

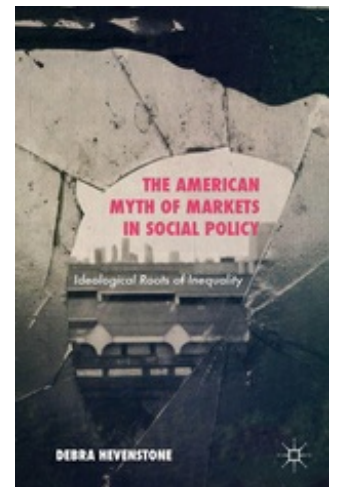
## Book Review: The American Myth of Markets in Social Policy: Ideological Roots of Inequality by Debra Hevenstone

*In The American Myth of Markets in Social Policy: Ideological Roots of Inequality*, Debra Hevenstone seeks to provide a critique of the ideological allegiance to markets in US policy formation, arguing that this can often serve to frustrate policy goals. While the book offers nuanced discussion of US social policy and draws effectively on a number of comparative cases to enrich the analysis, Jennifer Miller would have welcomed a more cohesive debunking of the 'myth' of the market with less reliance on personal anecdotes.

***The American Myth of Markets in Social Policy: Ideological Roots of Inequality*. Debra Hevenstone. Palgrave MacMillan. 2015.**

Donald Trump's rise in the presidential primaries highlights the faith that many Americans place in markets. The Donald has positioned himself as the mythical market saviour of the US, a man prepared for the leadership of the country by building a business empire and without ever having held elective office. As Trump said during the Republican debate broadcast on CNN on 15 September 2015: 'What I am [...] is a businessman, and that's the kind of mindset this country needs to bring it back.' Trump's policy positions are rife with markets, ideology and myth. And myths, of course, are ripe for debunking.

In *The American Myth of Markets in Social Policy: Ideological Roots of Inequality*, Debra Hevenstone addresses four main themes: a critique of the ideological allegiance to markets and local control in social policy; the perverse outcomes from tying measurement to incentives; the value of pragmatic experimentation in social policy; and the interdependent, layered nature of social policies. She argues that 'poorly designed foundational policies create future demand for more complex (and expensive) targeted policies' (3). Unlike the sweeping generalities that appeal to Trump's base, the book avoids blanket conclusions and offers recommendations specific to a given policy context, such as suggesting moderate paid parental leave as a foundational policy bridging labour market policy and social insurance.



While the nuanced policy positions are more realistic than the sweeping statements of the US campaign trail, the book does not offer the cohesive debunking of the market myth that I had hoped for. The book is an odd mixture of normative and positive economics. Arguments draw mainly on economics and sociology, and are supported with data in the form of graphs and citations of the peer-reviewed literature. The author's background is stronger in sociology, with discussions of the economics of public goods conflated with public services.

Surprisingly, the book is also interspersed (as the author says, 'littered') with personal and professional anecdotes. Some examples enrich the book, such as the author's direct experience with the healthcare systems in the UK and Switzerland as the US debated the Affordable Care Act (ACA). Hevenstone explains how the Swiss system's free market reputation is not entirely justified, and in turn, how the ACA is only very loosely modelled after the Swiss healthcare system.



**Image Credit: Affordable Care Act event (Nancy Pelosi)**

Overall, though, I would have preferred fewer personal anecdotes and found that they distracted considerably from the message. This was not a book in which I expected to find the passage: ‘When I worked in Cuba the norm was reversed. One of the other counselors had an ass, a really huge, jiggly ass, and the Cubans loved it! I remember one passerby shouted at her, “that is the *juiciest* mango I’ve ever seen” – and she took it as a compliment’ (31). For me, this passage distracted from, rather than emphasised, the point the author was hoping to make about social forces and individual behaviour. Including select professional anecdotes set off typographically in sidebars might have been a better choice.

While Hevenstone makes the point up front that her anecdotes provide a context for claims already supported by empirical data, they do muddy the waters. Should we believe the argument because of the data or because of the story? Also, human nature being what it is, surely selective attention creeps in to the choice of anecdotes. It’s hard for a critical reader to grapple with anecdotes. Do I accept them uncritically because I can’t dispute the author’s lived experience, or do I reject them outright with the first contradictory example that comes to mind?

When there is a case that very aptly supports an empirical or theoretical argument, I look to an academic author to provide the most appropriate case rather than the case that is closest at hand. It works best when these coincide. For example, in Jeffrey Sachs’s *The Age of Sustainable Development*, the author’s unique experience advising the UN on the Millennium Development Goals gives him privileged access to illustrative cases, such as the Millennium Villages. We can’t all advise the UN, of course.

When incorporating anecdotes, I would suggest selecting those cases where the author’s unique professional experiences will speak most closely to the reader. For example, Hevenstone’s experience in programme evaluation will speak to a graduate student aspiring to undertake social work. As a middle-aged woman from a background not so different from the author’s, I’ve already had the experiences she recounts – among them immigrant ancestors achieving the American Dream, crappy first jobs, overseas travel and first encounters with extremes of wealth and poverty.

If the anecdotes in this book are not for a reader like me, what type of reader might they benefit? As many young people are delaying their entry into the full-time workforce and staying longer in their parents’ households, some students are arriving at university, or even to graduate studies, with little practical knowledge of the labour market

and the realities of household formation. Such students may benefit from the additional context provided by the personal narratives. Also, as the stories address the author's experiences in the US and Europe, they may provide helpful context for students coming to study in these regions.

This review focuses perhaps too much on the form rather than the substance of the argument. I struggled with that as I personally found the form distracting. The book's greatest strengths are its attention to comparative public policy, particularly Swiss policy, and to the complex system of social policy delivered through employment in the US. Its overall premise – that social policy in the US suffers when elements of our government and society make idols of markets and local control – is one that I agree deserves broader discussion by citizens and policymakers alike.

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*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*

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