardians of those children.

There is a really neat contrast that can be shown between Germany and Denmark. They share a border; they are very close to each other geographically. But Germany has made the political choice to not provide lots of economic support to single mothers, so single mothers are very disadvantaged. They are not a huge population in Germany; they are a smaller population than in

the United States. But if you are a single mother in Germany, it is very, very tough. But right across the border, with basically the same ethnic composition of people, you get very low rates of poverty among single mothers. So that shows you that it is a political issue. Because right across this geographic border, there is a dramatic discontinuity, where you are less likely to be poor in Denmark, but you are much more likely to be poor in Germany. It shows that you can politically manipulate this issue.

Stephen McNamee: Of course the ultimate irony is that the wealthy are more heavily subsidized than the poor in what amounts to an upside-down "wealthfare" system. Government benefits received by the more affluent are more subtle and disguised in ways that are not recognized as such, allowing the affluent to receive such benefits without any stigma attached to them. Besides generous tax breaks, exclusions, and deductions targeted to the affluent, and such non–means tested forms of social "entitlements" as Social Security and Medicare, other examples of government policy and expenditures that disproportionately advantage the affluent range from such things as federally subsidized highway systems linking affluent suburbs to major metropolitan areas, airport accommodations and infrastructure for private pilots, and substantial tuition subsidies for state schools populated by middle- and upper-class students, just to name a few. The ideology of individualism has contributed to what amounts to lavish benefits for the presumed "deserving" rich and a limited and highly stigmatized safety net for the "underserving poor."

Jamila Michener: It's about our fundamental lack of political willingness to treat people with dignity no matter who they are, no matter how they are. We are simply not dedicated to treating people with dignity irrespective of their circumstances. I would argue that we have never been committed to that. That is what our social welfare policy reflects. It reflects an attenuated commitment to human dignity. And the reasons for that attenuation are connected to ideas about who is deserving and who is not, ideas about race and ideas about the "free" market. All those things and more are funneled through our political institutions and systems, and they are embedded in the decisions of the powers that be and the processes for determining who is in power.

Essentially, those things point toward a weak commitment to guaranteeing a basic standard of living linked to an unequivocal appreciation for human dignity. That's what's missing. If I had to sum up what our social policy reveals, I'd say it reveals a very weak commitment to human dignity.

AMERICA'S CULTURE OF INEQUALITY

Beliefs concerning individualism, along with related beliefs concerning meritocracy, neoliberalism, the American Dream, and the dominant ideology, have strong currency in the U.S. Together, these beliefs form a "culture of inequality," to borrow a concept from Michael Lewis. The prevalence of these beliefs and the ways in which they resonate with the average American help sustain what might otherwise be intolerable levels of economic insecurity. The following are highlights from our conversations about this culture of inequality in the U.S.

Jamila Michener: I believe that culture is important, just not in the way that most people tend to understand it. I teach a big course on the politics of poverty in the U.S., and so every fall I end up having long discussions with undergraduates here at Cornell University about poverty and its causes. One of the things that we talk about is culture. A lot of students believe that culture explains poverty, but they believe in something like a "culture of poverty." There's something about poor people, some cultural failing that explains why they can't manage to do well.

There's a reason why anyone who's doing well wants to believe that. If you're doing well, you want to believe that it's something about you. You want to believe that you've worked hard, you've done what you should do, and you've played by the rules. You've made the necessary choices and sacrifices, and so that explains why you are doing well. And if we believe that about ourselves, then the opposite is true—when somebody's doing badly, their choices, their cultural predilections explain that, too. We think of that as being the case for individuals, and then we abstract up to groups. If there are entire groups of people who aren't doing well—poor people, Black people, etc.—it must be because of the choices that they're making.

A long line of research has exposed that understanding of culture as fraudulent and not well aligned with what we've been able to measure as social scientists. Nonetheless, appreciating the contours and consequences of culture in terms of heterogeneous societal ideologies and attitudes like racism, sexism, classism, and individualism remains crucial.

I don't see competition between acknowledging the role of culture and that of institutions or structure. All of these things are working together to produce our current situation. All sorts of cultural norms and ideologies are infused in our political system and are undergirding the policies that explain and create inequality and poverty.

Henry Giroux: Massive inequality now dominates American life. The U.S. is dealing with these obscene kinds of contradictions, and it becomes difficult if people lack the language to move out of them. There is a book called *Coming Up Short* by Jennifer Silva, which has a very interesting take on this. Silva visited five or six working-class communities, and she was looking at young people in these communities. There were no jobs, no hope, but they all drank the Kool-Aid. They all thought it was about character. They all thought that the only way to deal with this problem was to deal with their own emotional traumas. When they looked around and saw people who were suffering in the same way, they blamed them. It was about character, they weren't resilient enough.

David Brady: There seems to be something deeply, deeply stitched into the American DNA from centuries of culture that makes us more individualistic.

Sharon Krause: I understand agency as having two sides to it. On the one hand is the individual will and initiative, what it is that we try to bring about in the world through our actions. On the other hand is efficacy, or the actual effects that we have on the world, the actual impact that we have on the world, the ways that the world is different because of something that we've done. And I think very often, when Americans think about agency—and I think this is often true in philosophy and political theory, too—we tend to think about agency in ways that highlight the first thing, individual will and initiative, and neglect the second thing, efficacy.

As a result of emphasizing the will side, the individual initiative side of agency, we end up with a conception of agency, and ultimately of freedom, that has a tendency to kind of collapse agency and freedom into willing and initiative. It neglects all of the ways that society can interrupt the connection within agency between individual initiative and will, on the one hand, and efficacy or impact on the other.

I think we overwhelmingly fail to grasp the two sides of agency. And because we fail to grasp and take seriously both sides of agency, we tend to undercut or underappreciate the ways that those two sides can come apart. We underappreciate how prevailing social inequalities and background meanings and norms and so on that contain bias and stigma; we underappreciate the deep effects that those things have on individual agency, and therefore on freedom.

