

The Great American Myth: The American Dream

Janice Areno had achieved the American Dream. Janice, a proud Republican and a dedicated accountant at Lacassane for forty-three years, came from a poor family in which her father had to quit school in the third grade to support his nine younger siblings. She admitted in her interview with Arlie Russel Hochschild in *Strangers In Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the Political Right* that she was proud of her father for his sacrifice, yet Janice was even more proud of his other great achievement: “He was never on disability or unemployment” (Hochschild 156). Janice Areno continued the family tradition proudly boasting that—like her dad—she never “took a dime from the government... never one one time ever drew an unemployment check or got any government assistance” (Hochschild 157). For Janice and her father, hard work had been their method of escaping poverty, and it was an achievement to be proud of. In escaping poverty through sheer hard work, Janice’s family is the very embodiment of the American Dream’s promise of social mobility.

However, Janice sees work as more than a means of economic mobility. For her it is a disciplinary function that instills honor. “When people got home at night, they’d be tired and wouldn’t be out drinking or doing drugs,” Janice claims, as opposed to depending on welfare which she believes creates laziness (Hochschild 159). Her family did not receive welfare for a lack of qualifying, but instead they sought every opportunity to avoid it and the perceived stigma attached. Welfare, according to Janice Areno, is a societal evil discouraging the very hard work that her family did to get ahead. Coming from this background, her stigmatization of welfare is almost understandable, yet times have changed.

These days, the United States has become “the most unequal of all industrialized nations” according to Michael Reisch in “United States: Social Welfare Policy and Privatization in

Post-Industrial Society” (Reisch 254). At the same time economic mobility is at an all time low. However, the story of going from rags to riches solely from sheer merit and hard work—the American Dream—resonates with many Americans like Janice today despite inequality and economic mobility seeming to be inversely proportional. The very idea of the American Dream is opposed to redistributive policies, which use tax money to provide services to large portions of the population, making up the social safety net. This American Dream prides itself on “The Protestant (Puritan) ethic of Western civilization, esteeming literacy, thrift, self-reliance, and diligent personal effort... leading to membership in the middle class and above” according to conservative journalist William Young in “The Protestant Ethic and Western Civilization”. In championing self-reliance as a pathway to economic success, welfare aid becomes stigmatized as a handout to those too lazy to work hard to achieve the American Dream. This stigmatization of welfare ultimately leads to a decrease in participation among those who are eligible. While right-wing rhetoric champions the American Dream’s ideals of self-reliance as a moralizing path to economic mobility, the American Dream stigmatizes welfare recipients and discourages the population from participating in redistributive programs within an increasingly unequal society. In perpetuating a false narrative of hard work equating to economic success the American Dream stigmatizes selective welfare policies which diminishes public support for the very policies designed to bring about the economic mobility the American Dream seeks to provide.

I. The Economic American Dream

The American Dream is as old as the Puritan work ethic it enshrines and deeply penetrates national discourse. The United States of the past stood in defiance to the rigid social hierarchy of the pre-twentieth century aristocratic Europe. The poor from around the globe sought out America’s economic mobility. For Janice and many others, “Work had been a

passport out of fear, poverty, and humiliation for her father and other generations back” (Hochschild 157). America has built its reputation on being the “land of opportunity.”

The present American situation is far removed from its founding. The once aristocratic Europe has now surpassed the United States in economic mobility with the adoption of the welfare-state. In her article “Social Welfare in Europe” Sarah Glazer examines American conservative rhetoric which argues that “generous welfare states are a drag on European economies, making them less dynamic and less productive than the United States”. Generous redistribution is feared as a socialist deterrent for individual social mobility within American discourse. Despite this trend toward tax cuts and retrenchment, “going from rags to riches, long a staple of the American dream, turns out to be easier in welfare-state Europe than the United States,” according to Glazer. The current strategy of tax cuts and welfare retrenchment is failing to achieve the economic mobility enjoyed in the European model. If anything, the United States is heading in a direction of economic stagnation, developing its own aristocracy where economic standing depends on success of the parental lineage.

