

Book explores 'rugged individualism' and its impact on inequality in America

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"Pull yourself up by the bootstraps." It's an old adage about American resilience. But how does it impact poverty?

A new book by a professor at the Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis explores and critiques the widespread perception in the United States that one's success or failure in life is largely the result of personal choices and individual characteristics.

["Rugged Individualism and the Misunderstanding of American Inequality,"](#) co-authored by Mark Rank, the Herbert S. Hadley Professor of Social Welfare, is published by Lehigh University Press.

"From its beginnings, America has emphasized and celebrated the idea of rugged individualism," said Rank, a noted expert on income inequality. "The notion of breaking the frontier, or the rags to riches stories, celebrate this ideal. The problem is that while individual agency and effort is important for getting ahead in life, it is often not enough."

We might think of it as a necessary but insufficient condition, he said. "Many other factors beyond an individual's control come into play in affecting how well one does in life. For example, I'm currently working on a book that focuses on the importance of chance and luck in profoundly shaping the course of our lives."

In "Rugged Individualism," Rank and his co-authors show that the distinctively individualist ideology of American politics and culture shapes attitudes toward [poverty](#) and [economic inequality](#) in profound ways, fostering social policies that de-emphasize structural remedies.

"The fact that America has been steeped in the ethos of rugged individualism prevents us from effectively addressing poverty and inequality as a nation," Rank said. "We tend to view poverty as the fault of the individual, and therefore, you simply need to pull yourself up by the bootstraps to get ahead. As a result, we provide minimal assistance to lower-income families. The result is the highest rates of poverty among the industrialized countries."

The book synthesizes data from large-scale surveys of the American population, and it features both conversations with academic experts and interviews with American citizens intimately familiar with the consequences of economic disadvantage. It explores the concept of "skeptical altruism," which the authors use to describe the American public's hesitancy to adopt a more robust and structurally oriented approach to solving the persistent problem of economic disadvantage.

"We use the term skeptical altruism to describe America's ambivalent attitudes toward assisting the poor," Rank said. "On the one hand, Americans do express a moral commitment to helping the poor. Yet, on the other hand, they are skeptical about the effectiveness of such help. This results in a very limited social welfare state, and an emphasis upon the importance of individual charity."

For Rank, one of the highlights of this project was getting to work with linguist and philosopher Noam Chomsky, who contributed the concluding chapter to the book.

"Collaborating with Chomsky, who is often considered the most widely cited scholar in the world, was an honor," Rank said.

Provided by Washington University in St. Louis

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