Henry Giroux: I think the culture of cruelty has accelerated to levels in which the unimaginable becomes normalized. The level of dispossession is so extreme. The level of inequality is so obscene. And all of a sudden, you just

have people being written off in ways that we have never seen before. With the social contract under attack and withering fast, as well as any notion of dependency and community being pathologized, it becomes much more difficult to protect those who are vulnerable. So they just become part of the logic of disposability. Whole towns rotting because manufacturing has moved out, resources have been taken away from people.

We find ourselves living in a society based on a predatory culture. It replaces compassion, sharing, and concern for the other with an unbridled individualism that gains sustenance from the notion that what really matters is survival of the fittest. This is a culture of barbarism that preaches the reality television and Ayn Rand notion of selfishness, egoism, and a notion of ruthless competition that states that only one person can be left on the island. I think this ideology is enormously destructive in the ways in which it turns bonds of trust into bonds of fear, insecurity, and in some cases, violence, and it is constantly mimicked everywhere. It normalizes itself through an empty neoliberal notion of individual responsibility in which all systemic problems disappear so that the only problems to be solved, if not caused, fall on the shoulders of individuals. We know the script. If you are just resilient and self-reliant or you pray, you'll get by. And that's nonsense, and it is pitting everybody against everybody else. Equally important, it prevents people from translating private troubles into larger social considerations. Then there's the Wall Street logic that ethics don't matter, that all kinds of activity should be separated from social cost. The only thing that matters is that you're the last person standing. That's a very brutal logic, a society can't exist on that logic. A society has to have public values and public trust. It can't operate on the assumption that the willingness to care for others, that having compassion for others' suffering, is a liability rather than a gift.

Peter Callero: The best way to get a sense of the American culture of individualism is to compare it with other cultures, other societies. Now, "culture" is a big word, it encompasses so much, and you are making big generalizations when talking about a whole country. But there is a good deal of research which compares individualistic and collectivist-oriented cultures. When you do this cross-cultural comparison, you find that American society is one of the most individualistic in terms of its beliefs and understandings of the world.

Heather Bullock: A Pew report showed that the United States is really so far pulled away from other comparison countries on individualism, on this belief that with hard work you can make it and move up the socioeconomic ladder. If you look at the public opinion polls, you do see people in the United States

expressing concern about the distribution of income, and thinking that there needs to be a fair distribution, and yet still seeing that you can make it through hard work. We pull away from other countries in that respect.

Stephen McNamee: Cross-culturally, Americans tend to have more individualistic explanations than citizens in other wealthy countries. Industrial European societies are much more open to structural and economic explanations to account for the distribution of income and wealth in societies. They are more comfortable with the idea that inheritance matters in terms of social hierarchy and social ranking. They can more easily identify and have a sense that where you start out in life matters in terms of where you end up. Americans have this notion that their country is the land of opportunity, and that opportunities are only limited by your individual capacities. The sense that anything is achievable at the individual level is very uniquely American.

Michael Lewis: I think it was a typically American statement by John F. Kennedy in his inauguration speech, where he said, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." Well, for the Europeans, that would sound strange in some ways. They believe that it is a legitimate question to ask what their countries can do for them.

Over the last few years, I have had an interesting opportunity to spend time in Western Europe, particularly in the Netherlands. I was invited to come to the University of Amsterdam and the Free University of Amsterdam. People there were worried that they were becoming more and more like the United States, more individualistic and so on. So I spent some time there, I gave a number of seminars, and we also had a conference. And it was very clear to me that they were wrong. They're not becoming more like the United States. And it has to do with the difference in culture and how that affects the policy space.

For the Western Europeans, the relationship between a collective and the individual is very different than it is in the United States. Western Europeans see individuals as part of a collective, their identity stems from the collective. In the United States, we see it just the opposite, that the collectivity is an aggregation of individuals. These are two different cultural models. To the Europeans, the notion that the individual grows out of the collective makes it easier to pass welfare legislation in a way that is more effective and more generous than is in the United States. In the United States, where people see the individual as dependent on his or her own resources and person, that makes it more difficult to deal with public policy on welfare. We don't share that much of an identity, except that we are Americans and have equal opportunity. If

I had worked harder than she has or he has, they should not ask me to solve their problems. Why should I pay for the next guy? Those are very different cultural formulations, and it seems to me that they have a profound impact.

This one anecdote illustrates, I think, how the culture works. At one of the meetings I attended when I was in Amsterdam, there was a member of the Dutch Parliament who was a Social Democrat. At the break when people were having coffee, he came up and we chatted a bit. He said, "We love Americans, but we don't understand you. We don't understand why you have this big problem trying to figure out how to provide health care for people. We do it, and it is very simple here. We pay our taxes and then we use the system." Which is of course a single-payer system. And this conversation was before this latest go-round on health care. He went on and said, "You get all bent out of shape, Americans make themselves into pretzels about health care. I know you will say we are a bunch of socialists, but we're not." He pointed to himself and said, "I'm a socialist. I wish my fellow countrymen were socialists. But they're not. In fact our history is a long history of capitalism. But we see this as a need that our fellow citizens have. You don't seem to see that in the same way."

Sharon Krause: There's a kind of individualism in our society that is more extreme than in many other places. There is something about our brand of individualism. There are some strengths to it, there are some positive aspects to it for sure. But it does, I think, stand in the way of our ability to see, acknowledge, and respond to the social conditions that undercut possibilities of agency and freedom for people who are marginalized. Or who are on the losing end of social inequalities.

I think one of the challenges for a democratic society is how to have aspirational ideals that motivate us to reach high, to aspire to a lot, that motivate us to love our country and appreciate what's good about it. But at the same time, ideals that don't cloud our judgment with fantasies. Ideals that enable us to be responsive to the ways in which the actual conditions of our lives or the lives of many Americans stand in the way, in systematic ways, of the realization of the aspirations that we hold as constitutive of what it means to be an American or what America means.

Heather Bullock: I think in the United States, individualism is baked into the way that we think about almost everything. It's like the air that we breathe. I don't even think we're conscious of it. It's part of popular culture in Nike "Just Do It" ads. It's part of political rhetoric.

