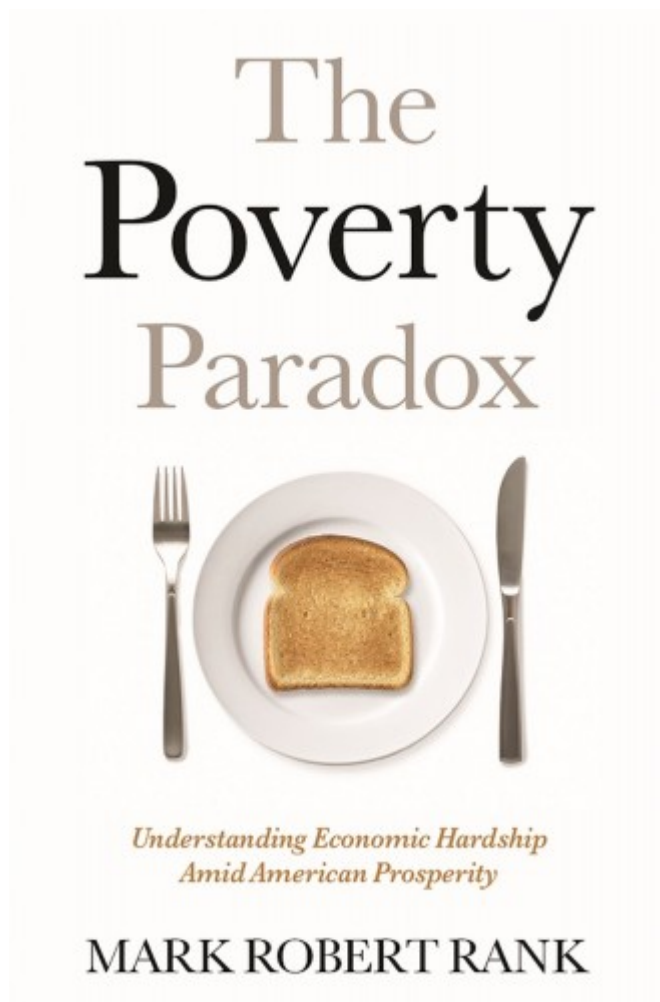


Impoverished by design

Sociologist Mark Rank shows how the United States systematically produces economic vulnerability.

by [Adam Vander Tuig](#) in the [November 2023](#) issue

In Review



The Poverty Paradox

Understanding Economic Hardship amid American Prosperity

By Mark Robert Rank

Oxford University Press

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I heard it for the first time while running on a treadmill, and I rewound and replayed it until I had it memorized. “I’ve listened to many a Marxist accuse the churches of having a vested interest in unjust structures which produce victims to whom good Christians can then pour out their hearts in charity,” thundered William Sloane Coffin from the pulpit of Riverside Church. “I’ve listened and I’ve shuddered, because so often in history it’s been so true.” Later, when I was a divinity school student, Coffin spoke to me every day as I listened to his sermons while exercising in the afternoons. I appreciated his willingness to preach openly, honestly, and astutely about money and class politics from a relatively radical Christian perspective. More than anyone else, he helped me make sense of my time in divinity school and in the Protestant church.

Coffin’s words returned to me as I read *The Poverty Paradox*. Sociologist Mark Robert Rank has researched, analyzed, and written about poverty in the United States for decades, and his expertise is on clear display in this book, which offers a cogent and comprehensive take on an enduring paradox. “Simply put,” he writes, “the argument is that poverty ultimately results from failures at the economic and political levels.” His conclusion might be one that many have already perceived, but his explanation of poverty in the United States provides a missing and especially crucial element in sociological studies.

Rank’s primary contribution comes in the book’s second major section, where he develops a “structural vulnerability explanation of poverty,” a perspective that he first began cultivating three decades ago. Traditional explanations of poverty in the US focus on individual choice and behavior, perpetuating the noxious, pervasive, and convenient myth that people without resources are feckless, inept, and irresponsible, having only themselves and their bad choices to blame. Rank’s approach, in contrast, demonstrates that modern America *guarantees* poverty. America denies many of its citizens the human capital (education and experience, for example) needed to be competitive in the labor market and then effectively punishes them for not possessing it.

In effect, the US systematically produces socioeconomic vulnerability instead of invulnerability, resulting in the experience of poverty for millions of people, no matter the choices they make. This is standard American operating procedure. As Rank puts it:

The structure of the American economy, in consort with its weak social safety net and public policies directed to the economically vulnerable, ensure that millions of Americans will experience impoverishment at any point in time, and that a much larger number will experience poverty over the course of a lifetime.

America manufactures little else the way it manufactures poverty.

Those likely to read Rank's book will probably be familiar with the data sets and statistics included. Almost half of all jobs in the US are low paying, meaning that they're not livable wages, and an ordinary male worker employed between 1973 and 2021 has seen an effective wage gain of only \$40 overall, less than a dollar per year. All this while "the gap between the bottom and top of society has been getting wider, with those in the top 20% of the income distribution the beneficiaries of virtually all of the economic gains over the past 50 years." To illustrate such "cumulative inequality," Rank artfully employs analogies using the Monopoly board game and musical chairs, as well as anecdotes from real workers.

Edgar, a 58-year-old Black man who works at Sam's Club for \$11.60 an hour, explains how the store aims to eliminate full-time positions to keep from having to pay benefits. Greg, a journalist, watched as scores of colleagues were laid off and the union agreed to a pay cut for those who remained, comparing the experience to the 2010 film, *127 Hours*, in which the main character cuts off his own arm to survive a climbing accident. Denise, a woman of color and mother of four who makes minimum wage working at a toy store, indicts the racism that prevents qualified people of color from securing jobs that utilize their skill sets and training. These are just a few of the testimonies included in this book, all of which are utterly maddening.

Rank explicitly names "free market capitalism and political decision-making" as culprits, but he writes little about capitalists and politicians themselves. He forthrightly advocates for reparations, universal health care, quality education, affordable housing, and an expanded and more substantial social safety net, but he

fails to emphasize that Republicans and all but the most left-leaning Democrats have routinely and resolutely opposed such measures. He explodes the myth that people who experience poverty have their bad behavior to blame for their condition, but he largely avoids detonating the related and equally absurd myth that people who experience wealth have their good behavior to credit for theirs.

Still, Rank's book is an essential contribution that fills a persistent gap in studies of American poverty, and Christians should surely read it. Once finished, Christians should study American wealth, too. The United States did not design the structural vulnerability that leads to American poverty and economic inequality. No, a small, bipartisan coalition of Americans did that. Rank's sociology colleagues C. Wright Mills and Heather Gautney call them "the power elite," and they have engineered these structures from sea to shining sea. The reality that deeply blue states like California, New York, and Illinois, where liberal Democrats have full legislative control, now trail red states on measures of affordable housing, equity in education, and overall economic equality makes this clear.

After reading Rank (as well as Mills and Gautney), Christians might decide that their vested interests should be in structures that alleviate wealth as much as those that alleviate poverty.