

Ronald L. Barlett and James B. Steele. America: Who Stole the Dream? Kansas City, Missouri: Andrews & McNeel, 1996.

In a brief and articulate manner, the authors of America: Who Stole the Dream? have successfully "debunked" the prevalent social-political ideology of "free trade, free markets, deregulation, less government, lower taxes, and open borders" that is promoted by the American economic elite, in general accord with the political leadership and the mass media of America. Here is a strong indictment of this ideology in theory and practice from the perspective of the American middle-class--or the working-class American majority--whose incomes and general economic well-being have been in decline since the early 1970s. The authors illustrate how these policies also work to create fewer "have-mores" than "have-lesses." The rich are getting richer and the poor, as well as the rest of the population, are getting poorer. This erosion of income is caused by the elitist and class policies that are based on a morally faulty ideology.

The authors point out these policies in areas of trade, immigration, deindustrialization, regulation and retraining. Because of the undermining of the economic wellbeing of the American middle-class, many social problems have accelerated in such diverse areas as race relations, corruption of the political process, and dissolution of families. In brief, the quality of life for most Americans has worsened:

First, "Free Trade" has forced American workers to compete with low-paid Third World workers for employment. This policy has encouraged the export of many manufacturing jobs overseas. Many workers have been forced into low-paying service jobs. Second, deregulation of business has permitted many takeovers, buyouts, and mergers which promote monopoly and result in job losses for many Americans: blue-collar, white-collar, and professional. Third, lower taxes on the wealthy and the multinational corporations have created an ever-widening gap between the rich and the rest of American society. Fourth, the economic elite have used the shrinking employment picture to undermine and destroy labor unions, dismantle worker health and safety laws, and generally reduce wages for workers. Fifth, "open borders" immigration policies have increased and encouraged serious competition for jobs in an already shrinking pool of available employment.

Sixth, job retraining programs designed to help workers displaced by these policies are generally useless or have very limited success. The jobs that they are "retained" for generally are lower paying than the employment lost. Seventh, these economic policies have reduced the funding available to address America's many social needs in a humane fashion. Private charities cannot alone be expected to fill the gap created by these policies.

The authors give excellent descriptions of how these policies have been implemented over the past thirty-plus years. Barlett and Steele describe the clever and thoroughly dishonest way in which the elite's lobbyists and much of the mass media have framed issues falsely in an either-or method as these proponents have sought to put their policies into place in American society. For example, one can have an overburdening system of government regulation of business and industry, or an essentially unregulated one, but no middle ground on the issue. The same cynical method has been used repeatedly in pushing this ideology's political and economic agenda on to American society.

The financial means by which these programs have been forced through the U.S. Congress and U.S. Senate have greatly undermined the nation's representative democratic form of government by means of large campaign donations and high-powered lobbying--even as this elite has sought to enrich themselves and increase their power.

The final chapter of America: Who Stole the Dream? admits there is economic growth in America, but because of the concentrated nature of much of this wealth, such prosperity means little to most American. The authors suggest a number of reforms to help make America more equitable and economically democratic. These include reform in trade immigration, global wages, taxes and trade regulation. In addition, Social Security and Medicare benefits should be limited to the lower and middle classes, not the wealthy who are financially capable of paying their own medical bills and certainly need no social security payments. Retraining programs should actually assist displaced workers. Executive salaries of large corporations should not be allowed to write off excessively high salaries as deductions. Government statistics should honestly reflect the economic picture for all people. The current system does not do so. Finally, regulations on congressional lobbying and in campaign financing are desperately needed if our government is truly to represent the interest of all the people.

The authors conclude their book by comparing America today with the America of the 1890s. Will America again take the route of reform to make government the servant of all the people, or will the present socially regressive trends continue and government remain the servant of the elite used to control and dominate the lives of the rest of the American people?

America: Who Stole the Dream? is written in popular language from the perspective of the American working-class majority. I greatly appreciated the author's use of personal stories of Americans whose economic dreams have been stolen by economic policies of the past thirty years. A book like this one clearly does not get the attention it deserves. This book illustrates what class oppression is about. I feel it is time to start looking at Liberation theology in the light of classism--oppression based on economic-social class--in American society. Barlett and Steele's book is a good place to begin that consideration.

Robert Hayes
Memphis, Tennessee