Certainly you see individualism in how people think about socioeconomic status, but I think it extends much, much further than that. The major messages of individualism are everywhere. They're in novels that we read. They're in popular culture. They're in popular movies. They're in Horatio Alger. All of it. Everywhere they're around us, including in parental socialization practices, in the ways that our classrooms are structured. It's built in. It's part of our culture, but it is also built into our structures. We live in a very individualistic society where rewards, even in preschool classrooms, are distributed in ways that are rewarding individual behavior, typically individual merit or success.

Stephen McNamee: For a variety of reasons, individualism is the dominant explanation for poverty and inequality among Americans at large. There are historical reasons why the U.S. is the most hyper-individualistic culture in the world. We are particularly unique in that regard. American individualism comes from a combination of economic, political, and cultural origins—the independence associated with a break from the hereditary aristocracy of the British Crown, the adoption of individual ownership and competition associated with capitalism, the individualist orientation of the Protestant ethic associated with the early conquering Puritan settlers, the rugged individualism associated with the expanding Western frontier. As a result of these historical and cultural forces, the default explanation for most Americans is very individualistic and reductionist, not just for poverty but for virtually everything. The individualistic explanation locates the cause of poverty within the individual who is deficient in some way; they are "not made of the right stuff" in the language of *The Meritocracy Myth*. They are incompetent, lazy, and/or shiftless. The presumption is that the American system of inequality operates as a sort of giant centrifuge where the cream of the crop, those made of the right stuff, naturally rises to the top. The dregs, those who lack these qualities, sort out at the bottom of the system. The presumption is that the cause is located within the individual, and even more reductionist than just their personality or personal characteristics, but within their biological makeup. Sometimes I refer to these theories as "bad seed" theories. Now, the weight of the evidence would suggest that economic factors are dominant, but individualism is the impulse that most Americans have, and it is really strong, so it is an uphill battle to try to explain these things to most Americans. You have to be convincing, compelling, and overwhelming with the evidence.

I've given talks on *The Meritocracy Myth* every now and then where I very systematically present the arguments in the book, including a significant amount of data to support the arguments. And after my presentation was finished, I would often get just a flat out denial from the audience, especially

from older Americans. Many would dismiss all of the facts that I just presented and just presume that it was just my opinion. They just couldn't bring themselves to conceptualize the U.S. as anything other than a meritocracy, as having anything other than equal and unlimited opportunities. And of course they all had individual stories, people they knew who started out absolutely poor and then worked their way up through hard work and grit and determination and gumption. If they could do it, then anybody can. Now, in the models, yes, somebody could hit the lottery. But what are the odds stacked against people? Of course it does happen; it is rare but it does happen, and when it does, it is celebrated. Giving the sociological perspective, convincing people of something other than the dominant explanations, is an uphill battle.

Heather Bullock: It's so hard in the United States for us to even have a very honest and open discourse around social class. Class is still something of a taboo topic. I think we still don't fully want to acknowledge that there are social classes in the United States, even though we absolutely know that there are. We really don't have much of a discourse for that. Of course there is some mobility; I don't want to suggest that there isn't. But it's not to the degree that people might think.

Henry Giroux: The country has always had a kind of romance with rugged individualism that slides very easily into what we saw with neoliberalism. It creates all of these myths around notions of freedom that not only get absorbed in a neoliberal ethic where freedom means freedom from government regulation and freedom to consume, while increasingly displacing any notion of the social. The social in the United States is worse than in England, worse than when Margaret Thatcher said there was no such thing as society, only individuals and families. Of course, bereft of any sense of moral, social, and political responsibility, the neoliberal notion of freedom demonstrates and attempts to normalize the freedom to be a racist, hate Muslims, humiliate the vulnerable, and hold nothing back in exposing one's sexist, racist, and nativist impulses.

This is not just about the merging of freedom and bigotry, it is also about the collapse of civic literacy under the weight of a state that monopolizes the commanding cultural apparatuses and other modes of communication. That is, you have massive social apparatuses, powerful commanding apparatuses, from the schools to the mainstream media, that basically limit the ability of people to get access to points of view that would challenge the normalization of neoliberal values, ethics, and social relations. To challenge the normalization of neoliberal ideology. I think we underestimate that. Politics follows culture. The real question is how people learn these behaviors, learn

to identify with modes of oppression that are basically aimed at them, all in the name of myths.

People's sense of agency, their sense of desire, their sense of self, is being shaped in ways that basically turn them into marketable goods, into consumers. What are they told? They are told that the only form of citizenship that matters is consuming. They're told that they live in a world which is about the survival of the fittest, a war of all against all. They are constantly bombarded by an ideology that says there are no such things as social problems, only individual problems.

It seems to me that a real crisis of agency emerges for a number of people. They are being depoliticized. They're being told that the only orbit that matters is private, that public life is a joke. I think what you are seeing is a real distortion of the capacity and the possibility to engage critical citizens. What we are really talking about here is the collapse of civic culture and the systemic erosion of any sense of shared responsibility. This has been going on for decades, but since the 1980s, with Reagan and Thatcher, it really comes into full bloom.

Jamila Michener: I think a lot of ideas intersect in this arena. A huge one is the distinction between the deserving and the undeserving, which echoes notions of meritocracy. Another major idea is that of individualism. A kind of "boot straps" individualism where people shouldn't be relying on the government. They shouldn't be relying on the state; they should be doing everything on their own.

Connected to that is a growing anti-government ideology, a kind of suspicion of government and a desire for limited government. That has really blossomed, I would say, over the last at least thirty years in our country. It is a really strong kind of anti-government sentiment, anti-statism, a deep distrust of government, a deep desire for small government. These ideas are not just about government being bad, but about the market being good or neutral. The way that many Americans revere the market and revile the government creates a circumstance in which excesses of capitalism sometimes go unchecked.

All of these ideas intersect with racism and sexism in ways that can be really perverse, and in ways that we don't always recognize. We can't, or won't, always identify what the precise problem is. I don't have to talk about my issue in terms of racism if I know that's not socially acceptable, or if I don't even recognize my own racial bias. I can just talk about wanting small government

or a free market, and what that rhetoric contributes to producing is a set of policies that are especially bad for low-income people, and especially bad for people of color, and especially bad for women. But I don't have to justify that with respect to race or class or gender. I can justify it with respect to an appreciation for the market. In this way, the market provides implicit or explicit ideological leverage for advancing a set of policies that have disproportionate implications for certain members of our communities. More generally, such ideas provide political cover; they change the nature of our public discourse in ways that obscure who suffers most and deflect from who bears responsibility for material and social outcomes.

