

The Egregious Lie Americans Tell Themselves

In September 2016, the Liberty Bridge in Pittsburgh caught on fire. Originally built in 1928 and last renovated in 1982, the bridge carries more than 50,000 vehicles a day and serves as a main commuter link between the city's central business district and its populous southern suburbs. Long in a state of questionable repair, it had been an object of particular concern after the spectacular and deadly collapse of the Interstate 35W bridge in Minneapolis in 2007. Pennsylvania had ^a and still has ^a one of the highest percentages of "structurally deficient" bridges in the nation, and the prospect of a failure of the Liberty Bridge, whose main span is nearly 45 feet above the Monongahela River, was terrifying to contemplate.

Nevertheless, it took six years after the I-35W disaster for Pennsylvania's perennially Republican state legislature to pass a transportation spending bill to free up repair funds. In the interim, increasingly drastic weight restrictions had been imposed in order to prevent, or at least mitigate against, a Liberty Bridge failure or collapse.

Even after legislative approval, funding delays pushed the start of the project to 2015, and it was expected to last 30 months. The blaze that engulfed the bridge burned so hot it buckled one of the main support beams, and an investigation [determined that the contractor had failed to follow proper fire safety protocols](#). The Occupational Safety and Health Administration fined it several thousand dollars. It faced a more substantial penalty of \$3 million from the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, but then the PennDOT decided to simply [waive the fine](#).

There's a verbal tic particular to a certain kind of response to a certain kind of story about the thinness and desperation of American society; about the person who died of preventable illness or the Kickstarter campaign to help another who can't afford cancer treatment even with "good" insurance; about the plight of the homeless or the lack of resources for the rural poor; about underpaid teachers spending thousands of dollars of their own money for the most basic classroom supplies; about train derailments, the ruination of the New York subway system and the decrepit states of our airports and ports of entry.

"I can't believe in the richest country in the world. ..."

This is the expression of incredulity and dismay that precedes some story about the fundamental impoverishment of American life, the fact that the lived, built geography of existence here is so frequently wanting, that the most basic social amenities are at once grossly overpriced and terribly underwhelming, that normal people (most especially the poor and working class) must navigate labyrinths of bureaucracy for the simplest public services, about our extraordinary social and political paralysis in the face of problems whose solutions seem to any reasonable person self-evident and relatively straightforward.

It is true that, as measured by GDP, or by the size of the credit and equity markets, or even just by the gaudy presence of our Googles, Amazons and Apples, the United States is the greatest machine for the production of money in the modern history of the world.

But this wealth is largely an abstraction, a trick of the broad and largely meaningless aggregations of numbers that makes up most of what the business pages call "economics." The American commonwealth is shockingly impoverished. Ask anyone who's compared the nine-plus-hour train ride from Pittsburgh to New York with the barely two-hour journey from Paris to Bordeaux, an

equidistant journey, or who's watched the orderly, accurate exit polls from a German election and compared them with the [fizzling, overheating voting machines in Florida](#).

Now, it is true that [bridges collapse in Europe](#), too, although this past summer's tragedy was in Italy, whose famously ungovernable corruption may be the closest continental analogue to our own United States. American liberals and leftists tend to over-valorize the Western European model, but there is no doubt that the wealthy countries at the core of the EU have far more successfully mitigated the most extreme social inequalities and built systems for health and transportation that far outstrip anything in the U.S. Even in their poor urban suburbs or, say, the disinvested industrial north of France, you will find nothing like the squalor that we still permit π that we accept as ordinary π [in the USA](#). Meanwhile, in our ever-declining adversary-of-convenience, the Moscow subway runs on time.

The social wealth of a society is better measured by the quality of its common lived environment than by a consolidated statistical approximation like GDP, or even an attempt at weighted comparisons like so-called [purchasing power parity](#). There is a reason why our great American cities, for all of our supposed wealth, often feel and look so shabby. The money goes elsewhere. Seville, a pretty, modest city of less than a million people in the south of Spain, built 80 kilometers of bike lanes for \$40 million in less than two years, and eliminated a lot of ugly, on-street parking in the process. Imagine a commensurate effort in New York City, a far wealthier place on paper. Well, its supposedly liberal mayor is going to give Amazon \$1.5 billion in tax breaks instead.

To be fair, New York City and state, mired in graft and corruption, cannot build a single mile of subway for less than \$2 billion.

Elsewhere, the con artists running America's military-industrial complex are worried that the hundreds of billions we sink every year into [planes that cannot fly in the rain](#) and [ships that cannot steer](#) have left the United States virtually [unable to win any wars](#). The United States spends perhaps a trillion dollars every year on its military and wars.

Poverty π both individual and social π is a policy, not an accident, and not some kind of natural law. These are deliberate choices about the allocation of resources. They are eminently undoable by modest exercises of political power, although if the state- and city-level Democratic leaders of New York and northern Virginia are the national mold, then our nominally left-wing party is utterly, hopelessly beholden to the upward transfer of social wealth to an extremely narrow cadre of already extremely rich men and women.

I voted last week, an exercise that now feels like mouthing polite prayers at someone else's church. The line snaked out the door of the tiny, hot basement room and into the cold rain. There were only three voting machines. One was broken, and one seemed to be working only intermittently. A young woman with a baby in a stroller was in line in front of me. After we'd waited for 10 minutes without moving, she looked at me and rolled her eyes. "Can you believe this is how we do this?" she said. "In 2018."

I smiled. I shrugged. I waved at her cute kid. I did not say, "Yes. I can believe it."