

## BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

**Rank, Mark Robert, Lawrence M. Eppard, and Heather E. Bullock.** *Poorly Understood: What America Gets Wrong About Poverty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021, p. 250, \$38.61 hardcover (8780190881382).

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**I**n *Poorly Understood: What America Gets Wrong About Poverty*, Mark Rank, Lawrence Eppard and Heather Bullock confront the false narratives permeating the political and social discourse on poverty. To set the record straight, the book catalogues and disputes a laundry list of myths related to poverty. In doing so, it offers answers to hotly-contested questions such as, “who exactly are the poor?” and, “what is to blame for their impoverishment?” The authors aim to incite action in favour of poverty’s elimination rather than simply tolerate its existence. This is framed as achievable when poverty is no longer perceived as an “us versus them” issue and when social policies are informed by the realities of poverty. By arguing that poverty is best understood in structural rather than individualistic terms, the authors demonstrate that poverty is primarily a product of system-level factors that are *external* to individuals as opposed to internal to them. In pursuing these ends, poverty myths and their implications are thematically organized into six sections within the book.

The first three sections combat myths related to the composition, causes, and consequences of poverty in America. Drawing upon their own work and secondary sources, the authors falsify three main claims: (1) that poverty impacts only a niche subsection of the population; (2) that poverty is best attributed to personal failure; and (3) that poverty harms only the poor. As a result, they show the reality of poverty is indiscriminate to demographic characteristics and one’s hard work and detrimental for the entirety of society. Behind this shift from myth to fact is the move from an individualist to a structuralist perspective on poverty. The structuralist perspective is articulated by way of visualizing the labour market as a game of musical chairs which allows them to show that irrespective of the qualities of the individual players, there will always be a fixed number who remain without a chair. Therefore, the authors argue that poverty is not the aggregate product of individuals who lack job skills, rather it exists because it is *structurally guaranteed* by deficits in job opportunities. Further exacerbating this, they also

argue that structural forces implicate decision-making processes through a lack of resources. According to the authors, the origin of “poor” decisions such as not going to university are more likely to be the result of situational constraints such as coming from a low-income background as opposed to foolish disposition.

The standout contribution here is not so much what is being argued but *how* it is being argued. Previous work on the causes of poverty has advocated for structural explanations, but in doing so often evaluates competing explanations separately (Royce 2018). It is one thing to present the individualist perspective and then separately go on to discuss the structuralist rebuttal. It is quite another to strategically forward the structuralist viewpoint through the very myths that cloud it. In the process of debunking each myth, the authors simultaneously build up their structural argument by knocking down the individualist façade. This merges the two perspectives and addresses them in tandem, which makes for a sharper argument. Utilizing the myth format as an organizational tool also does well to present the individualist versus structuralist debate within the poverty literature to a non-academic audience.

Sections four and five centre on disrupting narratives of American exceptionalism, first by showing how the country’s welfare state lags behind its OECD counterparts, and second by discrediting the folklore of the American dream. These myths assume that individuals begin life with relatively equivalent prospects, which itself implies that inequalities of outcome are meritocratic. In response, the authors claim such myths obscure the extent to which cumulative disadvantage encroaches upon individuals, both shaping their choices and constraining their opportunities. Inequalities ranging from family context to neighbourhood environment situate individuals upon differential trajectories. Importantly, to say that the playing field is unequal is also to hint at a *relational* element characterizing resource distribution and outcomes. Although not explicitly stated, this is illustrated through the authors’ example of a modified game of Monopoly in which some players enter the game with more assets than others. The key here is not that advantaged players are simply more likely to win, but that as these players hoard properties, they simultaneously exclude other players from those properties. This exclusion of others from the game of asset accumulation is what enables the advantaged to continually amass their riches. As in life, outcomes are fundamentally shaped by relations between people, not simply attributes internal to them.

The authors’ myth busting process consistently follows a theoretical-sound structuralist account. Structuralist arguments can be understood as entailing both “macro-structural” accounts concerned with identifying the concrete positions of poverty to be filled within a society, alongside

“situational” explanations preoccupied with contextualizing the behaviour of the impoverished (Calnitsky 2018: 7). Situational accounts view behaviour associated with poverty as originating from external forces as opposed to those based on one’s character. Consider a game of chess: in a casual match one may play well, but within a timed tournament-style game the player may rush themselves into a blunder. When given only a few seconds for a chess move, many would make sloppy decisions, and we intuitively recognize the situational rather than characterological causes. In line with a “macro-structural” approach, the musical chairs analogy explains the structurally produced positions of poverty via an insufficient supply of chairs. Next, the authors incorporate situational accounts by addressing decision-making myths that fail to contextualize “poverty-inducing” choices within broader structural constraints. The combined presence of these explanations works to effectively discredit poverty myths *and* enhance our understanding of the causes of poverty and inequality.

The book’s final section explains the persistence of poverty myths and parses out the implications for social policy based on reality rather than fiction. First, psychological and sociological explanations are surveyed to account for the resilience of poverty myths. Next, the authors propose three broad policy strategies which have been claimed to possess game-altering capacity: (1) increasing the number and quality of available jobs; (2) revamping the social safety net; and (3) fostering the growth of lower-income individual and community assets. Accordingly, the route to poverty reduction may entail job creation and minimum wage increases, alongside fortifying the welfare state with broader and more generous social programs. To complement this, the authors propose that low-income communities should be provided with the means to accumulate capital. At the individual level, this might include government-matched savings accounts for children, while communities could be strengthened through increased funding to public institutions.

In previous sections the authors emphasize the role of structural forces in generating poverty. However, this perspective fades when it comes to proposing solutions. Each of the three policy proposals aim to modify the structure by altering the rules of the game. But given the authors’ efforts to depict the flaws baked into the structure using their musical chairs analogy, one might ask: “if the game is so flawed, why continue to play?” This represents a missed opportunity to present a new game or imagine an alternative structure. Here, it is helpful to think of Erik Olin Wright’s (2019: 38) typology of “strategic logics” for confronting the capitalist structure. While “taming” capitalism simply modifies the rules of the game to reduce harm, “eroding” capitalism incorporates the aim of moving beyond the structure as it currently exists

(Wright 2019: 59). Following this logic, the authors' policy proposals favour harm reduction more than replacing the game. Nonetheless, these solutions offer ways to directly improve people's lives, which should not be discredited. Bringing more 'chairs' to the table is undoubtedly an excellent start considering policy implications are not the focus of this book. In future work, it would be beneficial to see an expanded policy section with more daring solutions.

Overall, *Poorly Understood* equips readers with the tools necessary to demystify poverty. Academics are in constant conversation with one another, making excellent contributions to the literature in the process. However, only so much progress towards alleviating poverty can be made without effectively disseminating what the findings indicate beyond the academy. The communication gap often resulting from this is itself a contributor to the persistence of poverty myths. That the authors acknowledge and act on this is commendable. For undergraduate students or those looking for an introduction to the subject matter, one cannot go wrong with this book. Rank, Eppard, and Bullock deliver a timely and refreshing work; one that calls out perspectives that minimize poverty's structural roots by centering blame on its' victims. While those well-versed on the topic may be left wishing for more in terms of alignment between theoretical approach and policy proposals, it is a powerful introduction to otherwise often inaccessible structural accounts of poverty.

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## REFERENCES

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