

The American Paradox

Review by D. Eric Schansberg

The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty

David G. Myers

Yale University Press, 2000

384 pp. Hardcover: \$29.95



In one sense, this is a book that would make any economist happy. In describing the material and spiritual "state of the union," Myers uses a framework of "on one hand" and "on the other hand." Harry Truman once remarked that he wanted a one-armed economist to avoid hearing that combination. But here, it is a pleasing characteristic, as Myers provides a thorough and mostly balanced survey of the relevant research on an array of topics that are crucial to the health of our country.

Myers opens with a question to frame the dilemma: Are we better off than we were forty years ago? In brief, he answers "yes" in terms of material well-being and "no" in terms of moral and emotional well-being what he describes as a seeming paradox. "Never has a culture experienced such physical comfort combined with such psychological misery," he writes. Even casual observers of current events can see the combination Myers documents: most people are experiencing increasing wealth and opportunity, while some are stuck in economic poverty and many have descended into spiritual poverty.

Christians will find reason to enjoy and respect Myers's book, given that his religious faith informs his worldview. This is most evident in his passion for the vulnerable in our society, paired with his unwillingness to downplay personal responsibility; a rare combination. Both optimists and pessimists will find anecdotal and statistical fodder to bolster their views. (Myers is guardedly optimistic in view of what he sees as improvements since the early 1990s and an increase in efforts to address society's social problems.) Careful thinkers will be impressed by the way he understands and explains statistics (carefully distinguishing between correlation and causation) and the attempts of social scientists to determine cause and effect.

Myers's topics are widely varied: sexuality, marriage and family, crime, materialism, individualism, entertainment and the media, education and its impact on values, and the role of faith. He documents familiar and not-so-familiar indicators, and he quotes a wide range of people. The book is eminently readable and scrupulously documented.

But all that said, Myers's effort is unnecessarily annoying at times, especially when the author submits to the common fallacy that everyone is an economist. His understanding of cause and effect outside of his discipline is standard but limited much as if I were to write a book on some aspect of social psychology after reading a few books on the topic. The result: At times, the economic analysis is lacking, and the political analysis is naive or too hopeful. Of course, it would be difficult for him to write well about this subject without passionate personal views, but, unfortunately, those views are not as well informed as his understanding of the academic literature.

The book is sprinkled with examples of this lack of economic analysis, but in this context, a brief list will have to suffice. From the realm of economics, he exhibits common confusions about CEO salaries; the impact of the minimum wage and other mandated benefits; firms looking for the cheapest labor independently of productivity concerns; spread-the-work proposals; and overpopulation and natural resource depletion. From the realm of political economy, he assumes that taxes typically "advance the common good"; he ignores the possibility that government can destroy community by taking the place of local and voluntary arrangements; and he argues that a deficiency of virtue is a greater problem for democracy and capitalism than it is for statism, when, in fact, the lack of virtue is surely more problematic when larger governments dictate that some people have more power over others.

There are also a few notable omissions, especially for such a comprehensive book. For example, he ignores the budding school-choice movement, although those reforms would solve the problems he cites and avoid other problems likely to follow from his proposals for curricula change. More generally, he calls for an end to "politics without principle," but then does not discuss the contexts under which government is a legitimate means even to agreed-upon ends. The most egregious example of this is his apology for China's one-child policy, where he concludes that "where there is cultural will, there is a way."

Finally, a few modest complaints about some of Myers's terminology. He refers to the moral crisis as a "social recession" a nice label, except it implies the need for national and governmental solutions. Elsewhere, he takes issue with "libertarian values," but he is referring only to an individualism that is often libertine, rather than to libertarianism as a political philosophy. In fact, the individualism he decries, when manifested in political markets, is one of the chief reasons our economy deviates so significantly from the libertarian ideal. He argues instead for communitarianism as a "third way," but even this is left fuzzy, since communitarians disagree over the extent to which "community" should be sought through coercive versus voluntary means.

My hope would be that Myers's principal concerns are not with the freedom of individuals per se but, rather, with what is done with that freedom. Further, I would hope that he is not as enthusiastic about communitarianism (however denied) as he is with what it proxies love, respect, and concern for others. In the end, we are all individuals created uniquely by God and designed for freedom. As Paul writes, "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works. It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. You were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love" (Eph. 2:10; Gal. 5:1,13).

D. Eric Schansberg, Ph.D., is professor of economics at Indiana University (New Albany), the author of Poor Policy: How Government Harms the Poor (Westview), and a contributing editor to Religion & Liberty.



Source: <http://www.action.org/publicat/and/review.php?id=360>

© Acton Institute 2003
161 Ottawa NW, Ste. 301 Grand Rapids, MI 49503
Phone: (616) 454-3080 Fax: (616) 454-9454 Email: info@action.org