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Review of Broke and Patriotic: Why Poor Americans Love Their Country

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Book Review

by Peter Kindle

Broke and Patriotic: Why Poor Americans Love their Country

Francesco Duina

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Why are America's poor so patriotic? Objectively, they have weaker social services and government support than many other economically advanced countries. Upward mobility for their children is largely a myth. They work long hours, and the gap between them and the rest of the country continues to grow. By both absolute and relative terms, they are worse off than the poor in other economically advanced countries. This book is a sociological attempt to understand this single phenomenon by Francesco Duina, currently a professor at Bates College.

Focusing on breadth rather than depth, Duina selected a rural and somewhat urban setting from two states, Montana ($n = 32$) and Alabama ($n = 31$). His 63 participants included 16 men, 17 African Americans, 13 Republicans/Conservatives, 17 Democrats/Liberals, and 15 Independents/Varies. Ages ranged from the early 20s to over 80 years. Most participants resided in Birmingham or Billings, but 12 resided in more rural locations. Some respondents were recruited in advance, but Duina recruited many face-to-face in places like laundromats or libraries. The semi-structured interviews lasted 30-40 minutes beginning with demographic information, questions about their sense of patriotism, questions comparing America to other countries, and questions about how they reconciled their poverty with their patriotic feelings toward America. All participants had incomes below the poverty line, and all but three were intensely patriotic. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, producing 894 single-spaced pages.

The eight chapters begin with an introduction providing an overview of Duina's methodology, research questions, and major findings. The second documents the disadvantages of the poor in the U.S. using data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and the high levels of patriotism as recorded by the General Social Survey and Pew surveys.

In the third chapter, Duina provides a brief summary of other research and theories addressing American patriotism although little of this work related directly to people in poverty. Generally speaking, American patriotism and exceptionalism, concepts often conflated by Duina, have been comprised of four components: (a) individualism as granted in our founding documents, (b) the American dream, (c) self-determination, and (d) the bond between God and country.

Historically, voices on the margins have not argued that the American social contract should be changed, but that it is violated by existing arrangements that create marginalization. Patriotism among the marginalized then is not a rejection of the promises of America, but an insistence that those promises be honored and extended to all, adding two components: (e) inclusiveness, and (f) earning inclusiveness through their contributions to America. System justification theory sees patriotism as (g) a rationalization of poverty by celebrating America; a Marxian interpretation anchors patriotism in (h) ignorance and misconceptions (false consciousness) sustained by biased education systems and a corrupt media; and rational choice theory might describe patriotism as a function of (i) the net benefits of living in America even if poor. Little empirical evidence exists to defend any of these theories as apt explanations for the patriotism of America's poor, but some research does suggest that national pride increases with income and decreases with education for White Americans.

The next three chapters expand on the three themes Duina noted in the interviews: hope (optimism and dignity), milk and honey (wealth and opportunity), and freedom (to determine one's physical and mental existence). The poor did not see a contradiction between their condition and their love of country because (a) failure is one's own fault, (b) the future looks bright, and (c) we are all of equal worth despite our different social and class distinctions.

Duina's participants believed that America represents hope – for themselves and the rest of the world. Perceptions were often that America uniquely provides an opportunity for the human spirit to thrive. On the world stage, America was perceived as offering generosity and answering the call to do the right thing. Generosity is demonstrated through giving, protecting, and receiving immigrants and refugees. Doing the right thing was largely contextualized in America's world policeman role, the perception that we do not start wars, but that we answer the call to help others. There is a firm belief in our good intentions. Ultimately, for many, American exceptionalism was due to God's blessings, often understood as a divine reaction to our honesty and faithfulness.

The patriotic poor stressed the wealth of America, and our capacity to take care of our own. This included their appreciation for America's natural beauty as well as their belief in the American Dream. Alabama participants tended more to gratitude for social service programs (public and private), whereas in Montana self-reliance was stronger. "[T]he quality of life and living in this country is higher than most places in the world, even for the poor" (p. 85). The perceptions of the poor were that America gives a great deal to its most vulnerable, and that other countries do not. Immigration is proof of how great America is. Everyone wants to come here.

Freedom, to participants, was what makes America special. The country was born out of the yearning for freedom. Other countries cannot make this claim. "[Here] the paramount unit of human existence is the individual rather than any kind of collectivity, and America is the country, par excellence, that recognizes this fact" (p. 130). Americans are free to travel without constraint or surveillance and free to believe, voice, and do what they will. Conflated in Montana with a libertarian embrace of gun ownership, and in Alabama with a lingering southern pride, both distinguished America from its government. Freedom was an American ideal, one not always supported by the current federal government.

The potential contradiction between poverty and patriotism, as seen through the eyes of the participants, is the focus of chapter seven. Almost everyone took ownership of their own lives without blaming external circumstances. “If everyone can make it in America, failure to make it is a person’s fault” (p. 152). There was no resentment toward the wealthy because they had earned it. Circumstances can be difficult, but they believed that a path to success is always available. Luck was sometimes denied. “Failure and success result only from a person’s choices” (p. 156). Optimism, the foundation of future hope, was often comingled with belief in God’s future blessings. Differences in outcomes were not as important as the idea that each person is equally worthy. To believe one life is more important than another is deeply un-American. We are all equal before God. Almost in passing Duina notes that participants admitted that America is all they know having never visited anyplace else.

In the last chapter, Duina reflected on his findings. The patriotism of America’s poor has deep roots. The fundamental aspect of the patriotism of America’s poor was not that they belonged to America, but that America belonged to them. Only two of the hypotheses pulled from the literature in chapter three did not find expression in the interviews: (a) participants did not justify love of country because they contributed to building it, and (b) participants did not rationalize their poverty by appeal to love of country. Duina concluded that the poor were not deceived by a false class consciousness, but truly appreciative of the social contract that is the U.S.. “There remains a genuine, bottom-up attachment to the country” (p. 178) that precludes revolt.

A concluding appendix expands on Duina’s methodology, lists pseudonymous demographics in detail, and reports briefly on the three participants who were not patriotic. The poor voices against patriotism ranged from cynicism to realism. Their sentiments were that we used to be great (1950s), but had lost something. Crime, welfare, immigration – we are no longer supportive of one another, respectful toward parents/elders, and willing to do the hard work to get ahead. The loss of moral rectitude was a common theme expressed as lazy welfare recipients, youth who do not work, political corruption, and debt spending. They believed that America is not taking care of its own. Duina wondered if this suggests that the sentiments of America’s poor could change toward disappointment in America or toward disappointment in our government.

According to the evidence presented in this book, 80-90% of America’s poor are intensely and uncritically patriotic with the rural poor leading all other segments of society. It is the uncritical aspect of this patriotism that is most alarming. The perceptions of the poor expressed in this book are almost a paean to individualism and meritocracy. There is little to no awareness among the participants that success today is determined by luck, not hard work (Frank, 2016), that wealth is more likely to be inherited than earned (Markovitz, 2019), and that the American social contract of caring for one another has been shredded by exaltation of shareholder value (Gosselin, 2008; Hacker, 2006). For the poor, the American Dream is, at best, on life support (McClelland & Tobin, 2010). Less than a year after these interviews were completed, Donald Trump was elected President of the United States riding the crest of a wave of rural anger described by Wuthnow (2018) as moral outrage at being left behind. I am left with a question, does patriotism evoke higher American ideals or sustain American privilege for a few? The country I served and love will always be and only be the former.

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