Sharon Krause: I think our radical and extreme version of free-market capitalism is a part of the picture. Because it kind of perpetuates this idea that everybody does it for themselves. And I think it's a mistake, it's not true that everybody does it for themselves. The pervasiveness it has in shaping our cultural values I think is part of why we lag behind some other democracies in being able to address the disabling conditions of individual agency in effective ways.

Heather Bullock: Individualism is very popular in the U.S. One way you might think about it, and I think Matt Hunt and I have talked about it this way in a chapter that we wrote together [in the *The Oxford Handbook of the Social Science of Poverty*], is that individualism is the base belief and then structuralism is layered on.

There's usually this kind of complicated sort of dual consciousness, particularly among groups who have experienced disadvantage in some way. So there's this emphasis that you're still part of this U.S. culture where individualism is embedded in our environment, so there's still this endorsement of individualism even among disadvantaged groups oftentimes. But then there's also oftentimes this recognition of the structural, too, based upon personal experience, hardship, contact, and so forth.

But even when we see barriers to upward mobility or we see the structural causes of poverty, for example, we might still think we're able to overcome those.

Michael Lewis: In the United States, the emphasis upon individualism in our culture is so strong and takes such primacy. This results in a lot of great success and a lot of achievement. But it also results in a sense that, no matter where people are located in the class structure, they basically have nobody to blame except themselves if they don't live up to their aspirations.

In the culture of inequality and its emphasis on the individual-as-central sensibility, we are constantly told that we all have opportunities. We tell kids in grade school that when they grow up, they can become president of the United States or some other august position. The first interpretation that we all make in this country is that, if I had only worked harder, I could have overcome everything.

Stephen McNamee: Racial inequality became a bigger part of the public discourse during and after the civil rights movement. For gender inequality, it happens on the heels of civil rights with the second wave in the 1970s. Then in the 1990s, we get LGBT issues becoming part of the public discourse. None of these issues are resolved, but at least they are openly debated and at least recognized as issues and potentially social justice issues. All of this is prior to the taking on of social class as a public issue that is just now becoming part of the public discourse. This is relatively new. I have been at this for forty years, and some of us have been screaming in the wilderness and nobody has been listening, so I think this is fascinating. All of a sudden, class issues have become a timely topic—the whole idea of economic inequality and of how much inequality America can tolerate or is sustainable. I take up a lot of these legitimacy arguments in *The Meritocracy Myth.*

Not to get too conspiratorial, but it has at least been convenient for the wealthy not to have to confront a counter-narrative of justification, for Americans to have a poor vocabulary, as you say, that doesn't present challenges to fairness based upon social class. There is a lot of false consciousness about this stuff—the whole ideology of individualism, worshipping at the altar of self and all that that entails. People don't see the structural constraints as easily.

Henry Giroux: We've got to rescue the language. The language of democracy, the language of justice, the language of fairness. All of a sudden, people are talking about inequality. That's new. All of a sudden, people are realizing that banks are terrible, they enrich the financial elite. All of a sudden, we are talking about people dying in this country by virtue of being atomized and being alienated, living in despair and anguish, and not knowing what to do with it. All of a sudden, we are talking about how trivial these cultural apparatuses have become in their promotion of idiocy, all in the name of choice. I think there is a formative culture emerging that is really at war with what I call the "failed sociality," the massively destructive formative culture that now dominates the United States.

There are a lot of people, such as independents, young people, women, the LGBT community, who are basically saying they have had enough.

And it seems to me that those mobilizations are going to increase. There is evidence for this in the recent organized, massive demonstrations waged by the Parkland students against gun violence and school shootings. We have also witnessed recently almost unparalleled walkouts, strikes, and demonstrations by teachers across the nation who are fighting not only for higher wages and better working conditions but also more funding to benefit their schools and students.

We have to find ways to promote alternative public spheres while at the same time working in the mainstream spheres and doing what you can to change them. Reinvent the formative culture that offers the possibility that the present isn't simply reproduced in the future.

WHAT'S SO WRONG WITH INDIVIDUALISM?

We have established that Americans generally prefer individualistic explanations of poverty and economic inequality over non-individualistic ones. But what's so wrong with individualism? Many of our scholars discussed the limitations of the individualistic perspective, and what follows are highlights from their arguments.

Heather Bullock: Individualistic beliefs really put us at risk of minimizing social barriers to advancement. Of minimizing the impact of all of the barriers to moving up the economic ladder. It leads us to minimize those and to not see them. It also blinds us to advantage as well, or if we see advantage, we attribute it to merit or hard work instead of to structure and advantage. So individualism works in both ways. It leads us to minimize structural factors as barriers to advancement and, in thinking about more advantaged groups, it also contributes to us minimizing the role of structural advantage in moving up that socioeconomic ladder.

I also think more broadly, it puts us at risk of not really thinking about or seeing a public good or the importance of a public good. It puts us at risk of not seeing that we have a shared fate with each other and a shared responsibility to each other. I think individualism blinds us to that as well. And really interestingly, there's some recent research that looks at the relationship of these kinds of beliefs to social mobility. The more individualistic we are, the more we tend to overestimate the likelihood of the possibility of social mobility. So it contributes to us thinking that it's easier to move up the socioeconomic ladder, which we very much do in the United States.

And a lot of times, even when we do see structural barriers to socioeconomic mobility, we see ourselves as being able to overcome those barriers.

Peter Callero: Where you are born in society, meaning the geography of place, the location of your social-class position—such as how much money your family has, how much education your parents have, the health status of your family of origin—those factors are the best predictors of where you are going to be in terms of social class.

It is something we don't want to believe. We want to believe that where we were born, our status in life in terms of class position, is going to be fluid, especially in this country. We want to believe that everybody has equal opportunity, and as long as we work hard and make the right choices, then we will succeed. This idea that in the United States, anybody can make it to the top. The evidence does not support that belief; that's an assumption that unfortunately is not based in fact. The explanation for why that is not the case is complicated and has many variables.