The main determinant of economic success is education which is linked to the parent’s wealth. In the article “Federal Anti-Poverty Programs Primarily Help the GOP’s Base,” Ronald Brownstein, senior editor for the Atlantic, found that “the poverty rate stood at nearly 25 percent for working-age white adults in families where no one holds at least a four-year college degree.” As the largest determinant of economic success, the growing importance of education and skills raise the barrier for entry into rewarding jobs when compared to the past. This creates a nearly hereditary class of poor where children are unlikely to achieve a higher education than their parents. Those unfortunate enough to be born into hardship are expected to be able to compete competitively for economic mobility despite limited access to resources that contribute to

success. The promise of economic mobility from hard work alone has become nothing more than a myth. Now you need hard work and money.

II. The Moral American Dream

Beyond personal diligence and self-reliance, morality is also a vital part of the Protestant work ethic. Young declares that social mobility is a result of, “self-mastery over hedonism and self-indulgence and a strong work ethic”. The hard work inherent in the doctrine has ascended to purposes of a moralizer that prevents societal decadence. In presenting self-reliance as a moralizing institution, Young’s protestant work ethic creates a compelling narrative—to some—capable of dismissing the European model of welfare as ‘socialist and soft’ on unemployed welfare recipients. The buzzword “socialist” deters any further consideration toward alternative welfare models in American discourse.

As a moralistic driver of economic mobility, the anti-welfare rhetoric of the American Dream begets the support of many hopeful blue-collared whites. LA Times journalist David Lauter explains in his article “How Do Americans View Poverty?” conflicting views on the role of welfare and its recipients that largely divide based on wealth and education. Blue-collar white Americans tend to think, “that government programs breed dependency and that most poor people would prefer to stay on welfare”. In contrast, minorities and educated whites believed, “that jobs for the poor are hard to find, that government programs help people get back on their feet and that most of the poor would rather earn their own way”. But the predominantly non-college educated group would be more likely to be in need of welfare due to their lack of higher education for greater job opportunities. Many families choose to reject welfare and instead take pride in their endurance and diligence—traits they consider to be moral—like Janice Areno.

III. Welfare Tyranny

Supporters of the American Dream critique welfare policies for not just promoting economic stagnation but also moral degradation. Michael Reisch, professor at University of Maryland, observes in the *United States: Social Welfare Policy and Privatization in Post-Industrial Society* that modern conservative rhetoric claims “welfare state policies discourage entrepreneurial activities, innovation, and risk; reduce the role of the voluntary sector and diminish civil society; increase the dependency of benefit recipients; and expand state power” (Reisch 253). This perception portrays the welfare state as a tyrannical opposite to the liberating principles of the American Dream. Lauter assesses that, “about one-third of Americans said that government programs had made poverty worse, a view that was particularly common among conservatives, 47%, and blue-collar whites, 43%”. Many of these blue-collar whites would be in similar circumstances as Janice and her father: on the cusp of poverty. Yet, many Americans have no faith in the beneficial nature of welfare institutions due to the perceived dependency on the government by undeserving takers of taxpayer money.

Besides encouraging laziness, Reisch observes that the welfare state was seen “as socially disruptive, wasteful, inefficient, and destructive of individual freedom” (253). There is substantial distrust towards welfare policies as a just institution. When Lauter posed the question “who has the greatest responsibility for helping the poor”, “Just under one in five Americans said that the poor themselves bear the greatest responsibility. Family, churches and charities each got mentioned by 10%-15%”. Individual work-ethic and local communities were expected to be the main supporters of the poor according to Republican voters. However, Reisch exposes a crucial problem with privatizing social welfare in that, “Privatization threatens to reproduce marketplace inequalities in the service sector and undermine the basic mission of the nonprofit sector itself”

(259). In place of the government, religious organizations and other non-profits would take up the role of welfare distribution. But, there is an “exemption religious organizations receive from Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. This allows them to receive public funds even if they discriminate in hiring, client screening, and program content” (Reisch 260). Privatized welfare from the church would be entitled to public funding yet exempt from anti-discriminatory legislation. Social programs would be sponsors of the socio-economic discrimination they are supposed to remove making them a poor replacement to encourage social mobility.

