

Book Reviews

The Undeserving Rich: American Beliefs about Inequality, Opportunity, and Redistribution. By Leslie McCall. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. xviii+292. \$29.99 (paper).

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We expect the blurbs on the back cover of a book to exaggerate its strengths and to downplay its weaknesses. But in the case of *The Undeserving Rich*, they only do it justice. Michèle Lamont, in her blurb, writes that “everyone concerned with growing inequality in the United States should read this book as it challenges the myth that Americans . . . are indifferent to it.” Playing on the welfare-discourse trope of the “undeserving poor,” author Leslie McCall introduces the concept of the “undeserving rich.” This term refers to the belief that many rich people are implicated in producing a form of inequality that operates to limit the opportunities available for ordinary people.

She convincingly demonstrates that there is no basis for the assertion of some politicians and journalists that Americans believe that opportunities are available, inequality is all right, and redistribution is undesirable. In particular, the argument that most Americans are uninformed and unaware of the issue of economic inequality is simply untrue.

What makes McCall’s discussion so refreshing is its combination of nuance, subtlety, and texture, and its nondogmatic, nonideological treatment of a quite complicated set of beliefs. McCall bases her analyses on survey data, primarily on the answers to a set of questions on inequality in the General Social Survey first asked in 1987 and repeated in 1992, 1996, 2000, 2008, and 2010. She supplements this with other survey questions from the American National Election Study and with systematic samples of media discourse. She is very sensitive to the limits of survey data and cautious about overinterpreting the answers to questions that were not designed for her purposes.

She is at her best in confronting various anomalies in the data. A good example is the uneven, nonlinear interest in the issue among the population in spite of the linear increase in income inequality during the period examined. Public interest spikes and recedes. For example, there is a major spike in public and media concern during the mid-1990s, somewhat surprising during a period of economic expansion. It falls off after that in spite of the continual major increases in income inequality over the next dozen years.

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McCall has a particularly rich discussion of the complicated relationship between awareness and beliefs about economic inequality and specific policy preferences. While the overwhelming majority is both aware of and concerned about increasing income inequality, this does not necessarily lead it to support redistribution policies such as increased taxes on the rich.

To guide her analysis, McCall makes use of a series of five familiar “tropes” about opportunity. These include (1) belief in a level playing field where everyone has an equal opportunity to prepare for the labor market, especially through education; (2) belief in the opportunity to pull oneself up by one’s bootstraps—that is, to get ahead in life through hard work and perseverance; (3) belief that a rising tide lifts all boats, creating better opportunities for everybody; (4) belief in the existence of equal job opportunities for any individual, regardless of race, gender, or class; and (5) the idea of just desserts—that compensation reflects the value of one’s contribution and performance. She weaves into her interpretation the presence of one or more of these tropes in people’s thinking and responses. Often the relationship contains surprises and is not at all obvious.

There are several places in which one might infer a belief about income inequality from general views about equal opportunity for different groups. But McCall shows that, for example, the belief that one can get ahead with hard work “has little to no effect on beliefs about economic inequality and, thus, cannot be used as an indicator of American tolerance for income inequality” (p. 225).

The bottom line of her analysis is that “although we cannot definitively test causal directions, we do know that the public perceives the rich as unfair beneficiaries of income inequality at best and causal agents of excessive and pernicious levels of income inequality at worst” (p. 181). About half the population believes that social advantages such as knowing the right people and the good luck of inherited wealth are important factors in getting ahead. And these beliefs about the restriction of opportunity do lead to heightened concern about income inequality.

While McCall was in the process of writing up her analysis of a data set ending in 2010, the Occupy movement started. She makes frequent reference to it and recognizes that it is changing the discourse on economic inequality, but she has no systematic data to clarify the changes. McCall might undertake a sequel to her fine book in which she shows in the same nuanced fashion how media discourse has changed because of the Occupy movement, which American beliefs were reinforced or changed, and what changes are likely to last.