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Dependents of the State

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Conservatives champion an ethos of hard work and self-reliance, and insist — heroically ignoring the evidence — that people’s life chances are determined by the exercise of those virtues. Liberals, meanwhile, counter the accusation that their policies encourage dependence by calling the social welfare system a “safety net,” there only to provide a “leg up” to people who have “fallen on hard times.” Unlike gay marriage or abortion, issues that divide left from right, everyone, no matter where they lie on the American political spectrum, loathes and fears state dependence. If dependence isn’t a moral failing to be punished, it’s an addictive substance off which people must be weaned.

Like so many politically important notions, the concept of “state dependence” purports to do no more than describe the way things are, but contains within it a powerful and suspect moral judgment. Americans who collect food stamps, Medicaid, unemployment insurance or welfare checks are said to be dependent on the state because the lives they lead would be different (indeed, worse) if the state did not provide these services — at least without their working harder and longer. Most of the people who rely on means-tested social services either cannot work, have been recently laid off thanks to the economic downturn, or are already working in poorly paid, immiserating jobs.

But if the poor are dependent on the state, so, too, are America’s rich. The extraordinary accumulation of wealth enjoyed by the socioeconomic elite — in 2007, the richest 1 percent of Americans accounted for about 24 percent of all income — simply wouldn’t be possible if the United States weren’t organized as it is. Just about every aspect of America’s economic and legal infrastructure — the laissez-faire governance of the markets; a convoluted tax structure that has hedge fund managers paying less than their office cleaners; the promise of state intervention when banks go belly-up; the legal protections afforded to corporations as if they were people; the enormous subsidies given to corporations (in total, about 50 percent more than social services spending); electoral funding practices that allow the wealthy to buy influence in government — allows the rich to stay rich and get richer. In primitive societies,

people can accumulate only as much stuff as they can physically gather and hold on to. It's only in "advanced" societies that the state provides the means to socioeconomic domination by a tiny minority. "The poverty of our century is unlike that of any other," the writer John Berger said about the 20th century.

The irony isn't only that the poor are condemned for being dependent on the state while the rich are not. It's also that the rich get so much more out of their dependence on the state than the poor. Without the support of the state, poor people's quality of life would certainly drop, but only by degrees: their lives would go from bad to worse. Take the state's assistance away from the rich, however, and their lives would take a serious plunge in comfort. No wonder rich people are on the whole conservative: the most ferocious defenders of the status quo are usually those who are most dependent on the system.

So, the question should not be why Americans loathe and fear dependence on the state, but rather: why do Americans loathe and fear some forms of state dependence but not others? Here's one possible answer. While the rich are dependent on the state, the state is in turn dependent on them. The elite might enjoy levels of comfort and prosperity that the majority can scarcely imagine, but it's no more than they deserve: they are, after all, the "job creators," the engines of economic growth. The poor, by contrast, are just a drag on the system.

Here's another answer one might give when asked why we should tolerate state dependence on the part of the rich, but not of the poor: the rich earn the benefits they accrue from the state, while the poor get something for nothing. Sure, the rich might have needed the state's help to get rich, but they have also had to work for their success; the poor can just sit back and wait for the welfare check to arrive. But this is to ignore the fact that most rich Americans didn't earn their wealth: they were given it, either directly through inheritance from their parents, or only slightly less directly through their access to elite secondary and higher education. Despite the sustaining myth of American meritocracy, one of the most significant determinants of where a child will end up on the socioeconomic ladder is which rung his or her parents occupied.