David Brady: Think about the big four individual risks of poverty: single parenthood, young headship, low education, and unemployment. These are indisputably the four big characteristics that predict your risk of poverty. If the demographic explanation is correct, then the United States should have very high levels of single parenthood, young headship, low educational attainment, and unemployment. That would explain why we have high poverty, because we have a large number of people carrying those four characteristics. The reality, however, is that the United States is actually below average on these things compared to other rich democracies. While we have above average single parenthood, we have very low unemployment rates, most of our population is highly educated, we have very few people compared to other countries who have low education, and we don't have particularly high young headship. So we don't actually have a lot of these individual characteristics in our country compared to other rich countries.

What is different in the United States is not the number of people with those individual characteristics, but the fact that we penalize the heck out of people with those characteristics. If you have these characteristics, we make it so incredibly hard to make ends meet. We penalize those characteristics very severely even though we don't see a particularly high prevalence of those characteristics in our country relative to other rich countries. The way we penalize them is that we provide insufficient social policies to support them. So if you are a young single mother with little education and you are unem-

ployed, you are almost guaranteed to be poor in the United States. It would be very, very hard for you to escape poverty. In most other rich democracies, it is a much lower probability of being poor. So we take these characteristics and we penalize them severely. All of our poverty scholarship is obsessed with reducing the number of people with these characteristics.

A more effective way to reduce poverty and a different way to think about it is to say that we choose politically which characteristics we are going to penalize and which characteristics we don't penalize. In our country we have chosen politically to penalize these characteristics by withholding social policies and withholding systems of support to help these people. So ultimately it is a political decision to penalize these characteristics and to withhold social policies to help these people, whereas most other rich democracies make a political choice to not penalize those characteristics as severely as we do.

Stephen McNamee: The idea that the U.S. is a meritocracy is the idea that people get ahead based upon their own individual merit. In thinking about why people get ahead, Americans identify innate talents, having the right attitude, working hard, and playing by the rules. That is the formula that Americans identify for getting ahead. The presumption in the U.S. is that these characteristics are directly associated with outcomes.

I argue in *The Meritocracy Myth* that this presumption is wildly overestimated. Instead, I argue that most Americans underestimate non-merit factors in accounting for who ends up with what—the biggest of which is inheritance broadly defined, where you start out in the first place. Your inheritance of your initial social-class position from your parents. I argue that the race to get ahead is a relay race that doesn't start over with each generation.

The privileges of starting ahead of others in the race includes social capital, who you know, which is a non-merit factor. Everybody knows other people, everybody has friends, but it helps to have friends in high places. Those who travel in high-powered social circles have access to information and resources that aid them in getting ahead beyond just merit. So that is non-merit advantage.

Cultural capital is also important. It is the knowledge of the ways of the life of the group. People born into privileged groups have the wherewithal, the demeanor, the presentation of self, and the comportment that goes with being accepted into those higher social circles without having to gain that knowledge from the outside in. And that is a non-merit advantage in getting ahead.

Also think about economic gifts from your parents. People get money from their parents when they die, but it is important to remember that you don't necessarily have to wait around for them to die to collect your inheritance. Parents invest in their children's futures while they are still alive as well. Most people would like to have their kids do well, but privileged parents are in a position to give them greater resources and make larger investments, beyond merit.

A huge factor that is not often talked about in discussions of inequality is the insulation against the risk of downward mobility that the privileged experience relative to the less privileged. Robert Putnam talks about the wealthy having "airbags" for their kids—if they mess up and make mistakes, the airbags will deploy and save them. They don't get permanently injured from the accidents that occur in life. So what goes up usually doesn't come down because of parental or familial rescue. Under a system of strict merit, when an individual does well or messes up, they move up or move down based on individual actions, based on individual merit. If you mess up, you should be downwardly mobile. But for the privileged, the family comes to the rescue with their resources. The poor don't have that. That is a non-merit advantage of the privileged.

Of all the non-merit factors, the one Americans tend to account for most is discrimination; they recognize that discrimination is unfair. They recognize that discrimination is the antithesis of merit. Most Americans are committed to at least the principle of equality of opportunity, and they recognize that blatant discrimination on the basis of race, sex, religion, and so on, is unfair. But the argument for many Americans is that those forms of discrimination are going away. Now even if all of those forms of discrimination magically disappeared, and the legacy of discrimination in terms of unequal starting points magically disappeared, the system would still be nowhere close to a meritocracy because of all of these other non-merit factors I have mentioned. Especially inheritance, which is downplayed for most Americans in terms of how they think the system operates. There are a litany of non-merit factors that people need to consider. It is my sense that Americans don't focus on those non-merit factors except for discrimination, and even then, they believe discrimination is going away, and most will claim they don't personally discriminate. And they think, if only we could have a system without discrimination, true equality of opportunity, it would be a true merit system. The evidence, however, suggests we would not be anywhere close to it, even if we could eliminate discrimination.

Jamila Michener: What we're getting wrong as a culture is that poverty is structural. People are massively misled about the degree to which poverty

is structural. It's not about what individual people are doing or not doing. It's not about personal choices, as much as we love choices. Does that mean people don't have any agency? No, of course they do. Does that mean the choices I make don't matter as far as my life outcomes? No, of course they do. But I am never free to make any choice I want. I am in a context, in a broader structural context in a particular country, in a particular state, in a particular neighborhood, and I am a part of different groups based on social class, race, gender, etc. I'm an immigrant or I'm not an immigrant.

I am in a variety of ways socially positioned, and that social position exposes me to a variety of structural conditions that are in large part responsible for my life trajectory. Social and economic positioning is responsible for whether I end up being poor or unequal relative to some other person or group. Public policy determines how hard it is to overcome that disadvantageous positioning, as well as how long, or hard, its consequences will endure. We can have people in our society who are low income or who aren't doing as well economically as others, and it doesn't have to mean they're not living a full and free life. But because of the structural reality that ultimately stems from social policies and relates to our cultural understandings, more people end up living in poverty and economic deprivation, and those people are prevented from having full, free, and fair standards of living. None of that has to be the case. None of it is inevitable. It's also not simply because individuals are making bad choices, although people across all social groups make bad choices at times.

