Analyzing the American Dream

Bootstrapped: Liberating Ourselves from the American Dream was originally published in August 2022 by Alissa Quart. Quart is a Gen X American nonfiction writer and journalist. She runs a nonprofit called The Economic Hardship Reporting Project, "which is devoted to covering income inequality and poverty. And [she] also spent much of the last eight years reporting on these matters" (Quart, 2022). Looking at her most recent book, *Bootstrapped*, she even considers it radical self-help, with what can be learned through her oppositional efforts (Quart, 2022). Quart has dedicated her professional life to writing and educating others about societal issues and events. She has no straight political stance documented or declared; however, this book and many others hold *stereotyped* liberal approaches to societal problems.

We should consider this text because it presents a very radical stance. No matter where you stand with your beliefs, educating yourself of all viewpoints is essential. Quart filled *Bootstrapped* with data and information showing how our world adopted the current idea of the American Dream and how it's still present today. Caring about this text would educate you about the bootstrapping ideal and give you viewpoints you might never have considered or thought about. Especially since Quart took a rigid political and opinionated stance, reading it could satisfy you or make your knowledge more holistic.

Quart's book is separated into four parts: "Creators of the American Dream," "Brokers of the American Dream," "Burdens of the American Dream," and "Toward a New American Dream." Within these parts, she addresses the main ideas of Bootstrapping: where it came from, who initiated the idea, who takes part, and what we can change. Quart writes this book with a very logical and authoritative approach. She incorporates her eight years of knowledge and research

about systemic and societal ideals and issues. This is done through a vast number of statistics, information from past and present, and interviews. She is educating us about the main idea of the American dream-bootstrapping-but also arguing against it. In the 19th century, "To get your work boots on your feet, you'd stand up and grab two small leather flaps on the sides known as bootstraps and pull the boot up" (3).

The idiom of pulling yourself up by your bootstraps came to life through this. It represents that the only way to make it as an American is through every man for themselves individualism. Quart describes this ideal as a "torturous myth that true success means getting ahead only on your energy and steam" (3). She thinks this adapted idea is foolish and negatively affects our country's social fabric. To her, it rests on the notion that the wealthy and successful are deserving, and the poor and those who struggle deserve their fate (Quart, 2022). She shows that "all conservatives like to emphasize their hard work and deservedness to justify their advantage in their community" (55). By emphasizing hard work, they are pushing the idea of singular success and how they are deserving.

Meanwhile, those who are poor, vulnerable, or unsuccessful are constantly bullied and publicly shamed because they couldn't 'pull themselves up' on their own. Quart explains that this has created a nation that demands self-reliance, induces self-blame, and makes a total disregard for the roles of people who helped you. Quart argues we need to rewrite this narrative because though people think they are independent, at some point in time, they were reliant on others. She suggests that we take individual steps to flush away this thought process of self-reliance. This can start with acknowledging that we absorb this bias into our lives and then ask ourselves who assisted us in our success (Quart, 2022). Quart emphasizes that there are alternative models that the world can follow instead of the classic American dream, the

bootstrapping ideal. She talks about the art of interdependence and dependence: “The resourcefulness and craft it takes to collaborate with others. To take a position of dependence that has a heightened engagement with society” (23). This will highlight that we are mutually connected and dependent and should accept and acknowledge support. She claims it will lift people and give individuals and our nation a better idea of achievement and attainment. This objective for Quart would be more successful, and she called it anti-bootstrapping (2022).

Quart approaches the start of her argument, focusing on the heavy use of logos, pathos, and counterargument. She uses data, facts, and hints of concession to persuade the audience through validity. She also uses ethos to demonstrate authority with hints of sympathy. Her preface starts with a statistic from a 2019 Center for American Progress survey: “60% of Republicans agreed with the statement: people get stuck in poverty primarily because they make bad decisions or lack the ambition to do better in life” (Quart, 2022). She uses the counterargument to refute the statement, proving that this mindset is pervasive and leads to harm. To get this point across, Quart exclaims, “According to a 2015 Oxford University and Joseph Rowan Tree Foundation study, poor people tend to experience a negative self-stereotyping effect, considering themselves low incompetent and even flawed at the root” (2022). Her use of data at the very start of her book gives a robust approach that her argument is backed up by logic. Following this, she uses a more personal approach, discussing how she's not the best at anti-bootstrapping. Quart exclaims that she was raised in this country, which has made her overworked with the same mindset of individual achievement (2022). From this, she believes there's another way of approaching life that “isn't simply a lonely faltering and often doomed trudge toward personal financial victory” (2022). Quart connects to the mood of the reader and shows sympathy and authority. When

executed, this sets her up perfectly to propose a counteroffer that backs up her main argument, trying to change the reader's mind.

