

**Bootstrapped** by Alissa Quart.  
HarperCollins, New York, 2023. \$26.

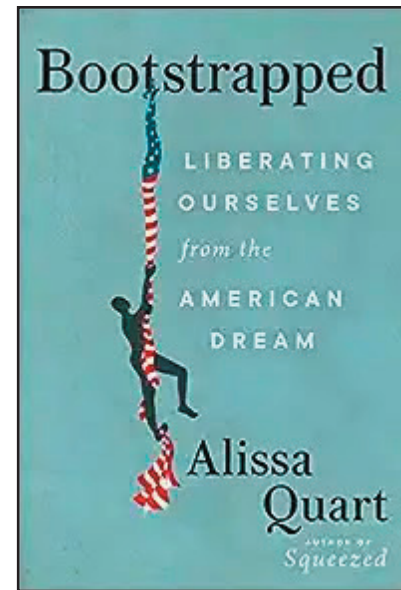
by Ed Meek

**T**he American dream is a powerful myth. “In the Will work and acquire, and thou hast chained the wheel of Chance.” Emerson said in “Self-Reliance.” If you work hard and save, invest, buy a house, you can be successful in America. Right? Every four years we hear presidential candidates tell their stories about working their way up. From Bill Clinton to Barack Obama to Nikki Haley. Celebrities like Eminem and Jay Z remind us of their rags to riches stories. In China, America is called the gold mountain where everyone can get rich. The Great Gatsby tells the story of Jay Gatsby who used his connections with corrupt characters like Meyer Wolfsheim (who fixed the World Series in 1919) to attain wealth. Donald Trump used seed money from daddy to build a real estate empire and exploited tax loopholes and bankruptcy laws. Then his starring role on *The Apprentice* convinced millions he should be President. Many of his followers see him as embodying the American dream.

This myth has a downside as Alissa Quart points out in her new book *Bootstrapped*. Those who fail to achieve the dream are blamed and they blame themselves. They must not have worked hard enough. Those failures are looked down upon because they failed to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. Quart tells us that, ironically, this expression originated in the 1800s when the rich had servants to help them put on their boots by pulling the bootstraps. Then, pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps was adopted to express the idea of working your way up. To this day, those who are rich and successful love to tell us that they did it all on their own. They are all the reincarnation of Horatio Alger’s ragged Dick who started as a shoeshine boy, became an office clerk and worked his way up the ladder.

One of the popular proponents of the dream was Ayn Rand whose *Atlas Shrugged* was handed out to new congressmen and women by Paul Ryan. Its brand of “self-made absolutism” as Quart calls it, is the myth the top 1% have adopted and promulgate to the bottom 99% who just haven’t worked hard enough or been talented enough to achieve their greatness. Quart digs into the biographies of famous individualists like Alger and Rand and Thoreau to make the case that their success depended on the help of others. Quart would agree with Hillary Clinton who said “It takes a village.”

Despite the campaign of Bernie Sanders and the work of Thomas Piketty, most Americans have no idea how much wealth the rich accumulate. According to Quart, “Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, with an estimated fortune of \$177 billion, topped the list for the fourth year (2021) running.”



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Musk came in second at \$151 billion. Americans still overwhelmingly believe in the fairness doctrine (an imaginary world where people get what they deserve). Robert Putnam writes with nostalgia about the 1950s when income distribution was less lopsided than it is today in his book *Bowling Alone*. In those days CEOs earned 25 times as much as the average worker. Now they earn hundreds of times as much.

Quart goes on to argue that many of the recent developments in our economy are branded as if they are cool but are instead problematic. All those independent contractors engaging in side-hustles driving Ubers and shopping for others and delivering food and teaching half of all the courses in our overpriced colleges and universities have no benefits and exist to make other people rich. GoFundMe is used to fill in some of the funds missing from our safety net. Our tech savvy world now has us stressed out while working as our own admins, our own tech help, our own editors. Quart says the wellness industry is yet another attempt to shift responsibility to the individual. Mindfulness is now the key to overcoming our unhappiness.

Our overworked economic model underwent a stress test during the pandemic when many of those side-hustles disappeared and we found out how dependent we were on essential workers. Quart admires the way many Americans responded to the crises by working together, supporting local restaurants, gaining a new appreciation for doctors and nurses and service workers. Our government responded by elevating our welfare state to include money for childcare, housing, health and unemployment. But those programs have all ended.

In Quart's utopian community there would be a lot more interdependence. She refers to Co-ops where people share ownership of a company. Marx called this controlling the means of production. In fact, much of what Quart argues for is a version of either socialism or the type of welfare state that exists in northern Europe and existed here during the pandemic. Quart seems to think this kind of shift can begin locally and catch on nationally.

According to Marx, governments have a tendency to become overdetermined. That is, Communism turns into a bureaucracy with too much power residing with the state where capitalism relies too much on the free market where power and too much money flows into the hands of a small, powerful minority.

Quart wants us to recognize that depending on others is healthy and makes us happier. She tells us about the Patriotic Millionaires, a group that is giving back some of its wealth and lobbying for a more just tax system. As Joseph Stiglitz says, the best and most fair answer to our wealth and power disparity is a graduated income tax. That would result in the top income earners paying higher taxes and it would mean the middle class, paying higher taxes too. Matthew Desmond, the author of *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*, points out that "the biggest beneficiaries of federal aid (in the form of tax breaks) are affluent families." If those tax breaks were eliminated and the money shifted to those who need it, poverty could be erased in the United States. The lack of a truly progressive income tax and tax breaks for the affluent are two reasons we have a growing deficit and a weak safety net.

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Quart's book is well worth reading for her perspective on the problems with the American dream and her calls for interdependence are praiseworthy although she doesn't seem to be aware of another pervasive notion particular to Americans that is intertwined with the American dream, libertarianism. If you're not sure what that is, watch a season of Yellowstone and you'll see what rural America really wants: their own land and the freedom to do what they want on it.

What is the biggest problem humanity faces? Is it climate change? Artificial intelligence? Pandemics? Geo-politics? All of these issues are related to the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few. Myths like the American dream of self-reliance as well as the belief in the strongman who will save us must be replaced with the realization that we all have a stake in these problems and will have to work together to solve them. As Alfred McCoy suggests in *To Govern the World*, only a world government can tackle all of these problems. And that government will have to recognize our interdependence.