It is because of the structure of our economy and the structure of our society. Unfortunately, structure is not as easy to understand or articulate as individual choices. Out of context, anyone can find some supposedly lazy person or some proverbial welfare queen and use them as an example, and say, "Look at these bad people." We all encounter people in our lives who might superficially fall into that category, and so the appeal of individualistic or cultural group explanations for poverty is compelling. It's intuitive to think about it that way.

But the main thing I would tell people is that our intuitions don't always lead us to the right place. Our intuitions make us think that poverty is individualistic, that it's about choices. Yet the most convincing empirical evidence that we have says that poverty is not about that, it is instead about systems and structures. Now, that means that we have to have more difficult conversations about what causes poverty. We have to think more carefully, we have to be more informed, we have to be more willing to engage in more thoughtful discussions about these issues. That's hard when you think about it on a national scale. Politics feeds on sound bites these days, and sound bites, anecdotes,

stereotypes, and shortcuts aren't going to get us to really tackling structural causes of poverty.

The takeaway is that we have to be prepared to do some work to grapple with structural realities and their historical and contemporary underpinnings. I understand that is a high, high calling. But it is how we should be thinking about the causes and consequences of inequality.

THE ROLE OF RACISM

Dominant culture, while not the only factor influencing social policies in the United States, is nonetheless important. While individualism is one aspect of dominant inequality beliefs, another which is at least as important to acknowledge is racism. Research suggests that racism is a strong predictor of people's support for different types of social policies. The following are highlights from some of our scholars' reflections on this relationship.

David Brady: There is this whole literature that shows that anti-Black sentiment is highly associated with welfare beliefs. It is part of the reason why Americans hate welfare. I'm persuaded by the work of Martin Gilens. There is something about anti-Black sentiment that is really powerful and undermines public support for social policy. And there is also this deep-seated individualism that is weird and unusual and distinctive. There is something uniquely cultural about American individualism which likely interacts powerfully with ideas about race in a way that really fuels anti-welfare sentiments.

It's not just race and it's not just individualism, it's a combination of those two. There is something about anti-Black sentiment, there is something about individualism, there is something really deep in our history that reinforces these cultural beliefs.

Jamila Michener: You must understand racial ideas and ideologies in order to understand what is underlying and motivating public policy decisions around social welfare policy.

In one study, Spencer Piston and Ashley Jardina showed a nationally representative sample of two thousand non-Hispanic White U.S. citizens a graphical depiction of the "Ascent of Man." The picture starts off with something that looks like an ape, and then progresses to something that looks a little less like an ape and more like a person, and finally after several slightly more

"evolved" steps forward, the graphic ends with a picture that is clearly a fully evolved human being. Piston and Jardina then asked survey respondents how "evolved" they believed Blacks and Whites to be on this evolutionary spectrum. What they found was that—and I don't know if I'm remembering the number exactly, but I know I'm in the right ballpark—something like 38 percent of White Americans placed African Americans on a part of the evolutionary scale that was below Whites. Thirty-eight percent of White Americans don't view Blacks as fully evolved relative to Whites. Now somebody may say, "Okay, 38 percent, at least the other 62 percent are on board." But that's just the 38 percent that were willing to admit their views. More than likely, because of social desirability bias, that number is even higher. And interestingly, even though there was some variation across political ideology and partisanship, there were still about a third of Democrats who placed African Americans as less fully evolved on that scale.

Then there's the really important work of scholars like Martin Gilens, which helps us to think about why Americans hate welfare so much—and they hate welfare in part because they associate it with Black people. Going further, we know from studies on health care and criminal justice that racial resentment is underlying many of the policy preferences of Americans.

This really matters when you start talking about social policy. If people think that African Americans are really not even fully human—that they're bound to fail, that they're less intelligent, they don't work as hard, they're just inherently inferior—then they won't want to support social policies that are going to help Black people. Then the logic becomes, "You can pour all the money into these communities you want, but these folks are just never going to be equal. They're never going to cut it." Ideas like that matter for how White Americans understand the right thing to do in terms of distributing social benefits and burdens.

Based on these notions, it makes a lot more sense to incarcerate Black people—to put them somewhere to limit the harm they can do to society—than it does to provide them with a better education, to provide them with health care, to provide them with other resources. I could go on. We can draw on aspects of research in public opinion and other fields in political science and sociology to build a broad and wide case for how racial ideologies, ideas, and attitudes that inhere in the American public, and have for a very long time, create constraints that prevent the enactment of policies that are truly equitable.

Stephen McNamee: There is a lot of White backlash now, and a lot of it is racial resentment, and a lot of that is connected to government supports and

how they have been racialized ideologically. Somehow welfare has come to be seen by many as supports for African Americans or other minority groups. White women, for instance, have benefited from affirmative action, but it tends not to get defined that way. Affirmative action is seen as something designated for people of color. And that is part of the backlash based on the assumption of reverse discrimination for Whites. The sense of loss that White working-class Americans have felt now that is associated with automation and globalization and deindustrialization, oftentimes when they look for somebody to blame for these circumstances the thought is, "Well, the rich can take care of themselves, and the government takes care of the poor, who are largely people of color. And the White working- and middle-classes get squeezed in the middle." So race really complicates inequality in America in a lot of ways.

Henry Giroux: Racism creates false arguments that impede any sense of real solidarity. For example, this happens when people at the highest levels of government constantly use the language of bigotry and hate to suggest that the culture of Blackness is also the culture of criminality. Structural racism causes visceral violence that extends from the legacy of lynching to the current racialized plague of mass incarceration. It is also evident in policies that reinforce law-and-order agendas that are nothing but racist. Or to basically sanction all sorts of policies that are ultimately racist in terms of their representations, images, codes, practices, and policies. For instance, think about the racism that has shaped Hollywood movies for decades, the current attempt by right wingers to roll back voting rights, the ongoing criminalization of a wide range of behaviors allegedly committed by Black youth, the vile attacks on Muslims, and so it goes. Racism does more than divide the country and the working class; it also destroys any viable notion of solidarity across racial and class lines and in doing so, invokes the terror of race-based state terrorism.

