



June 2000

Illusions of Prosperity: America's Working Families in an Age of Economic Insecurity. Joel Blau.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>

 Part of the [Social Work Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

(2000) "*Illusions of Prosperity: America's Working Families in an Age of Economic Insecurity.* Joel Blau.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 27 : Iss. 2 , Article 17.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol27/iss2/17>

This Book Note is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.



presidential elections in sight, it is uncertain how the debate will ultimately be translated into policy. This book offers an helpful overview of the arguments and should be widely consulted not only by academics but by anyone concerned about the future of social security.

Joel Blau, *Illusions of Prosperity: America's Working Families in an Age of Economic Insecurity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. # 30.00 hardcover.

Although capitalism's productive dynamic creates unprecedented economic prosperity, it also results in the concentration of wealth and income, and the perpetuation of poverty among those who are unable to participate effectively in the market. It is for this reason that 19th century liberal reformers and democratic socialists campaigned to regulate capitalism and mitigate its excesses. They advocated the strengthening of unions and the introduction of regulations that would protect labor and improve workplace conditions. They also worked for the creation of a comprehensive network of social services that would ensure adequate standards of living for all. The institutionalization of these measures in Europe resulted in what is known as the social democratic settlement or, more colloquially, as the welfare state. Although these reforms were not institutionalized to the same extent in the United States, various efforts to moderate capitalism were adopted.

Since the 1980s, these measures have been slowly eroded and today, as Joel Blau shows, unfettered capitalism is again triumphant. The result is a strong economic growth, huge profit margins and a concentration of wealth only rivaled by the boom years of the late 19th century. Despite the fact that many ordinary Americans have not benefited from the economic prosperity of recent years, they retain an unshakable faith in the the capitalist system. Blau shows how incomes for many middle class Americans have stagnated, how downsizing and lay-offs have hurt many hardworking employees, and how tax cuts have done little to assist working people. Despite these realities, most Americans believe that they have never had it so good. To make matters worse, education, employment training and welfare have all been subjugated to the market. Instead of mitigating the excesses of

capitalism, these social programs have been redesigned to serve its interests.

This is a depressing book which is rendered even more depressing by its concluding chapter. Although this chapter offers a comprehensive strategy for "the next deal", it is unlikely that proposals for reform will be implemented without major political and attitudinal changes. Indeed, Blau concedes that effective changes are only likely to be implemented after people realize that unregulated capitalism has failed them. The book would have been strengthened by a discussion of how populist politics could be used to mobilize public opinion against the current excesses of the time. Populism provided a effective impetus for reform at the end of the last century and could, in the hands of skillful political leaders, conceivably do so again. It would also have been interesting if Blau has speculated on the need for a new rationale for state interventionism that could inspire people as it did in the 1930s and 1940s. Nevertheless, Blau's analysis is rigorous, readable and prophetic. It should be widely consulted.

Martin Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999. \$ 25 hardcover, \$ 19.95 papercover.

It is generally recognized among welfare experts that there is widespread public antipathy to social programs that focus on the poor. While social programs that cater for all income groups, such as social security, have widespread support, means tested programs that cater for only for the needy are less popular. Although social scientists have offered numerous explanations for the public's negative attitudes towards welfare services, Martin Gilens argues that these explanations are incorrect. The major issue, he suggests, is not America's strong cultural commitment to individualism, or whether government aid is inclusive or targeted on the poor, but whether the recipients of welfare are people of color. In short, negative public attitudes towards welfare are governed by racism, and particularly by racist attitudes towards African Americans who are perceived to be manipulating the welfare system for their own ends.

Gilens makes use of a vast amount of survey data to support his argument. Survey research has consistently shown that the American public has a strong sense of compassion, and is willing