Quart uses the most rhetorical strategies in the first part of the book, Creators of The American Dream. She continues her argument with logic, ethos, forensic, demonstrative, and deliberative rhetoric. Quart had a conversation with the economist Joseph Stiglitz and started off her first part with a quote: "Being self-made was in itself a clear biological as well as social lie: biologically you can't be self-made, as no one is: you always begin life with gifts from your parents or liabilities" (5). She begins with a logical philosophy that backs up her argument, which creates a good image of reliability for the following chapter. With forensic rhetoric, she then puts her argument in the past tense, mentioning how "In 1971 Ronald Reagan... called such social aid a cancer eating at our vitals" (7). Starting with the past shows that bootstrapping has always been in our nation. She then proves how it bled into the present day and switches to demonstrative rhetoric. Quart does this by polarizing the two political parties, showing how the republican party worships bootstrapping, but Democrats are for collectivism. She mentions President Donald Trump adopted this ideology, but President Biden did not (2022). Quart leads this into a logical approach to our current president: "Biden fought for a bill that centered on human infrastructure described to benefit ordinary folks like welfare programs and other kinds of people-centered offerings" (11). This leads Quart to her use of deliberative rhetoric, which shows that we have an opportunity to bring people into this collective mindset as a nation. She says we have a "unique possibility to rewrite our tired cultural narrative that exalts lonesome achievement and spirituous self-sufficiency above all" (12). Using data from the present and switching to the future supports her argument by highlighting that ordinary people will benefit

from this support act. Compared to calling anti-bootstrapping cancer, she shows the positive effect of support and how we could have more if we just made a choice.

Slightly after, Quart focuses on two famous authors: Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. She exclaims that “these two men's preoccupation with the meaning of individualism helped to some extent to define the American way” (13). She uses a vast amount of information to address how their approach is irrational and helps train people’s minds about self-reliance as time passes. She gets validity in her logos by visiting and talking to Huntington Howell, a specialist in their work. Through the writings of *Self Reliance* and *Walden*, Howell stated that these two men idolized the ideology that “self-reliance can be understood as putting personal ambition and gain above society in the Republic” (18). Quart backs up her argument by mentioning how these two men were great friends who *relied on one another heavily* (2022). She validly proves her logic through this emphasis: even the two publicly acclaimed individualists still didn't go through life completely alone.

In Quarts parts two and three, Brokers of the American Dream and Burdens of the American Dream, she diminishes it down to logos and deliberative rhetoric as her main strategies. She starts by stating a statistic from French economist Thomas Piketty: “It's estimated that roughly “60% of Americans' private wealth was inherited rather than the result of the much-ballyhooed hard work” (57). This data sets her up to prove that most big brokers who claimed they bootstrapped their way did not. For example, she talks about how self-made rhetoric can hide the truth about Donald Trump. Quart explains that he and Fred Trump have “benefited from the governmental generosity receiving financing” (75). Quart spends the first three sections of her book using heavy logic from past and present to show the differences between bootstrapping and anti-bootstrapping. Her point is to show the illusion the American dream ideal has created.

This leads to her fourth part, Toward a New American Dream, which focuses on said suggestions and the current supporting situations she stated. The primary audience for Quart's book is Gen X or millennial liberals. The only other audience would be anyone who feels the American Dream ideal of bootstrapping has oppressed them. This inference is made from all her slander toward republican officials or past people in power. Also, this collectivist, socialist mindset and approach is something that is stereotyped as a very liberal point of view. Quart is also within Gen X/ the millennial range, and she is writing with the idea that her audience is the same or shares the same commonplaces she does. This book would benefit anyone who shares the same views Quart does. It would be empowering and refreshing to anyone who agrees with her or has been oppressed in the ways she's mentioned.