IV. Dependency, Decadence, and Deviants

Many Americans view welfare as simply a charitable handout to those who fail to achieve economic independence that stigmatizes recipients. In contrast, Burkhauser, a professor of economics at Cornell University, explains that, “Employed Swedes are comfortable paying cash transfers to fellow citizens who don't work, because they attribute it to bad luck, not laziness, most experts agree”(qtd in Glazer). This alternative view suggests that welfare should be an inherent right of citizenship for the unfortunate instead of charity. Sarah Glazer in "Social Welfare in Europe" describes Europe as “a place where social solidarity and protection from poverty are assured, compared to the more individualistic sink-or-swim philosophy of America”. This sink-or swim approach has placed great value in the act of being economically sufficient while deeming economic dependency as deficient. Welfare is not a guaranteed right, but a badge of shame.

In attributing welfare dependency to decadence, the meritocratic nature of the American Dream places a stigma on welfare recipients. Patrick M. Horan and Patricia Lee Austin observe in their article “The Social Bases of Welfare Stigma” that welfare carries a stigma of being a “deviant” and a “social liability”. Horan claims, “that the internalization of the negative

evaluation associated with a stigmatized social role (such as participation in a public welfare program) is one of the most damaging of the possible responses” (656). In stigmatizing the individuals who use welfare programs the system itself becomes, by association, a system for “deviants”. An endless cycle is created where welfare recipients are deviants for being on welfare while welfare itself is labeled a deviant institution for providing for deviants.

V. A Poor Program for the Poor

Stigmatization is responsible for the dismissive attitude toward welfare among Republican supporters despite the benefits it provides. Horan claims, “The concept of welfare stigma has provided a popular explanatory device for analysts seeking to account for the low participation rates among those eligible for public” (648). Welfare stigma creates a problem for society in that those in need are more reluctant to seek aid and get the help they need. Among those who use welfare programs such as the AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children), they are subjected to a loss in pride. In fact, Horan asserts, “the shame felt about being on welfare may account for the fact that an estimated one-half to two-thirds of those Americans who cannot find decent-paying jobs do not, although they qualify, go on welfare” (648). The shame brought by stigma deters a possible majority of those eligible from using social welfare programs despite their desperate need for it. For many who believe in the self-reliant American Dream, welfare dependency is merely a branding mark for those who failed to achieve the American Dream.

For those who endure the stigma and accept welfare policies, the political push for retrenchment on the right has left redistributive policies weak and dependents vulnerable lacking popular support. Eduardo Porter, renowned *New York Times* Journalist, suggests in his article

“Patching Up the Social Safety Net” that universal social programs, ones which the majority of the public depend on, are more robust and successful due to ample funding compared to selective policies, ones for just the poor. He asserts that, “Only universal programs that served all Americans could achieve the broad political support needed to become embedded in society”. Porter draws a connection between widespread use amongst all social classes with popular support for social policies such as social security. On the other hand, he claims, “Programs targeted at the poor would be stigmatized as charity, underfunded and left to wither”. The perception of selective welfare as a charity enables pushback from the political right. Those who are not recipients of the program are less likely to advocate for its expansion or even support it.

VI. A New Moralizer

In stigmatizing welfare recipients, the American Dream’s reliance on work ethic has discouraged many of those eligible from participating. This has only hurt chances for economic mobility while welfare-state Europe has surpassed the United States in economic mobility. With the economic reasoning nullified, the American Dream’s ideals contribute little more than to shame individuals into enduring hardships and rejecting economic relief. Universal policies present an opportunity to adapt both the economic and moral American Dream to the modern needs of the nation. This new moralizer would teach solidarity as opposed to the endurance of sink-or-swim self-reliant American Dream. With policies like social security, the United States already has pieces of a welfare state in the same vein as the solidaristic European welfare states. Although Porter raises a problem in that universal programs would be “difficult to push through the objections of a Republican Party divided between those who want a small government and

those who want it smaller”. While it will be tough to implement universal policies such as a Medicare-for-All, the lack of stigmatization and widespread use among all social classes will generate massive support. It is time that the United States delivers on its promise as “The Land of Opportunity” by adapting its welfare mentality so that individuals are not shamed for receiving help in their quest to achieve the American Dream.

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