

BOOK REVIEWS

**The Good Life and Its Discontents:
The American Dream in the Age of Entitlement, 1945-1995**
by Robert J. Samuelson
Times Books, 1995; 293pp. \$25

One anachronism of contemporary American society is that widespread economic anxiety and discontent persists in such an advanced and prosperous country. Some argue that despite the quality of material goods and services, the "American dream" remains for many a "pipe dream" that is increasingly impossible to attain. This fosters cynicism and resentment among the American electorate, and not to mention political irresponsibility on the part of elected officials.

Newsweek columnist Robert Samuelson reflects upon this prevailing trend among the American public in his recent book, *The Good Life and Its Discontents*. Samuelson argues that despite these frustrations on the part of many Americans in their never-ending quest to live as comfortably as possible things could be much worse. The American public enjoys a lifestyle that most people around the world will never come to know. In the words of Raymond Cattell, "poverty is relative. The woman on welfare today lives – in terms of housing, food, transport, medical attention and entertainment – better than a queen in medieval times." Now more than ever, most Americans relish a greater range of comfort and luxury in their daily lives than previous generations of Americans could hardly have imagined.

The Problem of "Entitlements"

Samuelson covers a vast amount of important material in trying to account for such widespread insecurity and maladjustment. As a pragmatist, he identifies one underlying aspect behind much of the public's unreasonable expectations: entitlements. For more and more Americans, a twentieth-century lifestyle means a large home, new car, generous salaries and bonuses, annual vacations and low cost-health

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coverage. What many would consider to be modern day luxuries, middle class Americans now view as sheer necessities. One of Samuelson's main points is that there are no guarantees in life; everything has its price and nothing comes without risk. The thread of Samuelson's thoughts echoes what General Douglas MacArthur once wrote, "there is no security in this life. There is only opportunity".

The aftermath of the great depression and World War II generated a blind faith in the capacity of government to solve *any* national crisis or social problem on the horizon: poverty programs for the indigent, social security for the elderly, public housing for the homeless and civil rights for the disenfranchised. The hurdles that some considered as obstacles to opportunity were levelled in an effort to create an equal chance with *minimal risk* for all. One's level of affluence was no longer *earned*, but was "*entitled*" simply on the basis of one's own existence.

The "Elusive Quality"

Any fair reading of Samuelson's work cannot ignore his meticulous penchant for detail and lucid insight. One of the few shortcomings of Samuelson's analysis is his brief critique of egalitarianism. What the author identifies as "elusive equality" may in fact fuel much of the resentment and mistrust that Samuelson explores in the rest of his book. The fifteen pages that he devotes to this could easily be expanded into a separate volume. Although Samuelson merely skims the surface of this sensitive subject, his brief analysis is right on the mark.

A society that is casual in its enthusiasm for rights and is excessively animated by egalitarian ideals ultimately risks becoming engulfed by absurdities. Government is driven by the demands for new and more varied forms of equality and, in the process, risks being overwhelmed by those who feel mistreated for almost any reason.

Again, the author summarizes what can only be described as the incoherent nature of egalitarian entitlements.

Everyone is ultimately entitled to everything. The great

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harm – or danger – is to destroy people’s faith in government itself, because (quite obviously) everyone cannot have everything. To try to impose equality on a vast panorama of its activities is to overburden government. A sensitivity to important and indefensible inequalities easily slips into the indiscriminate habit of judging most social and political issues in terms of equality. The result is guaranteed failure, because complete equality is a chimera. There has always been inequality and there always will be. Individual talent and temperament are too varied; fortune and circumstance are too fickle. Even if this were not so, could we ever agree upon what constitutes equality?

Samuelson provides some answers to specific issues that he raises: individuals should take more personal responsibility for their well-being and expect less from government services; politicians should not make unreasonable promises; balancing the federal budget is a desirable and practical idea; and the social security program requires reform.

The nature of the workplace, though changed by automation and computer technology, is different in another way, namely an erosion of the work ethic. For some, disenchantment in the workplace is no mere illusion. Individuals are discovering that a shifting set of standards is replacing merit in determining salary bonuses and promotions. In many instances, individual initiative is no longer the determining factor in acquiring either a raise or promotion. Generally, rewards and incentives were given in the past to prompt, efficient, energetic and productive employees. Today, fairness in the workplace is not so much a question of differential earnings or a wage gap as it is one of basic reciprocity. Meritorious pay incentives, if any are so given, should be awarded objectively on the basis of performance rather than given subjectively to those selected on criteria other than performance. The issue of fairness in employee performance evaluations, and the idea of returning to an objective standard for gauging individual achievement (employment testing and evaluations), would more than likely reverse some of the anxiety and discontentment among the American public.

Kevin Lamb

Rastafari: Roots and Ideology*by Harry Chevannes*

Syracuse University Press. 1994. 298 pp. \$34.95

Interviews with thirty converts from the 1930s and 1940s are a unique component of Barry Chevannes's book – a sweeping look into the origins and practices of Rastafarianism. From the direct accounts of these early members, the author reconstructs pivotal episodes in Rastafarian history to offer a rare look into a subgroup of Jamaican society whose beliefs took root in the social unrest of the 1930s. Here Chevannes traces Rastafarianism back to the prophet Marcus (Mosiah) Garvey, the pan-African advocate of black nationalism – and an African homeland for African-Americans.

Before Garvey, few Jamaicans, who had been brought to the island as slaves and who in the course of time had subsequently come to outnumber the formerly wholly white, British population of Jamaica, held positive attitudes about Africa. The rise of black nationalism, however, provided the movement with its impetus to organize a system of beliefs. A great speaker, Garvey's passionate rhetoric in support of black separatism brought him millions of adherents in the US and elsewhere, and in 1922 he even met with KKK leaders in the US, recognizing that they shared similar aims.

As a spiritual philosophy, Rastafarianism is linked to societies of runaway slaves, or maroons, and derives from both the African Myal religion and the Revivalist Zion churches. Like the revival movement, it embraces the four-hundred-year-old doctrine of repatriation. Rastas believe that they and all Africans who have migrated are but exiles in "Babylon" and are destined to be delivered out of captivity by a return to "Zion" or Africa the land of their ancestors and the seat of Jah Rastafari himself, Haile Selassie I, the former emperor of Ethiopia. The fact that Ethiopia was a totally different part of Africa, with a different population and culture from that from which the black American slaves were drawn is not regarded as in any way relevant.

Author Chevannes explores the movement's early roots among Jamaican blacks. This movement underwent a number of changes as it developed between 1834 and 1961, especially when freed slaves became free peasants. Many eventually moved to cities, where their economic and social prospects were possibly even more unsuited for

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