Throughout the sections of her book, deduction, and enthymeme are the main overarching approaches. She applies the general principles and ideas about her argument and interprets circumstances through the same lens. She does this with the intent that her audience shares the same commonplace that she does. Hence, you are reached if you are the main audience reading, and her decorum is valid. This is successful in Quart's argument due to her heavy use of logic. She fits into her audience, targeted toward liberals or Gen X, which is her generation and political stance. Her ethos fits her personality, making her non-indecorous. She *IS* the target audience and looks exactly how her audience would want her to look. Adding to this, her authority and reputation are successful. Quart is referencing data and a topic she's spent years studying. The type of information and research she's discussing provides a strong and valid logical approach. Quart's ornate speech and choice of words also add to this success, making it sound sophisticated, thoroughly researched, and thought out. However, I don't feel as if the argument was successful. I find her rhetorical approaches very weak, especially to someone who

isn't in her intended audience, and this is a massive loss on her part. When writing a book about a social issue, the widest audience should be reached to be most successful. Focusing on trying to convince the opposing side or the entire population is what will get you the desired results. Nothing will change if the argument only targets the people already on your side or within your audience. If decorum focuses on the art of fitting in everywhere, she is doing a horrendous job. Quart also has no expressed love or sympathy for the opposing argument. The entire book insults the opposing view, which is not helpful for a hard-to-love audience or a wider range of people reading. She's trying to change my mind, but that's not effective when all she's doing is diminishing and dismissing. There are also only a couple of true instances in the book where she acknowledges the counterargument. One of them is when talking about *Self Reliance*: "Emerson's biographer, Robert Richardson, writes that his subjects work is not a blueprint for selfishness and withdrawal; it is not anti-community but recommends self-reliance as a starting point rather than a goal" (p.21). She doesn't expand on this; she throws it into the first part. I find this improper because she spends a whole chapter demonetizing Emerson and the individualism he expresses within literature. How can you rationally do that when you list his true message yourself? Also, Quart only has one time where she said she was stuck in the American dream, which is her trying to obtain authority in her argument. She is trying to persuade how the bootstrapping ideal is oppressive, specifically to the poor, vulnerable, or high in a struggle. She has no real acknowledgment or experience relating to this point; all she says is how this ideal has made her "overwork with the same mindset of individual achievement" (preface). I don't see how I can trust this personal statement. This reference talks about how she's had to overwork, not how she's been *oppressed* or directly affected by how *she argues*. This makes her sound like a privileged white woman, which ruins her possible authority aspect. She shouldn't have

included this statement if she wanted to obtain more personal authority. As the behavioral economist Daniel Kahneman observed, human thinking comes in two flavors: fast and slow, emotions are fast, and deliberation is slow (Kirkham, 2021). Even though Quart has strong logic, which is important, there's absolutely no emotional appeal to this book. Her argument and propositions would be more persuading to people if emotion were her first approach rather than the overuse of data and statistics. Without desire, there's no action, and she lacks the imagery and painting a picture to make me lust over her proposed ideal. If she wants to be more effective, she needs to make us *feel something* to change our mood and *then* use data to back it up, creating deliberation. Additionally, Quart doesn't do a good job structuring or setting up the argument around solving her need through decision or action. There's a lack of making me believe her choice is advantageous. She proposes that we adopt the anti-bootstrapping mindset to become a more successful society. However, there are only a few of her suggestions at the end, which is odd structural-wise. It would be more effective and persuasive in the beginning or middle of the argument. Adding to this idea, this book was published in 2022, yet the audience and most examples were from the past. Why focus on the past and target the past generation when this one and current figures can make a change? I understood her approach of showing how the past led to the present, but it would be more effective to have less of that and more current examples leading to future rhetoric. This way, it would ground the reader in the present day, showing them the current issue, and then lead them to deliberative choices to make the change or idea she is proposing. This should have been done throughout the book instead of just throwing in all her suggestions at the end. There's also a lack of craft; Quart doesn't do a good enough job of appearing as if she knows what to do to fix this issue. Her competence is low with her suggestions on what should rather be done. She talks about small steps individuals can take,

but how will that change the nation? Even when mentioning school systems, worker coops, and interdependence, her ideas have no substance or plan of action.