Heather Bullock: If you ask Americans who they imagine as a welfare recipient, the association is typically with a person of color. There's a very recent and really powerful social psychological study where they essentially did just this. They basically found that the prototypical welfare recipient that participants constructed was a blacker-skin-toned hypothetical person. They morphed these images. So it's very much alive and well today.

I think there's still a steady drumbeat of some of the other stereotypes just around laziness and work ethic. One of the things I worry a lot about is the movement to take work requirements and some of the things that we've seen

with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and moving them into an ever-growing number of programs, whether it's the SNAP program or health care benefits. You certainly hear a lot of talk about that. Dramatic illustrations are fingerprinting welfare recipients, which I think certainly has racist roots. It's really criminalizing poverty, and there's no evidence that that's an effective thing to do. Estimates of fraud are very low, and the cost of drug testing welfare recipients is quite expensive, so drug testing and fingerprinting, I think they're very racist in nature.

I do a lot of work with low-income women, women experiencing housing precarity, women receiving public assistance. One of the really vicious parts of individualism, I think, and individualistic stereotypes and attributions for poverty, is that it does create that kind of distancing where people think, "Well, I really need this program. It's the other people on it that are giving it a bad name." And so you have this division that really divides low-income people from each other, whether it's around racism, like White welfare recipients saying, "It's not me. It's people of color receiving assistance that are fraudulent or giving it a bad name." And I think overcoming that kind of divisiveness and finding ways to bring together groups that really do have shared interests is crucial. Obviously that has to include middle-class people, too, who I think see their own economic precarity but don't necessarily see it connected to the plight of low-income people.

Stephen McNamee: I believe it is America's great original sin. We've struggled mightily with issues of race since slavery, and we haven't resolved these issues. We have confronted it as part of the public discourse, but it hasn't been resolved.

It is the advantage of those who already have wealth and power and privilege to retain it. It is not enough just to have more than others, you have to have a compelling rationale for why you deserve to have more than others. And the greater the level of inequality, the more compelling these narratives of justification need to be. And of course meritocracy is the major narrative of justification of inequality in America. It has been convenient for the wealthy and the powerful to have racial divisions among the poor and the working class in such a way that the poor and working class never find common ground to challenge the rich and the powerful in terms of their presumption of legitimacy of differential privilege. In some cases, I think it has been deliberate for the wealthy to stop and look the other way, even to actively engage in a racial explanation for inequality, because it deflects from the social-class causes of inequality. And that has been part of the American story.

Heather Bullock: I really think that individualism seems to be a thread that runs through sexism, racism, classism, and other -isms, which are all intersecting with each other. It's also the case that there are these other beliefs that individualism maps on to, things like a social-dominance orientation, belief in a just world. So there's a whole constellation, a whole network of beliefs that individualistic beliefs about poverty and wealth are really connected to, and racism obviously figures prominently into that. Many of the stereotypes about low-income people, about being lazy and unmotivated, are the same classic stereotypes that we see about people of color in the United States, particularly African Americans. If you look at some of the really classic work by scholars like Martin Gilens, you really see the significance of racism and racist ideology in predicting, along with individualism, anti-welfare attitudes.

AMERICAN NOTIONS OF FREEDOM

In chapter 2 we discussed the work of Louis Althusser, who asserted: "By keeping us all, both the exploiting and the exploited classes, believing that we are free, ideology ensures that most of us do not become so" (Ferretter 2006:94). Our cultural conceptualization of freedom impacts what we expect and do not expect, and therefore what we do and do not demand from our government. Too much emphasis on the negative aspects of freedom, for instance, leads to an underdeveloped understanding of how social forces impact people's lives and weaker demands of government to facilitate social justice. In many of our conversations with our scholars, we discussed the dominant American cultural understandings of freedom, focusing on the strengths and weaknesses of these dominant understandings. The following are highlights from our conversations.

David Brady: I have always bought Amartya Sen's argument about this. I thought it was very convincing, that we should develop these capabilities that people have in society. If you are really economically insecure and you are food insecure, for example, what kind of freedom do you really have? He says that we need to think broadly about functioning, or capabilities, to participate as equal members of society. I think that is not a bad way to think out it. Enhance people's capabilities and reduce the deprivation of capabilities. So development is giving more and more freedom to people to live their lives. That's not a bad way to think about freedom. So it's not just the negative issues of protecting your individual rights of expression or belief, it's also enhancing the opportunities and capabilities for the people that don't have a lot of resources. Having economic resources and capabilities allows people to exist as fully functioning members of society.

Heather Bullock: There is a very negative and pervasive framing of the government equaling regulations, or bureaucracy, or red tape, instead of government as an engine of mobility, of potentiality. I think that we got to a place where the framing of the government is entirely negative and not the government as a potential launch pad for opportunity, or for freedom, or for the pursuit of individual dreams or goals.

Henry Giroux: There are things missing from our very limited notion of freedom. The market functions in such a way as to suggest that it should govern not just economics but all of social life. Central to that is a notion of freedom which says that freedom is based on two things: unlimited choices and freedom from the government. You have multiple choices as a consumer, and freedom from the government, which is going to bear down on your life in ways that are disastrous. And I think both of those things are sheer nonsense. The foundation for both of these is a combination of two things. First, the organizing principle for this notion of freedom is that freedom is only about the freedom from and not the freedom to. Secondly, the ultimate sanction for freedom is fear, the ultimate legitimating force is fear. You have to be fearful of the people around you. What that does is it depoliticizes people. It offers up a kind of misrecognition about the social state that seems to suggest it is more of a pathology than anything else. That the government doesn't have responsibilities that are absolutely essential to a democracy, whether it is providing national health care or good schools or making sure that the air isn't polluted or regulating business, and so forth and so on.

Another issue around the question of freedom is that we typically don't talk about constraints. We don't talk about constraints that bear down on different groups in different ways so as to limit their freedom. So to say that a kid who is born in poverty has the same choices as anybody else, they just need to pick themselves up by their bootstraps, compared to a kid in the upper one percent, that is just nonsense. So unless you talk about choices in relation to constraints, then "choices" becomes an empty term. It becomes meaningless. But people drink the Kool-Aid because the social is absolutely individualized. All questions now are about character and individual responsibility, rather than the ability to translate private issues into larger social and systemic considerations.