If I didn't have to read this book, I would have closed it long ago because I was not persuaded; I found her opinions and arguments ignorant, unattainable, and improper. Quart was arguing against the developed ideal of bootstrapping, which is congruent with the 'American dream.' She thinks this view is oppressive to not only struggling adults but also developing stable children. Anti-bootstrapping is the idea Quart wants the nation to latch onto. This involves a very collectivist and interdependent lifestyle that shuts down the created idea of self-reliance. When she expressed how this ideal negatively affects children, I was blown away. Quart brings this up while discussing the TV show *Little House on The Prairie.* The main woman in the show demonstrates the bootstrapping ways and is self-reliant. Quart's daughter liked the idea of independence she found in this series and even dressed as the character for Halloween (Quart, 2022). She then states how her daughter was still very much reliant on her parents and wanted her to understand that dependence should be included in her autonomy (Quart, 2022). This whole statement I found preposterous because independence is empowering, especially to a woman, let alone a young woman. There is nothing wrong with a child being appealed to that ideal. Of course, you need your parents at that age, and you will always need them to some extent because they're tangled within your soul as part of your inner community. However, you will make a child hyper-dependent if you're constantly trying to prove that this individualist mindset is punishing. Instead, why don't you acknowledge the importance of self-reliance and teach your child balance and education about intrapersonal ability? Robert Richardson said it perfectly in a statement that even Quart addresses: Independence and self-reliance are starting points, not some narcissistic point of view that's anti-community (2022).

Adding onto this, referencing Thoreau, the way she approaches *Walden* is a very closed-minded view, and it's as if she hasn't even read the book. *Walden* is about finding the meaning of life and yourself in solidarity. Having solidarity brings you to meaning due to the lack of influence of the usual collective lived life. Being alone and having this individualist lifestyle is something you need to find clarity in a world that shouts so much conformity and collective nature in your face. You cannot find meaning in yourself and your life through somebody else; being alone will help you achieve this. He also writes about simplicity and self-sufficiency because of the desire to live free from the world's complexity. She is taking these points and demonizing them, twisting them to make it seem like this desire or want is some narcissistic destroying belief. The book isn't about anti-community; Quart makes it that way. Adding to this, she is trying to use *Walden* as an example for her argument yet fails to mention the biggest aspect that would back her up: Thoreau's father. His father was a wealthy man, which helped Thoreau embark on this journey of solidarity. If Quart is arguing for interdependence, she should have mentioned this aspect. This would've created a stronger argument (with logic) rather than focusing on the content and message of the book. When Quart mentions how she felt the pressure to overachieve due to the idea of the American dream, I found this quite ironic. Nobody *forced* her to do anything; she fully adapted this way of being herself through individualist thinking. My question to her is if she knew that the world was selling her something she didn't like, why not look away? However, if it happened subconsciously over time, this should've been addressed. That way, it would give the reader the most information to help her argument be more persuasive and clearer. Without the full context, she poses it as a conscious, individual choice, which goes against her argument. You have people who help you because it is fundamentally impossible to live directly on your own or be *completely* reliant on just yourself. However, YOU get up and

make the choices, and YOU choose to have a social circle to help you. Quart's argument was unsuccessful due to the *way* she approached presenting it. Her main point came through with validity. However, she chose a poor way of dispensing her argument to her audience. Quart didn't use proper rhetorical techniques to be persuasive enough. For example, she wasn't aware of fitting into a wider audience or appealing to anyone other than readers like her: Gen X, millennials, liberals, etc. If you want to enforce change, why only focus on those who agree? Next, Quart provided data to hold her claim. However, that's all she did. The book felt like one long list of statistics about anti-bootstrapping vs. bootstrapping; there was no emotion or plan of action, making her argument weak, dull, and unappealing. Adding to this, I was neither in her intended audience nor persuaded nor agreed with her. I felt stigmatized and dismissed with no strong appeal to support her argument. The book should be more solution-based, teaching people about their character, self-awareness, and societal place rather than all statistics and examples. Quart should also focus on how she presents her information to her audience and be more conscious of how someone disagrees will interpret it. People become hyper-independent for a reason, and the real focus question should be, *why* do I feel the need to say I did it all on my own?

References:

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