Jamila Michener: I think that we have a notion of negative freedom in the U.S. So freedom is about not being interfered with in an explicit way by the government or by another individual or person. This is why issues of freedom of speech get people so upset and folks are really passionate about it.

If there's some kind of liberty that we focus on and that we have at least a moderate commitment to, it's a negative liberty. I should be left to do what I can do, to accomplish what I can accomplish given the context.

It's not about a positive liberty that brings the context into the equation. So the difference between "I should be free to achieve what I can achieve given the context" and "The context should be adjusted so that I am equipped to thrive, and so that anybody irrespective of their starting point is equipped to thrive," there's a difference there. It's not a subtle difference, it's a big difference. At the heart of it is a limitation as far as our popular imagination around what the role of the government, what the role of different kinds of institutions, and even what the role of the market should be. What we expect is a kind of negative liberty—you don't stop me from doing X if I wanna do X—as opposed to a kind of positive and affirmative responsibility on the part of the government and other major social institutions and entities to create an environment that allows anyone to thrive. That's not even really part of our discourse; it's not something that we're deeply committed to. I think part of that is because equality itself is not something that we're deeply committed to. I think that's part of the ideational change that would have to occur in order to think differently about the possibilities of social policy. Part of that ideational change will have to come from a more robust understanding of what life is like for people who are nothing like "us."

Negative liberty is essentially a least common denominator. "You just leave me alone, I leave you alone." This makes for a scenario where we just leave each other alone without thinking about the background conditions that account for where we are at the point that we seek to be left alone. That is the least common denominator. It's the least we can ask for. Least common denominator politics tends to support and uphold the status quo. The status quo being supported and upheld is all that many people are willing to agree to because the status quo benefits them. They most certainly don't want a regime that benefits others, benefits those who are not them, those who are not like them.

There's a connection between our political institutions, which are very status quo preserving, and our cultural commitment to freedom from interference. Both are rooted in a conceptualization of liberty that wrongheadedly eschews a societal obligation to cultivate human capacities and sustain human dignity.

Peter Callero: People's understanding of the term "freedom" has been leaning toward the negative freedom interpretation. It is obviously consistent with

what we have been talking about so far in terms of the culture of individualism. So much so that I have been frustrated even in teaching in trying to get students to understand an alternative way of understanding the word "freedom." I am almost giving up on it, trying to come at it from a different angle.

It is difficult for people to understand that for us to be able to flourish as human beings, to reach our full potential, requires not only breaking down barriers but also creating the enabling social conditions that will allow us to flourish. If I use the word "freedom" in my lectures, then students just get confused. I think it's rooted in this false, narrow, limited understanding of what it means to be a human being. Until we can really get beyond that, those kinds of limited assumptions and interpretations of our nature, I think we're always going to struggle with this easy cultural interpretation of the isolated individual, the self-reliant and self-determined person. We need to be able to support the understanding of human beings as emerging from the social. Our individualism is really a gift from society, from community, from family, from institutions. Once we understand that, that the positive aspects of individuals that we cherish and value emerge from the social; once we understand that, then we can begin to introduce students and others to these larger ideas of the enabling conditions of society that allow us to flourish and allow us to thrive and allow us to reach our full potential as individuals.

Stephen McNamee: Part of the foundational character of American society is based on the concept of freedom. The early American colonists were in pursuit of freedom as a primary motivation for immigration to America. Some were seeking religious freedom, others were seeking freedom to acquire wealth, others seeking freedom from tyranny. In economic terms, Americans readily embraced the idea of a free market society as laid out in Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, coincidentally published in the same year as the Declaration of Independence. Smith's book became the Bible of capitalism and the blueprint for an American economy emphasizing individual competition, entrepreneurial ownership, and minimal governmental interference. But free markets do not guarantee political freedoms. Political freedoms came much more slowly and begrudgingly. The American promise of freedom was from the beginning not fully extended to slaves, Native Americans, indentured servants, women, and others. Since those early days, Americans have conflated the idea of free markets with political freedom, but they are not the same. One does not guarantee the other.

Michael Lewis: Freedom's an interesting thing. Freedom to do what? So you don't want the government in your bedroom, you don't want the government

in your private, personal life. That's a kind of freedom. But the other freedom is the freedom to achieve the American Dream.

We make a distinction between opportunity and social location, which is a false dichotomy. Your opportunities are constrained by your social location. And social location can only be dealt with through policy.

People would like the opportunity to do certain things. If government doesn't give me that opportunity, no matter how smart I am, and how motivated I am, it is going to be very difficult for me to achieve anything. If the people of New York City, through the government, did not offer to pay for the education of other people's children, I would not have gone to Brooklyn College, and then to graduate school, and then to do the work that I do. I got that freedom, a productive freedom.

Do I rule out all efforts to protect me from government? No I don't, and we of course need to be protected from the government in many ways.

The great philosopher John Stuart Mill was a great champion of income taxes. And when he was writing in support of that, people reacted, "How could you do that given your views on liberty?" And he said that there were certain things that were really important and that only governments, and governments with taxes available to them, can address. And I would take that position.

You're not going to deal with the inequality of place unless the government acts. And if you don't deal with the inequality of place, you aren't dealing with the problem of inequality of opportunity. And almost all Americans would say that not dealing with inequality of opportunity is wrong. And you can't deal with that without greater equality of place. That can only come through the intervention of the government.

Sharon Krause: I think about freedom as the collection of conditions—social, political, economic, cultural—that make the exercise of agency possible and make it possible for individual agency to come to fruition successfully. And I think about agency as the capacity to affect the world in ways that manifest or express who you are and what you're trying to do.

Providing freedom and protecting freedom for all of us means that as much as it means respecting other people's rights to religious freedom or freedom of assembly. It means actively fighting against economic inequality and implicit

bias and cultural values that stigmatize particular groups of people. Because those things stand in the way of individual freedom every bit as much as attacks on religious liberty or freedom of assembly. So none of us can enact our freedom by ourselves.

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